

Dynamics

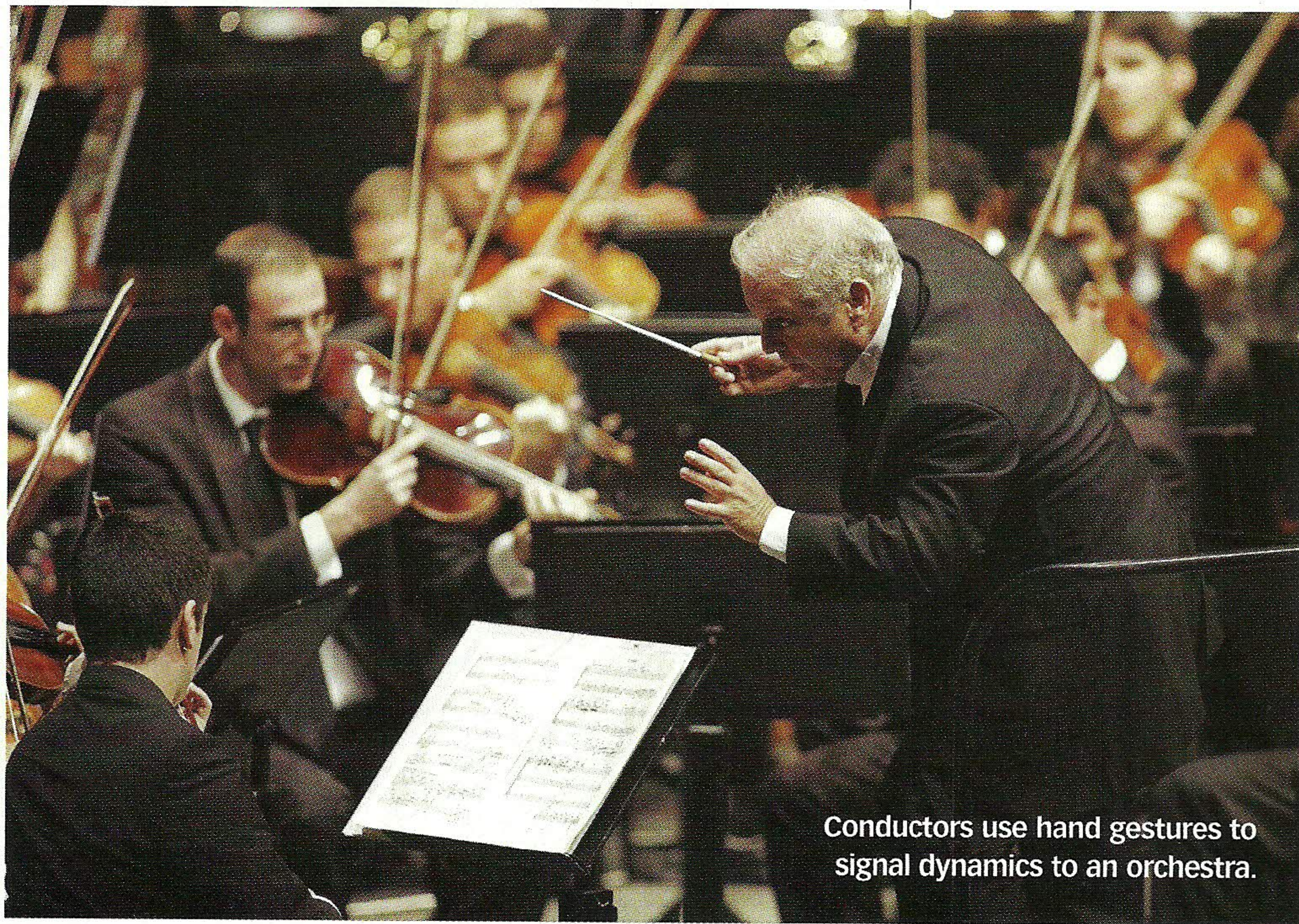


How to master the variations between loud and soft playing and make your music more expressive.

It may sound simple, but learning to control *dynamics*—the differences between loud and soft passages in a piece of music—can elevate a performance from the ordinary to the captivating. Look up *dynamic* in a thesaurus and you'll see words like *exciting*, *energetic*, *outgoing*, and *assertive*, all subjective terms that could be used to describe someone's personality as well as any piece of music. But to musicians, the word *dynamics* means something more objective: It refers to the loud and soft aspects of music and the relative differences between them. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with being "exciting" or "bold." While an exciting piece of music like Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" certainly uses dynamics, so too can a mellow piece like Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." It is *just as dynamic* without being loud or blowing you out of your chair with its power. In the musical sense, going from *very soft* to moderately soft is as dynamic as going from loud to *very loud*.

