

SCHOOLS OF MODERN PIANO TECHNIQUE:

A COMPARISON

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A Thesis Submitted to The W.A. Franke Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the bachelor's degree  
With Honors in

Piano Performance

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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# Schools of Modern Piano Technique: A Comparison

## Abstract

The objective for my thesis is to determine how to better tailor my teaching of piano technique to my students' individual bodies. In my own piano education, I have noticed that not every type of technique works for every person. Thus, in order to determine the suitable techniques for my own students, it is necessary to consult multiple schools of thought on the subject. For this project, I have studied existing schools of piano techniques and pedagogical tools including the Feldenkrais Method, the Alexander Technique, *Basic Principles in Piano Playing* by Josef Lhevinne, the Taubmann Technique, individual artists, and YouTube instructors. I have then distilled the main points from each of these techniques/artists and organized them by part of the body to which they refer. In the body of my thesis, I explain these main points, and then I have condensed them further into a technique chart. I believe that this paper and chart can assist me as well as other teachers and students in choosing the physical motions that will help each individual player best achieve a clean and confident sound at the piano. I also believe that this will lead to increased confidence as pianists find that, with the correct physical motions, clean and effortless technique is indeed within their reach.

## Individual Techniques

### Feldenkrais Method

#### Background

The first method I will be discussing is the Feldenkrais method. The Feldenkrais method was developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, a man whose varied education, careers, and interests allowed him to create a method of physical movement based on fusion of physics, body mechanics, neurology, learning theory, and psychology. Over the course of his life, he earned degrees in mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, and physics; worked in a French nuclear research program; played soccer; and earned a black belt in Judo. After injuring his knee, he began applying his scientific education to the human body, eventually developing what is now known as the Feldenkrais method.<sup>1</sup> According to the method's website, the Feldenkrais method uses gentle movement and directed attention to help increase one's awareness of movement and increase one's ease, range, flexibility, and efficiency of motion.<sup>2</sup>

#### Application to piano

According to the Alan Fraser institute, the key components of the Feldenkrais method at the piano are as follows:

- "Likening the hand to a mini-body, the fingers to legs with an 'ankle,' 'knee,' and 'hip-joint.'"

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<sup>1</sup> "Moshe Feldenkrais 1904-1984," Feldenkrais Guild of North America, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://feldenkrais.com/about-moshe-feldenkrais/>.

<sup>2</sup> "About the Feldenkrais Method," Feldenkrais Guild of North America, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://feldenkrais.com/about-the-feldenkrais-method/>.

- “Lying the hand down in the keys the better to sense its internal skeletal structure. As Moshe said, ‘nobody learned to walk by walking.’”
- “Empowering the hand's 'hip joint,' the metacarpal-phalangeal joint, by invoking the hand's natural grasping action to stand the fingers up into a fully expressed arch shape.”
- “Developing thumb opposition to access the hand's full power, ensuring that the thumb metacarpal bone is fully involved in all its movements.”
- “Eliminating wavy wrist movements that emasculate structural integrity.”
- “Having the arm follow the hand's inflected phrase movements just as the torso follows the legs in walking.”
- “Linking the hand's arch-generating action to supportive contractions in the upper arm and shoulder.”
- “Linking the fingertip to the sitz bones for a sense of support emanating from the whole body.”
- “Creating fluid torso angles to follow the hand and arm anywhere they move on the keyboard.”<sup>3</sup>

For my Feldenkrais research, I consulted a book by Alan Fraser entitled *The Craft of Piano Playing: A New Approach to Piano Technique*. It is a fusion of the Feldenkrais method and Eastern martial arts.<sup>4</sup> The main takeaway from this book is the concept of bone stacking and using one's skeletal structure to do the majority of the “work,” while the muscles are as free as possible.

## Alexander Technique

### Background

The Alexander Technique was developed by F.M. Alexander, an actor who was suffering from voice loss during recitations. In trying to figure out and fix this problem, he discovered that he needed to free his neck, especially when reciting, and that this freedom of the neck benefited the entire body. This is the basis of what is now known as the Alexander technique.<sup>5</sup>

### Application to piano

Like actors, pianists need to have free and uninhibited motions in order to achieve the technical feats required of them by composers. The Alexander Technique emphasizes posture, appropriate muscle relaxation, and whole-body emphasis.<sup>6</sup> Another concept related to the Alexander Technique is body mapping, which involves creating an anatomically correct mental

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<sup>3</sup> “Moshe’s Wisdom at the Piano,” Alan Fraser Institute, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.alanfraserinstitute.com/feldenkrais-and-piano.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Fraser. *The Craft of Piano Playing: A New Approach to Piano Technique* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>5</sup> “Two Means to Freedom and Ease: The Taubman Approach and the Alexander Technique,” *The Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique*, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.alexandertechnique.com/articles2/taubman/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Positive Posture at the Piano,” Poise Alexander Technique, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.poisealexandertechnique.com.au/articles/2018/5/18/positive-posture-at-the-piano>.

map of one's own body. This can help musicians play more effortlessly as their brains can now direct their bodies to move more in accordance with how their bodies are actually built.<sup>7</sup>

### Josef Lhevinne, *Basic Principles in Piano Playing*

#### Background

Josef Lhevinne was a concert pianist and teacher at the Moscow Conservatory and Juilliard. He is known for his virtuosity and tone production, and the small book that he wrote, *Basic Principles in Piano Playing*, is considered a classic.<sup>8</sup>

#### Application to Piano

As Josef Lhevinne was a master at tone production, much of his book is dedicated to instructions on producing good tone. Body movements, arm movements, wrist movements, palm position, and finger movements are all involved in tone production, and he discusses each of these. He also discusses other factors of piano playing, such as technical accuracy and the mental side of tone production.

### The Taubmann Technique

#### Background

Dorothy Taubman (1917-2013) was an American music teacher and lecturer, founder of the Taubman Institute for Piano, and originator of the Taubman Technique. While working with injuries and discomforts related to piano playing, she discovered that these problems were caused by incorrect motions at the instrument, and she developed her own technique of movement designed to correct these injurious habits. The result was the Taubman Technique.<sup>9</sup>

#### Application to piano

This technique has been effective in helping pianists avoid injury and/or recover from existing injuries. The Taubman Approach could be helpful even for pianists without injuries, as it can also enhance existing technique and tone production capabilities.

### Veda Kaplinsky

Veda Kaplinsky is the Chair of the piano department at Juilliard and is Professor of Piano at Texas Christian University. She studied with Dorothy Taubman and incorporates the Taubman technique into her teaching, with adjustments to the student's specific hand structure. According to Jarred Dunn,<sup>10</sup> one of her former students who is now a professional pianist and teacher, Kaplinsky was an exacting teacher who frequently told her students to "insist on perfection." In lessons, she requires students to keep playing something until they have mastered it, not simply

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<sup>7</sup> "About," Association for Body Mapping Education, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.bodymap.org/about>.

