

Preface

In *The Foundations of Technique*, the essential aspects of a healthy and reliable approach to piano playing were discussed. The question, 'What exactly is technique?' was considered. The reply, 'Technique is about putting into practice everything that you wish to fulfil', was suggested in the first pages and used as a starting point for each chapter.

Piano Technique in Practice takes a similar approach, applying technique to essential aspects of piano playing. The book begins with self-listening skills, rhythmic awareness and sound production – basic starting points for all musicians. Technique is then explored in Part Two via a consideration of tonal colour, rhythmic creativity, phrasing and voicing. Part Three looks at the 'nuts and bolts' and mechanics of playing, such as speed, strength, stamina and control. This leads into Part Four and a broader consideration of the essential techniques that need to be cultivated in order to develop musical assimilation in daily practising, sight-reading, fingering and memorisation.

As with *The Foundations of Technique*, the information presented in this second, more detailed, book is for all levels of pianists. It is for everyone interested in piano playing. I firmly believe that self-listening, sound production, voicing, phrasing and self-discipline can be developed from day one at the piano. Indeed, in their everyday teaching, practising and playing, pianists and teachers of all levels need constantly to consider the topics of each chapter herewith – regardless of whether they are experienced concert pianists, conservatoire teachers, adult amateurs or elementary level junior players.

It is for this reason that *Piano Technique in Practice* makes room for everyone who is interested in piano playing and teaching. In this respect the approach may be rather different from that taken in other books on technique. Many chapters begin with technical exercises and ideas that can be tackled and understood by pre-grade 1 players. What is interesting is that these have proved as helpful to the most advanced pianists as they have to beginners. Equally, examples taken from some of the most challenging works are included; as it is so easy in the 21st century to listen to repertoire via the internet, inexperienced players can follow these extracts via performances on YouTube, Spotify, etc.

Of course, each chapter does quickly move beyond the playing level of elementary pianists. But there is nothing scary about that! Pianists of all levels can understand concepts and, through an awareness of future possibilities, become inspired to develop in the longer term. It seems wrong to exclude beginner pianists from opportunities for technical enlightenment from the most exciting music available, so I give no apology for saturating the text that follows with adventurous music. Still, younger players may need to engage the attention of their parents at first in order to progress through the book, while beginner students of all ages would be well advised to work at the exercises and explanations in close association with their teachers.

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Basics of phrasing and structure

Structure

It is vital for performers to understand how the music they play is constructed. Without strong awareness of form and balance, a performance will inevitably meander and lack conviction. This should not surprise us, as virtually all western classical music can be viewed as either a 'journey in sound' or as 'sonic architecture'. But what is surprising is how often even virtuoso pianists can fail to project the logical dimensions in a great masterpiece effectively to an audience. Why is this the case?

To understand structure is to understand how to phrase. Phrasing – the art of making music intelligible, the joy of turning hundreds of notes on the printed page into musical sentences, paragraphs and stories – brings cohesion and logic to musical ideas. Working in partnership with rhythmic discipline, skilful phrasing is the main means by which pianists can bring a clear presentation of the musical flow, line and development to the listener. Think of commas, semicolons, full stops, paragraphs and chapters in a novel and you have a direct literary parallel with logical phrasing in music. Music is a kinetic art, and any performance that does not have logic and shape simply fails to convince.

Rudiments of phrasing

Of course, the basic and most simple phrases in music last for four bars and can most commonly be heard in nursery rhymes. Four-bar 'question' phrases usually open up a new musical idea and frequently finish on the dominant. They are usually followed by a further four-bar 'answer' phrase that neatly concludes on the tonic note of the piece. The resulting eight-bar musical sentence is the basis from which all phrasing in western music from the eighteenth century onwards can be considered. Deviations, modifications and extensions from this norm need to be understood. Players need to be able to show these constructions as they play, just as an orator will need to breathe and take stock temporarily at the ends of sentences, and even after commas. Of course, there are a vast number of rules and regulations that we must all grasp within musical sentences in order to play with authority. These take years of cultivation and assimilation. Traditionally, students gradually assimilate authority and understanding in phrasing through trial and error, picking up guidelines, suggestions, and even gimmicks and 'tricks' almost by default. Mastering the art of shaping music comes after many hours of piano lessons, experience as a listener and a gradual improvement in the art of self-listening.

However, there is a more systematic, methodical alternative. I am indebted to the pianist Carlo Grante for introducing me to two seminal textbooks from the nineteenth century that are in effect exhaustively detailed courses in phrasing, musical inflexions and grammar: *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing*,

Why play from memory? It is only in comparatively recent times that memorising has been expected from pianists. Prior to Liszt, performers tended not to play without the music, whereas today audiences and examiners require performances without the dots in solo repertoire and concertos. There is no doubt that playing from memory can lead to a closer connection with the music and a feeling of being more at one with the instrument. Teachers often imply that printed pages act as a barrier between players and the magical, quasi-improvisatory creativity in concerts that we all strive for and which, hopefully, leads to moments of spontaneous genius. The implication is that performing with the music desk up, a hired page-turner at your side and your eyes fixed on the notes makes for stiff, awkward and earth-bound music-making.

But equally common is the scenario where memory can destroy careers. The stress and effort to achieve infallible memory can be overwhelming. It always seems such a tragic waste when you hear of students, and even professional players, who actually go so far as to terminate their careers solely because of a fear of memory lapses. I would argue that memorising for performance is extremely beneficial for those who are confident and experienced enough to cope with it, but that negative factors (stress, anxiety, breakdown in mid flow) far outweigh the possible advantages of attempted memory for players who find it all unsettling, unreliable or even terrifying. It should also be mentioned that there are today many well-known and successful artists who are able to reach transcendental heights of sublime artistry at the keyboard with a sympathetically discreet page-turner at their side. It is clearly necessary to develop the skill of being able to read music without allowing it to interfere with your freedom at the instrument, as well as to develop your listening skills as you play and your connection with the audience. I would argue that a considerable amount of practice is necessary in order to build up these necessary qualities if you choose to use music in concerts – but it will be time well spent.

Having said that, it is still important for all pianists to work on their memory skills, even if they have no intention of ever memorising in concerts. Being able to internalise the music you play makes you closer to the music. By this I mean, for example, hearing a Beethoven sonata from beginning to end in your head, with no lapses in concentration. By doing this, you will not only have a fantastic sense of security when you play – you will also be able to focus away from the piano on exactly how you wish each phrase in your music to be shaped. When viewed as a technical tool towards greater musical awareness and creativity, memory can be seen on the same level as aural awareness, improvisatory facility, compositional skills, singing and sight-reading ability. Clearly, pianists will find that their playing improves if they build up their technique and understanding in each of these areas – even though they may not necessarily wish to have their compositions or singing flagged-up for public consumption!