

## Nine Top Tips for Practising Octaves

As mentioned in my **Piano Professional** article, octaves need careful practice and preparation. It's advisable to work at them very slowly and for short periods of time, particularly for those with small hands. Here are some ideas:

1. Start by encouraging good posture and total flexibility at the keyboard. Try to ensure your whole body feels free and not 'locked-up'.
2. If you feel an octave is too much of a stretch, begin by playing a sixth (six note interval as opposed to eight).
3. Play the interval (one in each hand) and as you sink into the keys, keep hold of them but drop your wrist; so the wrist should ideally feel floppy, free and devoid of any muscles stiffness in the hand, wrist or arm, yet you will still be holding down the keys.
4. The thumb and fifth finger (if you've chosen to use the fifth finger – some prefer using a fourth) will be assuming a 'standing' position, i.e. playing on the tip for the fifth finger and a gentle but firm 'grip' with the thumb. This will ensure the fingers stay on the keys, and will hopefully avoid splitting notes too. As the engaged finger and thumb 'grips', every other part of the hand, wrist and arm must feel no tension at all.
5. Once you've become accustomed to the necessary free wrist and arm needed whilst playing a wide stretch (it could take a while and might feel alien at first), start to move the wrist up and down whilst still playing the interval (instigating flexibility), then move slowly from one octave to the next, using a wrist rotational movement as you move.
6. After consistent but careful practice, the so-called octave 'stretch' will feel increasingly natural, and you may find you can stretch further and further without feeling any tension or rigidity (I eventually extended to tenths using this method!). The key is a free wrist and arm, whilst the hand assumes the out-stretched position.
7. Once confident, practice groups of octaves and always add a 'break' or resting point after an extended group. Possibly after four or six octaves in a row, stop playing and put your arm down by your side. Only continue if no tension is felt in the hand. This will build endurance and will stop the hand tiring.
8. Practising inner and outer parts alone (i.e. the thumb and the fourth or fifth fingers) can be helpful, and is particularly useful when playing octave skips or jumps.
9. Acquire speed gradually and always stop and rest after extended passages. Good luck!