In some ways, dynamics may be the most basic of the expressive techniques, focusing solely on the loudness of the music without regard for other performance elements

By Jon Chappell



Conductors use hand gestures to signal dynamics to an orchestra.

like phrasing, tempo, rhythm, and pitch. But the effect is far from simple: Variations in dynamics not only dictate whether the music is loud or soft, they also may influence the tonal character of the instrument itself (see Signature Sound on p. 46).

Before we go further, let's clear up a possible misunderstanding: While dynamics have to do with playing loud and soft, the overall *volume* the listener hears is a different matter. Think of it this way: If you're listening to a blaring trumpet or thundering drums through your iPod, you can turn down the volume until it's barely audible. But you can still tell the instruments were playing loudly, because the performers' powerful dynamics affected the instruments' tonal character. In a natural or acoustic setting, the character *and* the actual volume of the music change.

BASIC TERMS

Beginning musicians are taught that in musical language, dynamics are expressed using four Italian words: *pianissimo*, *piano*, *forte*, and *fortissimo*. The musical symbols for these words are *pp*, *p*, *f*, *ff*. If you want to modify them, making them louder or softer, you double or triple the letters (*fff* for really loud) or add an *m* (for *mezzo*, which means "medium"). Medium-soft (*mezzo-piano*, or *mp*) is actually louder than soft (*p*), and medium-loud (*mezzo-forte*, or *mf*), is softer than *f*. Figure 1 shows the eight usable dynamic levels in music, from softest to loudest.

In theory, a composer can create more dynamics levels (by, using four *f*'s or five *p*'s, for example)—and that has been done—but these eight are considered to be the standard.

At the beginning of every piece of music,

or any new section, there should be a dynamic marking in the score. (If there isn't, it's usually assumed that you play *mf*.) So if you see *p* at the beginning of a piece, such as Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude," you know this is a quiet song (see Fig. 2). And indeed, the musical material supports this. If you play through the music, or listen to a recording of it, you can see that it would be hard to imagine this piece played loudly. By contrast, the opening of Chopin's "Military Polonaise" is triumphant, bold, and, well, "military" in its mood (see Fig. 3). It has a starting dynamic level of *forte* (*f*), and it would be not only unusual, but difficult, to play this passage with anything but vigor and author-

CHANGING ON A DIME OR BY DEGREES

ity. In both Chopin examples, we can see how the music itself is enhanced by a specific dynamic approach. We've seen how dynamics symbols help reinforce the composer's intent by giving you clues on how to play a given piece of music. But how do you best put them into practice? How do you define what constitutes "loud" and "soft"—and how big is the gap between those two extremes? And how do you get from one dynamic level to another? Variations in dynamics occur in two ways: Sudden changes, where one note is quiet and the next is loud (or vice versa); and gradual changes, where a passage gets louder and softer over time.

A great example of a sudden, unexpected change in dynamics occurs in Haydn's "Surprise Symphony." The story goes that the classical composer got tired of his well-fed audiences sleeping through his music, so he wrote a very soft, *pianissimo* (*pp*) opening phrase, and then, with no warning, blasted the audience with a follow-up full-orchestral tutti, playing at *fortissimo* (*ff*). For 18th-century

Figure 1

SYMBOL	TRANSLATION	LEVEL
<i>ppp</i>	<i>pianississimo</i> , "triple p"	very, very soft
<i>pp</i>	<i>pianissimo</i>	very soft
<i>p</i>	<i>piano</i>	soft
<i>mp</i>	<i>mezzo-piano</i>	moderately soft
<i>mf</i>	<i>mezzo-forte</i>	moderately loud
<i>f</i>	<i>forte</i>	loud
<i>ff</i>	<i>fortissimo</i>	very loud
<i>fff</i>	<i>fortississimo</i> , "triple f"	very, very loud

