

MINI ESSAY 5: TECHNIQUE BASICS FOR BEGINNERS

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The following information about technique was developed during my dissertation research for my PhD in Music Education with an Emphasis in Piano Pedagogy from the University of Oklahoma. For my dissertation, I interviewed and observed four successful pre-college teachers to discover how they taught technique to beginning students. I also conducted post doctoral research by observing and interviewing eight other teachers.

The teachers I observed were Marvin Blickenstaff, Nancy Breth, Thu Carey, Ted Cooper, Suzanne Guy, Ella Karasik, Nina Polonsky, Mary Craig Powell, Olga Radosavljevich, Carolyn Shaak, Scott McBride Smith, and John Weems. All the teachers had different personalities, used varied method books, and subscribed to various schools of technique. However, they all had commonalities in their approach to beginning piano technique, which is encapsulated in this Mini Essay.

In addition to learning so much about technique during my research, I also learned that the best teachers are picky teachers. They care deeply about each student's progress and have high expectations for every student. As a result, their students rise to meet their expectations. Observing these fine teachers, and it completely changed the way I teach. I would encourage all teachers to observe other teachers as much as possible, as this helps us keep growing and learning as teachers so that we can do our best for our students.

Piano Hand Shape

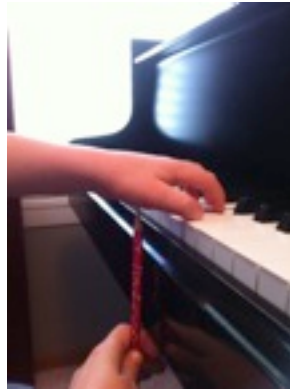
In the Unit 1 Black Key pieces in **Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1**, students develop basic coordination skills in using the arm and moving the fingers. Once students begin playing on White Keys in Unit 2, more attention can be devoted to the formation of the **Piano Hand Shape**. The reason modern piano methods begin on the black keys is not technical. It is for the purpose of being able to find a position on the piano easily. In terms of technique, it actually more difficult for beginners to play on the black keys than on the white keys.

A good **Piano Hand Shape** includes:

- Good Posture, in terms of height and distance from the piano, is a prerequisite to a good Piano Hand Shape
- Hands up over the keys and wrist level with the forearm
- Domed and strong hand knuckle bridge
- Gently curved fingers
- Relaxed non playing fingers (especially thumb)
- Firm fingertips (finger nail joint should not be collapsed)

Keeping the hand up over the keys and level with the wrist and arm can be a problem if students are pulling back from the elbow, or if their sitting position is too low at home. Students tend to naturally approach the keys from below rather than from above. Just because this is natural does not mean it is correct! Vigilance is required to correct this habit. To train students to keep their hands level with wrist and arm and to approach the keys from above:

- Be sure students are sitting at the proper height, both at the lesson and at home. The arm should be parallel with the keyboard.
- Students should not pull back at the elbow. The elbow should push forward a bit for each note.
- The thumb plays on its corner, not flat on its side, because flat thumbs pull the hand down.
- Hold a pencil (sharp tip up) under the student's hand, so that if he drops his hand, he will feel the pencil tip. I call this the "pencil of doom." Students think this is funny and often insist I get a sharper pencil!



Individual Finger Properties

Within a well-shaped hand, the individual fingers will exhibit the following characteristics:

- **Thumb** plays on its corner tip, not flat on its side.



- **Finger 2** plays on the pad of the finger with a firm knuckle joint (not overly curved).



- **Finger 3** plays on the pad of the finger with a firm knuckle joint (not overly curved).



- **Finger 4** generally needs to play a little taller than fingers 2 and 3 so that it does not end up approaching the keys from below or playing with a collapsed hand bridge.



- **Finger 5** plays on the outer tip of the finger, not too curved or standing too tall, and definitely not flat.



Firm Fingertips

Getting students to play with firm, rather than collapsed, fingertips can be a challenge.



Correct Firm Fingertip



Incorrect Collapsed Fingertip

Firm fingertips are essential because they allow the pianist to control the sound of each note. The pianist cannot judge how a key will go down if he plays with a collapsed fingertip.

Relaxation trumps firm fingertips, but teachers should work to help students develop the coordination of a loose arm, loose non-playing fingers, and firm fingertips on playing fingers. Be sure you check for loose shoulders while working on Piano Hand Shape. Teachers sometimes are so focused on how the hands look that they forget about possible sources of tension in other areas of the student's body, most notably the shoulders.

