

Pedals

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Pedals are a detailed topic, and there is a lot to cover. Let's get right to it!

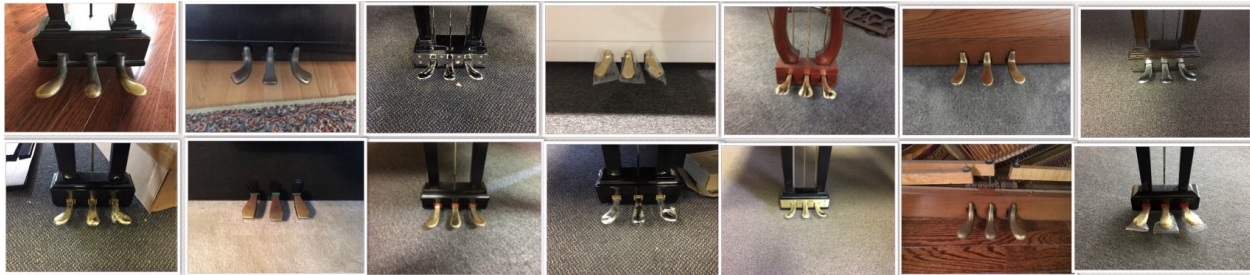
The sustain pedal (the pedal on the right toward the treble end of the piano, also referred to by some as the "loud" pedal) lifts all the dampers away from the strings. If you are unsure what dampers are, please refer to Issue 2 Dampers: The Importance of Silence. When this happens, all the strings are free to vibrate sympathetically with any sound produced by or around the piano. The more out of tune a piano is, the less the strings will vibrate sympathetically with each other, and the more unpleasant the ringing sound of the instrument will be. This pedal should have some play, what technicians refer to as the distance the pedal moves before the dampers start to life. Having a small amount of play in the pedal helps the pianist to not be forced to lift up the foot entirely while working the pedal, allowing for greater control.

The middle pedal is by far the most complicated of the three pedals. It has many names as it does different things depending on the type and model of the piano. Only one of these descriptions will apply to the pedal on your piano.

The first description of this pedal is called the sostenuto pedal. This type refers to most grand pianos and some of the higher quality upright pianos. Depressing this pedal engages a bar inside the piano that holds up specific dampers after the note is played on any note that has a damper. It acts as a third hand, allowing the pianist to hold specific notes or chords while playing elsewhere on the keyboard. It is most effective for sustaining bass notes while playing melodic passages that change chords; the pianist can then cleanly change chords with the sustain pedal without having to replay the bass note(s).

Sustaining bass notes leads to the second description of this pedal's function. On lower quality grands and many uprights of varying quality, the middle pedal lifts only the bass dampers. It is considered to be a "fake" sostenuto because bass notes can be held while playing passages on a different part of the keyboard, but it is less effective than a true sostenuto mechanism as other bass notes tend to ring sympathetically for as long as the pedal is engaged.





The third description of this pedal applies to many more modern uprights. This type of upright has a strip of felt that is lowered in front of the hammers (more on hammers in later issues) forcing the hammer to strike the felt before the string, significantly reducing the volume of the instrument. Once depressed, this pedal can usually be shifted to the left, causing the mechanism to be engaged without requiring use of the foot. It is referred to as the “practice” or the “mute” pedal. This pedal is for quietly practicing while not disturbing others and is NOT FOR REPETITIVE USE while playing. If used repetitively like the sustain or shift pedal it will wear out quickly and require replacement of parts. It is also not to be left engaged while the piano is not in use for the same reason.

The third pedal on the left toward the bass side of the piano is called the “una corda” or the shift pedal. On grand pianos this pedal shifts the entire keyboard to the right causing the hammers to strike only two of the three strings. If you see the keys moving when you depress this pedal, that is normal and means it is working correctly. Its function is to slightly reduce the volume of the instrument causing it to also be occasionally referred to as the “soft” pedal. It also forces the hammer to strike the string in a different spot than it usually does, changing the tonal quality of the sound. Accomplished concert pianists use this pedal frequently and are constantly changing the sound quality to give the music more tonal intrigue.

In an upright piano this pedal does not shift the action to the side, but rather lifts the hammers closer to the strings. The effect is similar to if you clap your hands from 2 feet apart or from 1 foot apart. The former creates a louder sound than the latter. Because the hammer does not strike a different spot as it does on a grand piano, the tonal quality is not as greatly effected.

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