

Developing Natural Keyboard Technique and Maintaining It for Life

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Establishing Natural Physical Motions at the Keyboard

Each finger **swings** freely from the knuckle to the key, while the thumb **rotates** to the key to play. The thumb does not lift to play. Separating the action of the thumb from that of the fingers is often one of the most difficult tasks for keyboardists. One should strive for the use of **natural rotation** between thumb and fingers, rotation forward for semitones, rotation forward for short finger 5, and more visible rotation for large intervals than small intervals. Controlled rotation in general should always be present. Even very active fingers need the assistance of rotation to move freely from place to place.

Ideally, the keyboardist needs to control the speed of attack into the key as well as speed of its release of the key. Although this is more critical on a tracker instrument, the control also assists in sensitive timing of the line and musical control on an electro-pneumatic instrument. On a tracker it is essential that as divisions are coupled and more stops added, the fingers, hands, arms, and body have the ability to control the increased weight.

Weight from the forearm can be added as needed behind each finger. The weight travels forward, not down, from the forearm through the relaxed wrist, which will allow the wrist to rebound up, not down, to the firm first finger joint. It is important to remember that equal weight can be added behind each finger if the weight comes from the forearm and travels through that relaxed wrist to the firm first finger joint. The possibility of adding equal weight behind fingers includes even fingers 4 and 5.

Because organists cannot control the volume of each note when striking the keys, they often do not use **natural voicing** in the hands as they would at the piano. Pianists generally play with the weight on the outside of the hands, and soften the physically strong thumb. This is in order to sound the outer voices louder than inner voices—and this is usually a necessary part of playing chords. This practice strengthens the naturally weaker outer fingers of the hand, and restrains the naturally stronger thumb and inner fingers. When organists continually play without voicing the chords, the weight tends to be concentrated on the thumb and inner part of the hand, making the physical control out of balance within the hand.

This physical imbalance translates into the habit of many organists to “bear down” on the keyboard rather than to add balanced weight with the forearm through the relaxed wrist. This may be the cause of common wrist tension problems among organists. The tense, heavy thumb interferes with the flexibility and activity of the fingers. Because the tendons of the 3rd and 4th fingers are “tethered” together, the 4th finger does not have the ability to lift independently, but one can still rotate to this finger, and with practice, add equal weight to it.

Tobias Matthay wrote the text *The Visible and Invisible in Pianoforte Technique*, in which he explains the relationship between active fingers and rotation, and how these two forces determine **touch control**. The fingers may at times be very active and visible, and the rotation nearly invisible; at other times, especially in slow, very legato passages, the rotation may be very visible and the action of the fingers almost invisible. In each case, both finger action and rotation are **always** present. It is the balance in the proportion of these two forces that results in the type and quality of touch control.