

Tone Production

Melanie Spanswick explores how best to achieve 'mastery of tone'.

Despite being a percussion instrument, the piano is capable of providing infinite tonal variety. From the softest whispers to the grandest, most powerful *fortissimos*, pianists have an abundant smorgasbord of tone available with which to conjure poetry and pathos. Whilst there are certain limitations or restrictions due to the varied quality of instruments, pianists are generally responsible for the sound they summon during each and every performance.

Exquisite tone production is the secret of a successful pianist; it makes each player unique and in some cases, instantly recognisable. Many great artists and teachers have spoken about the necessity of focusing on tone quality. These include the great pianist and pedagogue Heinrich Neuhaus (1888–1964) who devoted a chapter to tone production in his book *The Art of Piano Playing*:

'Mastery of tone is the first and most important task of all the problems of piano technique that the pianist must tackle, for tone is the substance of music; in ennobling and perfecting it we raise music itself to a great height. In working with my pupils I can say without exaggeration that three quarters of all work is done on tone' (chapter 3; pg. 56).

Renowned pianist and pedagogue, Theodor Leschetizky (1830-1915), also commented on tone production:

'No life without art, no art without life. One does not win people's hearts only with runs of scales and fast thirds, but rather with a noble singing style, clear and powerful, gentle and soft.'

Extract from *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* by Kenneth Hamilton (Chapter 5; pg. 139).

Other influential pedagogues such as Frédéric Chopin, Ferruccio Busoni and Tobias Matthay have all remarked about the importance of tonal quality. Many pianists and pedagogues cite this facet as the most crucial factor when delivering an expressive, musically committed account.

Yet, surprisingly, tone production is sometimes rather side-stepped during piano lessons and practice sessions. It's seemingly consigned as an after-thought; something to focus on during the final stages of preparation. How piano sound is produced does fundamentally change the whole concept of interpretation and performance, and

therefore should ideally be placed at the forefront in lessons. Pupils of all standards, from beginners through to advanced players, can benefit from knowledge regarding how sound is produced and the fundamental difference this can make to their performance. Placing a student's attention on how and why they must make a full, sonorous tone, and how this issue is intrinsically linked to phrasing, articulation and dynamics, is surely of utmost importance. So, with this in mind, how do we create a beautiful tone, and hence allow our artistic imaginations to take flight?

Before learning how to produce a good sound at the instrument, we need to understand what is required from our bodies, because the way the energy from the body is transmitted through the keys is the crucial determining factor in changing the sound. Many feel that playing the piano is all about speed, fast fingers and quick hand movements (and admittedly this does play an important role!), but to significantly change the sound produced, affording a full, warm, rich tone, the whole upper body must be involved. This is the reason any kind of tension or rigidity whilst playing will generally result in a harsh, thin sound or timbre.

It begins with our upper body, i.e. the back, shoulders, whole arm, elbows, wrist, hand and finger muscles, which all move specific parts in the hand, enabling it to strike the correct key. Similarly, bone structure also helps to transmit energy, cushioning the hand, particularly from the back and shoulders (through the arm, wrist and hand), projecting the sound into the keyboard. The combination of the pertinent back, shoulder, arm, hand, wrist and finger movements all working in tandem, results in a bountiful, expansive tone; it also feels comfortable, relaxed and much more flexible. Good tone production encourages a more secure, reliable technique and a feeling of calm and serenity during performance. In short, a full sound requires a pianist to move freely, swiftly and abundantly, which consequently generates greater note accuracy and assured control at the keyboard.

It's paramount for piano students to fully explore their potential regarding the sound they are able to produce, because without learning how to use and control the keyboard's complete

sonority, it becomes almost impossible to grade tone from *ppp* through to *fff* successfully.

This will prove imperative when employing an effective dynamic range appropriate for each musical period, style and composer.

HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS TO ENABLE A MORE BEAUTIFUL SOUND:

Sit comfortably at the keyboard; posture is a deciding factor where tone production is concerned. Many feel sitting too low is not good, but if you are too high over the keyboard, gaining control can be problematic. Always sit with a straight back and start with fingers on the keys, so that you will have control over the hammers (which strike the strings and hence produce the sound), and this will help with note accuracy too. Control of the sound can only happen between the time immediately before you depress the key and the escapement of the hammer. After a note has been played, pupils can relax and 'release' the note and their hand position, thus eliminating any further tension.

Allow the shoulders (and the whole back area) to be in a natural position, i.e. not raised. Raised shoulders (and a tense back) can cause many problems and will definitely promote tension by stopping free and flexible movement in the arm and hand. Correct this by constantly reminding pupils to think about how they feel whilst playing. One idea is to encourage students to drop their arms by their side freely, assuming 'dead' arms, ridding all tension. It's this heavy 'weight' that must be grasped and assimilated when learning to improve tone production. We have a tendency to ignore how our bodies really feel during a performance, usually because we are so focussed on what we are playing, but tension anywhere in the body will usually result in a certain discomfort and can lead to repetitive strain injury, too. Regular prompting will eventually establish a good habit, and pupils will learn how it feels to be totally comfortable.

The wrists are probably the most vital body part for promoting a good sound. Interestingly, they are the cause of much stiffness and constriction. Some schools of thought promote high wrists, others favour a low position, but the most conducive is a constantly moving wrist. If they are kept moving, there is little chance of the wrists becoming stiff or tense. Experiment by laying both hands on the keyboard, moving the wrists (rather than the hand or arm), first up and down then from side to side, and finally in a rotational movement or motion. Practise this every day before practice commences. It allows the wrists to become accustomed to moving around flexibly.

