The Complete Pianist

From healthy technique to natural artistry

Penelope Roskell

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Why I wrote this book

The Complete Pianist grew out of my own experiences as a pianist and piano teacher. In it I describe my approach to piano playing, which is based not only on 40 years' experience of professional playing and teaching, but also on many years of research into anatomy, yoga and other techniques.

As a young pianist, I had a natural talent and passion for playing and performing. My first teacher was a former Matthay student who gave me a strong foundation in healthy playing. However, when I became a full-time music student, I developed back ache, forearm tension and severe thumb pain (De Quervain's tenosynovitis) after practising Liszt's second piano concerto with a faulty octave technique. The tension I experienced also adversely affected my sound and restricted my natural ease of expression. I sought advice from teachers and read most of the available books, but couldn't find the practical step-by-step guidance I needed to resolve my particular problems. I had to stop playing for several months and, for some years afterwards, had to choose repertoire carefully.

My injury, however, triggered a life-long mission to uncover a healthier approach to playing the piano, which balances and co-ordinates the body to achieve the fullest musical expression with the minimum of effort.

I studied with some great piano teachers from diverse schools of teaching – pupils of Schnabel, Neuhaus, Cortot, Arrau, Busoni and Edwin Fischer. Their advice was musically inspiring, but often technically contradictory, so I decided to return to first principles in order to develop my own approach. I worked closely with a cranial osteopath and a yoga teacher, as well as attending classes in Alexander Technique, Tai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method. Most importantly, however, I observed, analyzed and experimented with every aspect of my own playing, searching for the basic principles which underlie a sound, healthy, expressive technique. I gauged the success, or otherwise, of any new idea by the musical result: if the sound was more beautiful and expressive, and if I could play passages with greater ease, I knew that I was on the right track.

I shared each new discovery with my students, who ranged from the naturally very gifted to the struggling; from very flexible to very stiff; from pianists with large, strong hands to students with tiny, weak or injured hands; from the poet to the virtuoso. The more students I taught, the more I found the same problems recurring: physical tension, weakness or lack of co-ordination resulting in uniform, dull or harsh sound; performance anxiety, often linked to an apparent lack of musical conviction. I started to search for universal solutions to all the most common problems, technical and musical, and to try to find the most effective way to convey these ideas to my students.

I knew from my own experience that it wasn't enough just to tell students to practise more: I needed to be able to explain to them precisely what physical movements to use in each passage and also why. I devised exercises for my students; most of these exercises were based on the natural flowing movements that we use in everyday life. If an exercise proved useful for a number of students, I continued to refine it until I felt it demonstrated the point clearly and effectively, and produced the most expressive sound.

To develop my understanding further, I studied anatomy of the hand and arm and worked closely with medical professionals from the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine, who frequently refer injured pianists to me. Working with pianists with playing-related injuries has become an important part of my work. The challenge of searching for a root cause and devising suitable exercises to address each problem has helped me develop an eye, as well as an ear, for the slightest imbalance which may, over a number of years, have developed into a major problem.

More recently, I compared my own research against the work of the renowned pedagogues of the past. I found that some of my own ideas were mirrored by other writers who, although using a different approach, based their work on similar principles. Much of my research and the material in this book is, however, completely new and, I hope, ground-breaking.

I have been writing this book for more than fifteen years – during that time some of the material has been made available through magazine articles. Now, for the first time, it is finally ready to be brought together in print.

The writing has been a lengthy, at times daunting, but ultimately a very satisfying journey. In this book I now share the results of a lifetime of original research in the hope that my knowledge and experience will benefit and inspire others and help them to realize their full potential at the piano.

Ergonomic fingering

A thorough understanding of the principles of fingering is vital for good piano playing. Good fingerings make everything easier; without them, pianists often waste hours of practice time trying to remedy a problem which could have been averted much earlier. By choosing the best, most ergonomic fingerings at the earliest opportunity, pianists train their fingers to become familiar with patterns which then become embedded into the 'muscle memory'. Secure fingerings ensure a much more secure performance.

