

THE CLIFFORD EVANS PIANO METHOD

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Introduction

Firstly thank you for your interest in this e-book, whatever your level of ability. Thank you to all my past and present pupils for giving me the opportunity of working with them. Also thank you to all the wonderful teachers I've had and who passed on to me their knowledge, insight and dedication. Last but not least, thank you to my mother for giving me her piano lessons and to my father for giving me my first love of music.

The idea of this e-book is that get an idea of the outline of my Piano Method and that you take advantage of my life-long passion and experience of teaching and playing piano to enhance your existing skill or to start building it from scratch. If you are a complete beginner and have always wanted to play the piano, congratulations for taking the plunge and there are the building blocks here for a good foundation particularly if used in conjunction with our other teaching aids or a teacher of your own choice . If you too are a teacher, you have my respect and understanding that this job is much harder than is apparent and it is my wish to make your challenges more easily surmountable and inspiring for others. The ideas are all available to be shared with you so that you can maximise your efficiency, save some valuable time and especially to help your pupils progress even more. If you are a professional and play concerts already as a solo recording artist or as a busy accompanist or duo player, you have my lifelong respect and I'm quietly confident that there will be something here that saves time or energy for you. You pros work so hard with such amazingly large repertoire and timetables that wrist, necks and back often react to the strain and take their toll. The solo artist is constantly pushing the boundaries of human skill and has little or no time to analyse the hows and whys of the piano technique. A busy accompanist covers so much repertoire that any hurdles need to be eliminated with as little time as and effort as possible. Having managed 12 years of concerts myself after overcoming 2 sprained wrists through over-practising as a student, that seriously influenced the development of my method and I have successfully assisted other professionals to redesign their techniques, overcoming or avoiding injury to regain that beautiful sound and relaxed approach in their piano playing.

Aims of this e-book

1. To help you eliminate tension and possible injury.
2. To help increase your control of the sound and its quality.

Solving of physical problems eventually opens the door to musical expression because at last our musical thought can be married to the physical skills in a method to which the piano responds. The piano has its own physical problems and we are trying to make a tuned percussion instrument produce beautiful melodic sounds and melodies reminiscent of a violin, flute or singer – instrument where the notes can be held on without decaying. My original motivation for analysing piano technique in this way was wrist injuries which acquired early on in my training. I had to find a way of overcoming these so I could continue playing myself and help others avoid those injuries. The result is the Clifford Evans Piano Method

Why should you read this e-book?

Time is short and we all have too much to do, but that's exactly why you should read it. A little at a time fitted into that coffee break is perfect and it will all mull around in your head for that next enjoyable piano session. So that takes care of the time problem? Not quite there's another advantage. I can honestly say that many if not all aspects of the Clifford Evans Piano Method developed over 50 years of teaching, will hopefully help people to play instantly better and even if it takes a while to get used to new ideas, time is definitely saved by reducing the risk of unnecessarily bad practise. You would expect a professional pianist to teach advanced students and I've helped professional pianists update their techniques to overcome piano injuries. That has always been most enjoyable and rewarding but equal satisfaction has come from an early fascination of teaching adult beginners with zero musical or piano knowledge. It is from teaching piano to a wide variety of people that my lifelong passion has developed for solving and explaining in clearly understandable terms, the most efficient ways of achieving a beautiful sound on the piano and acquiring a skill that sounds, looks and feels natural. As previously mentioned, my idol of-course has been Arthur Rubinstein and you only have to pop into YouTube to get an idea of how we would all like to play and enjoy the piano, but it's my own pupils who always want and deserve to know "Why" my latest suggestion to them works. I've had the pleasure of teaching so many different professional people the piano - from taxi drivers to builders to doctors and engineers. Many coordination skills already exist in the pupils before they start piano as I found out when teaching an ace operator of mechanical diggers.

Those guys can almost play the piano already and they are used to not making mistakes. Pupils' questions vary according to their profession, but it's teaching engineers of all kinds with their logical approach that has helped me develop my teaching delivery over the years. Doctors ask a different set of questions because of their knowledge of the human body - which muscle or which tendon is used in a particular piano movement. Doctors are great fun to teach because of their knowledge of how the brain works. Understanding a little of the processes helps one to get more out of one's own piano practice and to be more patient when the brain needs more time or careful repetition to achieve deep learning. Lessons with such dedicated pupils have often gone over the hour and not only is it the pupil who does the learning. Every lesson and every student has contributed to my teaching development but none more than the innocent questions from the zero knowledge person who just loves music and wants to know how. They make me think hard too about all the aspects of piano playing and music that it's all too easy for the teacher to take for granted. What is a key? Why are the black notes arranged like that? Why are there 8 notes in an octave? How do I learn to play fast? I love these questions enjoy answering every one of them. Of one thing I am sure is that everyone who wants to play the piano enough can create sufficient skill. The more skill you need or want will of-course determine how much practice in terms of hours months or years you will need to do. A second quality which I've noticed is that everyone has so many skills and thought processes already acquired that can be transferred into their piano progress. My main contribution is showing the way to make the complex motor coordination easier and even possible. This I do by an organised set of movements designed to achieve efficient ergonomics in one's playing, and by meticulous attention to fingering tailor-made for the experience and hand size of the student. You will bring your own skills to this task and ask your own special questions. Hopefully they will be answered in this e-book and that it will save you time and give you much progress as a student, teacher or pianist.

What are the bonuses of learning piano?

'Without music life would be a mistake.' - Nietzsche. The bonuses are physical and emotional and intellectual. Obviously playing the piano doesn't have the same fitness factor as going to the gym or running the marathon. Nevertheless there must be something special in it because a dedicated pupil of mine was a regular marathon runner who came to piano lessons for 5 years and enjoyed the experience by learning his favourite tunes. Perhaps we need a cocktail of fulfilling experiences to propel us through life but one thing is certain that playing your favourite music in addition to only listening to it, is very satisfying and releases endorphins with resulting feelings of well being. I don't need to look further than my own enjoyment of piano music and that of my pupils for evidence of this but have also read that playing a musical instrument - particularly the piano - reduces the likelihood or at least the intensity of dementia.

Playing the piano requires so many circuits to be established that it can only do the brain good. Amongst the physical benefits are improving the symptoms of arthritis in the hands. Once I had a pupil whose doctor suggested she play the piano to alleviate her suffering pain in the finger joints. Her arthritis in the hand did improve – especially her thumb which before that was almost unusable.

Let's consider more of the emotional benefits... Long term observation of my adult pupils produce admissions that their piano studies help them in their day jobs and even in their family life. The journey of learning such a demanding but pleasurable skill of a touch sensitive instrument gives such feedback that one cannot escape looking at oneself in the process of progress. That's the bonus that transfers lessons learnt from the piano to the rest of one's life. In addition, skills already in our possession assist our piano progress significantly. It is the teacher's role to unite these circles of learning in order to enable the students to achieve their full potential. This is what this e-book is trying to do for you but it's not designed to replace a good teacher- just to assist both parties and clear away any obstacles which we all put in our own paths.

At this point I can imagine those advanced or professional pianists amongst you thinking. ."Why do I need this stuff?.. this is for beginners and amateurs!" That's one way of looking at it, but much of this e-book applies to everyone who plays piano at any standard because it's all about achieving an efficient path of information and execution of the composer's message - understood and recreated by the performer for today's listener. For an interpretation of honesty and integrity, the performer needs to be free of mental, emotional and physical barriers, thereby enabling the listener to experience a meaningful connection with the message of the composer. Knowledge in itself does not achieve this and we don't all play with the effortless spontaneity of Arthur Rubinstein, but not having a map of the necessary criteria to follow will certainly mean we don't improve, at whatever level. We all have to develop and maintain a lifelong quest of humility and self-criticism in order to optimise our potential in this great skill. I hope all levels from beginner to professional will take a look at this e-book and benefit from it in some way, as well as any updates and downloads which might follow.

Digital or acoustic piano?

All the ideas in this e-book are applicable to both digital and acoustic pianos

although I do admit that the results that they produce are often less effective on the digital piano in spite of the tremendous progress that has been developed with touch sensitivity, weighted keys and other refinements designed to close the gap. The good news is that if you play an acoustic piano only occasionally - say once a week at your lesson, you can take the impression of this experience home with you and rehearse the ideas sufficiently well to make an improvement at your next opportunity of playing an acoustic piano. So although we all dream of that lovely grand piano, the modern digital piano gives the opportunity of great progress and I do believe that the action of a good digital piano is closer to the Grand action than that of an upright acoustic piano.

