

The Fundamentals of Piano Composition

Chapter 2.1 | Left and Right Hand Textures

Lesson Summary and Review

Lesson Summary

This lesson continues ideas and techniques discussed in Unit 1, with an emphasis on piano textures constructed using both hands together. While Unit 1 (for the most part) introduced melodic and accompanimental textures that stayed within just one hand, we'll learn how to compose textures that move back and forth between hands, or that incorporate both hands simultaneously.

Let's say that I've composed a constant 16th note ostinato in the right hand and a sustaining bass line in octaves in the left hand (shown below).

The musical score is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. The right hand (treble clef) plays a constant 16th note ostinato starting on B3, with a dynamic marking of *p sempre legato*. The left hand (bass clef) plays a sustaining bass line in octaves, starting on B2, also marked *p sempre legato*. The piece consists of four measures.

The example shown above features just two layers, and both hands are responsible for just one layer at a time. Both of the compositional layers however seem to fit a background role, and so I might want to add a more lyrical melodic foreground line, either in the left or the right hand. I'll first add a melodic line to the right hand in a register above the ostinato (shown below). With the right hand now responsible for two compositional layers, I must ensure that the simultaneous intervals are playable. And to keep the right hand from jumping up and down the keyboard over and over again, I might want to restrict the new melody notes to no higher than about an octave above the lowest ostinato note (B3), which is B4. That way, the right hand can remain in one hand position. Sudden hand position shifts at this tempo (while playing constant 16th notes) would be needlessly difficult and unidiomatic.

The musical score is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. The right hand (treble clef) now has two layers: the constant 16th note ostinato from B3 and a new melodic line starting on B4. The left hand (bass clef) continues with the sustaining bass line in octaves from B2, marked *p sempre legato*. The piece consists of four measures. A *ped.* (pedal) marking is present at the bottom of the first measure.

Instead of adding a melodic line to the right hand, I could add one to the left hand. Using the sustain pedal, there's plenty of temporal space in this left-hand staff for an additional layer. Instead of long sustaining bass notes, I'll notate 8th notes with open-ended slur markings, which imply a sustained ringing sound. I've placed several melodic fragments in a tenor register, above the bass notes, but below the right-hand ostinato.

♩ = 72

p sempre legato

Ped.

If given enough time, the left hand can reach over the right hand to play treble staff or upper treble notes (shown below, labeled *L.H.*). This is a common technique when the right hand is occupied in a lower register.

♩ = 72

L.H.

p sempre legato

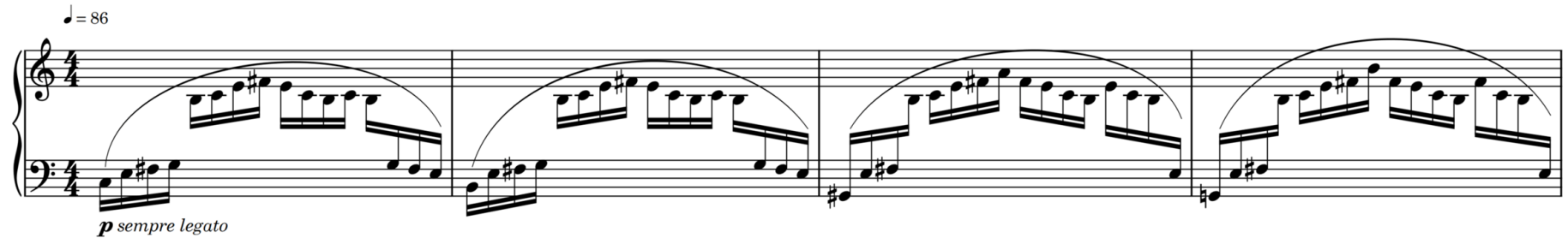
Ped.

Shown below is another constant 16th note texture, notated in the left hand, albeit with several instances of ledger lines above the bass clef staff. If the right hand was given a foreground melodic role (in place of the rests shown below), the left hand could certainly play the entire lower staff material, although a hand position shift would obviously be necessary.

♩ = 86

p sempre legato

I might instead decide to split this 16th note layer between the hands. In doing so, I've eliminated a need to shift either hand up or down.



p sempre legato

While both hands are contributing to this 16th note compositional layer, there are moments available in each measure for additional notes in both the top and bottom staves. In the version below, I've added melodic fragments in the upper staff (right hand) and occasional bass notes in the lower staff (left hand). The result is a three-layer pianistic texture that is much less complex than it might initially appear.



p sempre legato

Red.

Chapter 2.1 Excerpt Examples and Recordings

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Domenico Scarlatti | Keyboard Sonata in B Minor, K. 27 (1738)

Marco Alejandro Gil Esteva, pianist | © Stereo Arts Classics, SC under CC BY 3.0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aieXGYlgx7U&list=RDaeXGYlgx7U&start_radio=1

Ludwig van Beethoven | Piano Sonata No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 13: II. Adagio cantabile (1799)

Vladimir Feltsman, pianist | © 2010 Wyastone Estate Limited

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5kjS6Bxg-c&list=RDL5kjS6Bxg-c&start_radio=1

Frédéric Chopin | Preludes, Op.28 No.12 (1839)

Ivo Pogorelich, pianist | © 1990 Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Berlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6V4ODL73b4>

Edward MacDowell | 4 Little Poems, Op. 32: No. 2. The Brook; No.4. Winter (1888)

Dario Müller, pianist | © 2000 Dynamic

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doJ5OPFUMJY&list=RDdoJ5OPFUMJY&start_radio=1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=px8hdQt9-YI&list=RDpx8hdQt9-YI&start_radio=1

Francis Poulenc | 8 Nocturnes, No.6 (1938)

Alexandre Tharaud, pianist | © Arion

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuKF4tXp1XQ&list=RFuKF4tXp1XQ&start_radio=1

Edvard Grieg | Lyric Pieces, Op.12, No.1: Arietta (1867)

Håkon Austbø, pianist | © Brilliant Classics

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PFGpPzu_7s&list=RD9PFGpPzu_7s&start_radio=1

John Ireland | The Island Spell (1897)

John Lenehan, pianist | © 1999 Naxos

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk3Vz4wK4wU&list=RDpk3Vz4wK4wU&start_radio=1

Isaac Albéniz | Cantos de España, Op.232 (1891)

Alicia de Larrocha, pianist | All right reserved by the «Arxiu Alicia de Larrocha»

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8jrlhb-Lz8>