<sup>8</sup> "Josef Lhévinne," Britannica, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josef-Lhevinne>;

"Josef Lhevinne," Steinway & Sons, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://www.steinway.com/artists/josef-lhevinne>.

<sup>9</sup> "Dorothy Taubman and the Taubman Approach," Edna Golansky, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.ednagolansky.com/dorothy-taubman-the-tabuman-approach>.

<sup>10</sup> Jared Dunn, "Insisting on perfection: the teaching of Yoheved Kaplinsky," *Canadian Music* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2014), [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A449315928/AONE?u=uarizona\\_main&sid=googleScholar&xid=05d09e15](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A449315928/AONE?u=uarizona_main&sid=googleScholar&xid=05d09e15).

to give them the general idea of it and have them work on it later. She requires students to master music from the beginning, instead of speed-learning music with incorrect technique and then having to re-learn it correctly. She also teaches them not only to acknowledge the markings on the score, but to listen closely to their playing and determine whether or not they are actually implementing those markings in their playing. She is a “patient but resolute” teacher who is willing to spend as much time as necessary for the student to completely master the concepts she is teaching. The result for Jarred Dunn was that although he sometimes felt completely embarrassed about his playing during their lessons, he left the lessons with the revelation that she believed he could do everything necessary to play the piece correctly – because under her direction in the lesson he had done just that. He stated:

“When she claims that one should ‘insist on perfection,’ Veda is not, as I initially felt, putting an excessive amount of pressure on the student. She is insisting that one actually can achieve it; that perfection is within the realm of what is possible. And in its truest sense, this is the most encouraging message a teacher can send: you can do the best possible, provided you insist that you find a way to do it.”

### Individual Artists (In appendix)

In the Appendix, I have also analyzed the playing of two famous artists, Martha Argerich and Vladimir Horowitz, noting specifics of their technique such as general body movements, arm movements, wrist movements, palm position, and finger shape.

### Individual Instructors

And finally, I have turned to YouTube to see how internet teachers are instructing their viewers. The methods/instructors I have included are the Chopin Method, Josh Wright, and the ONE Music School (presented by Lang-Lang).

## **Feldenkrais Method**

### General notes

Moshe Feldenkrais’s catch phrase was “If you know what you’re doing, you can do what you want.”<sup>11</sup> The book by Alan Fraser, *The Craft of Piano Playing: A New Approach to Piano Technique*, reflects this with its detailed explanation of the movements of the body and the organization of the skeletal structure.

Before investigating each part of the body, let us look at some generalizations made by the book. First, it evaluates both the old school of “finger action” and the new “arm weight school” as being “both right and both wrong,” and states that they both represent incomplete ways of viewing human body motions.<sup>12</sup> Focusing solely on finger action can lead to tension and injury, but no better is the “narrower pianistic sound spectrum” brought about by the new

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<sup>11</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 38.

emphasis on relaxation and suppleness.<sup>13</sup> This book, clearly, does not promote either of these methods, but puts forth something else entirely.

Another generalization that the book makes is that form follows function: any motion, including “cement-like stiffness” can be correct depending on the specific tone you are going for.<sup>14</sup>

And the final generalization I would like to emphasize is that “[t]he more we reduce levels of muscular effort, the better skeletality can express itself: it is in a ‘muscular soup’ that the bones most easily find the alignments that are right for them.”<sup>15</sup> This is the main takeaway from this book. In fact, I would venture to call it a handbook on aligning the skeleton for maximum efficiency and power in performance.

### Body Movements

The overall instruction of this book for whole-body movements is to keep a free, moving torso while at the same time avoiding “awkward, haphazard, excessive, or unusually large” movements, which look odd and detract from musicality.<sup>16</sup> Also, limit auxiliary movements, including lifting off the bench.<sup>17</sup>

Here the book also borrows heavily from the Alexander Technique. It directs performers to sit on the center of gravity, which is their sitz bones.<sup>18</sup> Also, the book referenced Alexander as saying that the spine lengthens in every well-organized movement. But holding oneself in even the most beautiful, balanced, and/or lengthened position will result in stiff muscles. Consequently, one must think of “acture” instead of simply “posture.” “Acture” is the position the body assumes, or rather moves through, as it is involved in an action. Good posture is also good acture when it is the result of a healthy internal movement rather than a stiff position held in place to ‘look good.’<sup>19</sup> Even when still, the muscles in the body should always be active and moving (“acture”) rather than static and stiff (the connotation of “posture”).

Also, when playing, be conscious of the “bowl” of the pelvis, while also being conscious of the similar cupola shape of the hand.<sup>20</sup>

### Arms

As mentioned earlier, the book takes issue with the “arm weight” school, which overemphasizes relaxation and de-emphasizes the need of the fingers to do their work. Instead, Fraser posits that the purpose of using arm weight is to free up all the little finger muscles to focus on doing their jobs.<sup>21</sup> Arm weight is not meant to do the fingers’ jobs for them.

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<sup>13</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 2, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 34-37.

<sup>15</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 221.

<sup>16</sup> Aschbrenner, qtd. In Fraser, *Craft*, 182.

<sup>17</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 233-234.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 183.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 44.

Instead, one's hand should be awakened and active enough so that it can pull itself up rather than being pushed up by the arm.<sup>22</sup> A position in which the arm is pushing up the hand is similar to a situation in which the wrist is holding up the hand while the knuckles are flat.



