



Melanie Spanswick

# The Thumb

**T**humbs. We know they form an important part of our hand, but how often do we focus on all four fingers, with the intention of creating 'firmer' digits, yet ignore the thumb? The thumbs protrude at the side of each hand and we just expect them to naturally support the fingers. Recently, I've been working with several students, with the aim of solely developing more active thumbs.

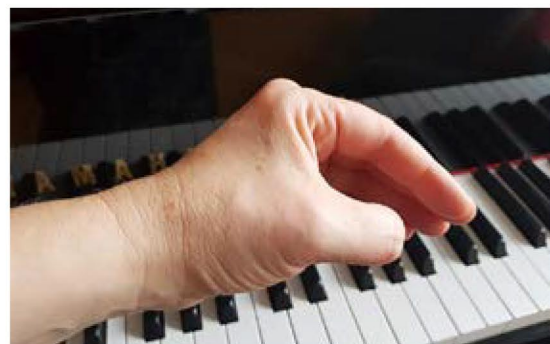
An active thumb movement can make a colossal difference to many aspects of piano technique; they essentially steer our hands, due to their dominant, yet slightly lower position than the fingers. Alberti bass accompaniments, octave playing and pristine rapid passagework are just a few of the typical piano elements demanding a clean, well-formed thumb. In my teaching, I'm very aware of a student's movement as they play the piano. Demonstrating to pupils 'how' and 'where' to move is, I feel, an issue which must be constantly addressed. Without correct, helpful movement, technique really can't be developed. This is certainly the case with our thumbs, and they require a different approach to the fingers.

Whereas fingers are frequently encouraged to play with all joints active, that is, not collapsing, and on the tips (or finger pads), ensuring firm contact with the key, the thumb will, by necessity, play almost on its side. However, like fingers, they are still best utilised with the joints fully engaged for optimum movement. If we allow our thumbs to just 'hang' or lag behind our fingers, or even worse, ignore them altogether, they will be unable to articulate with clarity and precision.

Here are a few ideas to encourage clean thumb playing:

To be aware of thumb movement, start by asking students to move their thumbs freely from the bass of the thumb; this exercise can be done away from the keyboard. Sway the thumb back and forth under the hand (photo 1), gradually building flexibility, keeping the fleshy part of the hand, that which is connected to the thumb, relaxed:

Photo 1:



It can also help to move the thumb in a circular motion over the hand too, moving it up and down gently, again from the bass of the thumb, but aim to do this carefully and free of any



tension. The hand should ideally feel completely loose when attempting these exercises:

Photo 2:



When placing the thumb on the keys, encourage students to allow only the corner of the thumb to come into contact with the key:

Photo 3:



This takes some practice but will preclude 'flat thumbs', where the thumb is literally lying flat on its side, which can result in uneven playing.

For thumb development, it can be beneficial to implement scales with special fingerings. Taking a C major scale, try this fingering, for the ascending scale pattern: 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2 or even: 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3. The thumb and second finger, or thumb and third finger can work for the left hand, too. Here, the hand will need to adjust to a constant wrist and forearm movement or very small rotation, but the frequent placement of the thumb on the key is excellent practice for learning to position it optimally. Ensure the touch is equal on every note,



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technique

and aim to keep the student's arm movement smooth.

This works well with a chromatic scale, too. It may feel a little unorthodox to begin with, as the movements required will test the thumb, encouraging it to 'move' out of its comfort zone, and play with precision on black keys. But provided this is done with total flexibility in the wrist and arm, and without tension, the thumb should feel more controlled:

Ex. 1

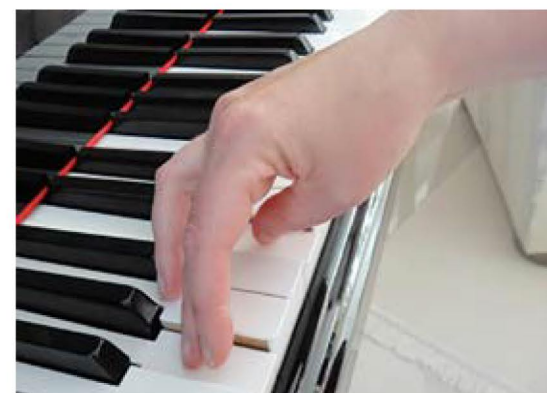


This exercise can also be practised replacing the second finger for the third, and should be used in the left hand, too.

