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Let's talk about slurs, phrases and ties. As a long time piano teacher, I find many students, even advanced players get confused. Slurs - curved line over/under two or more *different* notes. Tie - curved line connecting the *same* note(s) immediately next to one another. Phrase - a musical idea, often indicated with a slur line over/under many notes or more often, many measures. Slurs mean to play the notes legato, or to put it into English - play the notes smoothly, connected or without any silence between the notes. How this is done depends on your instrument. On piano, do not lift the finger of the first note until you go to play the 2nd note. In bowed strings, like violin, it typically means to keep the bow going in the same direction. Wind/brass instruments it often means that you don't tongue between notes. Check with your teacher on the best way to do a slur. You do have a teacher, right? Please tell me you aren't trying to do this without anyone checking your work to see if it is correct - just because it sounds fine to you doesn't mean it's correct. An example of slurs in the entire example above, all the curved lines over/above the notes are slurs, *except* for the D notes in the right hand and the E notes in the left hand in measures 7-8 & 15-16 (3rd beat tied to 1st beat). Those are ties. In all other cases, even measure 5 going into measure 6, the curve line is over/under at least 2 different notes. That's all there is to slurs. Note that in this piano music example, there are some passages with both stem up and stem down notes at the same time. We call the different directions "voices." In those cases, the position of the slur makes a difference. For example, the slur in measures 7 & 8 over the high (stems up) voices in the right hand part are under the influence of the slur, but not the low voices. At the end of a slur it is common to "take a breath" before going to the next note. At measure 22 below in the right hand, a pianist might shorten the length of the off-beat 8th notes (& of 1, & of 2, etc) ever so slightly. A violinist would change bow directions resulting in a break in the sound. How much breath one takes, if any, is subjective. An example of phrases in the above example starting at measure 26, the curved line over the right hand part is more properly called a phrase. A phrase being a musical idea implies that all the notes in the phrase are all part of one musical idea. Whether to play all the notes legato (smooth) as a slur would indicate is more of a performance choice than a requirement. In fact, in this example it is impossible to play the entire phrase connected. Can you spot why not? In measure 27 there are two repeated "G"s in the right hand. By definition, repeated notes cannot be played smoothly connected. One has to lift their fingers (or change bow direction, etc.) in order to play a repeated note. That causes a silence between the notes and thus they are no longer connected or smooth. Ties. In measures 40 to 41 and 41 to 42 are examples of ties. The top note, B on the 3rd beat is tied into the 1st beat. That means play the note on beat 3 and hold the note down until the end of the tied note, in this case the end of beat 1. The F in measure 41, beat one is tied to beat 2. The C on beat 2 is tied into beat 3 *and* into the dotted half note on beat one of measure 42. All the while, there is a phrase/slur line over measures 39 to 42. Both notes in the left hand of measure 41, beat 2 tie into the next measure. In the case of the ties, all the curved lines connect the *same* note(s) to the same note with no other notes between them. Don't be confused by the slur in measure 34 and 35. The first and last notes are both G in the right hand. Are the two G's tied? Of course not. Because there are several notes between them it can only mean the curved line is a slur. I hope this helps. Please comment below. Slurs and ties look almost identical, but they play very different roles in music notation. In this post, you'll learn the difference between slurs vs. ties in music, why they matter, and how they affect performance and rhythm. Understanding how to read and write slurs and ties in music will improve your phrasing articulation, and rhythmic accuracy. A slur is a curved line that connects two or more notes of different pitch. It tells the musician to play the notes smoothly and connected. This technique called legato. Slurs affect the articulation of the music - how it sounds - but not the duration of each note. In short, slurs change how music is played, not how long it is played. Additionally, slurs help group notes into musical phrases. They give the melody shape and direction. Whether you're playing classical or modern music, using slurs correctly enhances expression and musical style. A tie is also a curved line, but it connects two notes of the same pitch. Instead of paying the note twice, you hold the first note for its total value of both notes combined. For example: A quarter note tied to an eighth note means you hold the note for 1 + 1/2 = 1 1/2 beats. A tie creates a new, longer duration by joining together the values of same pitch notes. Ties are often used to: Extend a note across a beat or bar line Maintain clear