Figure 1: The hand pulling itself up



Figure 2: An exaggerated form of the opposite

Another concept that the book repeatedly emphasizes is the necessity of avoiding the “arm out” motion suggested by many teachers to help with phrasing.<sup>23</sup> According to Fraser, the only reason to move the elbow out is to fix the problem of a stiff arm, and the only reason an arm

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<sup>22</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 160, 188.

is stiff is because the hand is weak.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, if the hand is strong, there should ultimately be no need to move the elbow out. Also, when the hand pulls itself up on its own, the elbow will naturally fall inwards.<sup>25</sup> Using the “arm out” motion also hinders the upper arm, rib cage, and back muscles from participating in the structural support to their fullest potential.<sup>26</sup> And finally, moving the arm outwards pulls down the second finger’s metacarpal-phalangeal joint.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the arm should follow the lead of the hand and should only be used to shape phrases organically, rather than being used on single notes.<sup>28</sup>

One exercise suggested to help a pianist simultaneously develop proper hand structure and proper use of arm weight is the “whole arm as a whip” exercise. With fingers entrenched in the keyboard, swing the arm freely, keeping the wrist free. Then, when playing notes, practice playing your arm as one entire finger bearing a whole two kilograms of weight. Of course, this is not the proper way to play every piece, but is one way to gain the feeling of playing with a free arm and a solid hand shape.<sup>29</sup>

Another important concept is the concept of rotation. There are two types of arm rotation: one being the rotation of the entire arm in its shoulder socket and the other being the rotation of the radius around the ulna in the forearm.<sup>30</sup> It is with this latter rotation that this book is mostly concerned. Often, when encountering large leaps, pianists will swivel their hands instead of rotating. This lateral movement pulls the thumb away from body and stretches the fingers. Instead of swiveling like this, Fraser suggests lifting the thumb straight upwards while rotating the radius over the ulna. While doing this, leave the wrist and elbow closer to the body rather than pushing them outwards. While doing this, bend the 5<sup>th</sup> finger “backwards” to allow for a greater reach between the fifth and fourth fingers. Fraser likens this to a ballet dancer doing splits more easily by reaching one leg in front and one leg behind, rather than both legs out to the side.<sup>31</sup>

## Wrists

The role of the wrists in this method is “to transmit the force vectors acting through it precisely, cleanly, completely.”<sup>32</sup> It is possible to phrase from the wrist using minimal finger movement, but the wrist’s movement should in general be more internal rather than external.<sup>33</sup>

## Palms

According to Fraser, natural hand shape should be determined by examining the shape that the hands form when hanging at one’s side. When playing, one should keep this same shape. They should also maintain the same muscle tonus; i.e. the muscles should, for the most part,

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<sup>24</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 166-168.

<sup>30</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 203-204.

<sup>31</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 204-214.

<sup>32</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 191.

<sup>33</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 193.



remain just as “soft” as they are when hanging by one’s side.<sup>34</sup> Though an increase of muscle tonus may be necessary while playing a note, the muscles should return to a state of softness as soon as possible after contraction.<sup>35</sup> Also, as with the entire body, one should never consciously try to maintain this natural hand shape – doing so will result in excess tension. One should also never allow the hand to prepare excessively before playing a note. With this instruction comes a caveat, however: do not allow relaxation to become a state of deadness, but instead keep a state of “alive readiness, a neutrality that is capable.”<sup>36</sup>

When playing octaves, Fraser posits that the metacarpal-phalangeal joint should always rise: this decreases a tendency to bang out the octaves (p. 109-110).<sup>37</sup>



Figure 3: My conception of what playing octaves with the metacarpal-phalangeal joint raised looks like

Some other suggestions include practicing pressing and holding the notes in order to help develop good arch support (unless, of course, a pianist has such counterproductive structural habits as to make this exercise more detrimental than helpful),<sup>38</sup> and “reach[ing] for the sky” with fingers to help internal forearm muscles stay alive rather than seize up for lack of external motion.<sup>39</sup>

## Fingers

The main takeaway from Fraser’s book regarding the fingers is the concept of T’ai Chi walking. In T’ai Chi walking, an individual puts all of his or her weight on one leg, called the “yang” leg. At the same time, the other leg, the “yin” leg, is free and bears no weight, but is still

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<sup>34</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 222.

<sup>35</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 223.

<sup>36</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 223-224.

<sup>37</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 109-110.

<sup>38</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 267-271.

<sup>39</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 272.

full of life. When switching to the other leg, one places the “yin” leg down and then shifts all the weight over to it, without letting up on the “yang” leg. Once the weight is equally on both legs, the initial “yang” leg can begin to let up and now becomes the new “yin” leg, while the initial “yin” leg now bears all of the weight and is now considered the new “yang” leg. This method of walking helps an individual be more grounded.<sup>40</sup>

Fraser applies this to the hand by likening the hand to a “mini-body,”<sup>41</sup> with the fingers being the legs and the metacarpal ridge being the hips. Moving the metacarpal ridge forward over the fingers, as the hips move over the legs when walking, helps the hand to have more power.<sup>42</sup> Legato can be achieved by firming up the fingers and freeing the arm, and then transferring the weight from one finger to the next as in T’ai Chi Walking.<sup>43</sup>

One should also line up the fifth finger with the ulna, rather than the thumb with the radius. Otherwise, ulnar deviation will occur; and although this is sometimes productive, it is normally not advised as it can cause injury. For voicing, however, it can be effective to line up the thumb with the radius and then rotate the hand into the top note.<sup>44</sup>

When playing, grasp the keys with “real, healthy contact with the instrument.” Your hand should grasp the with the same conviction as it would grasp your opposite arm.<sup>45</sup>

As for the thumb, using a grasping motion can help generate a strong – but not rigid – arch support.<sup>46</sup> When thinking about the opposable thumbs, understand that the thumb is the counterpart of the four fingers: it is between the four fingers and the thumb that the hand is divided.<sup>47</sup>

As for the rest of the fingers, the book suggests several different finger shapes, all with different functions:<sup>48</sup>

“The hammerstroke: The fingertip points straight down, the whole finger rises a little, and then the tip, continuing to point down, goes in and down to the bottom of the key. It does not curl any further but stays pointing down. This I call the hammer action of the finger.”

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<sup>40</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 51-55.

<sup>41</sup> Alan Fraser Institute, “Moshe’s Wisdom.”

<sup>42</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 233.

<sup>43</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 58-61.

<sup>44</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 105-106.

<sup>45</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 71.

<sup>47</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 243-244.



Figure 4.1: My conception of the Hammerstroke

“The Cat Scratch: The fingertip ‘cat-scratches,’ actually curling towards the palm to make the note sound.”



Figure 4.2: My conception of the “Cat Scratch” (the position directly after playing)

“Out the Back Door: The ‘cat-scratch’ taken to the extreme: the fingertip travels a path that encompasses a 180-degree arc leaving the key by the back door, so to speak, and ending up pressed tightly not into your palm but rather into the crease right under your knuckle. This is for extreme staccato and fast repetitions using 3-2-1 or 4-3-2-1 fingerings.”



Figure 4.3: My impression of “Out the Back Door” (the position directly after playing)

“The Flat Finger: the finger lies totally flat in the key, palm lower than the board, wrist maximally low but not pressed down. Finger rises a little, pointing straight out somewhere slightly above the horizontal and not curling at all, then the whole underside of the finger lays itself along the entire length of the key, or at least as much of it as it can cover. This is ‘flat fingers,’ used for maximum cantilena, the absolutely juiciest singing tone possible.”



