

Bass finger training

Take a look at the image below – does anything look a little odd? The right hand is positioned down at the bottom of the keyboard. The reason for this is to create a more vigorous workout! The action for the bass notes on a piano is significantly heavier than at the top (or even the middle) of the keyboard. A quick glance at the instrument's 'physique' reveals all. The progressively thicker strings at the lower end of the keyboard require a far chunkier mechanism. Bigger dampers are also needed in order to null the sound when the keys (and/or pedal) are released. All this added bulk in the mechanism has to be stirred into action by the fingers; and for pianists the left hand must often pull more weight than the right.



Position your seat a couple of feet towards the bass end of the instrument and tilt the stool fractionally inwards to help you sit comfortably with the right hand, as shown. Importantly, point your right leg out a little in the direction of the instrument's far leg and position your head so that your upper body weight is comfortably balanced under foot. Even ten-second bursts of activity will seem inordinately tougher when working down in this subterranean region of the piano, but that's the whole point – it's quite a workout. Take frequent breaks to relax and make sure your neck and shoulders feel tension-free.

The left hand can of course also take advantage of working right down at the bottom of the keyboard in this way.

An interesting variant on this exercise is to do the opposite, i.e. position the stool off to the right at the piano's treble end and sit so that the left hand is comfortably able to play the very top notes. This can be useful if you want to practise a left-hand passage on a 'lighter' section of the keyboard. In either scenario, you'll be amazed when you return to a normal seating position.



NEW WORLD SYMPHONY

Antonin Dvořák
Arr. Mark Tanner

Largo, with a noble spirit ♩ = 86

The score is written for piano in 4/4 time. It consists of five systems of music. The first system starts with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The second system continues the melody. The third system starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The fourth system returns to mezzo-forte (mf). The fifth system ends with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The score includes fingerings, slurs, and pedaling marks.

	Pieces and Technique	Self Review
Session 1:	Ode to Joy	
	Initial confidence	
	Finger pilates 1	
Session 2:	Symphony No.1	
	Tension busters	
	Finger pilates 2	
Session 3:	La Mourisque	
	Staccato	
	Scales	
	Finger pilates 3	
Session 4:	Canon	
	Intervals	
	Finger pilates 4	
Session 5:	Eine Kleine Nachtmusik	
	Twenty practice tips	
	Finger pilates 5	

Notes, additional thoughts and ideas for the future

Key areas might include: posture and hand position, reading skills, favourite methods for learning pieces, building up a repertoire of pieces, scales, tension prevention, flexibility and mobility, confidence.

Learn your scales by sound and feel, not by sign

Theory books will take you on a journey through key signatures (the sharps or flats that are needed to make a particular scale sound 'right') and the various relationships that exist between them. Far better, in my opinion, to learn scales by how the patterns sound and feel, not by their prosaic presentation on manuscript paper. Let your knowledge of the theory trickle in as and when needed.

C major contrary motion: C D E F G A B C

Top: The two thumbs begin by playing middle C and straightaway start moving to their next port of call. Both thumbs should tuck in and glide out of view over the tops of their respective keys (**bottom left**). Neither wrist needs to twist by any significant degree.

Bottom right: Having reached the F in the right hand and G in the left, the 'snap' to the new hand position now has to happen – it's the moment of truth when the sleight-of-hand magic of the scale takes place. Don't let it jerk or become panicked. From here, the real work is done, and the fingers are now in position to play their remaining notes. Return home when ready, making sure that the third finger in each hand moves over your thumb smartly back to where the whole sequence started.



The everlasting note

You probably already have a good idea how the piano makes its sound via the keys, action, hammers, strings and soundboard, but I wonder if you've ever felt so close to it that you can almost feel its heartbeat? This simplest of 'mindful piano' exercises brings you a little more in touch with your piano. As a bonus, you'll experience how long notes last when a key is struck at different velocities or regions of the keyboard (this, you could say, is another of the instrument's vital statistics).

1. First, sit yourself centrally at the piano, then place the same finger of each hand onto one key, say, middle C.
2. Now, keeping both fingers in line with each other as you do so, play a solid note, at least *f*, and hold down the key firmly with both fingers to allow the sound to ring on. Keep your foot off the pedal for this!
3. Let go with one finger but keep the other where it is. There's no need to press down too hard on the key.
4. As the note decays, your task is to silently swap the fingers, i.e. *without* releasing the key or causing it to re-sound. You are overlapping your connection with the key each time, and yet the audible effect could hardly be simpler: one 'everlasting' note. The faster you trade fingers, the harder it will be to prevent a new note from sounding, but that's the fun and benefit of the exercise, especially if you come at each one from really high above the keyboard.

You'll easily be able to swap the fingers a dozen or more times with the note still ringing on, even with your eyes closed. Though the piano's action is only in play once, you still have to engage actively with the note while it lives. Vary how loudly you strike the note and count how many switches you can make before the sound disappears completely. Does it feel any different when you swap notes at the very top or bottom of the keyboard? This brief overlapping of fingers is not so different from the concept of *legato* fingering, except that in this case of course we just want to hear one note.