

Organizing Notes in Space

Developing Organ Technique and Musicality

By Dr. Wilma Jensen

Technical Assistance is based on some principles found in *The Visible and Invisible in Pianoforte Technique* by Tobias Matthay, along with ideas from other pianists, organists and my own experience in teaching.

First finger joint firm—wrist relaxed

“I don’t believe in total relaxation. When we’re totally relaxed, we are in bed asleep. If I pick up a handkerchief, I don’t have to tighten up some other part of my body, but I do have to have some tension in the hand...I differentiate between tension and intensity. I think of intensity as an emotional quality, whereas tension stifles freedom of feeling...The tension should be in the first finger joint, the joint having contact with the key. When we are young, our fingers often cave in due to weakness at the first joint. But weak first joints are ruinous. The first joints must be strengthened by proper exercises, stretching exercises or anything that will help to solidify the total tactile control. Furthermore, the wrist, which has eight bones in it and if not used enough will form small adhesions, must be malleable.”

Adele Marcus (*Clavier*, Vol. XI, No. 6, September ’72), famous piano teacher formerly at Juilliard

“Without a firm support or base for his finger action, the pianist is in the position of a gardener who tries to weed with a rubber-handed hoe.”

William S. Newman (*The Pianist’s Problems*, Harper and Row)

“Let the student be taught that he needs ‘strong and independent fingers, and a steel-like wrist,’ and from then on, all too often, his musical goose is cooked!”

Abby Whiteside (*Mastering the Chopin Etudes*)

It takes more energy to play the note than to hold the note. Hold the notes with the wrist and hand relaxed, but the first joints of each finger still able to keep the notes depressed. In a romantic style playing on a large tracker instrument, coupled manuals may become quite heavy. Try to control how much weight is needed to keep the notes depressed.

Active fingers (Bright Legato)

Finger—Fast attack and fast, timed release. All fingers (2, 3, 4, 5) capable of equal speed of attack and release. Let fingers swing to each key from the knuckles.

Rotation—Forearm motion with relaxed, flexible wrist. Small, natural rotations present, but scarcely visible. Rotate forward for fifth finger because it is so short. Rotate to and away from thumb. Do not lift thumb to play. The faster the speed, the smaller and less visible the rotations will be. With slower speed, the rotations may become larger and more visible. The faster the tempo, the closer to the key are all motions and actions.

“I once read the statement by Leonardo Da Vinci that ‘Structure is the basis of all movement,’ a potent statement from which I evolved many principles of movement in the hand. By the very structure of the hand, the thumb moves horizontally, the other fingers vertically from the knuckles. Therefore, if someone asks me how to play a scale exactly the way the hand is built: move 2, 3, 4, and 5 vertically, the thumb horizontally. The hand feels almost like an animal reaching out for 2, 3, 4, and 5, the thumb sliding along under the hand.”

Adele Marcus

Posture—Maintain good posture. Be sure total weight of body is on the bench with legs dangling, relaxed. Many people sit too far forward. Be able to lean forward without losing balance. Arms should be relaxed and shoulders back.

The Many Variations of Touch

Bright, Clear Legato—Fingers active, all fingers capable of equal speed into and out of key, small natural rotations. Adele Marcus—“But you must realize that the faster the speed, the closer you must get to the keyboard. When you strike any given object slowly, you have a wide leverage; when you strike faster, you have to get closer to the object.”

Legato—The more legato the passage, the finger can have a less fast attack and release. Rotation becomes more visible than in faster bright legato. Many gradations are possible.

Over-Legato—Finger much less active. Think of turning a doorknob with fingers not moving. Fingers are more “set” and weight is passed on from finger to finger by rotation. Wrist motion and rotation are very visible. Of course fingers will need to be somewhat involved. Many gradations possible.

Ordinary Touch of the Baroque—Developing this touch should perhaps wait until the hands and fingers already have many good controls. See *J.S. Bach’s Keyboard Technique: A Historical Introduction* by Quentin Faulkner for descriptions of Ordinary Touch by Quantz, Kirnberger, C.P.E. Bach, and many other composers of the period. See *Organ Technique Modern and Early* by George Ritchie and George Stauffer for beginning manual and pedal exercises to develop Ordinary Touch and all toe pedaling. (See *Part II Early Organ Technique: A Method of Articulated Playing for Music Composed before 1750*, pp. 167-256 (compositions are fingered). Also see texts by Jon Laukvik, John Brock and Sandra Soderlund.