Creating an easy relaxed movement as the thumb works its way under the hand is crucial for piano technique development. Firstly, ask students to experiment at the piano with four notes, C, D, E and F, using the right hand. Try this fingering: 1, 2, 3, 1. The first and last note will be played by the thumb. When playing the third finger on the E, lift the wrist slightly allowing the thumb to go under the hand to play the final note, but don't let go of the E. You'll notice that this position, that is playing and holding the E and F together with the third finger and thumb, will contort the hand, therefore try to ensure the hand muscles and tendons, especially those around the thumb joint, are pliable and flexible, so this position feels comfortable. The movement will require a 'letting go' or releasing of the tendons and muscles within the thumb joint in order to feel relaxed. This is best done whilst keeping both notes depressed, and it feels easier if the student 'drops' their hand and wrist (as opposed to keeping them in a stiff position), releasing tension. Now try this exercise with the left hand.

You can also use this concept to experiment with arpeggios; using the right hand, play a C major arpeggio: middle C with the thumb (1), E with the second finger (2), G with the third finger (3), and C (above middle C), again with the thumb (1). When you reach the G with the third finger, turn the thumb under the hand, leaving both finger and thumb in place, as shown in photo 4:

Photo 4:



As always, aim to keep the hand loose and relaxed as both notes are depressed. It's the release of tension in the hand and thumb joint as the notes are held which will help and encourage easy thumb movement. Now try this with the left hand, too. The following exercise might also prove helpful for students:

Ex 2:



This builds on the arpeggio idea suggested above, using the thumb to constantly turn under the hand, or the hand turning over the thumb in the left hand. Play bar one and three with a totally smooth, legato touch, and then the final bar (five), with the thumb playing the top notes (F and E), whilst the second and third fingers play the C. These note patterns should ideally be held as a chord, with the hand, wrist and arm completely released and relaxed. This takes some practice, and I normally have to work hard with students, encouraging the muscle/tendon release. But the exercise sets students up nicely for a loose, flexible hand and arm movement when practising scales and arpeggios.

Finally, find an Alberti Bass pattern (a broken chordal accompaniment figure) which requires the use of thumbs. Here's a left-hand example from Beethoven's *Sonata in C minor Op. 10 No. 1*, first movement (*Allegro molto e con brio*):

Ex. 3



A weak or flabby thumb is very obvious in this pattern; generally the thumb would play the repeated middle Cs in Ex. 3. It must skim the keys lightly yet very precisely and rhythmically. After blocking out the chordal pattern, or playing the notes in each bar altogether, harnessing an awareness of the fingering and note patterns, ask students to play deeply into the keys on every note, with a heavy tone. Accenting can help, at first just on the thumb, ensuring it employs the right-hand corner of the nail and with a good connection to surface of the key. Now accent every note, employing a very free rotating wrist movement throughout. Lastly, accent the lower note, keeping the Cs played by the thumb, lighter.

Once the fingers have been given a thorough workout, play the note patterns again very quickly and lightly, ensuring a tight rhythm. It's essential to balance the hand in passagework such as this, so a combination of finger/thumb power and wrist rotation will be crucial. But without an active thumb, achieving evenness will be almost impossible.

I hope these suggestions might be implemented in to a student's practice sessions. They will at least draw attention to the plight of the thumb, so it hopefully won't be a bystander during piano practice.

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.melaniespanswick.com](http://www.melaniespanswick.com)