Clifford Evans Piano Method Aims

Again to clarify the simple aims of my method and to risk repeating myself, they are to produce a beautiful sound at all dynamics and speeds and to be as comfortable and efficient as possible as well designed ergonomics, in order to develop a technique completely at the service of the music. This is very much akin to the detailed choreography used by the ballet dancer who follows a scripted plan and rehearses each movement many times progressing seamlessly from one to the next and producing a fluent physical expression of the music of the ballet. This is how we need to look at our piano playing and collect well rehearsed movements which can be used over and over again in the service of our interpretation. How, do you say, can all the apparent challenges of piano playing be overcome in order to achieve this? By turning every disadvantage into an advantage, by the art of compromise, by listening to every note and when arriving at a solution, often steering a safe course between the mythological Scylla and Charybdis. *See Bibliography*

Examples of this piano method's effectiveness

One of my adult student had been having lessons every 2 weeks without fail for 30 years. He was well above grade 8 ABRSM before coming to me but by coincidence, his childhood lessons fell short of the mark in many ways as did mine.

This gave me an ideal opportunity to put into practice and develop all the ideas I learnt at the Conservatoires of Birmingham London (RAM) and St. Petersburg as well as 12 years of concert playing. I asked him, "Why is it you keep coming after all these years?" He paused slightly and I wondered what was coming next. He replied, "Well, I keep on improving!" - What more can a teacher want?

Another pupil is an experienced orchestral violinist who wanted to learn piano from nothing. He made fascinating comparisons of piano and violin technique. Lessons with such dedicated pupils have often gone over the hour and both teacher and student are learning from each other. In addition to his musical experience, this student brought to the lesson a detailed understanding of Alexander Technique – a method of relaxation and self-awareness used by many disciplines - especially musicians. *See Bibliography.* Although I have not studied Alexander Technique, I was delighted when he told me that my piano method reflected closely the same approach.

My favourite experience of piano playing enriching someone's life through physical improvements, is a pupil who was already an advanced pianist, it must be said, and who came to me having suffered a stroke which had badly affected his left hand and he was very sad that he couldn't play as well as before the stroke. My meticulous attention to fingering, thereby creating good muscular memory together with very careful and thorough practice methods gradually assisted his progress and the use of his left hand. About 18 months later a listener or anyone watching him play would not have been able to deduce that he had suffered a stroke. We carried on working together for many years and he covered a large repertoire of his favourite music – not only which he had played in the past, but new repertoire which gave him much pleasure. This is one of my proudest achievements in over 50 years of piano teaching.

Making a beautiful sound A beautiful sound is far from easy to define and is bound to vary from one person to another to some extent as each person's hearing system is slightly different. So to define scientifically what are the parameters and sound formula for the beautiful sound is beyond the scope of this e-book. However, I think that most people will agree that there are harsh, strident sounds which are unpleasant to the ear and warm, bell-like sounds which are pleasant to the ear. What actually causes the difference between these two experiences is at certainly definable so if we take bell, for example, scientists can analyse the sound it makes when struck, by recording and analysing the harmonics - notes which we hear in addition to the main note and which give the overall sounds its character and beauty. Since every object has what's known as it's maximum resonance this is likely to be the most beautiful sound the bell can make - resulting from the bell vibrating in its own natural way. The sound will be changed by striking it harder and faster or with hammer of different material.

Striking the bell too fast or with a harder or larger metal hammer will produce a harsher sound caused by a different set of harmonics - the bell is no longer 'comfortable' and no longer vibrates at its optimum resonance, thereby producing a sound which we perceive as harsh and not so pleasant. For a great example of striking bells and their harmonics read about 'Big Ben' – the main bell of London's Elizabeth Tower. *See bibliography*

On the piano the hammer is controlled by several levers and a human being. There are therefore there are variable factors and if we know what they are and how to control them, we can make a beautiful or harsh sound - a loud sound or a quiet sound. Those variable factors are..

1. The speed of our finger action.
2. The depth of our finger action - shallow or deep
3. The amount of force applied resulting from the amount of arm weight we allow to drop to the fingers. This is controlled by contracting or relaxing the upper arm muscle - the biceps

As far as the piano action itself is concerned the main variable factor is the acceleration of the hammer and the resulting velocity at the point of impact with the string. Over accelerate the hammer and there will be too much force at the point of impact which damages the quality of the sound. This happens if the warm-sounding harmonics are changed by the string behaving differently. Whilst the finger holds down the note, it is dying away and there's not much we can do about it.

Legato

Knowing the difference between legato and staccato and how to play them is an important part of beautiful piano playing. Legato means join the notes leaving no gaps between them. Play everything legato unless there are staccato markings or rests. Part of the legato technique entails overlapping the notes very slightly, but not so much that the listener is aware of it. This of-course is done by the fingers but not by them alone. Arm weight described later is directed onto the note by controlling the upper arm biceps.

Staccato Staccato means detaching the notes – not joining them. That's done by replacing the last half of the note with silence. You can create different lengths of staccato by shortening or lengthening that silence. Also, at the beginning of that silence and the end of the staccato note, the key can be released slowly, thereby gently dropping the damper onto the strings for a more gradual termination of the note. Alternatively the note may be released quickly resulting in a more abrupt ending of the note.

Getting down to the details

For beginners learning the notes

1. Cover the hands so that your eyes stay on the music.
2. Don't look down but feel for the gaps between the black notes.
3. LH equals RH plus 2 is a useful formula in the early stages, but not meant as a substitute for deep learning. The same note in the LH is 2 letters further ahead in the alphabet from the RH so for example an A in the RH treble clef becomes a C in the LH bass clef.
4. Ledger lines are always confusing so here's another quick formula. The treble clef RH spaces FACE if converted to line notes and starting on the top line, help you calculate the ledger line notes above the stave. Conversely, if you take the stave line notes EGBDF and convert to spaces starting on the top space of the treble clef, this will help you calculate the ledger lines spaces above the stave. The same formula can be adopted for notes below the RH treble stave and applies also to the LH bass stave assuming of course that you convert ACEG into lines (below bass stave) and GBDF into spaces below stave
5. Practise naming treble and bass notes alternatively so that you get used to comparing the differences.
6. Follow carefully with your eyes the rise and fall of the melodic line as this will help you read the music.
7. Look out for notes that are not adjacent to each other In other words notes which are omitted, thereby creating different intervals. An interval is the distance between notes. You can have 3 notes apart from C to E making a 3rd, C to F making a 4th, C to G making a 5th and so on.
8. Get used to recognising chords or 3 notes stacked above each other like CEG or written one note after the other.
9. In your manuscript book, practise writing, naming and playing the notes first treble clef notes,
Space notes=FACE Line notes=EGBDF

Then bass clef notes, Space notes=ACEG Line notes=GBDFA

Lastly, when fluent with the individual clefs, practise flicking from one to the other until you are fast at recognising the notes as this what you have to do reading music. Until you are able to do this, your progress will be hindered.

10. Before you start learning a piece of music, make sure you can recognise and name the notes easily without looking at the keys.

11. There are many apps on the internet to help you learn the notes and the more methods you have the better, because note learning has to be good and deep and if neglected will hold back your progress considerably.

Prepare your frame of mind.

1 Imagine the sound you want to produce.

2 Relax muscles down from jaw neck and shoulders, then continue relaxing upper arm, forearm, wrist hand and fingers fingers. However, sometimes we have to relax some muscles and contract others, and this will be dealt with later.

3 You have to teach your own brain has to be taught these positive and negative actions before any piano playing can materialise.

4 From the key to the piano string several levers and moving parts carry the energy we have put through them to activate the hammer. The efficiency of this process depends very much on the quality of the piano action and the feedback from that action helps one to adjust ones technique.

5 Think about these questions: What happens when the hammer impacts on the string? How does the string vibrate? How does it like to be struck in order to produce a beautiful sound? What is a beautiful sound? What is a harsh sound? What causes the difference between the two?

6 Finally the end of the journey. The sound gets to our ears and eventually reaches the brain where it is processed and compared with the original intended sound by the listening and monitoring part of the brain. Adjustments can then be made to assist the next note. "Does that happen with every note?" I can hear you asking. Well in a perfect performance, yes, but in time it hopefully becomes instinctive and we don't realise how hard we are working whilst busy monitoring and enjoying the music.

