

Introduction

What exactly is piano technique? Is its cultivation really necessary? Is technique exclusively concerned with mechanical control? Does technical training mean years of drudgery and patience? Can anyone obtain technical control provided they spend enough time practising? Does technique lead an independent existence from musicality and artistry and therefore function as an unpleasant if essential necessity?

Too many students still believe that piano technique is somehow divorced from artistic creativity. The subject is unfairly stereotyped as something exclusively sporty and mechanical. It is assumed that speed, strength and accuracy are all that technique is about. Nothing could be further from the truth. All of the questions above can be swiftly answered in a couple of sentences herewith. Piano technique is about putting into practice everything that you wish to do. It is about fulfilling ambitions, hopes and desires. Technique makes dreams come true. It stands as a proverbial fairy figure from one of the Brothers Grimm tales: when technique is convincingly set up it seems to tell us 'Your wish is my command'.

Clearly you need to know what your heart desires before calling on your technique for assistance, but once your objectives are clear, then their successful realisation at the piano depends entirely on how effective your 'technique' fairy godmother is.

What follows is an adjusted and expanded version of some of the early articles written for *International Piano* magazine (www.internationalpiano.com) as a column entitled 'Masterclass' from 2001 to the present. This first book focuses on the essential foundations of piano playing. Beginning with considerations that enable a healthy posture and approach to develop at the instrument, it expands into a sequenced course of pianism that covers all the basic principles that are essential if a reliable technique is to be achieved.

The information presented is for everyone interested in piano playing. Because of this, it should be especially useful for teachers. The main information in each chapter is as relevant for beginners and intermediate players as for postgraduate students and professional concert pianists. It takes the spirit and approach of EPTA (the European Piano Teachers' Association, www.epta-uk.org) to heart in that it makes room for everyone who is interested in piano playing and teaching, at all levels. In this respect the approach may be rather different from that taken in other books on technique. We have technical exercises here that can easily be tackled by pre-grade 1 players. What is interesting is that these have proved to be just as helpful to the most advanced pianists as to beginners. Similarly examples from the most challenging works in the repertoire are included. Because it is so easy to listen to all of the repertoire in the 21st century on the internet, inexperienced players can follow these extracts via performances on YouTube, Spotify and so on. I believe that

‘Scale mastery leads to an awareness of which physical movements encourage velocity and which ones are more inhibitive.’

Some may consider it eccentric to wait until Chapter 9 before venturing into territory which most players immediately mention in connection with piano technique, but the reason for the delay is simple: scales in themselves are not central to technical understanding. Rather, they are tools which can be used to develop, enhance, illuminate and inspire (yes, scales can inspire!) healthy, dynamic progress. Every one of the previous chapters can be extended upon by the use of scales, and this is the basic point that so many miss. Scales are the vehicles in which you travel and certainly not the destination itself. Of course they are invaluable at the warm-up stage of practising, too. If you are tackling works in C sharp minor then it is very useful to play through a few scales in that key in unison, thirds and sixths beforehand. Scales certainly make excellent preparatory routines if approached quietly and slowly, with care given to healthy posture, relaxed practice, finger independence, economy of finger movement and natural, controlled position changes. Coordination can be built up by mixing touches between the hands, and of course the whole spectrum of dynamics should be utilised, not only to prevent boredom, but also to encourage in pupils the instinctive motivation to bring colour and tonal variety to their pianism.

A healthy dose of ABRSM or Trinity Guildhall standardised fingerings²⁷ will not do your sense of tonality, awareness of conventional fingering, sense of keyboard geometry, facility and confidence any harm. In fact, suspicion is bound to arise of any pianist who is not able to rattle off all major, minor (both harmonic and melodic forms) and chromatic scales in unison, contrary motion and with hands a third, tenth and sixth apart with ease. These are ‘bread and butter’ patterns which are second nature to any decent pianist, and it would be hard to begin any concerto from the Classical period without a firm grasp of them.

Basic scale practice

Scales can be enjoyable when approached in a ‘music as sport’ manner. A competitive way forward can easily be developed by using the metronome as the equivalent of a treadmill. Set the metronome at a slow speed (crotchet = 60) and start playing a scale with two notes to each tick. Once you can cope with the coordination necessary (no easy thing for novices as it requires rhythmic

²⁷ ‘The Manual of Scales, Broken Chords and Arpeggios’ (2001), ABRSM. Also Trinity Guildhall ‘Piano Scales and Arpeggios Initial-Grade 5’ (2006) and ‘Piano Scales and Arpeggios’ Grades 6-8 (2006).

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The *sostenuto* or middle pedal

‘...the clarity and precision of the middle pedal means that great focus and definition in the textures makes the music more defined and vivid in terms of colour and articulation.’

Though there were isolated examples prior to 1874 of instruments equipped with pedal mechanisms that enabled pianists to hold specific notes without affecting other notes, it is generally acknowledged that Albert Steinway ‘invented’ the middle pedal when he patented it in that year.⁵¹ Over the years it has had a variety of names (Steinway, *sostenuto* and organ pedal to name but a few) and generally a mysterious image, even amongst professional performers.

Sadly, ignorance has remained the rule as far as its use is concerned in many circles, and it is alarming to note how few students today realise that three conditions need to be remembered for the pedal to function effectively:

- 1 It will only work if you catch the notes you wish it to hold by playing them with your fingers (either out loud or silently) before you depress it with your foot (normally but by no means always your left foot).
- 2 It will not work if you depress it simultaneously with the sustaining (right) pedal or try to depress it whilst the sustaining pedal is depressed.
- 3 It will not work if you lift it up even slightly whilst using it. This causes extra and unwanted notes to be caught in the held sonority, leading to untidiness and hazy textures.

Achieving greater clarity

Repertoire written in the golden age of piano playing is the most natural for the middle pedal, especially transcriptions of organ works by Busoni and others. It is easy to see the benefits of this pedal in the extended pedal points of, for example, Tausig’s or Busoni’s transcriptions of the Bach D minor Organ Toccata, or in Busoni’s celebrated transcription of the Bach Violin Chaconne. Moreover this music seems to benefit from the use of the middle pedal as a means towards greater clarity than would be possible from the sustaining pedal:

51 Joseph Banowetz *Ibid*