

# Writing for the Piano

## Keys

Although professional musicians like a challenge, don't make things deliberately difficult for them. We would rather play in a key signature with two flats than ten sharps!!

## Pedalling

Most acoustic pianos have two pedals - a 'soft' pedal on the left, and a 'sustaining pedal', on the right. This pedal is generally used to join notes smoothly together – namely 'legato pedalling'. A pianist will automatically use discreet legato pedalling – you don't need to mark this in all the time. You might want to indicate 'con pedale' (with pedal) or 'sec' (dry) at the beginning of a piece or section. If the music has a lot of staccato markings then the pianist will instinctively use little or no pedal. You will only need to mark in precise pedalling if you want the pedal held down through a particular section or set of events.

The image contains two musical examples, labeled a) and b), illustrating pedalling techniques. Both examples are in 2/2 time and feature a right hand with chords and a left hand with a bass line. Example a) starts with a *mf* dynamic and a *sempre sim.* marking above the staff. Example b) starts with a *mf* dynamic and a *sempre sim.* marking above the staff, but includes a *f* dynamic marking in the second measure. Both examples use dashed lines and asterisks below the staves to indicate pedalling points.

## Articulation

Be clear about how you want your piece played: there are many combinations of staccato and legato that can make your piece interesting. Phrasing the music you compose will be advantageous to the player, to see how the music proceeds in their own part and with other instruments.

## Different registers of the piano

The different regions of the piano have different sonorities, and consequently different times of 'decay' – if you play the lowest note of the piano and hold it down it may last for 30 seconds or so. If you do the same for the top note of the piano it will disappear after 3 or 4 seconds. Therefore it is not advisable to compose long notes or chords in the highest register because they disappear too quickly. This area is better for repeated events and bright percussive material.

The lower end of the piano has a great deal of power: be careful to try out any chords you write in this part of the piano: notes played closely together in this area often can become murky and unclear, especially in the bottom two octaves. Single left hand notes and octaves work well.

## Hands

Always make sure that when you are writing chords that you make them playable. Most pianists are comfortable stretching one octave and some can stretch a tenth comfortably. If you want to make sure that a pianist can play your piece then perhaps make your chords an octave wide at most.

When you are writing chords always test out whether you can stretch them: most pianists are right handed so it works well if you give the right hand more complicated material than the left in general.

In piano writing the fingers are numbered 1-5 with your thumb in each hand known as finger number one.

When you are writing chords with several notes in make sure that there are no stretches between fingers 3 - 4 or 4 - 5 in either hand, as these fingers are relatively weak.

