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HAVING A "BALL" *with Staccato*

Staccato (sta-KAH-to: It., detached).

The shortened performance of a note (or group of notes) so that it sounds only for a moment, the major part of its written value being replaced by a rest. It is indicated either by the word *staccato* or, more frequently, by dots placed over the notes.

—*The Harvard Dictionary of Music*

How often has this definition been helpful in your teaching? Always...sometimes...never? In most cases, we explain that a staccato note is short and detached, knowing that in actual execution within a piece, the length of any staccato or detached note is ever changing. It must fit the mood and style of the section in which it occurs. As teachers of students beyond the beginning stages of music lessons we've probably all been caught in the vicious cycle: "Well, dear, play it a little longer...no, no, that's too long...try a bit shorter...oh, that's still not it...." Is it any wonder some students are ready to close the music and call it a day? And we haven't even gotten to that pesky staccato note with a line over it!

Some students can immediately connect to the music and instinctively create detached notes of appropriate musical length—most cannot. We must help these students develop a repertoire of aural images that offer different attacks, durations and releases. We can use wonderful adjectives to describe the staccato sound we are after: heavy, light, bouncy, cool, spicy, ethereal, dry, juicy, plump, clicky, clingy, thick, thin and so on. Of course, we are attempting to describe, with words, a sound that is *already* in *our* head. If you and your student are walking down the same road musically, these words may have meaning and can help refine the interpretation. For many students, the words are simply abstract. After making a half-hearted attempt to execute the plump, juicy, spicy, ethereal, or whatever, they will simply wail, "But *how*?" Now we're really stuck because we might be tempted to make technical suggestions appropriate to the instrument. A keyboard teacher may suggest freely dropping the finger, hand and arm, completely supporting the finger that is playing the staccato and follow through the stroke as if...; a wind teacher may say to allow the tongue to lightly make contact with the roof of the mouth for the attack, while supporting with the breath all the way through the note and then for the release you must...; and a string teacher may advise starting with the bow slightly above the string.... You get the idea. After all this explanation, are we really any closer to putting a sound in their heads? Sometimes it is best to leave the instrument and *find* the sound that needs to be produced.


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Balls Bouncing and Bouncing Balls

Let's consider balls for a moment. They come in many sizes and weights. Some are soft, some are firm, some can bounce really high, others float—and don't forget the badminton birdie, where the ball is just on the bottom. How about a marble? Isn't it just a really hard ball? Baseballs, softballs and whiffle balls (for those who want to learn to bat in small yards). Ping-pong balls, tennis balls, golf balls, basketballs and beach balls...this is starting to "sound" far better than ordinary music lessons. Do you remember the incredible energy in a superball? Or how about those salmon-colored playground balls that had such wonderful bounce? Maybe you crunch your abs while on a giant exercise ball or simply bounce on it for stress relief. Balls are everywhere, and we all have experienced bouncing them in one way or another.

Let's translate those balls into sound—surely you can find a myriad of places in music to use each of the following:

- The sound of two marbles clicking together
- The sound of a marble dropping onto a marble countertop or ceramic floor
- The sound of a golf ball dropping on a cement driveway
- That same golf ball dropping on cement, from 6 inches above, 1 foot above, 3 feet and so on
- An angry golfer bouncing his ball forcefully on the cement driveway (would the sound change or only the height of the bounce?)
- The distinctive *crack* as a major-league slugger hits a home run
- The sound of a bat hitting a softball
- The sound of a plastic bat hitting a whiffle ball
- The sound of a basketball being dribbled on a newly polished gymnasium floor
- The sound of a furious ping-pong game—the difference between the paddle/ball sound and the table/ball sound
- The sound of a tennis ball being served, then being lobbed (how do these sounds contrast with the ping-pong sounds?)
- The sound of a pumped-up beach ball bouncing on hard sand
- That same beach ball bouncing, but partially deflated

Not only do these analogies create a sound in the student's mind, many also create the sense of a physical motion, whether or not students are actively engaged in one of the mentioned ball-related activities. Actually, playing "air ball" is even better. Even if a keyboard student only "practices" dribbling with an imaginary basketball, he is learning to coordinate a hand and forearm movement. If

the same student changes his imaginary slow, easy dribble from waist high to a fast dribble below knee high, his motions will have to change. Many times the body will automatically find its new coordination—first away from the keyboard and then at the keys—without lengthy explanations from the teacher. Even a wind or string player can relate to the rush of energy in a fast dribble and have the tongue or bow arm coordinate accordingly. Try it when working on fast, articulated repeated notes.