rhythmic grouping in notation Show durations that don't fit a single note value When used correctly, ties improve both readability and timing in written music. When writing music, it's important to show that beat clearly. Music is organized in measures (bars), and each beat has a natural strength, a level of importance. For example, in a 4/4 time: Beat 1: Strong Beat 3: Secondary Strong Beats 2 and 4: Weak Important: Long notes like minims (half notes) or crotchets (quarter notes) should start on downbeats. If a long note starts on a weak beat and continues over a strong beat, use a tie. This keeps the beat structure visible, which helps with phrasing and interpretation. When writing music, clear use of ties helps show long a note extends across beats. This is especially useful when working with syncopated rhythms or complex phrasing. Ties aren't just about holding notes longer - they help organize rhythm clearly across beats. When a note crosses over from beat 2 to beat 3, it's better to write it as two notes tied rather than one long note. This keeps the beat structure visible and helps the performer feel the pulse more easily. When you write rhythms, it's best practice to start longer note values on downbeats. In the picture below, we see measures with rhythmic patterns. The top line shows the correct way to notate some of these patterns using ties, which makes it much easier to keep track of the beats and count each measure accurately. The bottom line shows incorrect notations, where it's more difficult to interpret the note values without ties. It can be pretty frustrating, can't it? For example, a minim (2 beats) should usually start in a strong beat. If it doesn't, break it into tied smaller values (like a quarter) so the rhythm matches the beat structure clearly. This helps performers read and feel the pulse more easily, and it improves rhythmic accuracy and musical phrasing. A downbeat is the first and strongest beat of the measure. So, in 4/4 time, we count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1, 2, 3, 4 = downbeats (on the pulse) Each & ("and") = upbeats (in between pulses) In 3/4 time, we count: 1 & 2 & 3 & Same idea: numbers are downbeats, "&"s are upbeats In 6/8 time, beats are grouped in two main beats Count: 1 & 2 & & 1 and 2 = main beats (downbeats), The "&"s are upbeats or subdivisions Tip: Understanding downbeats and upbeats is key when working with ties and syncopation, especially when writing rhythms that cross beats. Ties are essential when writing syncopation - rhythms that emphasize unexpected or offbeat moments. They shift the natural accent away from strong beats, creating tension, groove, or surprise. By using proper ties, composers and arrangers can: Highlight offbeats Make complex rhythms easier to read and count Preserve the structure of the meter Without ties, syncopated rhythms can look confusing and be hard to count or perform accurately. Understanding slurs and ties in music is essential for writing and performing with clarity. Slurs affect how notes are played; ties affect how long they are held. Both tools help musicians interpret music more accurately. When you notate music clearly, you make it easier to read, count, and perform - which leads to better playing and a stronger musical experience overall. To wrap things up, this post covered three topics: ties, slurs, and a brief introduction to syncopation. I know it might feel like TMI (too much info :D) But don't worry - the goal here is simply to get familiar with the basic terminology, see some helpful examples, and start recognizing how these elements make reading, practicing, and even listening to music easier and more enjoyable! If you're like more practice, you can check out my worksheet on rhythmic patterns, proper notation with ties, and much more -available on Etsy and Buy Me a Coffee! Join the Weekly "Melody Hub" Want to learn or refresh your music theory skills at your own pace? Every Sunday, you'll get a printable PDF lesson + extra worksheet straight to your inbox! Perfect for beginners & self-taught musicians Easy-to-follow printable PDFs Subscribe for €7/month on Buy Me a Coffee, and you'll receive a new PDF lesson every week! Your support not only gives you great resources but also helps me keep creating -so thank you, it truly means a lot! Asked • 02/27/21 7 Answers By Expert Tutors Omer K. answered • 07/26/24 Comprehensive Music Theory, Composition, Harmony and Piano Lessons A tie connects two notes of the same pitch, meaning you hold the note for the combined duration of those notes A tie is the same pitch. It ties the notes together and makes them longer. (ex: quarter note tied to quarter note = half note)A slur is an articulation. The pitches are not the same and the note values do not change. You simply connect them through your articulation. Calynn R. answered • 04/04/22 Music Minor A tie is used by a composer when they want to connect 2 or more notes of the same pitch on a musical staff to make the note longer. A slur is utilized when a composer wants to connect two or more notes of different pitches on a musical staff. Amanda K. answered • 11/08/21 Certified and Experienced Elementary and Special Education Teacher The difference between a tie and a slur is that a tie connects the same