Resolving tension in performance

Melanie Spanswick identifies the various stresses of performance and explains how to combat them

There will always be an element of stress in piano playing. Public performance, on any musical instrument, requires nerves of steel as well as complete focus, discipline and concentration. However, this is substantially different from the tension that arises due to technical problems and deficiencies. Some tension is very necessary, because without it, playing would be impossible, so it’s important to be able to recognise the imperative tension from the unnecessary, often detrimental type. Tension is a widespread problem in piano playing. Most professionals, amateurs and students suffer from this ailment at some time or other, and it can be very debilitating. Prolonged tension frequently causes pain which can eventually manifest as Tendonitis, Repetitive Strain Injury and, at worse, can stop piano playing completely.

There are two differing types of disadvantageous tension. The first comes from negative thought processes or mental stress. Many pianists have suffered from this, and it takes lots of positive mental work to alleviate. It’s quite startling just how much our external thoughts can ruin a performance particularly amongst those who have yet to learn how to deal with anxiety. Negative thoughts can arise from peer criticism, harsh, unhelpful teaching or just self-doubt. The latter is a recurring problem and is all down to fear and the age-old question, ‘will I be good enough?’.

The first line of defence when dealing with this conundrum is to tame the negative ‘inner-voice’. Recognise the mental ‘chatter’ that goes on before a performance (or perhaps on the days leading up to giving a performance). This chatter or ‘little voice’ never stops (‘what will happen if I make a mistake or my memory lets me down?’). We have all suffered. The most obvious way to remove this problem is to practise playing in front of others; whether it be one person, a small audience or large gathering, it doesn’t really matter. The most crucial factor is to get out there and play. It will be painful at first and mistakes will be made, but eventually with regular performance practice, pianists become familiar with the performing experience and as the fear subsides, so too will the tension. In essence, this tension is associated with fear. The second kind of tension is physical, and is generally caused by technical issues, which are much harder to mitigate. Rather like mental tension, technical issues can stop successful piano playing and solving them requires professional help or regular coaching. Physical ‘tightness’ or ‘tensing up’ is even more commonplace than mental tension. It can occur for many different reasons; the most obvious is poor teaching or insufficient, sloppy practice, but physical restrictions and pain may happen due to the mental worries and negativity already mentioned above. Another possible reason is attempting to play pieces that are out of our comfort zone or technically too demanding. Challenging repertoire needs to be worked at carefully, otherwise damage can easily be done to hands, arms, wrists and fingers.

One interesting feature regarding tension is that it can occur at any stage of musical development; from beginners to advanced students. The latter are much more difficult to help because their unfortunate habits are ingrained and therefore everything needs to be re-learnt which is very challenging for the student as well as the teacher, but it can be done with hard work and perseverance.

Good piano playing all starts with proper posture and free, flexible movement. This seems very obvious but it’s frequently side-lined as playing becomes more advanced, and this is where problems often start. As we sit at the piano, our whole body must feel free. Pupils should be encouraged to sit up straight near the edge of the stool, with their body weight transferred to their feet (which are flat on the floor) aiding stability. Hips can then be used as a pivot allowing for free movement. As the hands are placed on the keyboard, the forearms should be parallel to the floor in order to promote relaxed, comfortable playing.

Raised shoulders are a real sign of stress and tension. One of the best ways to deal with this is for hands to be placed on a student’s shoulders as they play, making them aware of their movements. They will then eventually start noticing it themselves. Neck and shoulder ache are associated with this habit, so pupils will start to feel better once they begin to free themselves. We are frequently unaware of our posture because we are totally focused on the music, so with this in mind a good teacher can be extremely helpful.

The next issue is usually tight forearms, often a ‘knock-on’ effect from the raised shoulders. Pupils are, again, unaware that they are playing in a tense fashion, so one way of illustrating this is to help them relax their arms altogether. A good idea is to encourage ‘heavy arm’; they will then know how to start ‘freeing’ themselves. Unless students are made aware of the ‘correct’ feeling, they will be unable to achieve this alone. Make no mistake, this is difficult to accomplish, but can be done over time and with a good supportive teacher.

Pupils may need regular prompting at every lesson for a while in order to get used to this completely ‘relaxed’ posture, because it will feel ‘strange’ and different at first; it is a habit that must encouraged regularly in order for it to become permanent.

As shoulders and arms become more supple, attention can turn to the real issue, which is usually weak fingers. Weak fingers provide so many physical problems and we find that tight
forearms and shoulders try to compensate for this deficiency. In fact, many parts of the body will try to counteract weak fingers and it's probably the most problematic element in piano playing.