7 Lastly but most important in the process of piano playing, we must not thwart progress by our own frame of mind. Our own emotions can and do often get in the way of a good interpretation which is as honest as we can be to the message of the composer. Modern science links artistic pursuits to the transparent spontaneity and curiosity of childhood which we tend to lose as we grow accepting the rules of life which stifle many such thoughts. Playing the piano may to a large extent rekindle the wonders of childhood and take us back to that first unspoilt frame of mind which we may have largely forgotten. Identifying the musical messages from ones favourite music of any type can reach deep into us and produce that satisfying sense of wonder which modern life overwhelms. However, to achieve this reward we need to come to the piano with an open mind and if there are any conflicts or frustrations from the past deep inside us we must try and push them aside and not allow them to get in the way of the music. This is easier said than done and is worthy of an e-book of its own.

Practice tips

1. Cut your nails so that they do not protrude beyond the pad of the finger. This is essential to enable you to play with curved fingers and achieve a good piano technique, hand position and sound. It also protects your keyboard from damage noticeable over time.
2. Practise slowly with much thoughtful repetition of short sections, each no longer than 2 to 4 bars, making sure that you overlap the sections by at least one note in order to build in continuity. Repetition, if coupled with listening and self-criticism, creates hard-wiring in the brain, which is essential for the development of muscular memory and coordination required in piano playing.
3. Fingering is important and if consistent and well learnt, produces good progress, so play the notes with the same fingers every time. Do a great deal of hands separate practice before putting hands together, then continue practising hands separately, mixing this with hands together practice for thorough progress. There is more about fingering in its own section.
4. Keep the tempo steady as soon as you can play a piece of piano or keyboard music, but keep it steady - once again practise slowly. Even if the direction is Allegro, save that for later when you have more control of the notes. However there's nothing wrong with trying out a faster pace at the end of your session to see how much progress there is at that speed – make a note of it on the metronome for future reference. Make a list of the mistakes you made at speed and then return to your slow practice the next day to put them right, or if you are not too tired at this point, on the same day.

5. Pain can be caused by tension and you should stop immediately and rest if you have pain. If you play too fast too soon, the same can happen, so relax and try not to tense up when practising or playing the piano. This way you can avoid both injury and harsh sound. If you experience pain, make a note of exactly what you were doing at the time to help your teacher identify and correct the problem. If I'm your teacher, email me immediately.
6. Looking at hands when learning to read music especially, will hold you back and should be avoided unless when finding the initial hand position or changing that hand position. Avoid looking down and up from the music to the keyboard and back again for every note. If you do have to look down for the occasional change of hand position or jump on the keyboard, try not to lose your place in the music. There is more about this in the section on Sight-reading.
7. Check your note learning and spend at least 5 minutes per day learning to recognise firstly right-hand, then left-hand notes. The earlier section on this subject deserves constant revision.
8. Don't rush. Resist the temptation to rush ahead to the next line before you have achieved a good, polished result.
9. Thoroughness. Make a reasonable job of one line before you progress to the next one. Always practise thoroughly to achieve good progress in your piano playing.
10. Revise old material, devoting one practice session a week to it and building up your own collection of favourites to play for relaxation or entertain your friends. For a professional it's an essential part of maintaining repertoire whilst preparing new material, but the principal is the same.
11. Correct mistake. Bad habits like fingering or note errors can develop. Regular piano lessons reduce these and help develop your piano technique, quality of sound and favourite repertoire.
12. Amount of practice. A beginner doesn't and can't practise as much as a professional, but it's possible play for pleasure to quite a reasonable standard with much less time. Regularity and quality of practice is more important than volume. A beginner should practise 30-40 minutes each day – morning is best and long sessions are not good. This can usually provide reasonable progress even if you have a demanding job and busy family life. If you miss one day you also lose the valuable brainwork done whilst asleep.

Practising technique

A daily technical programme forms an important part of the skill of playing the piano or keyboard. I favour this rather than the intensive use of manuals of exercises which require a great deal of understanding of piano technique before using them. For your own safety please read this e-book before trying exercise manuals. Firstly you need the ABRSM Scale Book and my technical programme below. People do try and play without an organised warm-up session but come up against more problems in repertoire and incorrect practise can result in injury which is not always immediately apparent. My warm-up session does help the progress of your technique generally as well as serving as warm-ups. Regular use of this programme enables you to devote more thought into playing expressively, which needs a confident technique and tone production skills. As the same issues reoccur in thousands of pieces of music, this programme will help you to learn new music more thoroughly.

Reasons to practise a technical programme

1. Scales, broken chords and arpeggios help you ...
2. to achieve tonal evenness with each finger by playing all the notes with equal loudness and quality.
3. to achieve rhythmic evenness with each finger by successfully playing many notes of equal length.
4. to join all the notes together (legato) by having no gaps between them
5. Scales and arpeggios help you to detach the notes by putting deliberate gaps between them (staccato).

Fingers, thumbs and hand help you...

1. to achieve a good finger action of the right kind by squeezing the note firmly with a circular action from the knuckle.
2. to perfect the passage of the thumb or the movement of the hand over the thumb - vital to good piano technique and progress.

3. to perfect the lateral movement of the hand when putting the thumb under.
4. to play with shape - getting gradually louder or softer over a number of notes
5. to be more aware of keys and key signatures, that is the number of sharps or flats in a piece of music.
6. with your sight-reading because you can recognise bits of scale and arpeggio patterns in the music.
7. to memorise music because scale and arpeggio patterns are easily recognisable and committed to memory.

Piano Method - daily technical programme

HS= Hands Separately HT= Hands Together

1. **Scales** initially contrary motion then later do similar motion (majors initially) HS and HT 2 octaves at first then progress to 3 and lastly 4 octaves.
2. **Arpeggios** of major chords in similar motion (majors initially) HS and HT 2 octaves at first then progress to 3 and lastly 4 octaves. Clifford Evans fingering to follow.
3. **Double 3rds** similar motion (majors initially) HS and HT 2 octaves at first then progress to 3 and lastly 4 octaves Clifford Evans fingering to follow.
4. **Broken chords**, standard pattern in similar motion (majors initially) HS and HT 2 octaves at first then progress to 3 and lastly 4 octaves.
5. **Double Octaves** similar motion (majors initially) HS and HT an octave apart, 2 octaves at first then progress to 3 octaves in triplets.

Summary of fingering of technical programme

1. **Scales** are mostly the same as the ABRSM Manual..
2. **Arpeggios** beginning on white notes usually start in the RH on 241 to exploit the large stretch between the thumb and 2nd finger which then coincides with the larger interval of a 4th in the arpeggio.
3. **Double 3rds** are mostly different and exploit the fingers 5+3 coinciding them with a comfortable interval in the scale usually involving 1 or 2 black notes.
4. **Broken Chords** The italics fingerings are for a very small hand and the 53 options are for the smaller hand. Use the 4th finger as much as possible.
5. **Octaves** 5th finger on the white notes and 4th finger on the black notes unless you have a small hand. Elbow in for black notes and out again for whites.

Order of practising the keys

Scales Choose your key ranging from 1 key per day to 1 key per week starting with majors in this order: C G D A E B F majors, then progress to the keys starting on a black note in this order: Db F# Eb Bb Ab majors. Advanced players can do all 12 keys every day and with these 5 exercises in about 20 minutes HT in Similar motion.

Arpeggios Choose your key ranging from 1 key per day to 1 key per week starting with majors in this order: C G F D A E B majors then progress to the keys starting on a black note in this order: Bb Db Eb Ab F#.

Double 3rds Choose your key ranging from 1 key per day to 1 key per week starting with majors in this order: C G D A E F B majors then progress to the keys starting on a black note in this order: Bb Db Eb Ab F#.

Broken Chords Choose your key ranging from 1 key per day to 1 key per week starting with majors in this order: C G F D A E B majors then progress to the keys starting on a black note in this order: Bb Db Eb Ab F#.

Double Octaves Choose your key ranging from 1 key per day to 1 key per week starting with majors in this order: C G F D A E B majors then progress to the keys starting on a black note in this order: Bb Db F# Eb Ab.

Fingering methods

My fingering methods have been developed over more than 50 years, so it's impossible for me to condense all that experience into this e-book. It's one of my USPs as a piano teacher and has had a great impact on the progress of my pupils. However, as fingering is mentioned so often in this paper, I'll attempt to outline my basic principals and hope that time will permit me to add many examples in later updates to this e-book. Each one of the following items really deserves a section of its own.

