

Developing Advanced Technical Skills Friday 9th April 2021 – Masayuki Tayama

Learning Aims

- to gain insights into piano technique at an advanced level
- to isolate technical issues and demonstrate these in a practical context

Technical skills at Advanced Level

1. Body awareness
2. Fast and even scales, and arpeggios
3. Ornaments
4. Near and far: finger substitution, wide leaps
5. Pedaling
6. Special effects: glissandi, tremolos
7. Polyrhythms
8. Extremes in dynamics
9. Chords: voicing, harmonic awareness

1. Body Awareness

- The body is supported by the feet and the sitting bones.
- The shoulder girdle (rotator cuff) needs to be relaxed. Learn to drop the shoulders.
- The forearm, operated from the ball and socket joint of the shoulder, needs to move freely: this movement is considered by many to be the key to good technique.
- A flexible wrist, undulating freely, allows the fingers to receive the necessary amount of arm weight and will stop tension build-up.
- Fingers are active as independent operators (not just as receptors of arm weight) and work best from a well-developed knuckle arch or bridge. Press the fourth finger and thumb together for a contracted arch; place the hand on kneecap/cranium for a bigger/expanded arch.

2. Fast Scales and Arpeggios

Scalic Passages

- These consist of positions, and the challenge is that of combining the positions. The faster the passage, the more we need to use a shift (rather than the use of the thumb for a real legato effect). Little bursts are better than lengthy efforts at a fast speed.
- The hand contracts before the shift, the thumb travels along the keys.
- The hand needs to stay near the keys at all times, and, in the case of a run which raises and then falls, keeping an open hand with the thumb ready to play again helps to minimise effort.
- It is helpful to see patterns in long fast scalic passages, such as the rhythmic groupings of notes: the first of the group is a landmark, the note to focus on.

The Chromatic Scale

- The standard fingering (3rd on black keys, thumb on whites apart from where two white keys are next to one another) works well at slow and moderate tempi.
- For faster passages, modify the above: for r.h., use 4th on Bb (which means that 2 is used on the preceding Ab). For the left hand, the corresponding notes are Gb and Ab.

Arpeggio Passages

- In fast arpeggio passages a shift is used, maintaining the alignment of the fingers with the keys. The arm is the transporter: the fingers cannot be blamed for mistakes if the arm has not taken them to their destination.
- The knuckle arch should be maintained; a gentle movement to free the elbow from the body helps, as does a slight turning of the inside edge of the hand inwards.
- When playing arpeggios as exercises, it is important to maintain a sense of pulse.

3. Ornaments

Trills

- *Measured trills* are always the easiest to start with, even in romantic music. In classical style writing trills often are accompanied by an Alberti Bass which provides rhythmic stability. Consider the best effect: at times, the note values of the bass may be adequate (and to be preferred to a messy, fast trill); six against the four of the bass is the next alternative, but in a fast tempo, five against four works well – but it takes time to learn.
- Chains of trills involve a stepwise move from one to the next, so a triplet may be necessary. In the Romantic period, there are passages which lend themselves to a more free-sounding trill, which, however, needs to link organically to what precedes and follows it. For fingering, use pairs of fingers which leave one out from between, so 1-3, 2-4, 3-5.
- Trills in parallel thirds: use 2-4 alternating with 5-1. A relaxed wrist allows the hand to operate as the mover.

Turns and Mordents

- Work at the music without these first. Then consider how it is best to interpret the symbol; there are usually more ways than one. Use a reliable edition; consult Howard Ferguson (PTC reading list).
- Conduct and hum the passage to make sure the flow is not disrupted.

4. Near and Far: finger substitution, sliding and wide leaps

Substituting one finger by another silently on the same key is necessary in passages where legato cannot otherwise be maintained. Usually it is easiest done as part of the initial movement to play the note, that is, it follows the first impulse seamlessly in a fluid gesture.

It is also possible, by applying weight on a finger for the shortest possible time, to use the same finger on an adjoining note.

- For leaps, keeping the fingers close to the keys is useful – the arm can feel the impulse to move before the fingers leave the keys. The notes from which the leap is taken need to be really firm: as in jumping over a ditch, one needs a firm starting point.
- Landing accurately involves the eyes, where not possible, the inner imaging of the keyboard.

5. Pedaling

The Damper Pedal

The dampers, felt-covered, stop the vibration of the strings (the highest octave and a half have no dampers). When the key is held down, the corresponding damper lifts, allowing the string to vibrate, and the sound to carry on. The damper pedal, on the right, is used to lift all the dampers, thus allowing the sounds to be sustained and to blend. It was not invented until late 1770s. The present foot pedal won favour over other forms, such as knee levers.