note, while a slur connects different notes. Yury L. answered • 03/21/21 Piano, Production, Theory, Music History, and Composition Tutor They look the same but a tie connects the same note and a slur connects different notes. If you see a tie then you have to hold the note for the duration of "both" of the tied notes. If you see a slur you have the play the notes legato. Timothy F. answered • 03/06/21 Master of Music in Jazz/Multi-instrumentalist Guitar, Piano, Producer A tie and slur look the same but they are telling you different things based on the context. A tie connects two of the same note and you hold that note for the sum of the two tied notes. For instance, if you have a half note tied to a quarter note you would hold that note for 3 beats (half note+quarter=2+1=3). A slur connects two or more notes and indicates that you play those notes connected or, in Italian, legato. Slurs can also indicate the length of a phrase. While they may look the same, they actually have a different approach. A tie is used when connecting two notes of the same pitch. While a slur is used to connect two notes of different pitch. There are two different kinds of curly lines in music notation - ties and slurs. Both look very similar on the page, but they do very different things - knowing how to recognize which is which is essential for avoiding confusion when practicing. Fortunately, there are some very clear distinctions between how ties and slurs appear in music notation.Ties connect notes to other notes to create longer note values. They are the only way to combine note values across barlines, and are valuable for offering a broader range of rhythmic combinations in general.A slur is a kind of articulation, and also a manner of indicating phrasing. For keyboard or piano music, the primary function of a slur is to tell the player that the notes it's affecting are to be played legato, or connected without gaps. Slurs can also be used to indicate a musical phrase (even one combining staccatos, accents, or other articulations), but are more commonly used to simply indicate legatoEven though ties and slurs look very similar on the page, there are a couple of key differences in the ways they appear that can make it easier to tell them apart.Because ties combine two note values into a single, longer note value, they can only connect two pitches of the same kind. "Pitch" is the word we use to refer to how high or low a note sounds - if you have two pitches of the same kind, it's the same as saying that you have two of the same notes. For example, a tie can connect one C to the same C, but not to a C in a different octave, or to any other note (those would be different pitches.Additionally, there can be no notes interrupting the connection between the tied notes (unless those notes are happening in a different "voice," and are meant to be played around the tied notes).Slurs, on the other hand, often occur over or under a number of notes (though they don't have to), and commonly stretch between two completely different pitches. Slurs can depart and arrive on the same pitch, but, to avoid being confused as ties, there must be other notes in between that are meant to be played as part of the slur.To summarize the visual differences between ties and slurs:Ties must connect two note values of the same pitch; slurs can affect notes of many pitches, and can depart and arrive at different pitches.Ties cannot be broken by any other notes (the connection between the tied notes cannot be interrupted); slurs that depart and arrive at the same pitch must have other notes in between (or even just a single note) to prevent them from being confused as ties.Here are some more examples to help you get more familiar with how ties and slurs look on the page:Thanks for checking out this article from Liberty Park Music! If you liked what you saw here, you can find more in our blog at libertyparkmusic.com. We also have a YouTube page! And if you're really ready to take your music training to the next level you can subscribe to our site and gain access to a full spectrum of piano, guitar, drum, and music theory lessons.West has over 10 years of teaching experience in settings that vary from private studios to college classrooms. In addition to teaching traditional forms of piano pedagogy, West frequently produces music and teaching materials that cater to the needs of his students. Check out West's course on Piano Etudes for both beginners and intermediate pianists. There's no shortage of instruments out there, and understanding the basics of music theory is key to mastering them. If you look at any music sheet, you'll find numerous notations that are used to convey a specific rule or message. Some of these symbols include slurs, ties, staccato, and legato. One of the most commonly used notations in a musical sheet is a slur. You've probably heard the term before, but do you know what it means? If you want to know exactly what a slur is in music, you've come to the right place. Here, you'll learn about slurs, why you need them, and a breakdown of the differences between a slur and a tie. I'll also talk about how you can implement slurs in your own performance. Let's get started! So, What Is a Slur In Music? Slur is a western musical notation that