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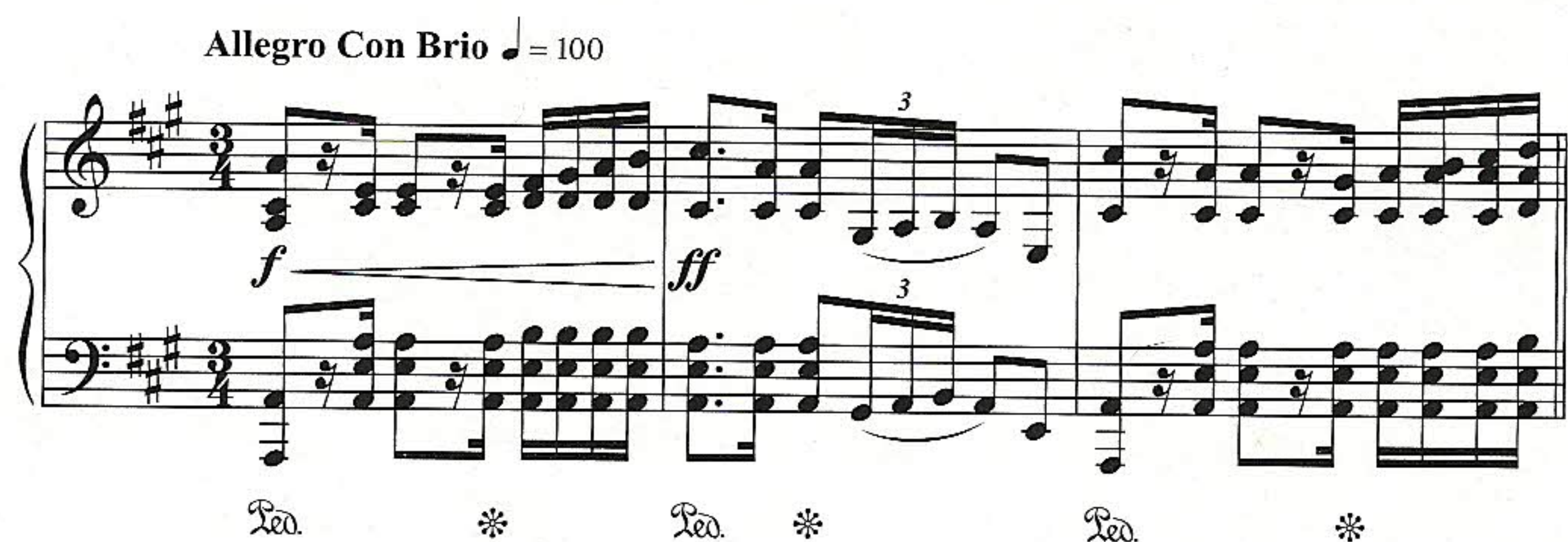
In Tune and Notion software (notionmusic.com) are teaming up to make our online music examples more student- and teacher-friendly than ever before! Log on to InTuneMonthly.com and click InTuneInteractive to see and hear the music examples shown here with both basic piano and with (where appropriate) full orchestral arrangements. As the cursor moves through the score, you'll see annotation identifying figures, motifs, phrases, and more. Each month, we'll be adding more lessons and features.

Figure 2



Frederic Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude," which the composer wrote when he was on vacation and the weather was depressingly rainy. The piano dynamic conveys the melancholy mood of the "raindrops" (steady eighth notes).

Figure 3



The "Military Polonaise" by Chopin. This full-chord finger-pounder almost begs to be played loudly and triumphantly.

audiences, this was the equivalent of a Marshall amp stack going off in their ears! Drastic dynamic changes can be used to signal a sudden dramatic change or surprise (e.g., when the hero of an opera stumbles upon his enemy in hiding).

Sudden dynamics can be heard in pop music, too—the "power ballad" often has a sudden change between the opening verse and the chorus. Listen to Augustana's "Boston," up to the lyric "You don't know me, you don't wear my chains, oh yeah." That's in a *mezzo-piano* dynamic. But right after that phrase, the drums kick in, the electric guitar strums out distorted *kerrrangs* of half-note chords, and the organ steps up its rhythms and presence. This increased activity and instrumentation substantially fills out the sound and moves the song up in dynamic level to *mezzo-forte*.

For gradual moves from one dynamic level to another, you employ a *crescendo* (which means "to get gradually louder") or a *decrescendo* or *diminuendo* (the two synonymous terms mean "to get gradually softer"). In written music, these are represented by "hairpins"—two horizontal lines that form open-ended angles facing in the direction of the change. Look again at Fig. 3, Chopin's "Military Polonaise." It shows that you start out loud and you get even louder from there (indicated by the hairpin that gets larger as you go along), until you reach the *fortis-*

simo (*ff*) climax at the beginning of bar 2. The crescendo hairpin and *fortissimo* corresponds to the musical climax of that phrase. For a long passage where writing in a hairpin would be impractical, composers and arrangers will write in the words "*cresc.*," "*decresc.*," or "*dim.*," sometimes using a dotted line to carry you to the next dynamic level. But for shorter passages—anything consisting of a few bars or less—hairpins do the job.

