

Thoughts on Technic

Most important area to master is “relaxation” – Alexander technic masterclass will offer more insights into this. Biggest technical issues at the advanced level are related to tension – also injury causing.

Wrist must be flexible – rarely fixed – Lang Lang.

Failure to “release” – continuing pressure on key

Shoulders

Let arms hang at sides – this is the natural shapes of the hand at its most relaxed

1. Scales
 - Compact hand – close to keys
 - Pulses in sixteenth note scales to help increase speed and evenness
2. Arpeggios
 - Use thumb as a pivot
 - Beware of chicken elbows
 - In quicker tempi, keep same shape for each triad – think “shift” – exercise will not be perfectly legato
 - Angle hand in the direction you are going
 - Use “unique” fingering for each inversion
3. Broken 4-note Chords
 - Circular motion – wrist cannot be fixed
4. Solid 4-note Chords
 - Be sure there is relaxation after each chord – don’t continue to press key
5. Octaves
 - Must be staccato
 - Let the spring of one staccato take you to the next key
6. Pedaling
 - Many intermediate students still struggle with legato pedaling – demonstrate how I teach it
7. Two-Against-Three Rhythms
 - Practice scale with RH and LH to match appearance in repertoire
 - B Major really is the easiest if you can convince them
8. Melodic Tone Production
 - Learning to voice melody above accompaniment is crucial by the intermediate level. Also to voice within chord in both RH and LH.
 - Firm fingertips, give in the wrist, heavy arm
 - Use scales and triads to practice this – one hand stronger than the other, one finger stronger than the other
 - Practice one hand passage with two hands so voicing is easier and student can “hear” the desired goal

Thoughts on Musical Forms and Styles

Understanding form is essential at all levels of music making. Most beginner pieces are in ternary form with perhaps an introduction or coda – have students find sections and mark. Continue through into more advanced playing.

At the intermediate level it is important that students begin to have some understanding of musical styles. Many of you have charts or posters in your studios outlining Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionist, Modern styles. This information is often “forgotten” by students – writing directly on their music helps it to stick. It’s Important over the years to link their repertoire – ex. Sonatina. What do you remember was important in your Classical sonatina last year?

Here are two of the most common forms. It’s important for students to understand that helping the audience to understand the form is part of their job.

TERNARY FORM

- Like a sandwich – the middle needs to be different than the outsides
- This can be taught in the earliest method book pieces
- Experiment with dynamic variety according to the ABA sections
- Look for how the composer varies the return of A
- How can you vary the return of A?

Ex. Masquerade by Niamath

SONATA-ALLEGRO FORM

- Mark exposition, development, recapitulation
- Mark appearance of each theme – most often three themes
- Determine key of each appearance – mark cadences or do some basic harmonic analysis.
Great to see more connection between repertoire and theory in new RCM syllabus
- Assign adjectives to each theme – think character more than just dynamic variety
- In the Classical style, sonatas must remain in an “elegant” style. Create a variety of characters without becoming aggressive or percussive.

Ex. Sonatina in C Major, Opus 157 #4, 2nd movement by Spindler

Thoughts on Conscious Learning

All too often students learn new music with most of their brain shut off. ☺ Slowing down and learning music “consciously” will help provide the foundation on which a student can be creative. Also, creativity comes in handy when looking for new ways to practice a piece.