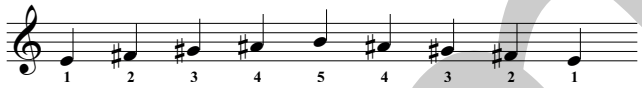
I find the best way to learn the principles of natural, ergonomic fingerings is through the understanding of fingerings for scales and arpeggios, which form the backbone of so much of our musical language. Some years ago, however, it became clear to me that many scales and arpeggio fingerings currently in use were far from ideal: they do not respect the natural curvature of the hand, or take into account how the hand relates to the white and black keys on the piano. They also often place the thumb on the wrong note, forcing the hand to twist and turn unnecessarily. In my book, *The Art of Piano Fingering: a new approach to fingering scales and arpeggios*, I revised the fingerings for every scale and arpeggio. The recommendations I made then still stand, and are as important for pianists as they were then.

In this chapter I will look at some fundamental principles which lie at the heart of good fingering, particularly in relation to scales and arpeggios.

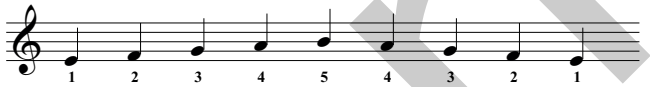
The hand at the keyboard

The first major composer to look in depth at the anatomy of the hand and how it relates to the keyboard was Chopin. In his very first lessons to new students, he would begin by demonstrating, for instance, how Example 1a is much easier to play and falls more naturally under the hand than Example 1b:

Example 1a



Example 1b



This is because the second, third and fourth fingers are much longer and fall naturally onto black notes, whereas the thumb and fifth finger naturally incline towards the white notes. In Example 1a, each finger is evenly curved. This could be summarized as:

Summary 1: The thumb and fifth finger prefer white notes, the longer fingers prefer black notes.

Chopin would then demonstrate how much easier it is to play the scale of B major than C major because the thumb passes much more readily under the hand *after a black note* than after a white note. This is a very basic principle of fingering which is so much second nature to us that we are often not even aware that we are doing it. (Who, for instance, would play the scale of E flat major, right hand, starting with the thumb?)

Summary 2: The thumb passes more easily under fingers playing black notes

Ergonomic scale fingerings

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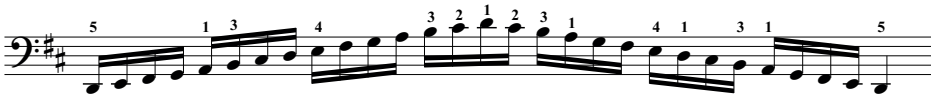
In many commonly-used scale fingerings, however, the thumb is positioned on the wrong note of the scale, causing awkward and unnecessary twisting movements. This can be demonstrated well in the left hand scale of D major. Traditionally, the scale has been taught starting on the fifth finger:

Example 2a



Notice how the third and fourth ('bridge') fingers play white notes and that the thumb passes under them rather awkwardly; the hand keeps twisting out of alignment, and the elbow tends to weave around. With the

One hand: two voices

Pianists often have to play two voices within one hand. This might be a passage of double notes where two voices move in parallel (see *Double notes*); or it could be two independent voices, such as in a fugue (see *Contrapuntal playing*). In this chapter I will be discussing and demonstrating how to play a beautiful cantabile melody in the foreground with a delicate accompanying figure in the background, with just one hand.

The advantages and disadvantages of exercises for two parts in one hand

There are numerous exercises and studies available which involve sustaining certain notes while the other fingers play an accompanying figure. If used in the right way, these can be of some benefit, but they can also be very damaging to small or weak hands if approached in the wrong way.

Firstly, it is particularly important not to press the sustained notes heavily into the keys – any pressure needs to be released immediately after sounding the note. Teachers, for instance, should avoid terms like 'pressing' or 'holding the note down': instead, 'resting lightly on the note' helps to avoid any prolonged pressure.