- Do as little as possible to achieve the desired result.
- Make your fingering as simple as possible.
- Decide on the most practical fingering and stick to it.
- Choose a fingering that works at speed.
- Choose a fingering which exploits the size and shape of your hand.
- Choose fingerings which reduce moving and changes of hand position.
- Choose fingering which are easy to memorise.
- Use fingering that works well playing hands together, not just hands separately.
- Don't shy away from using the 4rth finger: it's more useful than you might think.
- Use the best finger for making the sound that you need.
- Use 4321 on repeated notes with fingers in line.
- Choose your trill fingers according to which fingers are best for context.
- Use silent finger changes to join octaves or notes in a melody.

Analytical aspects of piano technique

All aspects of the piano method contribute to directing the correct weight via the fingers to the note by producing the necessary amount of energy for controlled note depression. This will depend on mastering the movements of all the limbs and will vary according to the speed and volume required. Once the movements are learned, they can be reduced to a minimum, which greatly improves the potential for speed when required by the music (but not for its own sake). Piano technique can be divided into the following components which need to be studied individually. The components all have to work together because they are inter-dependant.

1. Brain
2. Eyes
3. Ears
4. Ear care
5. Spine and Pelvis
6. Shoulders
7. Upper arm
8. Lower arm
9. Wrist
10. Hand
11. Fingers
12. Thumbs
13. Prepared stroke using upper and lower arm, wrist, hand, fingers and thumb.
14. Legs and feet.

1 Brain

A brief description of its neurology in piano activity. We've touched on this earlier and it's certainly where all the activity comes from. Just a little understanding of how it works renders huge advantages. My favourite one is that some knowledge reduces the tendency to be frustrated when confronted with difficult hurdles. Assuming we have identified a problem and it's solution, we need to design a practice method and then repeat fragments every day until that problem disappears. This takes us into practice methods to be illustrated later but for the moment suffice it to say that these same solutions themselves cause problems because the brain doesn't like repetition. In fact it gets bored very quickly, craving a new experience. It's apparently like a sponge which soaks up the water initially very fast until a saturation point is reached - that's when the brain loses interest, stops concentrating and it's time to make a coffee. That could easily be every 5 minutes so what to do? We have to deceive the brain into thinking that it is not a repetition. We need to think about the fragment in a different way by focusing on a different aspect. This will keep the concentration up with good brain chemicals to keep us going (endorphins). Boredom produces a different brain chemistry (serotonin) which reduces the efficiency of neurological activity - the aim of which is to generate good chemicals imprints in the brain called memory. Above all, through the repetitions we must carry on listening critically to every note - this will help achieve a more musical result and counteract the brain switching off with resulting boredom. So many technical issues require the establishments of brain circuitry which is not present necessarily used in every day life. The neural activity particularly from one side to the other, aural and visual contexts joining eventually to the motor-coordination region all work together, managed by the intellectual part of the brain which we have to train to store all the necessary information to make the other areas work efficiently as a team. The best pianists have all those areas working together beautifully to produce the resulting amazing skill to which we all aspire.

2 Eyes

Of-course we need our eyes to read the music and see where to put our fingers but plenty of wonderful blind pianists show that this is not essential to them. When a person loses sight or was born without it, the brain does a clever trick: it recruits the visual parts which are no longer active and uses them for other current tasks like listening to the sounds and feeling the notes not to mention remembering the music. In fact one reason why sighted professionals also play without music is that it does release part of the brain for other senses to use. In addition it makes it easier to manipulate the many jumps which piano music asks us to do. Some visual processing is used for this and for recognising the chords and patterns we have to find on the keyboard.

How does a blind pianist manage then? There are thousands of little sensors on the tips of our fingers which enable us to imagine in 3d what we are feeling with them. When a beginner can't resist looking at their hands every other note I remind them about this and encourage them to feel for the gaps between the black notes, to remember where the Cs and Fs are and keep looking at the music until they are more experienced to know when is necessary to look down and when not. Eyes are very useful naturally but it's also interesting to switch them off sometimes. In order to test the security of a new piece it's helpful to play it slowly in total darkness at different speeds stopping at different places and restarting again. That has to be an important difference in the approach of professional and amateur. Amateurs practise until they get it right the professionals practise until they can't get it wrong. However if the amateur tries to think professionally in their daily practice, progress and enjoyment can increase considerably. So although the eyes are our main tool when learning to read music, we need to make sure they don't make other senses lazy. When starting, there is so much visual information to take in that many students experience overload. The best idea is not to look too far ahead, get equally confident in both clefs and above all learn to recognise the notes instantly. The eyes can also help us to follow the musical line as it goes up and down – a most important and frequently overlooked trick. After all a professional won't be naming the notes as the music progresses so this is the main tool they use. Making sure the fingers not being used, are close to the notes, greatly following the music with the eyes . The idea being that if the fingering is placed close to the notes, then the student is more likely to take in information about that note and this reduces the tendency in the early stages, to be totally dependant on fingering but to also develop the reading of music

3 Ears

Ears are obviously essential for playing the piano but there's a great deal of difference between just hearing and listening. Hearing is the physical means of getting the sound into one's brain. Listening is switching on the analytical parts of the brain so that we are really aware of what kinds of sound are being made and how they are behaving. Processing that information is an important part of musical understanding and of playing a musical instrument. However, let's concentrate firstly on the hearing parts of the process. Here is a very simplified breakdown of what happens.... The piano string has just been struck by the hammer and vibrates back and forth many times a second from about 50 times for a low note 11,000 times a second at the top of the piano. This causes subtle changes in air pressure and those vibrations are picked up by our very sensitive eardrums. The sound is actually too loud for us at this point so the smallest muscles in the body attached to the 3 smallest bones - the hammer anvil and stirrup - suppress the sound's and make them acceptable to the cochlea -

a very clever organ which looks a bit like a large snail but even more skilful because it has many thousands of tiny hairs protected which vibrate in sympathy with the info from the hearing bones and eardrum. Each one of these tiny hairs is a different sound frequency and all of them are transmitted by the aural nerve to a specialist part of the brain called the aural cortex. This is where all the info is processed and understood or not depending on how well developed that part our brain is. We all hear the same sounds when a piece of music is played but it means more to us if we understand what we are hearing. Does our hearing keep up with the speed of the music? Can we notice as deal tunes being played simultaneously? If it's an orchestra or other group of musicians playing, can we pick out the various instruments or singers in a choir. Can we perceive how the composer starts with one idea and skilfully develops it into another and yet another? Can we differentiate between short notes and long notes or between notes which are joined or detached. Do we receive the emotional and intellectual message which the composer is sending to is us via the hands of a great pianist. To achieve this level of understanding is a worthwhile life-long journey to infinity. All this starts with the vibrating string, but how do we influence how that string vibrate because you may have noticed that not all pianists sound the same. That will hopefully become clear to you with the Clifford Evans Piano Method.

4 Ear care

Continuous noise level causes gradual damage to hearing if too loud, but exactly what is too loud? Anything below 75db is apparently deemed to be safe but 85 dB and above will cause damage. It's advisable to avoid sounds which are too close, too loud, or too long. Sudden loud noises can also cause damage because tiny ear muscles in the middle ear - especially the stapedial muscle - hasn't got enough time to react quickly enough to protect the cochlea, which can then become damaged. Orchestral players have problems sometimes depending where they are sitting in the orchestra. Pop concerts cause problems especially if you are too close to the loudspeakers. Playing piano too loud and with the wrong technique in a small echoey room is also not good for ears. You can go many years without problems and the damage is not obvious until accompanied by normal ageing or when the ears just can't take any more. Then it's too late and distressing with nasty conditions potentially developing like tinnitus, hyperacusis, distortion, reduction of hearing ability and deafness. It really is worth looking after your ears before it's too late. If your piano is digital you will have less problems because you can control the volume. If you have an acoustic piano in a small room, consider installing thicker curtains or putting a blanket between your piano and the wall. If you have a grand piano in a small room, you can close the lid completely and put the music stand on top of it instead of sliding it along the provided rails.

5 Spine and Pelvis

The spine plays a vital part in posture and is well worth attention. Sitting height is critical and depends on the difference in the length of the upper arm - the humerus - and spine. If we sit up straight with the back in an S shape not curled over like a C shape then we are less likely to get pain in the neck and lower back. The way to calculate sitting position is covered in the section on the shoulders. So, assuming good posture with a nicely S shape spine and with the hands on the keyboard we are ready to go. However, we won't be staying in the centre of the keyboard for long and will need to move up it to the right and down it to the left. When we see a pianist playing the camera rarely shows the back of the player and the enormous amount of work done by the spine is not apparent from the side shots. The shoulders at the top of the spine and the pelvis at the bottom are of course involved in any sideways movements, but don't forget the feet which help stability and thereby protect the lower spine as we move from side to side. If you move up to the right, then put the foot out to the right too or to the left when moving downwards. Pedal makes things harder, but will be covered in its own section.