Developing Firm Fingertips

A few ways to develop strong (non collapsed) fingernail joints are:

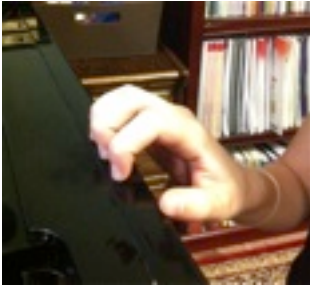
- Play repeated notes such as found in the **Zechariah Zebra** and **Kangaroo Technique Exercises**. Repeated notes build strength and allow the student to focus on one finger at a time without the added coordination of changing fingers on every note. (Thanks to Mary Craig Powell, Marvin Blickenstaff, and Carolyn Shaak to introducing me to the benefits of this exercise.)
- Be sure the student is not pulling back on the arm from the elbow when playing each note, as this pulls the hand down and causes the knuckles to collapse. There is a very subtle forward push on each note that keeps the hand in a good Piano Hand Shape. (Thanks to John Weems for this tip.)
- Make circles between each finger and the thumb. This helps students feel the sensation of strong fingertips.



- Have the student check your knuckles by pushing on them as you have your hand in a good Piano Hand Shape on the fallboard. Then check the student's knuckles.
- Roll the fingertips in putty to feel the resistance of the strong fingertip joints. I prefer glacier putty, as silly putty proved to be too stiff. (Thanks to Irina Gorin's website, <http://www.gorinpianostudio.com/> for this idea.)



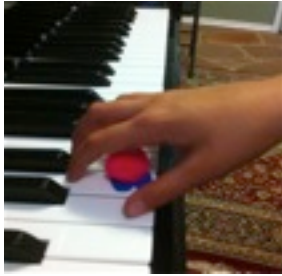
- Hang on a table with firm fingertips (like hanging off a cliff). I call these “Knuckle Pull Ups.”



- Gentle and persistent nagging is necessary. Do not give up, even if it takes many weeks of reminders for the student to play with strong fingertips. It is easier for children to play any way they can to just get the right keys down, and this is their default. But if teachers let students play with poor technique in the beginning of study, they will reach a point where they cannot play harder repertoire and where they cannot play cleanly or at fast tempos. It is much more difficult to fix poor technique in a transfer student than it is to take the time to start the student correctly at the beginning of study. Gentle and persistent nagging can take the form of the following **Teaching Strategies**:
 - **Oops.** Say, “Oops! What am I going to say? What did you forget?” Student answers, “Strong fingertips!”
 - **Immediate Correction.** Stop the student immediately when you see collapsed fingertips.
 - **Which Way?** Play with a firm fingernail joint and with a collapsed one. Ask the student which one is correct.
 - **One at a Time.** Ask the student to concentrate on one finger at a time. “Let’s see if you can have strong fingertips every time you play Finger 2.”
 - **Humor.** Tell the student you are the knuckle police and might have to give him a ticket if you see any floppy fingertips.
 - **Props.** Create a flock of Fuzzies, (which are pom poms with googly eyes glued on and foam feet).



Have the student choose a Fuzzy and name it. Talk about how Fuzzy sits under the student's hand in his house and hopes that his roof won't cave in (collapsed bridge or flat hand). Tell the student that when the fingertips are wobbly, Fuzzy is afraid his walls are going to collapse.



Then put the Fuzzy on the fallboard to watch the student play. The Fuzzy jumps up and down for joy when the student plays with good knuckles. I have had great success with this even with 12-year-old boys! You can use a small plastic animal if you cannot create any Fuzzies. I can't believe how hard my students will work to please the Fuzzy. I try not to take it personally!

- **Metacognition.** Tell the student why you are nagging him! "I am not just nagging you all the time to make you mad. I am concerned that we fix your floppy fingertips now because I want you to be able to play really cool Beethoven Sonatas when you get older, and if you play with poor technique, there is no way you will be able to play harder pieces."

Basic Motions and Articulations

The basic motions presented in **Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1** and **Piano Safari® Technical Exercises and Rote Pieces** are:

- Arm Weight (**Lion Paw**)



- Fast Repeated notes with a loose arm and firm fingertips (**Zechariah Zebra, Kangaroo**)



- *Non legato* articulation with an arm bounce on each note (**Tall Giraffe**)



- *Legato* articulation with an arm bounce on each note (**Tree Frog**)



- *Legato* articulation with one arm motion for several notes (**Soaring Bird**)



- Rotation (**Monkey Swinging in a Tree**)



Rationale for Beginning with *Non Legato* Articulation

Mastering these technical motions will aid a student greatly in playing his first year repertoire and will give him a firm foundation for all future technique. We find that at the beginning of study, having a student play with a *non legato* articulation is the easiest way for him to play with a solid tone while remaining relaxed and maintaining a good Piano Hand Shape. A small child does not have the strength required to depress the keys on the modern piano, with its heavy action, in an injury-free manner with the fingers alone. The arm must aid the fingers in playing.

The connection of the fingers for *legato* can be added once the student has mastered control over his arm, fingers, and hand shape. As the student progresses to late elementary and intermediate levels, more refined finger action will begin to develop. However, the involvement of the arm continues into advanced levels of piano technique.