In his foreword to Pischna's Exercises, Beringer (himself a composer of piano exercises) wrote, 'I have experienced in my own teaching that very grievous mistakes are frequently made in the way these exercises are taught and practised: mistakes which may lead to partial disablement of the hands, by over-stretching the fingers and overstraining the muscles of the arm. The sustained notes ought to be held down steadily but quite lightly, with only just sufficient weight (or pressure) to retain the keys at their bottom level.'[1]

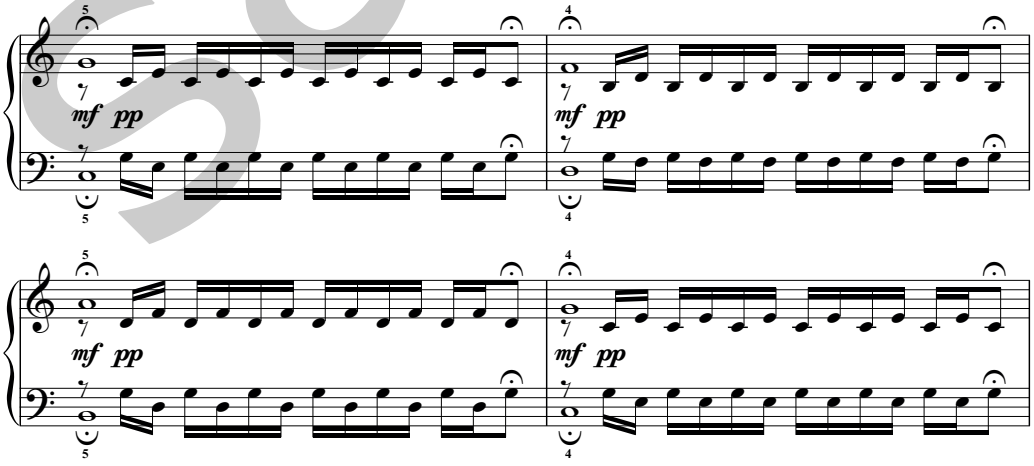
Also avoid exercises with excessive stretches which might cause tightness in the wrist, especially if you have small hands. Only play two-voice exercises *forte* when you can play them freely and without strain.

Some exercises for non-synchronized voicing

By the term 'non-synchronized voicing', I refer to exercises and pieces where the melody notes are played first and the accompaniment notes follow, as in Examples 1a, 1b and 2. In this type of passage, there is sufficient time to play the melody note first with some support of the arm, then release all arm weight and play the other fingers with a delicate finger touch. Here I demonstrate two exercises for this type of passage. Example 1 is a very simple exercise of my own devising in which the hand 'divides in two' to differentiate between the sounds. Example 2 is a more advanced exercise by Brahms.

I suggest that you play Example 1a first as block chords, so that you become familiar with the pattern of the harmonic sequence and do not need to look at the score: you need to be able to put all your attention into sound and touch in this exercise. When playing Example 1a as written, the pause between the melody notes and the accompaniment will give you time to prepare for the different kinds of touch.

Example 1a



[1] Josef Pischna, *60 Progressive Exercises for the Pianoforte*, edited by O. Beringer, London, Augener, 1915.

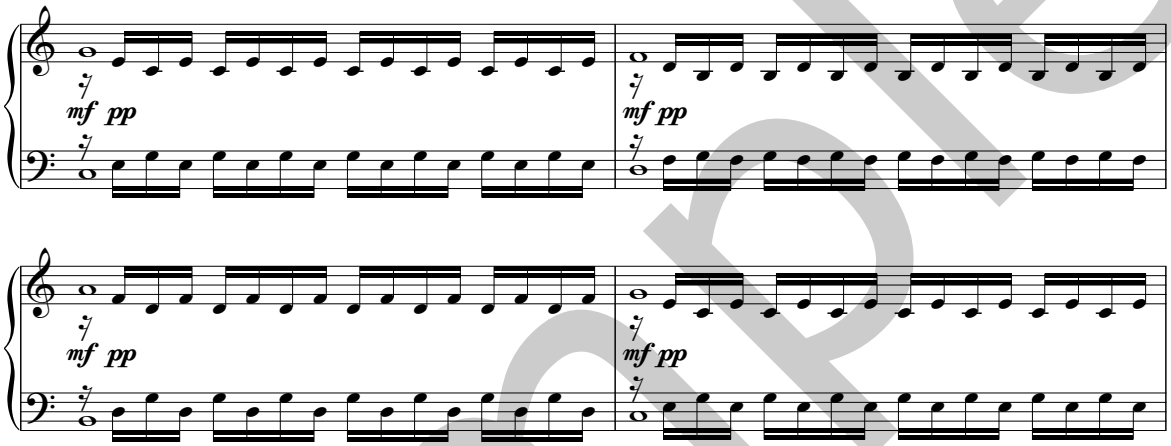
Balancing melody and accompaniment

In Example 1a, align the forearm with the fifth finger (swivelling the wrist round if necessary) then play the first sustained note with a cantabile Parachute touch. After sounding the note, just rest lightly on the keybed – do not press. Pause and check that there is no tension whatsoever in the other fingers – they should feel 'empty' and free. Now without actually depressing the keys, just touch the surface of the keys for the accompaniment notes ('shadowing' or 'miming' the notes). Continue to the end of the exercise, 'walking along the keybed' with the fourth and fifth fingers.

