



Melanie Spanswick

Developing the Fourth & Fifth Finger

In my last article, I discussed the importance of the 'Bridge' position. Many don't concur with this particular element as a crucial development for the young pianist, but, for me, it does play an important role in the formation of a comfortable hand position. A particular issue for those wanting to develop such a hand position can be a perpetual lack of firmness in the fourth and fifth finger; without these fingers working optimally, the hand tends to cave in, leading to a collapsed, and sometimes awkward, hand position, whereby fingers appear 'sprawling' or in positions which are not aligned to the hand; and a typical sign of tension can be seen when the fifth finger is perpetually raised or 'sticking up'. These issues inevitably lead to uneven, and usually unrhythmical, playing.

Most pianists and teachers know only too well the issues surrounding the fourth and fifth finger. They are, almost by nature, less developed than the first, second and third, no doubt partly due to their positioning on the hand. It's for this reason that many choose to 're-finger' passages so that these fingers need not be used. But surely this is evading the problem? If we side-step these fingers, they might be rendered almost obsolete, yet if we can implement their use in our daily practice, they will become accustomed to being gainfully employed, and will gradually feel firmer.

For the Bridge position to be fully realised, each finger must be working efficiently, that is, without the aid of other fingers and their tendons. Fingers need to be able to 'stand' on their own with a nicely curved shape, utilising each finger joint, but particularly the joint nearest the finger-tip.

Any exercises, or daily practice, undertaken on the fourth and fifth fingers, must be very carefully implemented as it's too easy for these fingers to buckle under over-use, causing possible injury. Rather, if a few well-chosen passages or exercises are worked at in very short, but regular, increments, then the fingers will eventually respond and start to feel firmer and more in control, especially under the demands of rapid, taxing passages.

Here are a few practice suggestions to begin the process of awakening and aligning our students' fourth and fifth fingers.

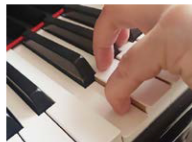
A particular student speciality during a practice session tends to be a lack of focused concentration. Students often seem to play notes without much thought, or without actually 'watching' how their fingers depress the keys. Therefore, the first step to developing any finger engagement, is to bring their awareness to their fingers, asking them to 'watch' as they play each note. Granted this is a daunting task, as it's almost impossible to observe every note as we play, but once

our students are able to gauge the feeling of each finger and how it should sit on a key, after a while, it will become a habit.

To begin with, ask students to ensure that the first finger joint (the one nearest the finger-tip) is in a slightly 'hooked', or 'fully engaged' position. This is trickier with the fourth and fifth finger, because they won't be used to this type of movement or position, and continual prompting, or reminding, might be necessary at first. The finger joint is a crucial part of a finger's armoury when developing clear articulation. Students can practise this movement away from the instrument.

Five-finger exercises can be helpful; perhaps suggest a C-G note pattern. As a student plays each note, ask them to watch 'how' their fingers sit on each key. When the F is played by the fourth finger (right hand), followed by the G, with the fifth finger, special attention will be required. Are they really using the tip of the finger? And I really do mean the tip – the very top part of the finger:

Photo 1:



Students may complain that they don't even have a finger 'pad' here, and that's fine because such a pad will eventually develop. Observe how the fingers connect with each key as notes are depressed, and, crucially, students must remember how the finger 'feels' as it depresses the key; the best way to do this is by learning the feeling, it will then, hopefully, become a good 'habit'. Repeat the F and G slowly, using the fourth and fifth finger, employing a heavy, firm touch, and finally, repeat the exercise with the left hand.

Try to ensure that your student's wrist and hand are 'guiding' or supporting each finger, too. Another misconception is the idea that fingers must be 'independent' of any other part of the upper body; this is almost certainly never the case, as the hand, wrist and arm should support fingers, especially during this early learning stage. If left to play 'alone', or totally independently, tension can easily arise.

