

## Czerny's Letters on the Art of Playing the Piano

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*First Rudiments of the Piano.*

When I, some years ago, had the pleasure of being personally acquainted with your family, I discovered in you so decided a talent for music, that I am rejoiced to hear you are now really about to devote yourself to the delightful art of playing the pianoforte. Your memory, at that time, easily retained any agreeable melody which you heard; you manifested a natural feeling for time and musical expression; and, added to this, your delicate fingers and hands possessed all the natural qualities so necessary for playing the pianoforte - flexibility, quickness of movement, and lightness, without being either too weak or too stiff.

So decided a disposition and inclination for this fine art could not, in truth, remain long dormant; for no art is more noble, nor more surely indicative of general mental cultivation, than music. By it we can command, not only for one's self, but for many others, a dignified and appropriate amusement; and, where great progress has been made, we also insure a degree of distinction in the world, which is as agreeable to the amateur as to the professional artist.

The first principals, namely, a knowledge of the keys and the notes, are the only really tedious and unpleasant points in learning music. When you have once conquered them, you will every day experience more and more amusement and delight in continuing your studies.

Consider the matter as if you were for a time compelled to wend your way among somewhat tangled and thorny bushes, in order to arrive at last at a charming prospect, and a spot always blooming in vernal beauty.

The best remedy against this disagreeable necessity is, to endeavor to fix these preliminary subjects on your memory as firmly and quickly as possible. Such pupils as manifest from the very outset, a desire and love for the thing, and who strongly and rationally apply their memories to the matter, will acquire a perfect knowledge of the keys and notes in a few weeks; while others, frightened at the apparent tediousness of the acquisition often lose several months in attaining the same object. Which, then of these two ways is the better?

Before anything else, I earnestly entreat you to acquire a graceful and appropriate position when sitting at the pianoforte. The seat which you use must be just so high, that the elbows, when hanging down freely, may be a very little less elevated than the upper surface of the keys; and if your feet should not reach the ground, have a dwarf stool or ottoman made of a proper height to place them upon. You must always seat yourself exactly facing the middle of the keyboard, and at such a distance from it that the tips of the elbows may be a little nearer to the keys than the shoulders.

Equally important is a graceful position and carriage of the head and upper part of the chest; it must neither be stiff nor bent.

It is not merely that an awkward position is disagreeable and ridiculous, but it also impedes, if not prevents, the development of a free and elegant style of playing.

The fore part of the arm (from the elbow to the fingers) should form a perfectly straight horizontal line; for the hand must neither rise upwards like a bell, nor be bent so as to slope downwards.

The fingers are to be so bent, that the tips of them, together with that of the thumb, when extended outwards, may form one right line, and so that the keys may always be struck with the soft and fleshy tips of the fingers, and that neither the nails nor the flat surface of the fingers shall touch the keys. In striking the black keys, the fingers must be stretched out a little more; but even in this case they must always remain sufficiently bent.

The percussion on the keys is effected solely by the fingers, which, without any actual blow, must press each key firmly down; and in doing this, neither the hand nor the arm must be allowed to make any

unnecessary movements. The thumb should always strike the key with its external narrow surface, and in so doing it must be but very little bent.

The white keys are to be struck on the middle of their anterior broad surfaces, and the black keys pretty close to their nearest extremities or ends.

You must take great care that you do not strike any key sideways or obliquely; as otherwise, an contiguous and wrong key may chance to be touched, and in music, nothing is worse than *producing wrong sounds*.

While on finger strikes, the other fingers must be kept close to the keys, but always bent, and posed quite freely in the air; for we must not touch any key before the moment in which it is to be struck.

The most important of the fingers is the *thumb*; it must never be allowed to hang down below the key-board; but, on the contrary, it should always be held *over* the keys in such a way that its tip may be elevated a little higher than the upper surface of the black keys; and it must strike from this position.

To observe all these rules exactly, it is requisite that the elbows should never be too distant from the body; and that the arms, from the shoulder downwards, should hang freely, without being pressed against the body.