Without the next trick we would be playing piano as if riding a bike round corners: you've guessed it - the right hand would be lower than the keys as you lean over to the right and so on with the left hand. There is a simple solution. The challenge is to retain the hands in the horizontal plain as we move up and down the keyboard. For this to happen and avoiding the raising of the wrist as we move - the shoulders, spine and pelvis have to form a flexible moving parallelogram. However it's more accurate to define it as an isosceles trapezoid as the top and bottom are not the same length. The simple solution is to raise the right shoulder slightly as you go up the piano and raise the left shoulder slightly as you go down the piano. Now we are keeping the shoulders parallel with the keyboard in its horizontal plain. There is still the chance of getting the elbow attached to the ribs as we move up and down, but this can be eliminated by keeping those elbows at 45 degrees – in other words “Out” but not “Up”.

More Pelvis options

In the above description of the fluid trapezoid, the body weight was transferred from left pelvis going down and right pelvis going up resulting in some lateral pelvis movement but not to the point of wriggling up or down on the piano stool! Normally we sit on the front part of the pelvis retaining the S shape spine and leaning 1-2 degrees forward to assist the pelvis pointing backwards. This is part of retaining the S shape of the back and avoiding strain and pain in the small of the back.

For very advanced players, sitting on the back of the pelvis can be useful when using a straight spine pointing slightly away from the keyboard, combining this with a straighter arm and a more gentle angle of the fingers when depressing the keys. This improves the cantabile (melodious) quality of the sound as it uses the weight of the whole arm and not just the upper arm. Employ this when playing a slow, beautiful melody full of long notes. Watch Arthur Rubinstein on YouTube.

Advanced: use the whole of spine, pelvis and shoulders as one unit rocking backwards and forwards, transferring the weight of the whole body onto the keys. For example in the opening chords of Tchaikovsky concerto no 1 in order to produce a loud, warm sound above the orchestra. How important the spine and pelvis are in piano technique.

6 Shoulders

Shoulders, posture and sitting height are critical and depend on the difference in the length of the upper arm - the humerus - and the spine. If we sit up straight with the back in an S shape not curled over like a C shape which causes unnecessary stress at the neck and small of the back. Also, make sure that the pelvis is pointing backwards so you are sitting on the front of the pelvis (not the back of it) then the elbow with they should be no more than 10 mm above the surface of the keys in other words slightly higher than dead level with the keys. You need someone (or a camera) to help you check this with their eyes at keyboard level. Now you can adjust your piano stool accordingly and you have a formula that will help you anywhere. Back to those shoulders - are they relaxed yet? There is one very old human response which might spoil your approach to the piano especially when the going gets tough - the fight or flight response. This originates from long ago to protect us in dangerous situations and to protect us at the thinnest part of the skull whilst in the danger. The shoulders go up and the head goes back and all the muscles freeze up. OK for self protection but no good for piano playing and achieving relaxed shoulders. Help is at hand but simply being told to relax is not sufficient. Concentrate firstly on your lower jaw, relax it and open the mouth slightly whilst being aware of the muscles to the neck relaxing. Now follow them along the scapula to the shoulder and down the arm and you will achieve a more relaxed state ready for playing the piano.

7 Upper Arm

Have you ever thought of the upper arm as being the breath of the pianist? Sounds odd but that's the truth. First we might have to revise how we think the art of piano playing works. It is a common misconception that in order to play louder on the piano, we press harder. Many fall into that trap only to produce a harsh sound the louder they play; or if pressing gently to try for a quiet sound it's likely that the sound will be indistinct and not be heard clearly at the back of the room or hall. So how do we cope with this? By using arm weight and gravity instead of applying force to the piano. 23

Liszt used this technique. If the upper arm biceps muscles are relaxed, there is available weight which we can direct and allow to be transferred to the keys. If those muscles are contracted (tightened), then the weight is held back and never reaches the keys. This is when we might be tempted to press harder to increase the volume; better to relax the biceps and let nature enhance the sound for us. The result is less wear and tear on the joints and a warmer, beautiful sound. We can either relax the biceps completely for the loudest sound or tighten it a little for not so loud a sound or tighten it completely so that no weight gets to the keys. In that case we only have the finger action at our disposal and very quiet but clear sounds can be controlled and successfully achieved instead of the rather hit and miss approach where you never really know what the result will be. It's all about controlling the sound and the biceps play a large role in this. There are of-course other factors dealt with in the section on fingers.

8 Lower arm

The lower arm plays a vital role of transferring that valuable weight from the upper arm to the fingers in addition to various movements which facilitate the work done by them. They are: rotation, circles, up-downs and lateral movements.

Rotation of the 2 forearm bones - the radius and the ulna - requires an inflexible wrist so that momentum goes straight through to the fingers. In this forearm rotation movement the forearm and hand lock together and work as one unit. It's comparable with the action of using a screwdriver but less stressful. The ulna is fixed at the elbow so rotation of the inner forearm is less than the outer forearm because that bone - the radius - is free to move almost 180 degrees. The trick with using this movement in piano playing is to equalise these movements. Luckily this is possible because like most piano movements, they are tiny. However, we have to exaggerate them at first so the brain learns the motor coordination and muscular memory. When this is secure the movements are reduced and if you are watching a pianist you probably wouldn't even notice unless you knew what look out for.

Circles can be clockwise or anti-clockwise according to the requirements of the music and need a flexible, relaxed wrist. I'm called them circles for ease of reference, but they are in fact ellipses or "squashed" circles. Although there is minimal movement in the elbow and shoulder joints, it's useful to think of the movement originating at the elbow as it moves in a way not unlike whisking an egg, or stirring your coffee but with a relaxed floppy hand. These circles not only direct the arm weight onto the notes for a good clear sound, but also enable a smooth transfer of weight at exactly the right time to give a good legato – the joining of the notes. It's worth also noticing that the top part of the circle with no notes, is faster than the bottom part which contains the notes.

Up-downs of the forearm also originate at the elbow with as little as possible movement from the upper arm and a response from the wrist that rather makes it look like a door hinge opening and closing, but in this case rising and falling. This movement is often used for example with repeated chords and the effort is put into lifting the forearm and then letting it drop by its own weight so that we exploit the weight and gravity principals of the method.

Lateral movement of the arm helps us to get to the correct notes more easily and move up and down the keyboard. How to move the whole body when doing this will be dealt with later but the main thing to remember is that we need to move the body left and right in a way which prevents the elbows from clashing with the ribs. Those elbows need freedom of movement.

9 Wrist

The wrist is considered in the section on the lower arm and the hand because obviously it always works in conjunction with them. The wrist basically enables much flexibility of all the necessary movements required for piano playing and particularly those which involve the lower arm and hand. I've found that the wrist is often much neglected and such omission frequently leads to injury for the pianist- amateur or professional. The 7 bones of the wrist enable our circular, lateral or up-down movements which not only enables everything so far described, but gives the hand an opportunity to be very versatile. Sounds obvious up to now, so what's the fuss about ? The most important function of the wrist is not only to enable the hand and arm movements but to act as an efficient shock absorber, helping to protect us from injury and to make a more beautiful sound. It works a bit like the suspension a car which absorbs the bumps on the road and gives us a smoother ride. There are forces in piano playing which likewise need to be absorbed so that we do the best possible for the music and for looking after our joints, muscles and tendons. If we play with a rigid wrist even when it rotates with the arm, then we run the risk of the pianist's hazard - a ganglion developing in between membrane which contains a fluid like substance designed to stop the wrist bones rubbing against each other. Reoccurring tension in and around the wrist can cause a tiny puncture and the liquid leaks through it and hardens. This is nature's way of making a repair but leaves a lump called a ganglion. Further tension can cause inflammation to the surrounding tissues and this can cause severe pain or eventually restricting movement. However, the good news is that if we develop as perfect a technique as possible, this lump can and does shrink over time. I'm speaking from experience of-course and the only way I was able to eliminate pain and continue my playing, was to develop my Clifford Evans Piano Method over a lifetime of playing and teaching. It's a tall order to achieve everything in this method but even the basics make one huge difference to sound quality and reduction in injury.