To develop finger power alongside hand and wrist flexibility, encourage students to use a rotational wrist motion; some call

it a 'wrist circle', which is a flexible, circular movement made by the wrist, alleviating any building tension in the wrist or hand (I have already written about this motion many times in some of my previous articles in *Piano Professional*). The development of this movement will be vital in the slow but steady process of instigating firmer fingers, and for the release of the tendon between the fourth and fifth finger, which, if taut and tense, will inhibit movement between the two fingers.

I ask students to form a wrist circle after every note in the following exercise, as marked by the arrows:

Consolation, No. 13 (*Allegro moderato*) from 25 Studies Op. 100 by Friedrich Burgmüller.

Ex. 1



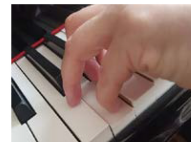
It's preferable to begin by leaving out the lower semibreve in every bar of the right-hand part, only adding it after solid practice has taken place. Encourage students to play each quaver slowly and firmly (with their right hand), to the bottom of the key-bed, using the suggested fingering, therefore producing a powerful sonority, using the fingertips, as described above. Students need to pay attention to the sound of notes, too, and 'how' they are depressed. Once the note has been sounded keep the key depressed and immediately release any tension or stiffness in the wrist, arm, and especially the hand, which has a habit of 'locking'; this involves allowing the wrist (and whole arm) to 'flop' down, often below the level of the keyboard, ensuring that upper body 'release' really has taken place. It can be beneficial to use exaggerated movements or motions when assimilating the feeling of tension and release.

By forming a circular wrist movement after every note, the movement made by the wrist promotes its relaxation and therefore the release of any building tension, and it also propels the subsequent finger onto the next note, helping to produce a rich tone, due to the weight of the hand and arm behind it as it is played. This exercise must only be worked at slowly. Regular practice will yield results, but it needs to be done over a period of time, normally several months, for fingers to feel noticeably firmer, and, as teachers, we must constantly check our students are doing the exercise in the correct manner. A similar exercise for the left hand must also be implemented, or you can make up your own, which is what I tend to do.

Once the fourth and fifth fingers have worked at such exercises slowly (in both hands), more arm-weight can be added. Students can use the same criteria as above, but with the 'weight' of the whole arm fuelling every note, that is, as the note is depressed, the whole arm must 'swing' behind it, and the wrist must 'cushion' the sound as it strikes the key in order to avoid a harsh tone. This is a most important part of the process; the tension needed to play a note powerfully must be 'released' immediately afterwards. By releasing after every note, students are letting go of any potential locking-up or injury.

The 'walking' fourth and fifth finger is a popular exercise with my students. This involves the fourth finger literally walking over the fifth but with a legato touch, like this:

Photo 2:



As with any exercise, the hand must be relaxed, and fingers engaged. Practise for very short periods of time, with a full sound. Here is a possible note pattern which promotes this movement:

Ex. 2



Another useful exercise, for the development of the fourth and fifth finger, is to re-finger passages (for practice purposes) using the fourths and fifths in place of more obvious fingering involving the first, second and third fingers. This is beneficial for the student to become accustomed to using these fingers with greater alacrity.

Whilst working at repertoire, the following technique draws attention to these fingers and can add extra power, if done attentively, and only during practice. It involves adding an accent or tenuto marking to notes played by the fourth and fifth finger, aiding their development:

Ex. 3

Study No. 9 (*Allegretto Scherzando*) from 30 Etudes Progressives Op. 46 by Stephen Heller



Accents such as those in the left-hand, in this exercise, will not only help stabilise the fourth and fifth finger, but they may also prove vital in creating even and rhythmical passages, too.

These small steps will increase awareness of movement in the fourth and fifth fingers, hopefully leading to greater control and neater articulation, and a healthy piano technique.

Melanie Spanswick is a pianist, teacher, writer and composer. Her successful three-book piano course for returning pianists, *Play it again! PIANO*, is published by Schott Music.

Melanie teaches the piano at Junior Guildhall School of Music and Drama as well as at Eton College. She is also Honorary Master Teacher at the Tom Lee Academy in Hong Kong, and she will host the Piano Teachers Course at Chetham's International Piano Summer School in 2021. www.melanienspanswick.com