The knowledge of the notes is a mere affair of memory; and for every note, you must endeavor to find and strike the proper key, on the instant and without the least hesitation. In music this constitutes what is called *reading the notes*; and when you shall have acquired this readiness, you will have overcome the most difficult thing which elementary objects in music will be likely to present to you.

At first you will naturally learn only the notes in the treble clef; and for this purpose we may employ the following means:-

First. When you look at a note, you must name it aloud, and then seek for and strike the key which belongs to it.

Secondly. When you strike at hazard any white key on the treble side of the key-board, you must name it aloud, and seek directly for the note belonging to it.

Thirdly. After having struck any white key at hazard, you must describe aloud, in words, what line or what space it represents.

Fourthly. You must often play through, slowly, some of the easiest pieces for beginners, note by note, and with great attention, naming each note as you proceed.

Fifthly. I must also recommend you to adopt the following expedient: since you are already much advanced in writing, you must learn to write music. The little trouble that this will cost, you will find amply recompensed by great advantages. Notes are much easier to write than letters; and, if you daily devote a quarter of an hour to this task, in a couple of weeks you will become sufficiently expert at it.

Your teacher will give you the instructions requisite for this purpose; and when you have been in this way accustomed to place the notes as they come, exactly on or between the lines, copy out daily one of the easiest elementary lessons, and then write in letter over each note its proper denomination; after which, play the piece over slowly.

When, in this way, you have learned to know perfectly all the degrees in the treble clef, and are able to play slowly, but correctly, with both hands, all those little pieces in my School, which are written for both hands in the treble clef, then take the bass notes, and proceed with them just in the same manner.

You must practise each piece, paying the strictest attention to the fingering indicated, till you are able to execute it without stopping or stumbling. Each day you should read through a couple of fresh little pieces, to

accustom the eye and the fingers to the various and ever new passages which are formed by means of the notes.

At first, after each note, we must also look at the key which is to be struck; but afterwards, when we have attained a tolerable certainty in finding the keys, it is better to fix the eye on the notes rather than on the keys.

And now allow me in this letter to offer this last very important remark: the best knowledge of the notes avails us very little, if, *at the same time*, the fingers do not begin to develop that degree of flexibility which is requisite for striking the keys, and for playing in general. I, therefore, most earnestly recommend you to practise daily, with untiring diligence and the greatest attention, five-finger exercises in both hands, which your instructor will explain to you, in order that your fingers may speedily acquire that pliability, independence, and volubility, which are absolutely necessary to playing.

Do not be alarmed at the little trouble and application that this may require; try three or four times every day, for at least a quarter of an hour each time, to play through the exercises with attention. In fact, it is as impossible to play the piano-forte well with stiff and untractable fingers, as to dance well with stiff and untractable feet. *Volubility of finger is one of the chief requisites is pianoforte playing.*

It is very proper that your teacher gives you an hour's lesson every day. If, in addition to this, you daily dedicate another hour - or, if possible, two hours - to practising by yourself, you will in a few months have forever conquered all that is difficult or tedious in the elementary branches of playing; and you will each day see augmented the pleasure which the delightful art of music so richly bestows on its votaries.

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Two Months Later.

*On Touch, Tone, and the Mode of treating the Pianoforte.*

I have just received your welcome letter, and learn from it that you have already made considerable progress in reading the letters, and that you are able to play several of the first and easiest little pieces, somewhat slowly perhaps, but still intelligibly.

Continue daily to decipher a couple of new little pieces, and at the same time to practise still more those which you have already learned, so that these latter ones may go off quicker and quicker, and that you may each week study at least two fresh pieces. For, as you have an earnest wish to attain to a high degree of excellence in pianoforte-playing you must look upon all that has been given to you as yet only as a *means to that end*, and, indeed, as that means which will conduct to this end *as quickly and as agreeably as possible*. I could not refrain from laughing a little, if I may be allowed to tell you so, at your complaining to me how much your master vexed and tormented you with finger exercises, with rules relating to touch, to the position of the hands, to clearness, volubility, &c.