When you are able to divide the hand successfully in this way, start to sound the inner notes with a leggiero finger touch (see Playing pianissimo*).*

Any work that you do on Example 1a will pay off when you start to practise Example 1b. The muscles will automatically do whatever is necessary to switch quickly between the different layers of sound.

Example 1b



Example 2 uses a similar technique to Example 1, and I recommend that you also practise this exercise initially with a pause on the first note of each bar, to allow time to prepare the change in touch. Pianists with a small to medium span should be careful how they approach Example 2 as it involves some wider stretches between the fingers: I recommend studying the section on 'Minimizing the stretch' on page 86 before approaching this exercise.

Brahms exercise

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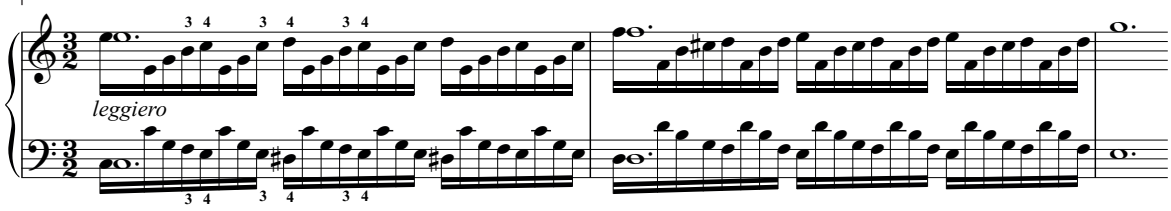
In Example 2, align the forearm with the fifth finger, then play the first note with a cantabile Parachute touch. Release any pressure, check that the wrist is soft and swivel it round to bring the thumb very lightly onto its key. Then let the wrist gradually swivel back towards fifth-finger alignment as you play the next three notes with a leggiero touch and so on. As the wrist brings each finger into position you are also minimizing the stretch between the fingers.

Initially the undulating elliptical wrist movements will be quite large, but as the tempo increases the movement becomes much more refined, although the wrist will continue to feel soft and 'elastic'. The smaller your span, the bigger the movement you will need. Pianists with very large hands may not need any movement at all, but will still find that a slight swivelling will improve the quality of sound.

Example 2 Brahms: No. 10 from 51 Exercises WoO 6



Releasing forearm tension

All the exercises in this book are intended to return the body to its natural state, in which muscles are not only strong, but also in balance. If muscles have good tone and are neither too tense nor too lax, they alternate quickly between tension and release, avoiding any long-term build-up of tension. When forearm muscles, however, are holding an excessive amount of 'static tension', they are no longer able to release quickly: they become fatigued and, not only do they feel uncomfortable or painful in themselves, they also severely restrict the movement of the fingers.

Chapters in this book which are particularly helpful for reducing forearm tension include:

- *The Roskell warm-ups.*
- *The pianist's elbow.*
- *The pianist's wrist.*
- *The Parachute touch*, *The Nimble finger touch* and *The Singing finger touch.*
- *Releasing the non-playing fingers.*
- *Full arm-release chords.*
- *Rotation technique.*

Any reader who uses these techniques regularly should not experience forearm tension or pain. However, if you do still have tension, perhaps as a result of years of playing with a lot of pressure, then it is worth considering what may have caused the tension in the first place, so that you can avoid it in future.

Main causes of forearm tension

Co-contraction

In order to lift the hand or finger, the extensor muscles in the upperside of the forearm needs to contract. To allow the hand or finger to depress the key, the flexor muscles need to contract and the extensor muscles needs to release to allow it to do so. However, if you push the hand down into the keyboard without simultaneously releasing the extensor muscles, both antagonistic muscles pull against each other, causing 'co-contraction': the simultaneous contraction, or tightening, of opposing muscles. Over time, co-contraction can cause chronic tension.