Getting a feel for very light staccato can be difficult for some students. In this case, an imaginary badminton volley can help. In order to keep a real birdie in play during a fun volley, there must be a reasonably firm contact with the ball at the bottom and then a relaxed, easy flow in the arm to follow through. If you want to move past the imaginary, why not try an inflated balloon? A group of young students can quickly connect to the feeling of controlling the balloon's movement with very light taps and free arms. Alternating between the balloon exercise and the instrument solidifies this light staccato sound.

There is always the question, "where should the focus be—on the attack of the note or the release"? Thinking back to the dictionary definition that calls for a "shortened performance of a note," you might think the release is where the focus must be. Indeed, if you are a keyboard player who was taught to play staccato with the image of "touching a hot stove" you are probably focused on pulling away—quickly—from those hot keys! This produces a very clipped staccato sound that may be appropriate in some instances. But if you want a longer note, what do you do? Tell the student to stay on the hot stove longer? In bouncing balls, the rebound (release) just happens after the point of impact with a hard surface. The length of silence between bounces is determined, then, by the ball's size, shape, weight and material. It can be the same on an instrument: the attack of the note creates the release. Do you think about dribbling a basketball by pulling your hand up? Of course not! Let musical releases happen, just like the rebound of the arm off a basketball, guided by the image of sound in your head. An exercise ball is a wonderful tool for physically understanding note lengths and releases. Have the student bounce on the ball, first, continuously maintaining contact with the ball and then, gradually allowing the torso to come off the ball. This can be a great way to help develop understanding of notes with staccato dots *and* tenuto marks, staccato notes under a slur and so on.

> "The height of the bounce determines the proportion between beat and silence: slower notes get more space, faster notes get less space."

Bouncing and then catching a tennis ball, palm up, so the ball "slaps" into the palm, can bring awareness to the two-note slur—just another variation on a staccato. Have the student forcefully drop a tennis ball and then catch it with the same hand while paying attention to the sound of the ball hitting the floor and then the sound of it entering the hand. The sound of the ball being caught is quieter than when it hits the floor—a typical two-note slur sound. There is also a physical down-up motion that may be relevant as well, depending on the instrument.

Frequently, students see staccato dots and have a rhythmic meltdown, most of the time increasing the tempo. The same students might easily understand and execute a rhythm while playing legato, but adding staccato distorts their rhythmic perception. In this case, they may be losing the sense of time in the silence between the notes. Physically bouncing a ball in time brings back a steady rhythmic awareness, but to build sensitivity to the space between notes, the student must pay attention to both the impact and the silence in between. This is easily experienced by using a ping-pong ball and paddle. Allow the student to "warm up" by gently tapping the ball upward, trying to keep a steady pulse. It is immediately evident that the ball must bounce to the exact same height every time to keep a steady tempo. The height of the bounce determines the proportion between beat and silence: slower notes get more space, faster notes get less space. The student directly controls all the variables and is able to internalize and transfer the sensation to the rhythmic spacing of the staccato passage on his instrument.

Now that the sound, space and execution of staccato notes are in place, it might be wise to add one more component—line and phrase. Once more, balls can come into play to help the student understand the sense of forward movement in a phrase. Imagine or experience dribbling a ball while stationary and then taking that dribbling ball for a walk. This exercise helps the student conceptualize the idea of producing forward motion, while at the same time dealing with the up/down image of staccato. Those fortunate enough to be able to walk while playing their instrument can experience this first-hand.

Dig into your old toy box, dust off those balls and use your imagination. The next time you see staccato dots—just have a ball!

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