"Ah!" exclaim you, in a manner quite touching, "must all this really be so?"

Yes, such is indeed the case; and here I cannot assist you. Your teacher is quite right in being so strict as to all these points, and I will explain the reason why. From every musical instrument we may produce either a fine tone or a detestable one, *according as we handle it*. The same excellent violin which, in the hands of a clever player, sounds so delightfully, will, when handled by a clumsy person, yield disagreeable sounds. It is the same with the pianoforte. If it is not properly handled by the player, or if we merely thump and bang the keys, the best instrument will sound hard and unpleasant. On the other hand, if we employ too little force, or do not know how to use this power in a proper manner, the tone will be poor and dull, and the performance unintelligible, and without soul or expression.

The interior mechanism of the keys is such that the strings will only sound well when we, -

First. Strike each key perpendicularly; that is straight downwards, and exactly in the middle, and therefore not sideways nor obliquely.

Secondly. When, after the percussion, each key is so firmly pressed down as to cause the full tone of the instrument to be audible.

Thirdly. When, before the percussion, we do not raise the finger too high; as, otherwise, along with the tone there will be heard the blow on the key.

Fourthly. When the hand and arm, even when striking with considerable force, do not make any jumping, chopping, or oscillating movement; for you will find that the fingers cannot possibly play pleasantly and tranquilly when the hands and arms are unsteady.

Fifthly and lastly. When the player observes all these rules in rapid runs, or even in skips and extensions as strictly as in slow and quiet passages.

All the finger exercises, and particularly the *scales*, have no other end than to accustom the fingers to the application of these rules so thoroughly, that the player shall practise all that he studies in future strictly according to the principles we have given.

"Ah! *the scales*," you write to me: "*that* is truly a tedious story! Are these things then really as necessary as my teacher says?"

Yes, these scales are the *most necessary point of all*, not only for beginners, but even for pupils who are much advanced; and, indeed, the most expert players do and must constantly have recourse to and practise them. Permit me to demonstrate this to you, as I know that you have a good understanding, and are fond of reflecting.

You know already that the passing of the thumb *under* the other fingers, and of the three middle fingers *over* the thumb, is absolutely necessary, and that it is the only means by which we are enabled to strike a long series of keys quickly one after the other.

But this passing of the thumb and fingers, even in the most rapid passages, must be effected in a manner so natural, equal, and unlabored, that the hearer shall not be able to distinguish the smallest interruption or inequality. This, however, is almost the greatest difficulty in pianoforte playing; and it is possible only when neither the arm nor the hand makes the smallest movement upwards or sideways, and when the joints of all the fingers attain gradually and by long practice so great a degree of flexibility and address, that in a rapid run over the key-board one is almost tempted to think that the player has at least fifty fingers on each hand. To attain this highly necessary property, there is no other means than the most diligent, uninterrupted daily practice of the scales in all the keys.

But these scales have many other various uses. There are few musical compositions in which they are not introduced by the author in some shape or other. In every piece, whether written to-day or one hundred years ago, they are the principal means by which every passage and every melody is formed. The diatonic scales or the chords broken into arpeggios, you will every where find employed innumerable times.

You will now easily imagine what an advantage it gives a player when he is perfectly acquainted, in all the keys, with these FUNDAMENTAL PASSAGES, from which so many others are derived, and what a command over the entire key-board, and what an easy insight into any musical piece, he gains thereby.

Farther, no property is more necessary and important to the player than a well-developed *flexibility, lightness, and volubility* of the fingers., This cannot be acquired in any way so quickly as by the practice of the scales. For, if we were to try to attain those qualities by the merely studying of different musical compositions, we should spend whole years to accomplish our purpose. Many beautiful pieces require to be executed in a very quick degree of movement, and with great volubility of finger. But how tiresome and detestable would not these same pieces sound, if played slow, stiff, and unequal! And even those compositions which are slow on the whole, still contain many occasional runs and embellishments which require great rapidity of finger. All these *he* has *already* conquered who is able to play the scales well and with sufficient quickness.