conveys playing a sequence of two or more notes without taking any pause in between them. To be more specific, the notes should be played in legato. Legato means that each note has to be played smoothly and should be connected with another note. In singing, a slur indicates that a sequence of notes should be played without rearticulating it in a single breath. This notation is generally indicated by a curved line. It can be above the note if the stem is facing downward and below it, if the stem is facing upward. If a slur or curved line is placed below or above and connects more than two notes, then those notes should be played together without a break. There are numerous reasons for which slurs matter. Some of them are: Slurs are arguably the best way to express accentuation. Slurs allow you to play a series of two or more notes as legato. Slurs are used to perform fast scales. There are other reasons why slurs matter. They help musicians to determine the sound of the notes, what notes should be grouped together, and in what numbers. They not only tell us the number of notes but also determine how to inflect them. During a performance, it's essential for the notes to sound inflected, no matter how long that note is. Slurs are expressed differently in each instrument. Take guitars, for example, most intermediate guitarists can read and perform slurs. Trombone players, on the other hand, consider slurs to be one of the most difficult techniques to master, even for experienced players. Differences Between Slurs And Ties Slurs and ties may appear similar to the inexperienced ear. For beginner musicians, it can also be tricky to understand the difference between the two. However, both have a unique role to play in a musical composition. Before we can hear the difference between slurs and ties, we first need to understand how a tie functions. What Is a Tie? A tie in a music sheet can be identified as an arched line that joins two or more notes of the same pitch. Unlike slurs, a tie can't connect two notes that are in different pitches. However, it can connect two notes with different rhythmic values. For example, a quarter note and an eighth note, it should go for one and a half beats. If this dotted quarter note is connected to an eighth note by a tie, it should go for an additional half beat. So if I play the first note and hold for one and a half beats, I should then play the next note and keep holding for another half beat. The combined note should last for 2 beats. Differences Between Them A slur is an articulation mark that indicates connecting two or more notes as one smooth sound, without sounding out each note separately. In other words, slurs are used when you don't want to sound out every note of a chord, but you still want the chord to be heard as separate sounds. A tie, on the other hand, means that you have to play the two notes together as a single, longer, note. You're meant to play the tie for the duration of the sum of beats in both notes. One distinction that sets them apart is that you won't find any notes between a tie. It'll connect two notes that are placed side by side. It doesn't matter which measure these notes are; the only condition is that it should be adjoining. So, while ties are used to combine notes for a stronger impact, slurs are used to indicate legato articulation. How Should You Use Slurs in Your Own Playing? Once you understand how slurs work, you'll start to notice how they sound when you're listening to an instrument or playing it. However, if there's more than one slur involved in the same piece of music, it might be hard to recognize all of them. In addition to that, you might struggle to understand how different instruments execute slurs during their performance. So, let's take a look at some instruments that commonly use slurs in music, and how you should interpret them. Windpipe or Brass Music There are two main interpretations of slurs in the Windpipe. The first is playing all the notes in a single breath. The second is that you must never rearticulate the notes with your tongue. In brass music, it's important for you to connect all the notes smoothly without tonguing. You'll often come across a mark or symbol that combines both slur and staccato. Well, in musical terms, this is known as Portato. You can play these kinds of notes by brushing the keys with your fingers. String Music In string music, the slur is used to point out bowing, which means that you have to keep the bow moving in a single direction and then change it between slurs. String players play the slur in one stroke of their bow, same as how someone playing a wind instrument would play it in one breath. Vocal Music When it comes to vocal music, slurs are never used as phrasing. On the contrary, they're used to indicate a syllable that is stretched for more than one note. This is also referred to as melisma in western musical terms. If, by any chance, a composer wants to indicate phrasing, they will often use dotted lines to differentiate it from a melisma slur. Guitar The guitar incorporates slurs in a lot of variations. Slurs can be executed using slides, hammer-ons, pull-offs, and bends. In guitar, musical slurs are generally divided into two: musical and technical. Musical slurs help in playing legato. On