



Painless Piano Playing

Part 3

The previous two articles on this subject explained the importance of optimal movement at the keyboard. Using very simple exercises, I illustrated how I teach students to relax their upper bodies whilst they play. It's too easy for our pupils to practise their pieces without realising how much tension they carry in their hands, arms and wrists, irrespective of their age; generally, the older and more advanced the student, the more obvious the issue. Spotting tension is relatively easy, and as teachers we become accustomed to observing how our students move as they play. But once tension has been highlighted and students are made aware of it, we must find various methods to alleviate restricting tautness before conditions such as tendonitis and repetitive strain injury manifest.

Painless Piano Playing Parts 1 & 2 demonstrated simple exercises; in Part 1 the exercises were to be done away from the piano, and worked at regularly with a focus on how relaxed the student 'feels' whilst doing them. In particular, we looked at keeping shoulders, arms, wrists and hands loose and relaxed. In Part 2, we examined the beneficial use of moving the wrist in an exaggerated circular movement, often known as wrist circles or wrist rotations, which, if practised correctly, can be a very helpful method of releasing the tension that can exist when playing from note to note; students do have a tendency to 'lock' when playing a passage, especially rapid passage work. In particular, they forget to 'release' their hands and wrists, and sometimes, their arms, too. Therefore, we must find appropriate places for them to release tension during practice and performance.

This article continues to encourage the development of flexibility. Recapping a little, Ex. 1 was the final exercise in Painless Piano Playing Part 2:

Ex. 1

Rotate wrist in between each note

This very simple five-finger exercise can be a useful vehicle for our pupils to 'release' their hands and wrists after they play, that is, between each note. As we are aware, tension is required to play a note, but after it has been played, we can't do anything to change the sound on the piano (unlike a violin), so therefore we should ideally release the hand and wrist immediately.

Students can be encouraged to play and hold the first note (middle C) with their thumb, and as they do so, they can drop the hand, wrist and arm (and shoulder!) in order to experience the feeling of 'release' in their muscles and tendons, whilst still holding onto the C, all before moving on to play the next note (D). The wrist will often flop down below the level of the keyboard here, and again, I reiterate that this is NOT a position to play the piano, but merely one to learn the feeling of releasing tension; wrists should be aligned with the keyboard for good piano playing but be able to move freely when necessary. Flatter fingers are desired for this exercise. Once this has all been assimilated, which can take a few weeks, we move on to a subsequent exercise still employing the five-finger note pattern, but this time, using the previously mentioned wrist circles.

The wrist circles require a complete circular movement made by the wrist between notes; as the pupil goes to play the note, so the thumb (if playing C) strikes the note with a downward motion in the wrist, which will now be accompanied by some weight from the arm, to help produce a rich tone. As the key is struck by the thumb (or finger), the wrist, helped by a loose arm movement and a guiding elbow motion, will make a circular movement, lowering the thumb into the key, using a deep touch, and moving below the keyboard level, before rising up (in a circular movement) before forming the next circle for the following note (D). By this stage, I would ask students to play on their finger-tips using a hook-shaped finger fully engaging the first finger joint, which will be the basis for developing firmer fingers. This is especially important with regards the fourth and fifth finger which will need careful practice.

Moving on from playing very slowly, and working at 'releasing' the wrist and hands between notes, we now require our students to learn how to do this whilst playing faster passages. For those who have never worked at their piano playing in this manner, it may take a few weeks to get to this stage. That's not to say that students can't play any other repertoire - on the contrary, it can be a good idea to learn flexibility on all pieces being studied, and I frequently teach this technique on scales and arpeggios, too.

One of the most pressing issues to be fully understood is the 'feeling' of the release, this is what I spend most time working on with students; once they realise how they must feel as they play, especially after playing groups of notes or note patterns, they are well on the way to ascertaining and incorporating this flexible approach. A good starting point is to ask your pupil to clench their fist and then swiftly release it, in order to understand the concept. I also ask students to 'drop' the wrist and hand if tension is still present. A 'dropping' motion, as in dropping the hand, wrist and arm down by their side, encourages them to fully relax their upper body.

For the next exercise, let's use the following study from 101 Daily Exercises (Op. 261) by Czerny (Ex. 2). It's the first piece in the volume, but you could easily use any running passage taken from a repertoire piece:

Ex. 2

101 Exercises
No. 1 in C major
Carl Czerny Op. 216

Allegro

We will play it slowly at first, using the same technique employed for the five-finger pattern; something like this:

Ex. 3

Wrist rotation or circle etc.

Allow a 'gap' after each note, where the wrist can form wrist circles, and can release any tension after every note. Aim to play on the finger-tips and use a very deep touch when playing slowly (it's also advisable to use the second study in Op. 261 too, for the left hand). The gap between notes can be as long as needed at first, then it will become shorter as the student learns how to release, until eventually they are playing the passage as written, that is, with the correct rhythm. If they have practised and 'learned' how to release sufficiently well, they will still be releasing their muscles and tendons during performance without noticeable gaps.

Now the challenge is to add speed. Find places in the passage to add a tension break. I have added a break after every group of semiquavers in the next example, Ex. 4:

Ex. 4

Tension break or 'gap' etc.

These breaks or gaps provide convenient places to rest. Longer gaps work well at first; ask students to allow a one- or two-second break after each crotchet beat to free themselves so that they are not 'locking' up. During this time, they should ideally be employing one wrist circle for every group of four semiquavers, whilst playing on the tips of their fingers, firmly into the key bed, ensuring each note is 'even' rhythmically.

we must find various methods to alleviate restricting tautness before conditions such as tendonitis and repetitive strain injury manifest

By playing each note evenly, they will mitigate the tendency to rush when playing notes using the fourth and fifth fingers. This will demand that these fingers play as firmly as the thumb and the second and third fingers, and will eventually contribute to developing the 'Bridge' position (where knuckles form a 'bridge' over the hand).