Vibrated Legato—Matthay calls this “arm vibration touch.” The firm impulse from the upper forearm to the first finger joint moves the relaxed wrist in an upward motion. This can be vibrated legato or as speed increases, the fingers can pull out and become more detached. This touch is useful in medium-fast aggressive passages such as free sections in North German works or fantasies. This touch, however, cannot move extremely quickly. It can go from vibrated legato to vibrated non-legato to staccato. The fingers will “pull out” after the impulse the faster the speed.

Pulling Out Touch—When the speed is very fast and too fast for a vibrated touch the fingers need to pull out of the key after playing. For the sake of clarity, the finger actually pulls away from the surface of the key. The

fingers touch the keys to play but pull above the key for the release. It is good to practice this at the piano so that the weak fourth finger is able to pull out quickly.

Leggiero—A very light touch, slightly detached when full speed is achieved. Small motions. Very active fingers touching the keys. Very small natural motions only. Rotation scarcely visible. Slow initial practicing should start legato with active fingers. When speed increases, touch can be more clear “half-staccato.” Smallest muscles used. Becomes very light with increased speed (most difficult touch to teach and achieve).

Staccato—Many degrees of staccato possible. Various speeds of attack and release according to musical requirement.

Detached chords—Varying speeds of attack according to musical requirements. Use impulse from the arm, relaxed wrist moving upward and forward. Forearm moves wrist during the holding of the chord. If the chord should have a long duration, the wrist will move slowly after the attack. There may be a fast attack but the move through with the wrist can be very slow according to the musical needs. The speed of attack is often different than the speed of the follow-through or rebound with the wrist. Shape of chord should be “set” in the hand with unused fingers slightly raised so impulses are behind only fingers to be used (“cookie cutter” shape). Be sure thumb stays very relaxed. Adele Marcus—“short chords are played from the stomach muscles.” This makes the attack very fast and wrist follows through quickly. Sometimes it is helpful for the student to verbalize “uh, uh, uh.” Keep fingers used in chords touching the key through attack and release, other fingers slightly lifted.

How To Be Musical?

Of course this is an impossible question to answer. It is helpful if the student listens to recordings of music (not just organ) of various periods and genres. Also playing another instrument and experience in an orchestra or band and singing in a choir are all helpful. Piano study is essential. The study should include scales, arpeggios and chord progressions in all keys. The “timing of the line” is critical for the interpretation of music of different periods.

“Technique is essentially an act of ‘aiming or timing’ the right activities of the limb at the musically right moment during the key descent—an accurate timing of the beginning, culmination, and cessation of the needed limb— exertions for each note. Solely by such Act of Timing, can you bind Technique and Music together.”

Tobias Matthay

Baroque Music

In Baroque Music Ordinary Touch, articulation and clarity of the “natural rhythm,” resulting from the hierarchy of the measure are essential. The role of the bar line and/or meter is a major consideration. One can make clear the architecture and form with slightly extra time, breaths and articulations between phrases and sections. Time for natural accents, stresses and cadences subtly can be communicated. Consideration should be made for harmonic progressions, dissonances, cadences and key centers. The harmonic background needs to show through the total texture. Slow movements may have slightly more stretch and rubato according to the shape

of the melody, following the natural melodic line. Consideration should be made of national influence—North German, French Classic, Italian, etc.

Romantic Music

One must first understand the form and architecture of the entire composition. The sweep and contour of melodic lines often play an important role in shaping and stretch of lines. There usually is more stretch in romantic music than in Baroque. Many chord progressions may be interjected and occasionally override the melody. The interaction of melodic importance and harmonic importance often is a clue to control of freedom. The harmony, harmonic rhythm (frequency of chord changes) and interaction with melodic lines all play a part in decisions about freedom and expressive nuances. Forward motion and relaxation of motion are often major considerations in romantic music.

Contemporary Music

Contemporary music often can incorporate features of all stylistic periods—some sections with melodic flow, with or without meter, while others contain strongly accented beats or notes. If the music is in a meter, one must decide if the meter is merely a convenience for clarification on the page or whether or not it carries implications of measure hierarchy. One must analyze the work for linear and/or harmonic importance and interaction of each. Take time as needed for accents. Mixed meters will need to be practiced slowly and evenly at first, eventually graduating to the feel of groups of unequal lengths and added time stresses. Communicate the form and character of the music.

All Periods

In all stylistic periods, many ritards may be determined by the harmonic rhythm (speed of most important chord changes). Keep the previous natural accents through the ritard, not just slowing the fastest notes. Continuing the strong accents makes a natural slowing. In contrast to this there may be compositions which need to be “timeless”—no recurring accents such as *Chant of Peace*, Langlais; *Prayer of Christ ascending toward His Father*, Messiaen; *The world awaiting the Saviour*, Dupré; etc.