10 Hands

Lateral movement is also used by the hands in again conjunction with the forearm and wrist. It's not a large movement, but is most useful when coordinating with the thumb. If the thumb goes under the hand or the hand comes over the thumb as in scale passages, they work together nicely. As the thumb goes under the fingers, the hand moves laterally in the opposite direction.

Its pretty obvious we need the hands to play the piano but nature plays a major role here and we are stuck with what we are given. The trick is to understand the size and shape of your own hand and work within its limits staying as relaxed as possible to avoid injury and strive for a beautiful and warm sound.

Small hands that can barely stretch an octave will always have to be careful what repertoire they choose. A 9th stretch is very helpful and a 10th makes Christmas come early. There are many damage limitation exercises that help the small hand, including modifications of fingering, stretching an octave by repositioning the thumb at the front edge of the key especially if you use the angle of the hand to place the 5th finger further in the note. Other useful compromises involve redistribution of notes, spreading of chords and as a last resort, omission of notes.

Large hands have problems too. The larger hand may also have thick and long fingers which get in the way of delicate fast finger work and the 3rd finger may even get stuck between the black notes. To avoid this they have to exploit the arm at an angle of 45 degrees and that often solves the problem. In addition to lateral hand movements already explained, the other main movements of the hand are...

Opening and closing of the hand. For example opening of the hand for octaves - easier for the larger hand because some of the same muscles are used to relax and make a floppy dropped hand which leads us to the next movement....

A floppy hand combined with up and down movement and flexible wrist is used to create the shock absorber effect for better tone or as part of the up down hand and forearm used for tone control and phrasing – more above this further down.

Rotation in fixed position as extension of the forearm and ideal for passage work like the Alberto bass (Mozart Sonata in C major K 537) or tremolo octaves (Beethoven Sonata Pathetique).

Clockwise circles with flexible wrist as in broken chords (down) and anti-clockwise circles (up).

11 Fingers

Most people think fingers are the most important aspect of playing the piano. Certainly we would be very limited without 8 good fingers and 2 versatile thumbs. They are both actually the tip of the iceberg and work best when supported by everything previously described. Just as with the other limbs used in playing piano, we can fall into the trap of pushing or digging into the note with the finger. This will result in exhausting finger work and poor control of the sound and its quality. Nevertheless it's nothing to be ashamed of because in the rest of life we all tend to push anything which requires moving - like opening a door. Try squeezing instead of pushing downwards and you will be applying the main aspect of J.S.Bach's Clavichord technique. I got it wrong for many years until my teachers in Russia, Professor Pavel Serebriakoff and Elena Serkova, introduced me to J.S.Bach's technique of playing the clavichord – an important predecessor of the piano with its hammer-like action striking the string. See *Bibliography*. This is a technique of squeezing the key towards the inner palm of the hand, but without sliding along the key. The finger should be activated in a gripping type action originating from the 1st knuckle with numbers 2 and 3 following progressively. The success of this action depends on a further 2 factors : the finger should be initially in a semi-curved state as if holding a pear with the thinner part touching the fingers. Fingers holding a tangerines would be overruled and result in the dreaded digging and pushing action so hard to control by contacting the key with the top of the finger. Avoid over-curved or straight fingers, which produce the wrong angle and sound making it very difficult or even impossible to vary to volume, length and quality of the note which is of-course what we are trying to achieve. Now that we have a finger action based on a natural gripping movement we can vary two aspects as required for the music: the depth of the squeezing finger and the speed of its action. We can perform a shallow, deep, slow or fast squeeze and all the variations of those. Directing the weight from the biceps through the forearm to the fingers and we begin to understand how the most musical of pianists at any level manage to produce such a variety of beautiful sounds at all dynamics. Another important but quite advanced aspect when quietly repeating the notes (as in Beethoven's "Für Elise") is "playing the bed of the key" – which means feeling the subtle contact with the moving hammer being prevented from coming back to its first resting place by a part called the jack. The result produces a longer and quieter note without being staccato. This aspect is not available on all digital pianos.

12 Thumbs

Thumbs are a slightly different scenario, being designed to work almost in the opposite direction to the fingers - ideal for gripping the branches of a tree a few million years ago, but not useful for piano playing. The thumb would like to go horizontally across the keys but that too is not useful.

The pianist would like to go straight down with the thumb when striking the key but that is soon uncomfortable and even painful. However, sometimes this is all we can do when the thumb is already under the fingers as in an arpeggio. This results in the thumb being the only digit which uses two techniques as required. However, whenever possible we should use the compromise of activating the thumb by striking the note at 45 degrees which is still fairly comfortable and has the added advantage of reducing the volume of the note. Whilst doing this it's necessary to move the thumb from the first joint at the wrist – an often neglected joint. This turns it into a longer lever so a smaller action from the wrist joint delivers a larger movement at the pad of the thumb - or rather that is the side of the pad of the thumb because of our 45 degree angle of striking the note. Using this wrist joint as much as we can also helps protect the other joints of the thumb.

13 Prepared stroke technique for achieving a beautiful sound

This is meant not only for advanced and professional pianists under the correct supervision can be adopted little by little from the very early stages of piano learning. In fact it is of great benefit to do so because adding it later can be harder. All the techniques outlined so far still won't produce that beautiful fluid sound which we desire. The prepared stroke with its Up, Drop, Rest routine is the 'centre of the onion' as far as my piano method is concerned, but I will not take all the credit for this. I owe the core of this knowledge to a great teacher and pianist who introduced me to it. That pianist was Harold Rubens, in whose obituary in one of the International Piano Magazines was described as being known for his 'golden sound'. I don't know how he acquired this technique, but in addition to the hint in Harold Schoenberg's book "The Great Pianists" and Liszt weight, you can see that the pianists who achieve such quality of playing definitely use it. You can see for yourself on YouTube videos of Arthur Schnabel, Michelangelo and Claudio Arrau.

Practising the prepared stroke

The basic version of this technique involves a slight lift of the forearm before striking the note with the finger, although I prefer to describe this as squeezing the note from the muscular memory and 1st knuckle but with definitely without sliding along the key. At the point of squeezing the note, the biceps are contracted with their weight held back. We then relax them and allow the weight of the arm to drop onto the key. All through this process, the fingers have not left the keys because the flexible wrist and floppy hand enable them to stay there by acting like a shock absorber for any energy returning to us from the hammer, much like the suspension of your car makes the bumps on the road less noticeable. Remember Newton's law ... for each action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It's this opposite reaction from the impact of the hammer which we need to absorb in order to reduce harsh tone. After all this, you rest in the note before beginning the process all over again.

Phrasing and prepared stroke

If we want to play 2 notes in succession or a series of duplet phrases, we go through the same procedure again but this time we hold on to the first note for its required length - say a quaver - whilst leaving our arm weight on it for its duration. When ready to play the next note we do 3 things simultaneously...

1. Squeeze the note firmly (without sliding)
2. Contract the biceps
3. Lift the forearm.

We are now on the up-lift part of whatever note is played next. In this case it's another duplet and we can play a whole series of them. There is however a subtle refinement to perfect the joined note, (legato) slurred notes – the fingers provide a slight overlap with the biceps only contracting as the first note of the 2 is released.

If a triplet or quadruplet is required, the first and last of the 3 or 4 notes are treated exactly as the first and last notes of the duplet. However the notes in between them need us to just continue with a relaxed biceps where the weight of the arm is being transferred from one note to the next aided by a slight overlap of the fingers

Jumps and the prepared stroke

If for example there are jumps between the described phrases described above, then the "Up" stroke of the last note of a phrase becomes the prepared stroke of the first note of the next phrase. With the biceps contracted at this point, the arm simultaneously goes up or down the keyboard for the jump, adopting a trajectory without rising above the keyboard more than 10-15mm. When a point immediately above the note at the end of the jump is reached, the biceps are relaxed and the next phrase or single note played.

Prepared stroke with different limbs - especially the whole arm

The prepared stroke can be used with whole arm, forearm, hand or just the finger. Applied by the whole arm - upper and lower together, you can back slightly in order to straighten the arm, thus making more weight and volume available - excellent for chord work as in the opening of Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto number 1, or for getting that extra weight onto a cantabile melody with a series of long notes which need to be especially sonorous as required in many Chopin Nocturnes.

Prepared stroke by the hand

A slight prepared stroke of the hand activated really by lifting the hand by the forearm from the wrist, needs to be coincided with the squeezing fingers as the hand comes down. Once again it doesn't have to be a large movement especially as it exploits the whole of the hand weight which is much more than that of a solitary finger. This prepared stroke of the hand is ideal for any notes or chords which need to be carefully controlled for quality and volume.

