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The Bridge Position

If you cast your mind back to when you started learning the piano, you might recall being informed about basic hand positions by your piano tutor. It may have been during the first lesson, or certainly within the first few lessons. Piano teachers, particularly those teaching twenty, thirty or forty years ago, frequently espoused the necessary or ideal hand position for piano playing as similar to ‘grasping’ or holding an orange in their hand, or perhaps they may mention that a suitable hand shape should be akin to that assumed when one holds a tennis ball – maybe they even provided a tennis ball for you to try it out for yourself. One of my students seems to remember it fondly as being asked not to ‘squash the hamster’!

The hand position these descriptions are all referring to is more commonly known as the ‘Bridge’ position; this simply means a hand position where the knuckles of the hand are visible or protruding above the hand, that is, forming a bridge across the hand, from one side to the other, and therefore supporting a nicely rounded hand and curved fingers. In the following image (Photo 1), my knuckles are clearly sitting above or at the top of my hand, forming a reasonably comfortable hand shape from which each finger is capable of playing independently:

the formation of the Bridge relies on each finger having a curved, rounded stance

Whether fingers actually play independently or ‘on their own’ is a moot point for many, including myself, as they never really act entirely alone, because they require much support and guidance from the hand, wrist and arm, to play accurately and produce a rich tone.

When students don’t have a formed Bridge position, their hand will tend to collapse and therefore any kind of finger power or clear articulation will be a challenge. A common issue for students, when the Bridge position hasn’t as yet been fully formed, is that fingers literally lean on each other for support. For example, the fifth finger, left to its own devices, will tend not to function without employing the same tendons as those used to play the fourth finger, rendering them permanently intertwined. This can cause injury and might certainly instigate weaknesses in those fingers.

A typical ‘knock-on’ effect from this problem is when the fifth finger perpetually loiters in the air, ‘sticking-up’ instead of forming a relaxed position, and this is especially problematic when using the fourth finger. We’ve all seen students with finger positions awkwardly splayed outwards, and, similarly, if the hand is collapsed, that is, not in a rounded position supported by the Bridge, tension is generally not far away either, which is relatively simple to spot, but much trickier to alleviate.

When helping students to develop the Bridge position, the issues are multifaceted. If a pupil is young, then they are generally not so aware of these issues, which makes it easier to teach and implement, but once a student reaches teenage years, or is an adult returner, they usually know how the hand should ideally be shaped, and they become increasingly upset or anxious if their ‘Bridge’ has yet to appear, or if their fourth and fifth fingers aren’t working optimally.

I try to avoid the inevitable illusion involving the tennis ball; in my opinion, it’s not sufficient simply to talk in passing about ‘holding an orange’ and then never mention hand positions in any further lesson. Implementing such a hand position takes patience and lots of regular work, both from the teacher and student. But with conscious, focused practice and self-awareness, a student will eventually discard old habits and form a fresh, newly-rounded, comfortable hand position.

In the following photo (Photo 2), my hand is assuming a position totally unsuited to playing the piano, but it is a useful position to help students identify their knuckles and how they might start to form a bridge:

This involves keeping fingers straight, raising the hand a little, almost as though the hands are being pulled in towards the body. Pupils can then refer to this position as a means of building an awareness of their own Bridge. As with much of my teaching, I aim to accentuate movements to aid flexibility and relaxation, and if a student learns the feeling of a motion or movement, they are usually well on the way to adopting it.

As is frequently the case, taking a problem out of context, providing exercises, and keeping the student buoyant and happy whilst working towards this goal, is crucial. It may be done next to other technical tests, such as scales and arpeggios, or it may be worked at in complete isolation.

The reason the hand tends to collapse, making Bridge formation challenging, is generally weakness in the fourth and fifth finger; the formation of the Bridge relies on each finger having a curved, rounded stance. The fourths and fifths, or outer fingers, don’t always naturally sit on the keys in this manner, and they also tend to be side-stepped during practice, with many purposefully changing fingerings in order to not utilise these fingers. But by doing so, we are ignoring the possibilities of almost half of the hand! Surely, it’s better to develop the fourth and fifth alongside the first, second and third?

The following exercises have been beneficial to my students:

Devised for the outer fingers, this very simple note pattern allows each finger to sink into the key bed; encourage students to focus on how fingers strike the key; depressing it using the finger-tip with a deep or firm touch (a tenuto has been added for this purpose). Try to make pianists aware of the first finger joint (the one nearest the finger-tip), which must be working and fully engaged, so that a ‘hooked finger shape aids finger-tip placement on the keys.

This is demanding for the fourth and fifth at first, and will require short bursts of concentrated practice; too much, and there is a risk of injury. This exercise can be practiced hands separately, too, in order to observe finger movement during key depression.

Aim for pupils to be made aware of the corresponding knuckle, keeping it visible, so that it can support the finger. Connection with the key is also vital; a rich sonority will only emerge as fingers learn to plunge to the depths of the key, with the help of a loose, relaxed wrist and gently oscillating arm.

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