

Weight just a minute! And other thoughts on technique

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Technical Approach

I have a very broad definition of technique which I define as the ability of the pianist to create a menagerie of tonal colors and textures. It is having an absolutely gigantic palette from which to choose one's musical ideas. This is the essence of technique. I break down technique into basically five areas:

- 1) finger dexterity
- 2) tone production
- 3) arm and wrist coordination
- 4) rhythmic energy
- 5) balance/voicing

Finger dexterity

My approach to finger dexterity is one that first and foremost emphasizes that the fingers never move independently of the wrist and arm. The wrist is constantly supporting even the fastest finger motion by insuring that the fingers are never in an uncomfortable position. This is accomplished through rotation. Proper rotational techniques insure that the fingers are always operating with efficient muscle motion and drastically reduce the chances of muscle fatigue. I utilize several drills in the studio to build this finger dexterity including the ubiquitous use of scales and arpeggios and important drills inherited from my teacher Menahem Pressler.

Tone Production

Quality tone production is the result of a totally integrated movement that transfers weight from the upper torso to the finger tip. A great deal of pedagogical energy is always spent teaching my students the difference between "dead" weight (resulting from the smooth transfer of weight from the upper body through the arm to the finger) and "forced" weight (resulting from muscular pressure applied directly to the key). Once my student understands this important difference and can hear and feel this important difference, then proper tone production is easily achieved.

Arm/wrist coordination

The single greatest impediment to arm and wrist coordination is excess tension, usually in the wrists. This unfortunately is the most common problem I have encountered in my many years of teaching. Students who come with a brittle sound and locked wrists must undergo a fundamental technical overhaul. I have several exercises designed to loosen the wrist and thereby permit arm weight to be transferred to the fingers.

Rhythmic Energy

Of all the above mentioned aspects of technique, a student's ability to rhythmically organize music material is the single most important aspect of successfully communicating a musical idea. Students are continually amazed in lesson when I reveal that what they considered a "finger problem" turned out to be a "pulse problem." All of my students will attest to the emphasis I give in lessons to pulsing. By internally organizing a passage of music, the hand and fingers are automatically more focused and efficient. And not one student leaves my studio without playing all of their scales pulsing every four or eight notes. I also require that all my students be able to verbally pulse all difficult passages in their music.

Balance/Voicing:

Unless students possess the ability to bring out significant musical lines embedded within a musical texture, high-level music making is simply not possible. I utilize several drills to increase a student's ability to play the right hand louder or softer than the left. But more important are the drills designed to create independence within the hand itself. I teach my students to be able to bring out any finger while all others remain softer. Again, as with the production of tone, the answer lies in the ability to transfer arm weight to any finger and subsequently withdraw weight from the remaining fingers. I emphasize right from the initial reading of any new composition that achieving proper balance be done at the beginning of the learning process so that the appropriate motions for balance are continually reinforced. The end results of this type of practicing are significantly stronger and more solid performances that are characterized by clarity of musical thought.

Drills

No.1: For building finger strength

Take each finger individually and drop with the full weight of the arm on a note. Using the pencil trick as a guide, teach the student to support the arm with each finger. Check that wrists and elbows are not locked and that fingers do not collapse.

No.2: For loosening wrist and arms and building finger strength

Press fingers 2-5 down simultaneously to the bottom of the keybed with both hands. With arm weight flowing to the tips of the fingers, rotate wrists and arms while maintaining a constant amount of weight to the finger tips.

No.3: For developing loose wrists and strong fingers

5 4
1 2

etc.

1 2
5 4

etc.

Detailed description: This exercise consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system has a treble staff with a sequence of chords: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, and C4-E4-G4. The bass staff has a sequence of chords: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, and C4-E4-G4. Fingerings are indicated as 5-1 and 4-2 for the treble staff, and 1-5 and 2-4 for the bass staff. The second system has a treble staff with a sequence of chords: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, and C4-E4-G4. The bass staff has a sequence of chords: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, and C4-E4-G4. Both systems end with 'etc.'.

No.4: For building finger dexterity and rotation in wrists

C

Maj. Min. Dimin.

D-flat

etc.

Continue pattern through all keys.

Also, play in reverse (i.e., starting on 5th fingers)

Detailed description: This exercise consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system is in C major and contains three measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure is labeled 'Maj.', the second 'Min.', and the third 'Dimin.'. The second system is in D-flat major and contains two measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure is labeled 'etc.'. To the right of the second system, there are two empty staves with the text 'Continue pattern through all keys.' and 'Also, play in reverse (i.e., starting on 5th fingers)'.