Prepared stroke by fingers

Use of weaker and stronger fingers. When we need an exact but quiet dynamic and need to know in advance what loudness that will be, it can be useful to use a tiny prepared stroke by just one finger. This means lifting it from the knuckle joint but so imperceptibly that the finger pad doesn't lose contact with the surface of the key. In other words we are just exploiting the springiness of the flesh available to us on the finger pad, but that's all we need for subtle control

Speed of the prepared stroke.

When learning movements like the up-down prepared stroke it's necessary to exaggerate them slightly so that the brain learns to coordinate the up-downs with the correct notes and phrasing. If you watch the top classical pianists who use this technique you'll see that the movements are as little as is necessary to achieve the required result. So although we must initially practise them with large movements in order to teach the brain the motor coordination. When the brain fully understands the new instructions and some muscular memory has developed, we can reduce the degree of the movements as well as increasing speed.

Conflicting instructions

Probably the hardest aspect of controlling the limbs is deciding which one needs to be relaxed and which needs to be contracted. It is fortunately something which the brain gets used to with regular coaxing. For example there are some muscles around the elbow which need to be contracted in order to raise the lower arm. This at the same time as usually relaxing the biceps. This can be described as sending a positive instruction (to the lower arm lifting muscles) at the same time as sending a negative instruction to the biceps (saying relax please).

The same applies to the floppy hand which we need when playing most aspects of the technique (but not rotating forearm). As an example, let us take a scale of 3rds. The biceps have to be contracted slightly for the forearm lift and move between each of the 3rds. During this time the wrist and hand have to remain relaxed and floppy. Here again we have simultaneously positive and negative instructions which take some acquiring at whatever level if it's a new acquisition to your technique at any level. 30

Most people find these conflicting actions the hardest part of controlling limbs, muscles and weight, but once you have acquired them, your playing will develop in an effective and enjoyable way.

Transitioning from one movement to the next

Often we have a passage using a movement which is followed by another completely different movement. This can be very disconcerting at first but all we need do is...

1. Make sure the individual movements are practised to the point of fluency.
2. Take one bar either side of the transition and practise the changeover.

It's an excellent idea to practise transitions from any movement so that when this is encountered in a piece of music, you are already equipped.

Combining movements – one in each hand

Sometimes we need to use one movement in the left hand and a different one in the right hand. My favourite example is in the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata in G major opus 14 no2 starting at bar 89 where we use the floppy hand forearm staccato in the left hand and clockwise circle in the right hand for the triplets.

It's a good idea to practise all the groups of combined movements so that again you are equipped before encountering them in the music. Just to recap, they are...

1. Up Down prepared stroke
2. Clockwise circles
3. Anti-clockwise circles
4. lateral hand movement
5. rotating forearm
6. floppy hand

Combining 2 movements in one hand (very advanced)

Sometimes we need to use 2 movements in the same hand. For example in a 5th finger melody combining with triplet quavers where the 1st of the 3 is the melody note, we could use clockwise circles and incorporate a down stroke at the point where the top part of the circle joins the bottom part. This makes the top part of the circle the prepared up stroke for the down stroke.

14 Legs and feet

The legs and feet play their part in balancing and supporting our whole body and you can learn more about this in the section on the spine and pelvis for moving up and down the piano. As far as using the feet for the pedals are concerned, here are some basic principals: the heel has to stay on the floor at all times and the ball of the foot stays in contact with the pedal whilst depressing and releasing it. It's particularly important to retain contact as the spring of the pedal brings the pedal up: this is to avoid tapping the pedal with the foot which of-course makes a noise as well as causing potential damage to the lyre of the grand piano. Last but not least - losing contact delivers imprecise pedalling and spoils your musical intentions. When the pedal is not being used, the ball of the foot remains in contact with the pedal ready for action. For advanced and often not so advanced players, there is another turn in the story.. If you have to use the pedal at the same time as moving up and down the piano, it will usually be the right foot. It will therefore be hundreds of pages of music necessary to angle the right foot so that the heel is pointing to the right – the whole of the lower leg is naturally involved and is not altogether comfortable, but it's another trick in your palette when using the pedals, should you need it and is useful for reducing strain on the lower back.

Using the pedals

The Right pedal Before starting on the legs and feet, let's just look at the pedal functions which they operate. The right pedal or sustaining pedal operates the dampers, which normally rest on the strings to stop them vibrating. As the foot goes down, the dampers are raised from the strings, allowing them to vibrate freely. As the foot comes up, the dampers return to their original position, killing any existing sound and once again preventing the strings from vibrating.

Clever sustaining pedal

After a note is played it dies away, but with a fast and deep depression of the sustaining pedal we can hope to increase the harmonics and give the illusion of crescendo through the note. (As at the end of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata in Eb opus 81a). Once we progress to the next note we can control the speed that the damper drops into the string and therefore the precise or gradual ending of the note. This requires experimentation to judge the instrument and room acoustics, but I recommend a tiny overlap of the pedal just to make sure there is a good join between the notes and that the harmonics are kept going as long as possible.

The Left pedal or Una corda is sometimes called the soft pedal because it produces a quieter sound. On a grand piano, the keyboard moves to the right so that the hammers strike only 1 or 2 strings instead of all the strings (mostly 3). On an upright piano a similar effect is achieved by pushing the hammers forward and reducing their striking distance and resulting acceleration. On a digital piano the softer notes of the Una corda are achieved by the internal electronics.

The middle pedal on a grand piano is called the sostenuto pedal and retains the dampers in their lifted position if they were already up at the time of pedal depression. This means that you depress the pedal after you have played the notes and held it down. Again on a digital piano the effect is achieved by the electronics as opposed the mechanical means. On an acoustic upright piano, the pedal is usually a practice pedal, giving a very quiet unobtrusive sound if you are concerned about your neighbours or other members of your family. The resulting muffled sound is achieved by lifting a long piece of felt into position between the hammers and the strings.

Memorising music

Why play by memory? It's actually easier to play by memory than with music when much of the concentration is taken by looking at the notes and translating them onto the piano keyboard. If you play by memory, this, now spare, brain power is free to concentrate on the real job at hand - that of playing and interpreting the music as well as looking at your hand for those big jumps. It's useful to know about memory types before setting out to memorise a piece of piano music. They are: muscular memory, aural memory, visual memory relating to the music page, visual memory relating to the geography of the keyboard and lastly but most importantly, intellectual memory the type of memory which is based on analysing the piano music in detail. People have varying degrees of ability in these skills.

Muscular memory

Muscular memory consists of the movements of the hands arms and fingers which the brain recalls easily if there has been a lot of repetition in the learning process. In order to develop this memory efficiently. It's essential to learn the piece of music using the correct finger on each note every time you play or rehearse the music. Repetition of short overlapping phrases improves muscular memory.

Aural memory

Aural memory consists basically of remembering the tune in your head. This can be developed to include the chords accompanying the tune as well as any other detail, assuming that you can recognise and remember the different sounds. Most of us have some natural aural memory because we can sing a tune without access to the music, but highly developed aural memory requires much training even if you are a naturally gifted musician.

Visual memory

Visual memory of the music page is about recognising patterns and shapes on the page like photographic memory. You can remember the way the piano music is set out on the page and actually what the notation looks like in the form of a graphic in your mind. Visual memory of the keyboard is about recognising the geographic patterns and shapes on the keyboard itself, beginning in the very first lesson by noticing that there are black and white notes in groups of twos and threes. This can be developed into recognising the complex keyboard patterns created by the piano music and starts by noticing where the semitones and tones come as well as the distances between one note and the next, the intervals.

Intellectual memory

Although the types of memory explained so far, are useful in their own way, none of them are completely reliable if you want to remember the music with confidence so that you can play to others in private or public. As soon as you play to others, you will feel that you are being watched and therefore under pressure, so the most reliable way to combat any nervousness, which can lead to mind wandering, lack of focus and resulting mistakes, is intellectual memory which consists of being mentally aware, knowing and analysing how the piano music is constructed in every detail. Intellectual memory includes knowing all the scales, arpeggios and chords as well as their progressions, recognising and remembering them as they appear in the music. The better you have studied the music, the more easily you can relax and enjoy it even under the pressure of playing in the lesson or to others.

Chords

Chords help you memorise piano music because they show how most of the notes relate to each other and if you learn about chord progressions, it assists the understanding of the music. Many of the patterns are repeated thousands of times in all styles of music and it is these reoccurring patterns which enable musicians to remember securely, two hours of piano music under pressure in a piano recital, for example. Secure memory results in being free to concentrate and focus on the interpretation and performance of the music.