Once shortened, the 'gaps' or breaks after every crotchet beat can be hastened until they are unnoticeable in terms of the rhythmic pulse, but the wrist will still feel the sense of release because it has now become accustomed to small release breaks at certain points. By this point semiquavers should be completely even rhythmically, and the wrist will utilise a very quick circular movement in the place where the 'gaps' or tension breaks once were.

The final stage is to gradually increase the tempo and lighten the touch. As speed is added, more finger control will be necessary, so the pupil must have understood each stage thoroughly. Eventually, fingers will feel considerably firmer and will be able to play rhythmically at speed all whilst regularly releasing any tension via swift wrist circles at various points in any score.

Now your student understands the concept of tension and release, they can apply it to all sorts of passagework, from rapid scalar playing, to double notes or octaves, finding places within particular figurations to break any tension that they might have. The following passage hails from *La Chasse*, No. 9 from *25 Easy and Progressive Studies Op. 100* by Burgmüller. Here, the downward octave movement can become tiring without finding appropriate tension - release points, such as those suggested by the downward arrow marking in Ex. 5:

Ex. 5

Allow a brief pause for a tension break

Allegro vivace

Similarly, the following group of octaves, which are taken from *Study No. 49 Octaves - Bravura*, from *Art of Finger Dexterity Op. 740* by Czerny, could be split every four

One of the most pressing issues to be fully understood is the 'feeling' of the release

semiquavers during practice for tension breaks as shown in Ex. 7. Ex. 6 is the original version:

Ex. 6

Vivace

Ex. 7

Vivace

Such movement might seem a daunting challenge for students, but if worked at regularly and in small increments, a reliable technique will be formed and the upper body will feel comfortable and relaxed whilst playing at speed, and fingers will gradually feel firmer and have greater control.

Melanie Spanswick is a pianist, teacher, writer and composer. Her piano course for returning pianists, *Play it again: PIANO*, is published by Schott Music. This successful three-book series takes students from elementary (Grade 1) to professional level (Associate diploma) via a large anthology of repertoire, with each piece accompanied by copious practice tips and ideas. Book 4 will be published in 2021. www.melaniespanswick.com

piano PROFESSIONAL series

AVAILABLE FROM FABER MUSIC:

Based on McLachlan's long-standing and acclaimed series of articles for *International Piano*, this innovative approach is for everyone interested in piano playing and teaching.

Also available in the series:

The Psychology of Piano Technique
ISBN: 0571532756 £9.99

Piano Technique in Practice
ISBN: 0571539351 £12.99

The Mindful Pianist
ISBN: 0571539637 £9.99

The Psychology of Piano Technique deals with a large range of topics and problems which pianists of all levels constantly face. It takes a technical perspective on what have traditionally been seen as psychological issues, presenting a new approach for performing musicians and their teachers.

ISBN: 0-571-54031-7 £12.99

SPECIAL OFFER: ALL FOUR BOOKS FOR £40*

* Offer only available from EPTA UK.

epta UK FABER MUSIC PUBLISHING SERVICES

www.epta-uk.org

Sergio Pamies

Important considerations for the jazz pianist:

how to effectively create spontaneous introductions

In the traditional jazz small group standard practice, jazz pianists have been expected in many cases to set up a song during a performance. They need to develop harmonic, melodic and rhythmic skills that will allow them to set the initial chord, the mood, and the groove of the song. This is a crucial aspect that can determine the success of any performance, since the ability of the pianist in developing this task can potentially affect the group's confidence and concentration.

Introductions can be classified into different categories according to their nature. Sometimes these introductions are developed over ostinato figures or harmonic vamps that are not related to any of the song's materials. On the other hand, introductions can recall melodic gestures from the songs, or are improvised using the chordal structure of the last eight bars, or the bridge. Some introductions became very popular and therefore have been canonised, becoming part of the tune. Therefore, jazz musicians are expected to know them since some performers start playing without calling what tune they are going to play. These are some of the categories I propose, in order to identify some traits that can be learned and therefore practised and reproduced by jazz piano students and performers.

Multi-layer introductions
In some cases, introductions are built over an ostinato figure. This ostinato can appear first in the acoustic bass, then be joined by the piano, drums, and finally, by the saxophone or trumpet. A great example of this technique can be found

Jazz pianists have the ability to improvise lines over a common-knowledge turnaround progression

in the famous Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker's version of *A Night in Tunisia*. The ostinato figure is written based on the harmony of the first four bars of the song, so when Dizzy Gillespie starts playing the melody, the rest of the combo can keep playing it. Another example would be Clifford Brown's version of *I'll Remember April*, where the ostinato is first introduced by Max Roach on drums, then joined by the bass, piano, saxophone and finally trumpet. Although these types of introductions are not meant to be played by solo piano, pianists are expected to know their part, and perhaps start the ostinato figure themselves. These two introductions can be used as a model, and pianists can create their own ostinato figures to set up any other songs. This way of constructing an introduction helps set up a particular groove (in the case of these two examples, a *latin* groove) that becomes part of the arrangement for the entire performance.

Introductions using improvised lines over turnaround progressions
Jazz pianists have the ability to improvise lines over a common-knowledge turnaround progression that can be easily discussed with the bass player prior to the performance