Another exercise which can be beneficial,

is to play a five finger pattern (place the fingers over middle C, followed by nearby D, E, F, G; using the fingering 1–5 (or 5–1 in the left hand), and whilst holding down the first note (middle C), encourage the wrist to make a complete circular motion keeping the thumb (of the right hand) firmly attached to the note (even though the sound has dispersed). This allows the wrist and arm action to feel malleable whilst playing a note. Now continue playing D–G (and back down again, from G to middle C) using the same motion (taking time between each note) focusing on sinking deep into each key, feeling the key bed every time. By doing this regularly, pupils will become aware of the relaxed hand and wrist positions required to produce a more attractive sound. It's certainly a technique to be worked at consistently, instilling the feeling which will ultimately metamorphose into a good habit.

Once the wrists are more yielding, so the arms and elbows will move more freely. The circular wrist motion will allow the upper body to move more effectively and efficiently, making keyboard coverage that much better and quicker.

The hand should now already be in a relaxed position; many prescribe forming and honing an arch shape, with the knuckles in an elevated aspect (like that formed when grasping an apple). This can be an effective approach and will help to eliminate a collapsing hand, buoying the fingers, so they can work independently of the hand, striking each key with plenty of power by employing each finger joint (joints must not collapse, instead they should be totally engaged, supporting each finger). A rotating wrist movement will help the fingers to work on their own after a while, because of the freedom attained from the rotation motion whilst playing one note at a time (as the above exercise suggests).

A soft, elastic, heavy whole arm movement provides plenty of gravity, support and substance behind the wrist, allowing it to harness this

arm weight generated by the back, shoulders, and upper arms, using this to produce a full, fat sound. The fingers should ideally play on their 'pads', the padded, soft area of skin on the finger-tip, because this will further 'cushion' the sound. If the sound is sufficiently cushioned by the finger (and whole arm) as it attacks the key, it in effect plays the key at a very slightly slower speed, caressing the key rather than forcefully hitting it. That combined with the weight of the arm seems to change the sound, thus producing a richer, warmer colour. Thorough flexibility in the wrist and 'looseness' in the other parts of the upper body are vital, but the fingers must remain like steel; and this is developed over time by strengthening finger and hand muscles (usually via scales, exercises, studies etc.).

It takes a while to master the use and control of the body in the way necessary to change the sound, but it can and will become a habit with patient practice. Once the fingers employ the heavy weight supported by the arm and upper body, they'll take on a new persona and will begin to adopt completely new sonorities, particularly with regard to singing tone or *cantabile*.

Cantabile is only really possible with plenty of weight behind the key; fingers must sink into the key bed, right to the bottom of the key, focusing on the musical line, playing with either a *crescendo* or *diminuendo* from note to note.

The piano sound's natural decay means listening to a musical line is crucial when judging each sound in order to proffer a musically satisfying phrase. So listening becomes a vital part of tone production and tonal variation, and similarly, learning to voice within counterpoint, chords, and copious different piano textures is also essential.

It can be a good idea to practise this component by working at sound variation in combination with the physiology of tone production as outlined above. Try using the musical extract below as a vehicle for creating different tonal

possibilities; pupils can work at creating their own sound variations, from as quiet and soft as possible to all out *fortissimos*, whilst being sure to check their body is working efficiently.

Plenty of experimentation will foster an increasingly large and diverse tonal palette, allowing for expert gradation of tone. Another interesting challenge is to use the same example to practise voicing specific lines i.e. highlighting the top of each chord, then the bottom note in either hand, followed by some of the inner notes within each chord. This will help to gain finger control too.

When producing a powerful *fortissimo*, guard against the urge to play as loudly as possible, because beyond a certain level, the sound tends to become astringent and unpleasant. Also having some sound in reserve can be important; not playing at full capacity (whether *fff* or *ppp*) all the time, keeping some power or delicacy for certain performance situations can be a good idea (in order to cope with different instruments and acoustics).

Employing the pedal further changes timbre and luminosity, and ideally the pedals can be used to enhance or complement tonal variety. Whether using the *Sustaining* (*Damper* or *Right*) pedal, the *Sostenuto* pedal (*Middle*) or *Una Corda* (*Left*) pedal (on grand pianos; uprights pedals may vary), each one adds a different tonal quality and ought to be used as an extra sonority as opposed to merely making the instrument louder (*Sustaining* pedal), quieter (*Una Corda*) or as a bolster (or cover) for defective finger *legato*.

Hopefully, these ideas may inspire students to continuously strive and search for a pleasing, more generous, opulent resonance at the piano. Once the technique for expanding and consolidating tone production has been acquired, students will enjoy the increasing feeling of beauty and control within their grasp. ■

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The image shows a musical score for piano in 4/4 time. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with chords in each measure. The dynamics are labeled below the notes: ppp, pp, p, mp, mf, f, ff, fff. The chords are: C4-E4-G4 (ppp), C4-E4-G4 (pp), C4-E4-G4 (p), C4-E4-G4 (mp), C4-E4-G4 (mf), C4-E4-G4 (f), C4-E4-G4 (ff), C4-E4-G4 (fff).