When a piece calls for a lot of dynamic variation, the changes in dynamics can be challenging to execute as the notes themselves. For example, look at Fig. 4, which is a dramatic vocal part for the character of a cowardly lion. In the first phrase, he is proclaiming his kingly superiority. But then something catches his attention, and his bravado is immediately reduced to timidity, because he fears it might be a mouse. If you didn't have the dynamics supporting this phrase, the melody and lyrics alone would hardly convey the complete range of emotions. However, note that the musical line does support the dynamics. The crescendo appears on the singer's rise, toward the strong part of his range. As the line descends, the dynamics reduce, too. It's a good example of how dynamics and melody support one another.

DYNAMIC DO'S AND DON'TS

You might think that an arranger can just decide whether a passage should be loud or soft and write the corresponding letter in



Augustana's song "Boston" uses dynamics between sections to grab the listeners' attention.

the score—the musicians will obey, right? But it's not as simple as that. Just as the *music* supported the dynamics in our Chopin and lion examples, so too do the *characteristics of instruments* themselves have natural dynamic tendencies. A composer must be careful not to write dynamics that are difficult, or even impossible to play. For example, to play high notes on the trumpet requires the player to purse his lips together and blow fairly hard. You get a wonderfully bright, brilliant sound on a high A, but it's never going to be soft. That high A is in the part of the trumpet's range that can only be played with a fair amount of air behind it—in other words, *loud*. Now consider the flute. Up high, the flute can play loud or soft. But down in the bottom of its range—middle C and below—the flute becomes quite breathy, and can only play notes very quietly. So if your orchestra members see the parts in bars 1 and 2 in Fig. 5, they will not be happy. These dynamics “fight” with the instrument's natural ability to produce tones at these levels. So not only will the notes themselves be unconvincing coming from the instruments, the performers won't respect the music—or the person who wrote them—because it shows an ignorance of how their instruments are played.

So, how can the composer fix the first two bars in Fig. 5 (and how can a musician presented with the part cope)? Well, in the case of the trumpet, you can employ a mute. There are many mutes available for the trumpet, and all provide different characters. Miles Davis, an important jazz trumpeter, introduced the “cool” sound of jazz starting in the 1950s, and he did this in part by playing softly. But to get around the limitation of the trumpet being basically a loud instrument, he employed a mute—specifically a wah-wah mute or harmon mute. This part calls for a cup mute (the more common type), but it effectively reduces the volume of the trumpet's naturally loud high A. You have to be careful, though, because a mute changes the character of the trumpet, making it more “buzzy.” Bar 2 presents a real problem for the flute, and for the arranger. We could transpose the part up an octave to put it in a stronger part of the flute's range. But this changes the notes themselves to a different octave. So a better solution might be to actually change instruments. Bar 4 shows the part reassigned to the clarinet, which can easily play this part *forte*. Problem solved.

DYNAMIC EXIT

Written music can give you clues to how loud or soft to play, but it's important to practice your dynamics as often as possible, whether you're reading a sonata or improvising with a rock band. Learn how to play loud, but under control: If you just blow, bow, hit, or strum your instrument as hard as you can, your sound won't just be loud, it'll be sloppy. And if you tense up to play loud, you'll lose speed and tone. Learn how to play softly while maintaining strength: If your attack is too delicate, a sustained note may drop out or fade away too early. And work on those transitions: Practice going smoothly from loud to soft and back. Develop the control required to make a sudden jump from dynamic extremes. As you master dynamics, your instrument will come alive with a greater range of expression. **T**

Figure 4



A dramatic melody with detailed dynamics to help the performer convey the proper emotional swings.

Figure 5



“Impossible dynamics” and their solutions.

A Keyboard by Any Other Name

Ever wonder why the familiar instrument with the black and white keys has the same name as the dynamic level for “soft?” It's not an accident. When the piano was invented, in the early 18th century (see *The Medici Collection*, p. 52), it improved on its predecessor the harpsichord (J.S. Bach's chief keyboard instrument) in one very significant way: It could play both loud *and* soft. (The harpsichord had only one dynamic level: kinda soft.) The sophisticated mechanical action and use of hard felt hammers gave this new instrument an unprecedented dynamic range. It could play thunderously loud and delicately soft. It could not only play louder than the harpsichord but softer too (which was the more interesting quality), because of its superior string-striking mechanism. So the people of the time gave this new innovation a very unimaginative and clunky name: the piano-forte (literally “soft-loud”). This eventually got shortened to just “piano,” but the irony is that the piano's ensuing popularity was due to its power. It could keep up with the orchestra, volume-wise, and could fill a concert hall all by itself. So perhaps it really should have been called the “forte!”