Co-contraction can be resolved by learning how to release each set of muscles spontaneously as soon as they have finished their action, so that the hand and finger can move without resistance.

High finger action

A high finger action does not, as is commonly believed, strengthen the fingers. It is very tiring for the forearm and ultimately reduces finger independence and strength. It is always important to bear in mind that the piano sound is produced by depressing the piano key, not by lifting the hand or finger high above the key surface. I often have to remind students who play with high finger touch that 'the piano is down there, not up at the ceiling!' Very little effort is required to lift the finger from the keybed: the key and the finger just rebound by themselves (see *Note-endings and jeu perlé*).

Overly curved fingers

Excessively curved fingers also over-use the extensor and flexor muscles in the forearm. In contrast to this, the exercises in *Strengthening the hand*, and the techniques such as the Nimble finger touch and the Singing finger touch focus on using the intrinsic hand muscles. These muscles are situated in the hand itself and their action does not tire the forearm at all.

Weak hands

If the hand muscles are weak, pianists tend to over-compensate by tensing the wrist and elbow to achieve power. To play the piano effectively, the hand needs to be strong enough to retain its arch, and the power needs to come primarily from the upper arm, not the forearm (see *Strengthening the hand*).

Bracing the wrist

Holding the wrist tight as you put pressure into the keys will affect the whole forearm. The wrist needs to remain supple – all the strength and energy comes from the upper arm and the muscles of the torso (see *The pianist's wrist* and *Powerful chords and octaves for advanced pianists*). Even when playing powerful chords, any pressure needs to be released immediately after sounding the note.

High or low wrist

Playing with a consistently high wrist will stretch the extensors and contract the flexors. A low wrist will do the opposite. Keep a soft, 'long' wrist and work around your neutral wrist position.

Excessive stretches

Playing repertoire with extensive passages in a stretch position may cause build-up of forearm tension. Take frequent breaks, or reconsider the choice of repertoire, especially if you have small hands.

Pivoting from the wrist

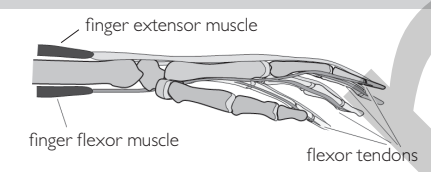
The 'woodpecker' approach to staccato chords and octaves, pivoting from the wrist, is another frequent cause of forearm tension, as it relies on the forearm muscles to pull the hand up. 'Shaking the hand out of the sleeves' is a much more effective staccato technique, as the hand mainly just rebounds by itself (see *Staccato chords*).

Lack of rotation

All pianists need 'rotational freedom': sufficient softness in the elbow and forearm to rotate when required. The exercises in *Rotation technique* keep the elbow free and minimize tension in the forearm.

It is also worth considering any other possible causes of tension, such as lifting heavy objects, typing, or texting.

Developing awareness of the forearm muscles



Rest your right arm on the arm of a chair, with your hand hanging loosely off the end. Place your left hand lightly on the extensor muscle in the right forearm and pull all the fingers of your right hand up and back towards your body. Feel the extensor muscle contract (harden). Now release your right hand back down and feel the muscle soften. Repeat several times, focusing on the release of the extensor muscle each time your hand drops.

Now place your left hand on the underside of the forearm and push your hand and fingers downwards. Feel the flexor muscles tightening.

Each time you move your hand up or down, the muscles in the forearm need to tense and release alternately.

THE ROSKELL FOREARM-RELEASING SEQUENCE

This sequence of exercises helps to relax the forearm. It also gives a gentle stretch to the forearm muscles, maintaining optimal muscle tone and a full range of movement. As the exercises are very gentle, they are particularly useful for pianists who want to maintain flexibility but find that strenuous stretching exercises cause pain or discomfort.

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The released arm

Rest your hand in playing position, then allow the wrist to move very slowly and smoothly up and down as far as possible. Keep the wrist, elbow and forearm soft, fluid and 'well-oiled'. This movement gives a very gentle 'massage' to the muscles as they alternate a mild tension-and-release. It prevents any static tension from building up. This is also the movement that is used (albeit in a much more subtle way) every time you employ the Parachute touch in your playing.

Then move the arm in sideways and circular motion.