Figure 4.4: My conception of the Flat Finger

“The Natural Finger: The finger is only very moderately curved, as it is when hanging at rest. When you raise it and have it stroke into the key it maintains this slight curve – this is the most natural movement imaginable and one of the most useful, and yet it seems to be the one we use least at the piano. It seems we always need to mess around with things somehow. I am amazed at how often I will be touching a student’s hand, monitoring it, and even if it approaches the vicinity of the keyboard I can feel its internal

tension increasing. There seems to be this chronic need to prepare to play – as if the hand was not perfectly capable of playing in its natural condition, in its natural state of muscular tonus!”



Figure 4.5: My conception of what the natural finger looks like

For this last method (the natural finger), at all times the finger must have internal movement rather than act as an inflexible stick. Also, whenever playing, even when playing forte, the fingers may at times need vigorous motions but must always stay physically soft.<sup>49</sup>

## Alexander Technique

### General Notes

For the Alexander Technique portion, I will focus on the concepts of body mapping. These concepts were more fully fleshed out by William and Barbara Conable. William Conable said that the teachings about body mapping are not to “substitute for [the Alexander Technique’s] essential teachings: primary control, inhibition, orders, and the like,” and are not “central to understanding the Technique,” but that they “are clearly implied in Alexander’s writings.”<sup>50</sup> I believe that they are therefore pertinent to the study of the Alexander Technique for musicians. There are several overall principles to keep in mind when studying the Alexander Technique/body mapping. First, remember that whatever position is recommended, must still be coupled with free movement. Never should you stay in these “correct” postures rigidly, but you should rather return to that balanced position over and over as if it is your home.<sup>51</sup> However,

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<sup>49</sup> Fraser, *Craft*, 244-245.

<sup>50</sup> “Origins and Theory of Mapping: by William Conable,” Association for Body Mapping Education, Accessed My 22, 2023, <https://www.bodymap.org/origins-and-theory-of-mapping>.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Conable. *What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body: The Practical Application of Body Mapping to Making Music* (Oregon: Andover Press, 2000), 36.

neither should one attempt complete relaxation; rather, think of balancing the body.<sup>52</sup> Also, keep in mind the distinction between work and tension. Work is using muscles; tension is tightening muscles before using them.<sup>53</sup> And finally, learn to tap into your sixth sense of kinesthesia – awareness of your body and its movements.<sup>54</sup> This is the purpose of the body mapping – to increase awareness of the locations of the parts of one’s own body.

## Body Movements

### Neck

One must first have a free neck. If the neck is free, then the whole body can be free. When the neck is free, the head can balance on the spine. When the head is balanced, the front of the spine should be equidistant from the back of the head and the front of the spine. A free neck can turn, tilt, lift up, and look down.<sup>55</sup>

### Spine

Next, one must be aware of the spine.<sup>56</sup> The spine should be curved, not straight. Instead of trying to straighten the spine, we must cooperate with its curves. The spine should also be free to lengthen. If we are not tensing, the neck and spine can lengthen and gather freely, as it should, repeatedly throughout the day. Also, we should be conscious of where we are letting our weight settle, and we should bear the majority of it on the front half of the spine. If we carry our weight on the back half of the spine, we are putting weight and pressure on the part of the spine that carries the nerves, and this is not optimal. Instead, we should gently shift the weight to our core area. The weight should be centered over our hips and sitz bones, resulting in the weight of the head and thorax balancing on the lumbar spine, which is the thickest part of the body. Finally, tightening the muscles on the back of the neck increases this weight on the nerve half of the spine, which even more reason to free up the neck. And also, make sure to follow these “laws of the spine”:<sup>57</sup>

- “The head must lead spinal movement (as it does in all creatures). This is why the neck must be so free, so that it doesn’t interfere. The spine is an ensemble. It plays all together with the head conducting.”
- “The vertebrae must follow in sequence (politely).”
- “The spine must be free to lengthen and gather in spinal movement, not just bend and twist (the lengthening and gathering is part of the spine’s natural resiliency, and it supports and coordinates the movement of the limbs).”
- “Spinal movement should be distributed across the whole spine, not concentrated in part of it.”

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<sup>52</sup> Judith Kleinman and Peter Buckoke, *The Alexander Technique for Musicians* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 15, ProQuest Ebrary.

<sup>53</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 74.

<sup>54</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 6-8.

<sup>56</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 9-13, 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 19.

## Back, Front, & Torso

Make sure to free up your back and your front, and remember that your back is just as wide as your front.<sup>58</sup> Do not push your chest out or your shoulders back.<sup>59</sup>

Understand that the waist is not part of our anatomy. The middle of our bodies is not the “waist” but actually the sitz bones. Thinking of our bodies this way allows our torso to be as long as possible. Also, the sitz bones are where we sit; we do not sit on our legs. Balancing on our sitz bones is the “correct” posture according to the Alexander Technique.<sup>60</sup>

## Legs

Our legs actually connect into our torso – at the sitz bones, not higher. Each leg moves in three places: the hips, the knees, and the ankles. When playing, never plant or stiffen the legs. Legs should be free.<sup>61</sup>

## Arms

When thinking about the arms, pay close attention to the joints. The arms have four joints: the sternoclavicular joint, shoulder joint, elbow, wrist. The arms also have three rotations: the rotation of shoulder blade over the ribs, the movement at the joint of the upper arm and shoulder blade, and the rotation of the elbow. The joint of the upper arm and shoulder blade pivots at the sternum. Also, the deep muscles that move the collarbones are part of the arms, as are the muscles that move the shoulder blades. That means that in order to free up the arms, the neck as well as the front and the back must also be free.<sup>62</sup>

The upper arm bones should rotate inwards, as should the thigh bones. Full rotation can only be achieved by freeing and then rebalancing the head, which in turn allows the back to lengthen and widen.<sup>63</sup>

As for the elbows, understand that the elbows can both bend and rotate. Contrary to what many believe, rotation does not happen at the wrist. Instead, the rotation comes from the elbow as the radius moves over the ulna. Understanding this can help the wrist remain long and easy rather than scrunched.<sup>64</sup>

## Wrists

Primarily, understand that the wrist is not a hinge – it is eight separate bones. Understanding this will help keep from locking or over-stabilizing the wrist. As with all of the other parts of the body, the wrist should be free, and should only be momentarily stabilized when initially playing the keys. There should be no limitation of the movement between the hand

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<sup>58</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 14-15.

<sup>59</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 23-25.

<sup>62</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 43, 50-57.

<sup>63</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 71.