Practicing

Start every new composition slowly and perfectly. Practice repeating small sections even a measure or two at a time, and repeating small passages three or four times before moving on. This will set the music more quickly than practicing long passages and repeating them. The metronome can be used for making the small unit of the beat even. Do not add rubato in the very beginning while practicing with the metronome, but create an even base before adding nuances of time. Working up the tempo notch by notch or every other notch on the metronome is helpful in building tempo while keeping subdivisions even. In some romantic music where you want a moderate or even slow attack of the key, use the metronome sparingly. Some musicians tend to make too fast an attack into the key when using the metronome.

“I recommend use of the metronome from the very beginning, from the very first scale, throughout our musical lives. I still use it daily, even on tour, to maintain the discipline of daily practice and full mastery of the keyboard. I prefer to increase speed at regular intervals.”

Ruth Slenczynska

“Without Rhythm there is but Emptiness.”

“What you have to learn is to intend every note you play – an intentional sound and an intentional time – and an intentional duration.”

“Freedom, rotationally, is a sine qua non in all playing.”

“If it is NOT music, then it is not worth worrying over. A typewriter will serve as well!”

Tobias Matthay

There is a time to take the metronome away so as to add natural accents, phrasing, etc. After a composition is up to tempo, continue to practice a medium tempo, medium-fast and fast, using the metronome only part of the time, but using the same three tempos each time. Try not to add accents while you are practicing with the metronome, otherwise some notes will be lengthened too much and others rushed. A great deal of medium speed practice is healthy for maintaining a composition already learned. Be sure to use consistent fingering, part of which is marked in the score.

Practice Separate Parts—RH and Pedal, LH and Pedal, Pedal alone, etc., repeating small sections. Even after the composition is coordinated, still review practicing separately, but with increased tempo. This will maintain the accuracy and coordination of the composition.

Have Starting Points throughout the composition. Sometimes practice OUT OF ORDER—last line, next to last line—backward, etc. Don’t always start at the beginning and play through, so that it becomes motor memory only. This does not usually hold up under pressure. Try always to keep the mind involved along with the motor memory.

Skeleton Practice—Play most important notes, leaving out runs, etc. Think the other notes and play at important moments in time - on time.

Conduct the score, verbalizing notes aloud without actually playing. You are thinking and feeling the note placement and timing of the line.

- **Verbalize** various details aloud.
- Count big beats aloud.
- Say name of note on important beats (only letter names, no accidentals).
- Say name of pedal note on important beats.

- Invent text to help rhythmic accents. For example, the last movement of Widor VI “Who is this King of Glory



- Invent text for a romantic melodic line so that a word is said on some of the fastest notes (2nd mvt. Widor VI).
- “Pull” or stretch melodic line like an opera aria.
- Be inventive to find any kind of helpful verbalizing aloud.

Under pressure the performer may find stability by thinking some of those texts or counts already practiced rather than just thinking how nervous he or she is, or who might be listening.

Play Very Fast Short, Short Passages—Stop just before a beat with fast preparation—fingers on the next beat—play subsequent short passages, very fast preparing next beat, etc., etc. Later put two passages together, whole measures, etc. This is practicing very fast in small groups and always preparing the next beat quickly. Tempo develops quickly.

Repertoire—It is helpful for a student to have some very easy repertoire to produce in quantity, medium difficult repertoire for improving technique and musicianship and a limited amount of very difficult repertoire. It is important for the teacher to choose repertoire for the student which is truly accessible for growth at each level. Some repertoire the student might choose with the approval of the teacher. Until the student is moderately comfortable with technique, I always choose the repertoire for a specific reason technically or musically.

By practicing compositions which require varying kinds of techniques and musical abilities, as well as studying literature of different nationalities and historic periods, the student is certain to make good improvement. The feeling of self-improvement is incredibly motivating!

Teaching Video Now Available

Newly released teaching video, ***Organizing Notes in Space: Developing Organ Technique and Musicality*** by Wilma Jensen, includes two DVDs and accompanying booklet. The DVDs include 7 mini-masterclasses with former students and 3 sessions with Wilma Jensen discussing elements of technique and musicality. There is a conversation with long-time friend and former student, Dr. Janette Fishell, Chair of the Organ Department of Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. The booklet contains descriptions of the touches covered in the video sessions as well as a reference bibliography of the books Wilma Jensen has found most useful in her own career.

Available through Lois Fyfe Music at 1-800-851-9023 or sales@loisfyfemusic.com.