Weak fingers (or fingers that don't really work on their own, they are relying on other extraneous parts of the body to 'prop' them up) are also related to stiff wrists. Often pianists will use their whole arm in one rigid motion forgetting that a free, rotating wrist can not only really help with movement but is paramount for a good sound too. One way of dealing with these issues is to address the wrists and finger shortcomings concurrently. There are so many ways of doing this, but it can be particularly helpful to use simple Czerny exercises. The simpler the better; the 101 Exercises Op. 261 work well, for example. The first two exercises provide all the necessary notes in fact.

The first exercise consists of groups of four semiquavers in the right hand (which runs up and down the keyboard in C major) with accompanying chords in the left (see Figure 1). The aim here is not speed. On the contrary, the slower the better to start with until the fingers and wrists are responding correctly. Always use Czerny's fingerings. Start with a good hand position; one useful analogy is to place your hands over your knees whilst sitting down, you will find you hand forms a 'cupped' shape. It's really important to make sure that knuckles are in an elevated position, i.e. the hand isn't collapsing (see inset below), otherwise strong fingers are impossible to achieve. Free or rotating wrists, which are not too high or low, are also crucial (illustrated above).
Power and finger strength both come from a solid hand position which will then encourage each finger to play on its tip (or pad) and, most importantly, on its own, i.e. without relying on other muscles from other fingers or parts of the hand to help out. The joints in each finger must not collapse either, but rather, they must help the fingers attain complete independence which is the end goal.

Practise the right hand of the first Czerny study alone for a while; each note must be deliberately struck, slowly so that every finger plays on its tips and produces a good, full sound, i.e. reaching fully to the bottom of the key bed. This is not the time to play pianissimo. It’s beneficial to learn these exercises from memory, so that hand positions and movements can be properly observed during practice. Between each note, encourage pupils to ‘free’ their wrist of excess tension. An effective way of doing this is to make sure the wrist moves freely between each note so as to stop it ‘locking up’. Many sit this as rotational wrist movement.

Encourage students to move their wrists (between every semiquaver at first) in a circular motion, making sure the wrist feels relaxed or floppy (the correct sensation should be very similar to that when the arm flops down by our side; nothing must feel tight or tense). This is all especially important when dealing with the fourth and fifth fingers, which by nature are far weaker and therefore more troublesome. A sure sign of tension in the hand is when the fifth finger sticks up towards heaven. This is symptomatic of problems, but will eventually be alleviated during this ‘freeing’ process as every finger gains control and independence. As the fingers and wrists become accustomed to this motion between every note, so then this rotational movement can be eventually lengthened to every group of four semiquavers allowing for more speed.

It’s a good idea to reiterate the main issue concerning tension; whilst striking a note, tension is needed but as soon as the note has been played, that is the time to relax the hand fully. This coincides with freeing the wrist at the appropriate moment in the Czerny study as described above. By doing this, fingers will eventually become not only much stronger but also totally independent too, because their muscles are being perpetually strengthened with every practice session whilst the rest of the upper torso is learning to relax.

The second study focuses on the left hand and should be practised as much, if not more so, than that for the right. The left hand by nature is weaker (for most pianists) and usually needs more attention. Repeat the entire process with this second study. About twenty minutes’ practice per day on these exercises should be sufficient to change basic technique.

Students must be encouraged to listen to the sound they produce and also to feel the connection between each and every struck note (and to be sure that the whole arm and shoulder is responding freely). Always observe rhythm, and metronome practice is a good idea once the fingers start to move properly. All semiquavers (or whatever passagework is being negotiated) should be played absolutely equally, which is a sign of secure strong finger motion. It will usually take a few months of slow practice before the student learns to feel relaxed playing in what is essentially a completely new and alien way. It’s at this point that speed can slowly resume.

Once fingers are independent, examine hand positions for chords, arpeggios and scales as these provide the bedrock of piano technique as well as most piano pieces. The perfect scale requires constant free rotational motion in the wrist which is all linked to the technique studied using these basic Czerny studies. The same applies to arpeggios, which demand much more movement; tense wrists stemming from weak fingers are the overriding reason why many struggle with rapid passagework such as arpeggios.

Once the fingers and wrists are working well, introduce arm weight. This should now be a fairly straightforward process because fingers and wrists are already flexible, strong and independent, so pupils will learn to harness their body weight to make not just a good, rich sound but also a full, large one too. Harsh sounds are often produced because of insufficient arm weight which can lead to ‘hitting’ the instrument, resulting in limited tonal colour. Once a pupil grasps the feel for a large, warm sonority, then they will be able to hone their tonal palate accordingly.

Learning to resolve tension in piano playing is a challenge, but if taught correctly, it will lead to a confident, relaxed, comfortable technique and a much happier, contented pianist.

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