<sup>64</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 60-61.

bones and the wrist, the wrist and the arm bones, or among the bones of the wrist. A free wrist allows the hand to move forward, back, right, and left.<sup>65</sup>

### Fingers

When the hand is at rest, the fifth finger should be lined up with the ulna, rather than the thumb lined up with the wrist. This can help with fifth finger weakness as well.<sup>66</sup> In this position, the hand is organized around the little finger.<sup>67</sup>

As for the fingers, remember that the first crease underneath each finger (the crease closest to the palm) is not the joint – rather it falls between the first and second joints. Also, because of the thumb’s different construction, its first joint is actually at the wrist. The joint that lines up with the other fingers’ first joints is actually the second joint of the finger.<sup>68</sup>

## **Josef Lhevinne, *Basic Principles in Piano Playing***

### General Notes

Though Lhevinne discusses technique in great detail in this book, technique to him was never an end in itself. In fact, he does not think highly of musicians whose only aim is to play fast without ever giving a thought to the musical concepts. Technique is only a means to an end, that end being to convey the composer’s ideas.

### Body Movements

Josef Lhevinne explains early on in the book that the entire body is involved in the production of good tone. A good touch on the piano involves eliminating all non-essential movements, and this even applies to the torso.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, inclining the body towards the keyboard can help with one’s power.<sup>70</sup>

### Arms

The arms are instrumental in developing delicate playing. In order to play delicately, the arm must feel “feather-light,” without any tightening, cramping, nervous tension, or stiffening of the muscles. This “feather-light,” floating arm is easier to achieve when the elbow is extended slightly away from the body. Note that does not mean that the arm should just hang limp in an excess of relaxation – this would only cause the arm to be dead and heavy.<sup>71</sup>

Another use of the arm is in executing whole-forearm staccato. In this type of staccato, the wrist is stiff and the whole arm moves up and down to create the staccato motion.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 64-66.

<sup>66</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 62-63.

<sup>67</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 68.

<sup>68</sup> Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know*, 69.

<sup>69</sup> Josef Lhevinne. *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), 12.

<sup>70</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 29-31.

<sup>71</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 36.



## Wrists

For the majority of playing, the wrist must always be flexible. To Lhevinne, playing without using the wrist is equivalent to riding in a car without shock absorbers! The exception to this is when one is attempting an extremely brilliant sound. To achieve this, it will be most effective to use a stiff wrist and pointed fingers.<sup>73</sup> (Stiff wrist is also required when executing forearm staccato, as explained above.)

When trying to achieve power in playing, the wrists must always be free in order to maintain a nice tone. Otherwise, one risks his or her playing sounding like “noise” rather than power.<sup>74</sup>

Wrist also can play a role in accuracy. Sometimes, accuracy can be aided by raising or lowering the wrist or moving the hand laterally. Lhevinne recommends experimenting with exact heights and angles to find what works with each individual hand.<sup>75</sup>

And finally, in order to increase lightness when playing staccato, Lhevinne recommends raising the wrist. This can also help avoid unwanted finger tapping sounds on the keys.<sup>76</sup>

## Palms

The position of the palms is integral to accurate playing. Students must always use the best possible hand position (what Lhevinne calls “hand slant”) in order to achieve accuracy. The performer must experiment to find what position is best for that particular passage, and keep in mind that “the easiest position is always the best.”<sup>77</sup>

## Fingers

Of all the parts of the pianist’s playing mechanism, Lhevinne had the most to say about the fingers. First, he explains that students must spend time learning scales with correct fingering so that, when scales appear in repertoire, the student will save much time by already knowing how to play them. Also, using correct fingering in general will help with accuracy.<sup>78</sup>

Lhevinne states that the only action that should occur in striking a key should be the movement at the metacarpal joints. All other non-essential movement should be removed.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 19-20.

<sup>74</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 31-32.

<sup>75</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 34-35.

<sup>76</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 34-35.

<sup>78</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 9-11.

<sup>79</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 12-13.



Figure 5.1 Using only the metacarpal joints to lift the finger



Figure 5.2 Using more than just the metacarpal joints to lift the fingers

Also, the physical shape of the whole hand affects the tone: the individual performer's hand shape, finger length, finger width, etc. Wider and softer fingers, for example, will produce a softer tone more naturally than narrow, hard fingers. Pianists should take note of this fact and, although obviously unable to change their natural hand and finger shape, should attempt to strike the keys with the most padded part of their finger, which is the "ball" of the finger rather than the fingertip. The fingertip can and should, however, be used if a brilliant or delicate tone is

required.<sup>80</sup> Another important part of good tone production is the essential aspect of striking the key all the way to the bottom.<sup>81</sup>

When attempting a beautiful tone, a performer must first have a mental concept of what that tone is.<sup>82</sup> Then, he or she must descend on the key very carefully – with no thumping and certainly no hitting of the key. A hypothetical slow-motion recording of the key descent should reveal no bumps in the motion at all. Then, when touching the key, “as large a surface of the fingertip as feasible engages the key, and the wrist is so loose that it normally sinks below the level of the keyboard.” The feeling must be of grasping the key rather than hitting it – the piano keyboard must never be thought of as a tabletop. Note that when playing a melody, only the first note must be played this way. “The other notes, if the melody is to be played legato, must be taken with the fingers quite near the keys, raising or dropping the wrist according to the design of the melody.” Once finished playing, the finger must leave the keys the same way it arrived – with no bumps in the sound or the gesture. Lhevinne likens it to an airplane leaving the ground.<sup>83</sup>

When playing delicately, the musician must note first that delicacy does not equate to missing notes. Lhevinne condemns inaccuracies as unpardonable. Delicacy must be achieved by a combination of having a “feather-light” arm (described above), keeping fingers on the surface of the keys, using the fingertips rather than the ball of the finger, and descending all the way to the bottom of the keys.<sup>84</sup>

When needing to play with great power, use the fleshy part of the fingers. “There is an acoustical principle involved in striking the keys,” Lhevinne says. “If the blow is a sudden, hard, brutal one, the vibrations of the wires seem to be far less pervading than when the hammers are operated so that the wires are ‘rung’ as a bell.”<sup>85</sup>

For finger staccato, one can effectively use a “wiping the keys” motion. And regardless of what type of staccato one is using, the fingers must always be “looking down.”<sup>86</sup>

And finally, before proceeding to the next technique, it is worthwhile to read Lhevinne’s eloquent discourse on conveying musicality through the fingers and arm:

“Before proceeding further it might be well to note that the player can actually think moods and conditions into his arm and fingers. His mental attitude means a great deal in the quality of his playing. Just as the voice immediately reflects in its quality the emotions of great joy, pain, sorrow, scorn, meanness and horror, so do the fingers and the arm in somewhat similar fashion respond to these emotions and represent them in playing for those who have mastered the technic of playing so that they are not concerned with details which should become automatic. Anyone who heard Rubinstein play will realize how the emotions can be conveyed to the keyboard in an altogether marvelous manner. No audience is immune to this appeal. The non-musical auditors, in fact, come more for this sensation than for any understanding of pure music. They know instantly when it is

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<sup>80</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 14, 18-19, 27.