For pianists today, the damper pedal is a vital part of interpretative means. Subtleties of pedaling offer vast possibilities and are worthy of patient study.

The use of the Damper Pedal

- Direct (rhythmic) pedaling; the pedal is applied for the duration of the sound, and then released.
- Syncopated (legato) pedaling: used to link sounds, the pedal is operated after the keys are played: the sounds are thus linked.
- Half pedaling: the pedal is pressed only part of the way down – perhaps even as little as having the felt of the dampers just “tickle” the strings.
- Flutter pedalling: produces much the same effect as the above, but easier to control on an unfamiliar piano. The foot operates the pedal in fast repetition.
- Stylistic considerations affect the use of the pedal. In Romantic music a whole new dimension is brought about by the pedal, and composers clearly intend pedal in many cases to be used even if harmonies “clash” and rests are not heard.

The Una Corda Pedal

This was, in fact, the first pedal to be invented: Cristofori included a hand-operated knob to shift the hammers to hit just one of the two strings. On an upright piano, the effect is different. The hammers are simply brought nearer the strings, thus reducing the distance of their strike.

The use of the Una Corda Pedal

- Softer sounds.
- Special effect (there are examples in Debussy's music where he asks for "una corda" in forte) – the hammers are not presenting their more commonly-used, hardened surface to the strings.

The Sostenuto Pedal

The most recent, and the least used of the three pedals, often called the 'middle pedal' because that is where it is situated, allows the player to retain long notes in the lower register while operating the damper pedal to affect notes played above the sustained ones.

Invented in the mid-1800s, it became more widely available after Steinway perfected its mechanics. Even though many passages in Debussy's piano music can benefit from the use of the middle pedal, Paul Roberts argues that by a sensitive use of the two other pedals, an even better effect may result.

6. Special effects: glissandi, tremolos

- For outward glissandi, use the back of the three long fingers. For inbound ones, use a slanted thumb, backed by the second finger.
- Tremolos involve a swaying, or trebling sensation of the forearm, sometimes called rotation. The image of weight being transferred helps to keep the movement economical. It is useful to think of the two notes involved as working in the same direction, each note gives momentum to the next.

7. Polyrythms

- Are polyrythms supposed to sound interwoven – or should they be a case of two independent patterns occupying the same amount of time? Two against three is a case which can be usefully represented by a rhythmic pattern reduced to a single line (interwoven).
- Four against three, as in LvB Op. 13, Adagio, is a good example. Establish the pulse in each hand before playing them together, paying attention to the melodic line in the r.h. When the hands are to play together, common sense advice such as "play the second note of the four before the second of the three, then do the notes one after the other". The four can be reduced to two.
- It is possible to simplify complex polyrythms (when learning a piece) by re-organising irregular groups to coincide with notes in the other hand; a group of seven can be a combination of four and three (thus seen as divided into two) or as two, two and a three (if the division is to be into three). The groups can then be shifted to produce the real effect.

8. Extremes in Dynamics

The two problems often encountered are the extremes in *piano* and *forte*: each requires a distinct technique.

- Playing really quietly means risking not getting a sound at all. It is useful to experiment with how quietly you can actually play. This works for single notes as well as for chords.
- Creating an impressive, dramatic big sound again involves the arm, but now moving at a great speed, releasing as much of the weight of the arm, backed by the whole body, supported by the feet, as possible. It is not necessary to lift the fingers off the keys.

9. Chord voicing and harmonic awareness

- Visualising the components (rather than thinking of the notes as some kind of a block) is the first step; the next one is to play the chosen notes slightly ahead of time. It also helps to connect a movement with each note, imagining a curved line – and a bigger one for the important notes. Imagery helps: “light a lamp on your xth finger”.
- Teach students to hear and to play the following as early as possible, using descriptive language, and clear voicing (see brackets) when playing:
 - The four cadences (bass line!)
 - The diminished and dominant sevenths
 - Neapolitan Sixths (hear the flattened second note of the minor scale as well as the bass)
 - Second inversions of tonic triads (the bass)
 - Picardian Thirds (the major third)

NB: A detailed resume of various theories about technique can be found in Uszler et al, in Part VI, (chapters 20 -23 are particularly relevant).

Sources:

Ignatius-Fleet, Heli *Developing Advanced Technical Skills* PTC Lecture