Memory testing

Even professionals make mistakes and the human element is always present, but there are quite a few methods for testing and improving memory. They include playing the piano music in different keys, playing in the dark or blind-folded, deprives one of visual memory and forces the use of the aural memory and increases careful listening. It also tests the reliability of any jumps in the piano music. Another method is to deprive yourself of muscular memory by playing the left hand notes with the right hand and vice versa, one hand at a time. It's even useful to test your memory by playing the tune with one finger instead of the chosen fingering.

Sight-reading

Sight-reading is the skill of reading and playing piano music which you haven't seen before. This is a very useful because it enabled you to try out and enjoy new pieces of music without practising them. The idea is not necessarily to play perfectly, but to get most of the notes sounding and especially to keep going. Continuous and flowing rhythm is a priority as well as remembering what key you are playing in and to include the correct sharps or flats. Although undesirable, wrong notes will be inevitable so it's better to miss out a note than play the wrong one. Look and study before sight-reading the music. Before you play anything and try to understand in advance what is going on. The more information you can take in before playing, the better you will play the music. The two main things to look out for are the key and the rhythm.

Try not to look at your hands on the keyboard, but keep your eyes on the music. You can place the music higher up on the music stand so that it becomes difficult to look down. That's good for your sight-reading and if continue to look up and down, you'll get neck ache, which I would certainly not encourage! You could also put some books at the end of the piano lid and then close it except for a small gap for your hands. Of course, mind the lid doesn't fall onto your hands. Both these methods will encourage you to keep your eyes on the music and above all, keep going.

The Clef

When the clef changes This can be an easy trap to fall into. Often one hand can change into the clef of the other hand. For example the left hand could play in the treble clef or the right hand could play in the bass clef, meaning that either hand could be playing the notes of either clef. It's a good idea to get used to doing this to avoid surprises, as well as looking out for this in the music. Remember also to notice at which point the piano music reverts to the normal situation. By the way, changes of key signature or time signature are preceded by thin double bar-lines.

Key-signature

Make sure you know what key the music is in by looking at the key signature. Is it in a major or minor key? You should have all the key-signatures by memory and be able to recognise the key instantly. Check that the piece ends in the same key as it starts in and whether or not it actually changes key in the middle of the music. The ending key takes priority and the music is technically in that key, even if it begins in another.

Accidentals

These are extra sharps not in the key signature and help you decide whether you are in a major or minor key. In the minor key the 6th and 7th degrees of the scale are sharpened on the way up and flattened on the way down. These are flats or naturals placed in front of the first incident of that note in a bar. If there is another incident of the same note in the same bar, another accidental is not required because the first one is valid for the whole bar. At the next bar-line the music reverts to the key-signature at the beginning of the line. Unlike the accidentals, the sharps or flats in the key signature last for the whole piece and apply to every register (octave) used in the music. Sometimes there are unnecessary accidentals added, which can be confusing.

Rhythm

Then study the rhythm of the piano music - still without playing it. Use a metronome for helping you to play with good rhythm and your digital piano or keyboard will probably have a very accurate one.

At the beginning of the music is the time-signature, which tells you what type of beat to expect and how many of them are in each bar. For example 4/4 is four crotchets or quarter-notes in each bar. It's not easy to practise with the metronome and it's good to get fluent with the notes first, then include counting under your breath 1+2+3+4+ crotchets in a typical 4/4 bar or alternatively 1234 1234 quavers.

When you change from one note value to another, make sure that the pulse remains the same either side of the change of note values. When there are rests, make sure you keep the main beat going without rushing.

When there are no notes to help you feel the beat, it's all too easy to increase your musical pulse without realising it. All you have at this point is the speed of the pulse inside you. Lastly, check if the music changes time signature during the piece there are usually helpful metronome markings at this point to show the relationship between the 2 time-signatures. If there are none, then the pulse stays the same.

Rhythm can easily become inaccurate when you have a tie, which looks like a slur but as it joins two notes of identical pitch (but not necessarily length), you hold on the first one for the combined value of both notes without repeating the second one unnecessarily. Count very carefully through the ties. Many find slurs and ties confusing. A slur is over or under a set of notes of different pitch and should not be confused with a tie. A slur behaves quite differently and means that you play the notes under it legato.

Speed

Next look through the music and find the most difficult part with the fastest notes. How fast you think you can play these notes will determine the speed you choose to play the music. Choose a speed which is slower than you would like to play the piece, because once you start you shouldn't hesitate or stop when sight-reading.

Look ahead

Try to your eyes are slightly ahead of your hands, but only a fraction. There is in fact a way of practising and forcing your eyes to look ahead a little. You can get a relative or friend, ideally who already reads music, to put a card over the bar which you are currently playing as you play each note. This will encourage you to look ahead at the next bar. Later you can ask your friend to cover up the whole bar or even two bars at a time, forcing you to look further and further ahead. If your friend or relative doesn't read music, it can still be helpful fun because they won't be able to judge the speed of your reading. Eventually what you have to do is look at the bar, memorise it instantly and play it whilst already looking at the next one. You can see why it's called "sight-reading".

Patience in sight-reading

Most important is to be patient with yourself. This really helps your progress with sight-reading, although it may take many months to improve to your satisfaction. Read some new music every day, try to relax and enjoy doing it. Practise putting one of the above ideas into your session each day or even try one idea per week if time is short. The good news is that if you master this skill it will help you learn new pieces faster too and you can even develop into using your piano playing by accompanying other instruments or playing piano duets – that most enjoyable of musical activities.

Nerves

Most of my pupils are a little nervous in the lessons and the only time I hear what they can really do is if I manage to hear them unaware that I'm listening, and the difference is noticeable. Even after years of reassuring them that I'm never judgemental and only there to assist, they are still nervous. So I've concluded that this is a natural part of the human spirit which enjoys challenging itself to try and achieve the best results we can. If you can channel that nervous energy into increasing your concentration and focus in the piano lesson at the same time as thinking about and enjoying the music you are playing, then the nerves will reduce and with practise, even disappear.

Conclusion

Piano playing belongs to everyone but is accessible only to those who have either determination or natural talent or both, not to mention a passion for music. There are of course the lucky ones born with the right genes and nurturing environment, but after a lifetime of helping adults who always dreamt of playing the piano and who pluck up the courage, they are more often than not pleasantly surprised at what they can and do manage to achieve. It doesn't matter how talented or hard-working you are, progress will be limited if you don't have an efficient and practical technique which created the sounds you want. If the challenges are broken up into easily manageable mini-projects, progress can be considerable and rewarding. It's not always easy to find time to develop the necessary daily practice with the rigours of modern life, but much can be achieved with a regular, quality routine. For the beginner, 30 to 60 minutes can produce good results. Professional work of-course requires much more time and 8 hours a day passes quickly when memorising hundreds of pages of music. They too need to organise their practice very carefully to achieve the programmes and the same care should be taken by the complete beginner. The trick is to learn professional solutions about how to use your practice time. Sitting down at the piano and playing for enjoyment is great, but it doesn't create new skill - that takes planning and self-discipline. I hope this e-book helps you on that journey and wish you well in this most rewarding of quests, which requires Quality, Understanding, Excellence, Success, and Training, but the greatest of these is training.

Clifford Evans 20th October 2021 Ipswich UK

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"His touch was very complex. He aimed chiefly at a singing tone. To this end he did not merely let the key, after pressing it down, come to rest and then ascend, but raised it by a gradual drawing-back of the finger-tips towards the inner flat of the hand, so as to give the string the proper time to vibrate and die away. By this means the tone was not only prolonged, but also made more beautiful, so that even on an instrument so poor in tone as the clavichord he could play cantabile and legato.

This style of playing applies, of course, only to the clavichord, - where finger and string stood in intimate relation to each other, - and not to the clavicembalo. Bach's touch was therefore absolutely modern, for the latest theories upon the "singing tone" on the pianoforte agree in recognising it to depend not only on the striking of the keys, but also, to a great extent, on the regulation of their ascent. Bach is also modern in this respect, that he would have spoken not of a "touch" but only of a conscious transmission of strength and pressure to the keys. Sebastian Erard's invention of the double escapement (1823), which made possible endlessly varied gradations in the re-striking of a tone, would thus have been joyfully welcomed by Bach; the mechanism of the modern pianoforte is, in fact, mostly only the fulfilment of his boldest dreams. He would not have altogether agreed with the size of our keys and with the strength of pressure that they demand."

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