the other hand, technical slurs help in playing the music more conveniently. That said, a slurred note is much more sifter compared to a stricken note. There Are Two Types of Slurs in Guitar The first one is called ascending or a hammer-on. You can make this type of slur by pushing a note downwards without picking it. You can probably guess it by its name, which indicates that a note should be hammered or pushed down with force. This usually happens right after one note is played so that its momentum can help the other note to sound clear. The primary purpose behind this articulation is to make the note that's hammered on sound softer, and less assertive. The second type is called descending or pull-off. This is usually played by taking your finger off of the note you're playing. This will make the sound without picking any extra notes. Similar to hammer-off, it will also need some momentum so that the pull of the note can be heard clearly. Slurs in Piano In a piano, the meaning of a slur is to play legato. As you go further in more details, you will find a lot of different variations of slurs in piano. For example, there's a technique called the two-note slur in piano. This technique doesn't just focus on joining two notes together, but also how each note carries a different weight to it. When a first note is meant to have a stronger impact, it's always accentuated. This can be done by holding the note for longer or making it sound louder. On the other hand, the second note of the two-note slur will be shorter, or quieter. In piano, more than four measures of slurs are known as phrases. There are many phrases of slurs that can be either short or long. There is no specific rule for its length. Slurs in Violin Slurring in violin means to change the notes using your left hand without changing the direction of your right hand. It shares the same concept as guitar slurring. It's not considered hard to carry out a slur using a violin. It can give beginners a headache at first, but once they get the hang of it, it becomes second nature to execute it. The idea is to know how to evenly distribute the weight of the bow over all the notes. Make sure you have plenty of room in your bow so you can play it correctly. A tie, a slur and a phrase all look quite similar and sometimes they can get confused with each other since they look like this: This symbol is typically used above the staff (or inverted and used underneath the staff), depending on which direction the stems of the notes are going. This applies to ties, slurs and phrases. The length of the above 'curved line' can also vary, depending how many notes it spans across, or in the case of ties, how spaced the notes are physically written on the page. In some ways, a tied note or notes are the easiest to explain. If you see the curved line going from one note to another, especially but not exclusively over bar lines, that the notes are exactly the same, then it is a tied note. It can't be say from one E to a different E, it has to be exactly the same pitch. If it is not exactly the same pitch, then it is simply not a tied note or notes. It is important to note that there is no limit as to how many notes can be 'tied' together. Theoretically and practically (especially through the assistance of pressing down on the right pedal, known as the sustained pedal) the one note can last for several bars. A slur and a phrase can be a little harder to differentiate. A slur can involve as little as 2 notes but at the same time, it is quite short, usually only a few notes long. The reason why they are indicated to be slurred is that one note is seamlessly blended into the next note until all the notes indicated by the slur, end. This is not technical, but I like to think of slurs are like syllables of a word. When you say a word with 2 or more syllables, you don't pronounce the syllables by verbally chopping them up but rather you blend the syllables, no matter how many, into each other to create the sound of the whole word. To help clarify my example, I'll use the word 'miscommunication' because it has a lot of syllables. We don't pronounce it like 'mis-com-mu-ni-ca-tion', but rather a blended whole of 'miscommunication'. A phrase is a blend of legato, which in musical terms means "smooth and well connected". So a phrase usually has like a theme or a melody or some complete fragment that is cohesive. Using the analogy of grammar, I think a phrase is a lot like a complete sentence. It can be short or long and it has components that make it a complete thought. When we read a sentence, it has a flow to it - a different flow to what a word with many syllables, but nevertheless there is a cohesion and flow. A tie, a slur and a phrase mark might all look very similar, however they each have their own function and once you truly understand the difference, the easier it is to actually spot those differences. Slur: Two or more notes of the same or differing pitch can be slurred. When notes are slurred they will be played back in a smooth and connected manner. The command for the slur is Notes: Slur and the quick key is the semicolon (;). Tie: Two notes of the same pitch can be tied. When notes are tied, the first note will be played and held for the duration of both notes. The command