<sup>81</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 21-23.

<sup>84</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 31-32.

<sup>86</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 36.

present and go away gratified and rewarded. They do not understand the musical niceties, but they do comprehend the communication of human sensations and emotions when sincerely portrayed by the pianist who feels that he has something more to do in his art than merely play the notes.”<sup>87</sup>

## **Taubman Technique**

### General Notes

The general principle of the Taubman approach<sup>88</sup> is correct alignment and “coordinate motion...[t]he fingers, hand and forearm must be properly connected and move together at all times for the pianist to play with efficiency and ease.” The Approach also discusses the interdependence of the hands. The brain cannot focus on more than one thing at once, so a performer needs to think of the hands as one entity in order to play most effectively.

### Body Movements

For the Taubman approach, the correct seat height is mandatory. The forearm and elbow should be level with the white keys. Note that the correct seat height is thus dependent on the length of the upper arm.<sup>89</sup>

### Arms

The two main components of correct arm motion according to the Taubman technique are forearm motions (rotational and lateral) and shaping motions. For the former, a performer must “allow the fingers, hand and forearm to move as a unit and prevent fingers from isolating, curling and stretching. Fatigue, tension and pain are avoided and a technique emerges that is symptom free, fast and reliable.” And when shaping, the hand and arm must participate in “curvilinear motions by the hand and forearm over groups of notes, due to the different lengths of the fingers, changes in direction, fingering and more, that add to the feeling of naturalness, speed and ease. Shaping allows a person to sound musical without effort; without it passages tend to sound notey and static.”

### Palms

According to the Taubman Approach, the entire hand must move in when playing black keys and out when playing white keys. This helps avoid twisting motions that can cause injury. The Taubman Approach also gives insight into playing octaves and chords without stretching, and with a rebound that keeps the playing mechanism aligned. It promises to help the pianist “play octaves and chords with clarity, ease and speed.”

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<sup>87</sup> Lhevinne, *Basic Principles*, 26.

<sup>88</sup> Edna Golandsky, “The Taubman Approach: Basic Principles,” Edna Golansky, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.ednagolandsky.com/the-taubman-approach-basic-principles>.

<sup>89</sup> “What is the Taubman Approach, and how can it help you as a pianist?” Pianist Magazine, accessed 23 April 2023, <https://www.pianistmagazine.com/blogs/what-is-the-taubman-approach-and-how-can-it-help-you-as-a-pianist/>.

## Fingers

According to the Taubman Approach, good tone production is something that can be taught and is a combination of weight and speed going into the key. For fingering, find a fingering that adheres to the laws of physical alignment; your fingers will absorb such a fingering more easily than they would an awkward fingering. And finally, it is possible to achieve a legato sound even without physically connecting the notes if one uses tone production, shaping, and pedaling. This allows the musician to avoid stretches which cause injury.

## **Technique Chart**

On the next page is a chart with the basic takeaways for each technique studied. The rows are different parts of the body, and the columns are different methods.

## Technique Chart

	Feldenkrais Method	Alexander Technique	Josef and Rosina Lhevinne	Taubman Technique
General Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “If you know what you’re doing, you can do what you want.”</li> <li>- Both “finger action” and “arm weight” schools are equally right and equally wrong</li> <li>- Form follows function</li> <li>- Reducing muscular effort allows the skeleton to align itself correctly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Never rigidly stay in “correct” postures</li> <li>- Balance rather than relaxation</li> <li>- Work is using muscles; tension is tightening muscles before using them</li> <li>- Sixth sense = kinesthesia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Technique is never an end in itself</li> <li>- The “end” is to convey the composer’s ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Alignment and coordinate motion</li> <li>- Interdependence of hands</li> </ul>
Body Movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- keep a free torso, avoid auxiliary movements</li> <li>- Sit on the sitz bones but don’t rigidly hold this position</li> <li>- Be aware of the “bowl” of the pelvis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neck must be free</li> <li>- Spine should be curved, not straight</li> <li>- Most of our weight should be on the front part of the spine</li> <li>- Back and front should be free</li> <li>- The waist is not a part of human anatomy</li> <li>- Legs should be free</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Entire body involved in producing good tone</li> <li>- Eliminate all non-essential movements for good tone</li> <li>- Incline the body toward the keyboard for power in playing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Correct seat height</li> </ul>
Arms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The point of arm weight is to free up the little muscles to do their jobs</li> <li>- Avoid the “arm out” motion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arms have four joints and three rotations</li> <li>- Upper arms should rotate inwards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use “feather-light” arm for delicate playing</li> <li>- Whole-forearm staccato can be effectively produced by stiffening the wrist and playing with the whole arm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use rotation and lateral forearm movements</li> <li>- Shape notes with hand and forearm</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exercise: entrench fingers in the key bed and swing wrist and arms freely</li> <li>- Rotate by letting the radius slide over the ulna, rather than swiveling the wrist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rotation of the hand and forearm happens at the elbow, not at the wrist</li> </ul>		
Wrists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wrist's role is to transmit force vectors</li> <li>- Movement should be mostly internal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The wrist is eight separate bones, not a hinge</li> <li>- Wrist should only be momentarily stabilized and then immediately freed again</li> <li>- No limitation of movement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wrist must almost always be flexible</li> <li>- One exception is when playing with brilliancy – then use stiff wrist and pointed fingers</li> </ul>	N/A
Palms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Natural hand shape is the shape of the hand when hanging at one's side</li> <li>- Keep this shape and muscle tonus, but do not consciously try to maintain it as this can cause tension</li> <li>- Metacarpal-phalangeal joint should rise when playing octaves</li> <li>- Practice pressing and holding to develop good arch support</li> </ul>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use the best possible hand position to achieve greatest accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Move hand in when playing black keys and out when playing white keys, rather than twisting</li> <li>- Octaves and chords can be played without stretching and with an aligned rebound</li> </ul>