Non Legato to Legato Progression

In short, the progression from *non legato* to *legato* in a student's study is as follows:

- **Non Legato: Tall Giraffe Technique.** The student plays detached with an arm bounce on each note in every piece.
- **Legato with Arm Bounce: Tree Frog Technique.** The student plays with an arm bounce on each note while the fingers connect from note to note. At this point, the student should be able to play his pieces with Tall Giraffe or Tree Frog Technique on command, differentiating with ease between these articulations.
- **Legato with a Smooth Arm: Soaring Bird Technique.** The student plays with one arm motion over several notes while the fingers connect each note to the next.
- **Finger Action.** Increasing refinements in finger technique and choreography between the arm and fingers continue into the advanced levels.

Rotation

Rotation from finger to finger is an important skill for young pianists to learn, as it prepares them for tremolo, broken octaves, Alberti bass, and other fast interval patterns common in piano literature. It is an extension of a well-choreographed arm that is aligned behind the playing finger. Rotation involves the forearm, wrist, and hand moving as a well-aligned unit to transfer the arm weight from one finger to the next. Rotation is not wiggling or twisting the wrist. Rotation should be done slowly and with an exaggerated motion. As speed increases, the rotation becomes smaller.

Checking for Relaxation

It is important that children develop a free technical mechanism that has the minimum amount of tension required to play. The Teaching Strategy I find the most helpful for checking for tension is called **Freeze**. While the child is playing, I say, "Freeze." The child stops on the note he is playing, and I physically check for tension in the following areas:

- **Shoulders.** I touch the raised shoulder so it relaxes. I tell the student to put any tension that wants to creep into the shoulders into his abdomen instead so that he plays the piano from a strong central core. If a student has a weak core, he is likely to compensate for his weak posture by putting tension in other parts of the body.
- **Forearms.** I gently wiggle the student's forearms to see if they move easily or if they are stiff from too much tension.
- **Thumb (as a non-playing finger).** I gently move the student's thumb up and down with my 2nd finger to see if it moves easily (loose), or if it is stiff (tense). If it is stiff, I ask the student to pretend the thumb is asleep and to let it go. I keep checking until the thumb is loose. Children will quickly internalize what a loose thumb feels like. (Thanks to Ted Cooper for this technique tip.)
- **Overly Raised Fingers (non-playing).** The non-playing fingers should not stay glued to the keys, but should move in a choreographed way with the arm. However, fingers that stick up or are curled signal excess tension. Touch them to make them relax.

Being able to relax while frozen on one note does not automatically mean the student will be able to maintain the same relaxation while playing, but it is an important step in that direction. The student needs to know what “relaxed” feels like and will gradually be able to play in a more relaxed manner after mastering “relaxed” in the **Freeze**.

Finger Action

The arm is the main playing mechanism at the beginning of study. It can take students quite some time (as in years) to develop the fine motor control required for pure, fast finger action. For children, the arm never capitulates totally to finger action, as the heavy action of the modern piano requires children to use a heavier lever (the arm) to depress the keys than is required for an adult (although adults should also play with actively involved arms).

As the student gains coordination over the arm and fingers, the next refinement of technique is in the area of finger action. Two main ideas students need to understand about finger action are:

- **Pick Up the Fingers.** A student may sometimes let his fingers get lazy and overhold, or smear, notes together. Tell the student to pick up his fingers so that one finger releases as the next plays the key. He can develop awareness for how the fingers work together in *legato* by focusing on the finger that is releasing the key rather than on the finger that is depressing the next key. (Thanks to my teacher, Edward Gates, for this technical concept.)
- **Release Toward the Fallboard.** The student should release each finger up and slightly toward the fallboard, rather than back underneath the hand. For example, in a fast five-finger pattern, the fingers will look like they are flicking up and away from the hand as opposed to curling back under the hand. Play fingers 5 4 3 2 1 slowly and pay attention to each finger releasing quickly up. Increase the speed and be sure the fingers are still releasing up. (Thanks to my teacher, Duane Hulbert, for this technical concept.)

Summary

Helping students develop a solid technical foundation is one of the most important tasks of the beginning teacher, as this forms the foundation for all playing in the future. If a student has great musical ideas but bad technique, he will not be able to express his musicality. It is well worth the time at the beginning of study to be sure that *all* students develop a good technique. In summary, the elements of a solid elementary level piano technique are:

- Proper sitting position at the piano
- Relaxed shoulders and body
- Freedom and confidence of movement all over the keyboard
- Good Piano Hand Shape
- Hands up and over the keys, with each finger approaching the keys from above, not from below

- Knowledge of how each finger is different from the others and its ideal approach to the keys
- Firm fingertips
- Alignment of the arm behind the finger playing (with an arm bounce on each note). Walking from one note to the next with proper alignment is the basic choreography that lays the foundation for more complex choreographies in the future.
- Mastery of the basic articulations:
 - 1. *Non legato* with an arm bounce on each note
 - 2. *Legato* with an arm bounce on each note
 - 3. *Legato* with one arm movement over several notes
- Ability to change articulations on command
- Basics of finger action in terms of how to release keys
- Basics of rotation