- 1) At an advanced level teachers most often work on specific passages with a student – perhaps spending an entire lesson on one piece or even a few bars! At the beginner level we often work on an entire piece with a student before they go home to learn it so they know what to do. But at an intermediate level we often send music home to learn. Avoid the temptation to say, “This piece isn’t too hard. Go home and learn it and we’ll work on it next week.” Consider spending an entire lesson on a new piece with a student. You will save yourself lesson time in the end.
- 2) Create a practice plan for new pieces. A practice plan would include dividing the piece into sections, discussing whether to learn passages hands separately or hands together, outlining the form, focusing on learning fingering as well as notes/rhythm, pointing out important cadences, etc.
- 3) Find ways to turn repeated patterns into technical exercises (ex. Ascending 1st inversion triads in “Toccatina” by Kabalevsky).
- 4) Practice in chords wherever possible. Turn broken triad patterns into solid chords to help with memory in the future and ensure proper hand positions.
- 5) Draw a bracket around specific tricky bits and make a plan for drilling those passages 3, 5, or 10 times each day. Do this before they learn the piece. Ex. Arabesque
- 6) Practice melodies alone phrase by phrase to try various natural shapes.
- 7) Practice hands separately to accomplish specific things – ex. Articulation.
- 8) Slow practice is SO important and SO hard to convince students to do.
- 9) Stop and think about how do you want the music to SOUND? What tone are you striving for? What is the mood? What tempo sounds best?
- 10) Teach your students to practice in opposites. Somehow when we hear something played in the opposite manner than we expect it actually helps our ear and brain to solidify the correct interpretation in our minds. For example, practice legato passages staccato. Play a very fast piece very slowly and vice versa. Practice *forte* passages *pianissimo*. Present the musical material to your brain in as many different ways as possible.
- 11) Encourage performing in the dark once the piece is memorized. This helps to confirm memory and focuses the student to remain close to the keys. It also helps us to concentrate on the tone without distractions.
- 12) Encourage students to “be their own teacher/critic” by recording their piece on an Ipod and listening to it with the score in front of them.

When students learn music “consciously” it helps to develop confidence!

Practice Plan for Invention #8 by JS Bach

Find and play all subjects (measure 1-2) with correct fingering Practice all the "rattles" (measure 5-6 and similar) in dotted rhythms watching for rotation in wrist Practice pattern in RH measure 15 and similar pointing out moving line and keeping repeated notes light

Divide into three sections

Measure 1-12

Measure 12-25

Measure 26-34

For each section practice

All eighth notes staccato

All sixteenth notes legato

Hands together RH forte and LH piano

Hands together RH piano and LH forte

Whole piece

Practice entire piece with slow metronome playing only eighth notes then only sixteenth notes.

Practice entire piece forte then piano

Practice entire piece staccato

Go through entire piece marking which hand is prominent in conversation between hands OR if they are equal. Rehearse entire piece listening for voicing. Each hand takes a turn in the spotlight.

Note: Not all eighths need to be staccato. Use some imagination in articulation but be consistent.

Note: Photocopying the piece in order to mark motives and/or voicing with a highlighter may be useful.

Thoughts on Repertoire Selection and Finding an Inspiring “Challenge”

- Choosing repertoire based on themes particularly if you have a student who learns music quickly.
- Sometimes by the intermediate level we only learn music we plan to “perfect.” This is discouraging to many students.
- Don’t be afraid of popular selection lists. This music is often just as challenging as their Classical music.
- Students are often eager to get through the levels or to play music that’s too hard for them. Consider allowing a Level 6 student to learn one Level 8 piece they really love. Avoid focusing on “perfection” for exams/festival only – a challenge will often inspire hard work which will benefit all of their playing.
- Student piano concerti suggestions:
- Performing opportunities are essential for motivation, getting comfortable onstage and providing a challenge. Studio recitals, music festivals, exams, nursing homes, church, school, shameless plug for the Jean McCulloch competition – in Yorkton this year. Great exam preparation with an excellent adjudicator’s comments. Or a great goal to work towards if not doing an exam.

Student Concerti (Level 5 – 9)

Concerto in Classical Style – Martha Mier

Concerto in C Major – Catherine Rollin

Concerto Romantique – Catherine Rollin

Concerto for Young Pianists – Edwards

Concerto in G Major – Vandall

Miniature Concerto - Rowley

Piano Concerto #3 (Youth Concerto) - Kabalevsky

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Divide into three sections

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For each section practice:

- All eighth notes staccato
- All sixteenth notes legato
- Hands together RH forte and LH piano
- Hands together RH piano and LH forte

Entire piece

- Practice entire piece with slow metronome playing only eighth notes then only sixteenth notes.
- Practice entire piece forte then piano
- Practice entire piece staccato
- Go through entire piece marking which hand is prominent in conversation between hands OR if they are equal. Rehearse entire piece listening for voicing. Each hand takes a turn in the spotlight.

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