<p>Fingers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- T'ai Chi Walking applied to fingers</li> <li>- Hand is a "mini-body"</li> <li>- Line up the fifth finger with the ulna rather than the thumb with the radius</li> <li>- The thumb is the opposite of the four fingers</li> <li>- Five different finger shapes: the Hammerstroke, the Cat Scratch, Out the Back Door, the Flat Finger, and the Natural Finger</li> <li>- Always stay physically soft, even when playing forte</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fifth finger should be lined up with ulna, rather than thumb with wrist</li> <li>- The first crease underneath each finger is not the joint</li> <li>- The thumb's first joint is at the wrist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learn scales now, save time later</li> <li>- Use the best fingering for greatest accuracy</li> <li>- The only moving part of the hand should be at the metacarpal joint</li> <li>- Use the "ball" of the fingertip for the best tone (except for brilliant or delicate playing)</li> <li>- Descent onto and ascent from the keys should be seamless, without bumps</li> <li>- Always descend all the way to the bottom of the key</li> <li>- For delicate playing, keep fingers on the surface of the keys</li> <li>- For powerful playing, use fleshy part of fingers</li> <li>- "Wiping the keys" motion can be effective for staccato</li> <li>- Emotions can be conveyed through the fingers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tone production is a combination of weight and speed</li> <li>- Fingering should adhere to laws of alignment</li> <li>- Legato can be achieved without physical connection</li> </ul>
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## Appendix: Artists and YouTube Instructors

### **Artists**

#### Martha Argerich

##### Body Movements

When playing, Martha Argerich<sup>90</sup> would keep her body relatively still, but also moving side to side in order to make the notes easier to reach. Sometimes, when playing large chords, her head would move, indicating that all of her body was participating.

##### Arms

Her upper arms were almost motionless near the shoulder, but her entire arms would move right and left depending on where she was putting her hands. Her elbows also seemed to remain relatively stationary but were not pinned at her sides – they were farther out. Sometimes this would require her to bend her wrist when playing near the middle of the piano. Her elbow would help her with outward motions, however.

##### Wrists

Argerich's wrist seemed completely free, and she could often be caught "throwing" her hand from the wrist. Her wrist was often higher than her hands, especially when playing octaves and large chords, but during other passages (especially scalar ones), her wrist would dip lower than her fingers and below the keyboard. Her wrist would move right and left as well depending on where her hand needed to be in relation to her arm. However, her wrist did not pivot during thumb crossings; she seemed to execute the crossings with her fingers only and with minimal wrist involvement.

##### Palms

Though Argerich's hand shape changed drastically depending on what type of technique she was executing, a few single notes played during the piece revealed her "baseline" hand shape – a beautiful, textbook, rounded hand shape. The arch in the middle of her palm had firm support and her metacarpal-phalangeal joints were raised. However, if she needed to stretch farther (including for playing octaves), her whole hand would flatten although the metacarpal-phalangeal joints never sank below the second finger joints. When holding a chord with her hands, she appeared to be digging deeply into the keyboard, making strong, healthy contact with the instrument and truly feeling the key bed.

##### Fingers

If any part of Argerich's playing apparatus was active, it was the fingers themselves. At times, her fingers seemed to play by flicking downwards from a horizontal position level with

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<sup>90</sup> Martha Argerich, "Martha Argerich – Prokofiev – Piano Concerto No 3 – Previn." Classical Vault 1, October 23, 2014, video, 27:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgnE25-kvyk>.

the back of her hand. On some fast passages, her fingers would swipe inwards as they played the keys. Her fingers stood up tall, and although her baseline hand position (as discussed above) was a rounded hand shape, she did not hesitate to use straight fingers when needed, especially when using the fingers of one hand to play chords over top of the other hand. And finally, it was sometimes clear that her thumb was lifting straight up in the air, which seemed similar to the technique recommended by Fraser for rotation (see under “Arms” in the Feldenkrais Method section).

## Horowitz

### General Notes

Of all the professional pianists filling the stages in the last few centuries, the one who has certainly received the most attention for his unusual technique was Horowitz.<sup>91</sup> While every concert pianist is incredible in their achievements at the instrument, Horowitz’s playing is almost unexplainable, as it breaks nearly every “rule” of hand position and technique. His playing style seems to defy the laws of physics, mechanics, and physiology as they are understood today – yet his technique is immaculate and his musicality legendary. Let us examine this musical icon more closely.

### Body Movements

Horowitz displayed minimal body movement and no shoulder movement. In very intense parts, his head would shake a little, and his whole body would move, but otherwise almost none of the visible playing action took place in his body.

### Arms

Contrary to what modern instructors teach students today, Horowitz’s elbows dropped far below the surface of the keys. Even more intriguing, his elbow seemed looser and freer than his wrist and seemed to be his main “hinge” for his hand movements, including staccatos. Although it seems like using the entire forearm for a movement like this would be excessive and tiring, he executes it effortlessly. Finally, when moving laterally across the keyboard, his elbow would follow his arm rather than staying at a fixed distance from his side.

### Wrists

Like his elbows, Horowitz’s wrists hung below the surface of the keys when resting in his baseline hand position. When playing more technical passages such as chords or octaves, the wrist would rise above the fingers. As mentioned above, his wrist was in general more stabilized and less free and elastic than the elbow, where most of the external motion seemed to arise. The wrist did move in a few ways, however. Primarily, the wrist seemed to bounce slightly with each note played – again, not a technique recommended by most teachers for attaining a smooth legato sound, but Horowitz seems to have no trouble. The second motion of the wrist was an

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<sup>91</sup> Vladimir Horowitz, “Horowitz Rachmaninoff 3rd Concerto Mehta NYPO 1978,” Pedro Taam, January 4, 2009, video, 44:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgnE25-kvyk>.

occasional backwards flick of the hand from the wrist. The opposite – a forwards “throwing motion” of the hands – did not seem to appear in his technical repertoire.

## Palms

When playing in more of his “baseline” position, Horowitz’s fingers almost lay flat on the keys. His hand then bent downwards at the metacarpal ridge and fell lower than the key surface. When he did need to raise his hands higher to play more technical passages, the first two metacarpal-phalangeal joints (i.e. those belonging to his second and third fingers) seemed to rise higher than the third and fourth (i.e. those belonging to the fourth and fifth fingers).

## Fingers

As mentioned above, Horowitz’s baseline hand position involved playing with his fingers flat, and this is unarguably the most famous element of Horowitz’s technique. Interestingly, the very tips of his fingers seemed to curve upwards, and he seemed to be playing on more of the “ball” of the finger rather than the tip of the finger. His fifth finger was especially intriguing, as it would sometimes flip upwards and sometimes curl inwards. Occasionally, he would curve his fingers the way most teachers today recommend, but even then, the curve was relatively slight.

## **YouTube Instructors**

### The Chopin Method

The Chopin Method<sup>92</sup> is based on the idea that each finger has a personality and thus plays differently by design. This method may be suitable for playing Classical and Romantic period music. According to this method, the fingers must fall over the keys rather than press or push.