for the tie is Notes: Tied and the quick key is the slash (/). The direction of a slur or tie can be changed by selecting the slurred or tied notes, pressing Alt+Enter and under the Notes tab, setting Slur Direction or Tie Direction to Upward or Downward. This article explains what slurs, staccato and ties mean in music and how they differentiate. A basic knowledge of how to read music is needed to be able to fully understand the content.A slur is a curved line placed over or under two or more notes to indicate to play the notes joined or connected. The Italian musical term for playing connected is legato. Learn more Italian musical terms here. Below is an example of a slur.A phrase is a group of notes joined by a slur. See the example below.Although they look similar, a tie is different from a slur. In a slur, there are notes of different pitch. In a tie, the notes are all of the same pitch. When you play notes that are tied, you play the first note and hold it for the value of all the notes that follow. The example below features a tie between bars 1 and 2. If you were playing this passage, you would play note E on the fourth beat of bar 1 and hold it over the bar for the duration of the first beat of bar 2. In other words, you hold note E for 2 beats.Below is another example of a tie. In this example, you play note C on the first beat of bar 1 and hold it over the whole of bar 2 and bar 3 (1st beat). In other words, you hold note C for 9 beats.Staccato is an Italian musical term which means the opposite of legato (slurs). When notes are played staccato, you play them short and detached. In musical notation, staccato notes are indicated by dots placed above or below the notes. See the example below.I hope you are now comfortable understanding the difference between slurs, staccato and ties. If you are interested in learning more music theory or would like to learn a musical instrument at Do Re Mi Studios, click here. Do you know the difference between ties and slurs? This is something I have noticed a lot people find confusing. They do look similar, but there are some clear differences. We're going to explore what those differences are right now.A tie connects two or more notes of the same pitch together with a curved line over or under the notes. The rhythms are then added together. The value of the second note, or tied note, is added to the value of the first note.Can there be several notes tied together? Yes, you can find multiple notes tied together. This makes for a really long time to hold one note.Ties are always written on the opposite side of the note stems. They are drawn connecting the note heads, not the stems. So, if the stems are mostly facing down, the tie is written above the notes. If the stems are mostly going up, the tie can be found below the notes.To play or sing ties, you sound the first note and hold it for the length of both notes without replaying the second note.For example, this tied note is held for a total of 6 counts. The whole note equals 4 counts plus the 2 counts of the half note.However, you don't want to count "1-2-3-4-5-6". You will get lost as to what beat you are on. Instead, count "1-2-3-4, 1-2". Make sure you are keeping track of every beat going by, regardless of how the notes are connected.A slur connects two or more notes of different pitches together by a curved line over or under the notes. When you hear notes that are slurred, there is a connection of sound. No break or silence is heard between the pitches.The term legato is used to describe how you play or sing slurred notes. Literally, it means "to unite or bind". To put it in simpler terms, it means a smooth connection from one note to the next.Here's an example of notes with slurs.When you see the majority of the stems going in the same direction, a slur is written on the opposite side of the stems. In other words, slurs are always written right above or below the note head, depending on the direction of the stems. Usually, when you see a good mix in stem direction, the slur is written above the notes.If you play a wind instrument, only the first note of the slurred grouping is tongued. After tonguing the first note, keep the air moving leaving no break in sound between the notes. Also, do not breathe in between the notes with slurs. On string instruments, a slur means to play a group of notes with one long bowing. For piano players, slurs tell us when to lift the hands.Ties are thought of as a part of rhythm in music. They have more to do with note values or how long you hold a note. Slurs are more along the lines of articulation or how you play a note. Do you play it short, long, connected, accented, etc.? In the case of slurs, you play using a connection of sound called legato playing. This is slightly different on each instrument.While ties and slurs can be confusing, we've found some real differences that are worth remembering. My hope is that now you will know the difference between these two markings and know exactly what to do when you see them.Just keep in mind that ties hold while slurs are smooth. Ties use the same notes while slurs connect different notes together.There you go. The tie and slur mystery is finally solved! The best self-study music theory book loved by all my readers and students.