Among the fingers, the second finger is the leader. The third finger is the strongest and is the center of the hand. It aligns with the center of the radius bone and is the main support for the hand. The fourth finger, in contrast, is the weakest and should be “married” to its “Siamese twin” of the third finger. According to the Chopin Method, a pianist should not attempt to gain independence of the fourth finger from the third. The fifth finger is somewhat of a leader as well, playing both bass and soprano. And finally, the thumb is the oddball of all the fingers. Its movement begins from the wrist and therefore it has much more flexibility to move up, down, left, and right. When the thumb is playing, another finger must always be supporting it.

### Josh Wright

Josh Wright’s explanation of basic technique<sup>93</sup> involves the whole body but is based mostly on the wrist. According to Wright, the fingers must be active, but the arm must supply all

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<sup>92</sup> The Chopin Method, “4. The Chopin Method: The Fingers,” The Chopin Method, September 21, 2022, video, 9:34, [https://youtu.be/\\_sm8UqTtsXE](https://youtu.be/_sm8UqTtsXE).

<sup>93</sup> Wright, Josh, “Piano Techniques: Finger, Wrist, and Arm Functions - Josh Wright Piano TV,” Josh Wright, April 24, 2015, video, 10:52, <https://youtu.be/eQvKujdReBk>.

of the weight. One must feel this weight mostly in the arm and wrist, but also in the core, legs, and feet, and the legs must be spread a little as if one is sitting on a horse. For tone control he suggests a relaxed but solid wrist like a shock absorber. For a forte tone, keep everything relaxed and use arm weight, but keep the wrist more solid. For a piano tone, keep the same arm weight as was used for the forte tone, but let the wrist “give” a little more. In this way, the wrist is the key to tone production.

### The ONE Music School (Lang Lang)

The last school we will study is the ONE Music School,<sup>94</sup> whose guest presenter was Lang Lang. According to Lang Lang, for baseline hand position the fingers should be standing up and looking like they are holding an egg. Use high-lift practice, but make sure not to play too strongly at first.

	Artists	YouTube Instructors
General Notes	<b>Argerich</b> N/A  <b>Horowitz</b> - Breaks all the rules!	N/A
Body Movements	<b>Argerich</b> - Body relatively still - Side-to-side movement - Head movement with large chords  <b>Horowitz</b> - Minimal movement; no shoulder movement - Moving head/whole body in intense parts	<b>Chopin Method</b> N/A  <b>Josh Wright</b> - Must feel arm weight mostly in arm and wrist but also in rest of the body  <b>The ONE Music School (Lang Lang)</b> N/A
Arms	<b>Argerich</b> - Shoulder almost motionless - Arms moving right and left - Elbows at somewhat of a constant location a few inches from her side  <b>Horowitz</b> - Elbows below the keyboard	N/A

<sup>94</sup> Lang Lang, “Guide to proper piano hand position,” The ONE Music School, May 26, 2020, video, 2:10, <https://youtu.be/4Uefz3CaTEk>.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Elbows as a hinge</li> <li>- Elbows follow arm</li> </ul>	
Wrists	<p><b>Argerich</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completely free wrist</li> <li>- Wrist higher than hands when playing chords; lower than hands when playing scales</li> <li>- Wrists move right and left</li> <li>- Not much wrist movement during thumb crossings</li> </ul> <p><b>Horowitz</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wrists lower than the keyboard</li> <li>- Wrists more stabilized; flexibility from elbow</li> <li>- Wrist moves higher than fingers for chords</li> <li>- Bouncing hand from wrist with every note</li> <li>- Upwards flicking motion of hand from wrist</li> </ul>	<p><b>Chopin Method</b> N/A</p> <p><b>Josh Wright</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More or less “give” in the wrist is the key to different types of tone production</li> </ul> <p><b>The ONE Music School (Lang Lang)</b> N/A</p>
Palms	<p><b>Argerich</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Metacarpal-phalangeal joint raised normally, flattened for larger spans</li> <li>- Firm hand/arch support, rounded hand shape</li> <li>- Digging into keyboard for sustained chords</li> </ul> <p><b>Horowitz</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fingers almost lying flat on keys</li> <li>- First two metacarpal-phalangeal joints higher than second two</li> </ul>	<p><b>Chopin Method</b> N/A</p> <p><b>Josh Wright</b> N/A</p> <p><b>The ONE Music School (Lang Lang)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fingers should look like holding an egg</li> </ul>
Fingers	<p><b>Argerich</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lots of finger articulation</li> <li>- Finger “swiping” motion from almost horizontal finger position</li> <li>- Use of straight fingers</li> <li>- Lifting thumb straight upwards</li> </ul> <p><b>Horowitz</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fingers lying flat but curve when necessary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Chopin Method</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each finger has a different personality</li> </ul> <p><b>Josh Wright</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fingers must be active</li> </ul> <p><b>The ONE Music School (Lang Lang)</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very tips of fingers seemed curved</li> <li>- Playing on “ball” rather than tip of finger</li> <li>- Finger 5 flicking up or curling in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Careful high-lift practice</li> </ul>
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## Conclusion

Although the intent of this paper was never to determine “correct” technique for all pianists (given that each student’s body is different), an analysis of the mainstream schools of piano technique did lead to some clear generalizations. The main consensus is that freeing up the neck, arms, and wrists is vital to having good technique. This does not mean that the pianist should be in a state of complete relaxation of all muscles at all times, but rather that all muscles that are non-essential to a particular motion should not be contracted. Instead, it is best to align and stack the bones so that one can play with maximum power and minimum effort using the laws of motion and physics rather than using tension and pushing. For example, one bone alignment that was suggested by two separate methods was lining up finger 5 with the ulna rather than the thumb with the radius. Hand position was also important in the methods, and though the exact hand shape differed slightly depending on the method as well as the particular type of sound desired, the general consensus was that a rounded hand shape is preferred. Since these principles were repeated across the different schools of technique, a wise teacher should consider these when instructing students.

Beyond this, each method was very different in its approach to the movements of the body, arms, wrists, palms, and fingers. The methods did not necessarily contradict each other so much as give different and unique perspectives on the issues at hand. Thus, they provide an array of options for ways in which teachers and students can approach technical issues. Students and teachers are encouraged to experiment with these different methods until they find what works for their hand and helps them play with the greatest cleanliness and clarity. After all, as Rosina Lhevinne says in her forward to her husband’s book, “*technique [is] never a goal in itself; rather, it [is] only a means to express the ideas of the composer.*” In your technique practice, let the music be your guide and the comfort of your movements be your validation (or the lack of comfort be your warning sign!), and enjoy the feeling of freedom and musical liberty that only correct technique can impart.

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