At present you cannot form an idea of the beauty and effect which is produced by a pure, clear, rapid, and *strictly equal* execution of such runs; they are musical rows of pearls; and many great artists are more particularly distinguished on account of their peculiar excellence in the performance of them. You will no doubt have already remarked, that correct *fingerings* is a very important part of pianoforte playing, and one which costs every pupil a good deal of labor. Now, the scales contain all the principal rules of fingering, and they are in themselves sufficient, in almost all cases, to show the pupil the right path. What do you say to all these advantages? Is it not well worth the while to occupy yourself seriously with these same tiresome scales?

I must now tell you in *what way* you ought to proceed to do this. For, if *studied in a wrong manner*, the scales may prove as injurious as they are capable of being serviceable when properly practised. You know that the five fingers are by no means equal to each other in natural strength. Thus, for example, the thumb is much stronger than any of the other fingers; the first finger is much stronger than the little finger; and the third finger, on the contrary, is, with almost every person, the weakest of all. The *pianist*, however, must know now to employ these various degrees of power, so that in playing the scales all the fingers may strike their appropriate keys *with perfect equality of strength*; for the scales sound well only when they are played in every respect *with the most exact equality*.

This equality is *threefold*; namely, - First. *Equality of strength*. No one note ought to sound in the smallest degree louder than another, whether it be struck with the thumb, or the first, second, third, or little finger.

Secondly. *Equality in point of quickness*.

Each note must follow the preceding one strictly in the same degree of movement, whether we play the scales slow or quick.

Thirdly and lastly. *Equality in holding the notes down.*

No key must be held down for a longer or shorter time than the rest; that is, each finger must only keep its key pressed down till the following one is struck, and it must then be taken up exactly at the very moment that the next finger comes in contact with its key. This must, of course, also be observed in *passing the thumb under* the middle fingers, or in passing the latter *over* the thumb.

If we offend even against only *one* of these three principal rules, the quality and beauty of the run is destroyed, and the utility of the practice lost. Each scale, therefore, must be practised, first with the right hand only, and then with both hands, and *at first, extremely slow*, always consulting the judgment of your teacher, or taking the counsel of your own good ear, as to whether the fingers sufficiently observe all the rules.

From week to week you must increase the degree of rapidity, till at last all the fingers are in a condition to fly over the keys with lightness, firmness, and distinct and beautiful execution. Every day when you seat yourself at the pianoforte, let the *scales* be, for one half hour, the first thing which you attack; as by this means the fingers will be got in readiness for everything else.

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Two Months Later

*On Time, Subdivision of the Notes, and Fingering.*

The intelligence of your further progress rejoiced me very much.

Your fingers already begin to develop a well-regulated flexibility; your touch and execution are no longer heavy and sluggish; the finger exercises, the runs, and scale passages go off tolerably quick, light, and equal; and lastly, you already play several dozen little pieces without faults, and generally without stumbling. You see that a reasonable degree of diligence and obedience to the precepts of your teacher will soon be rewarded by the most pleasing results.

The difficulty which the observance of the sharp, natural, flat, double sharp, and double flat still causes you, will soon disappear, if you firmly apply your memory to this point, and if you constantly take good notice of, and learn to quickly retain, the marks of transposition which are indicated at the beginning of each piece, as well as those which occur accidentally in the bar.

But the time and the *subdivision of the notes* cause you, as you write to me, still much trouble; and we will therefore treat a little on this subject to-day.

The *subdivision of the notes* in music is a thing so certain and so positively determined, that we cannot well commit a fault against it, *if we give to each note and rest its exact value, and if, in so doing, we consult the eye rather than the ear.* For the eye always sees aright when it is supported by the memory; but the ear by itself may very often be deceived, particularly in beginners.

The duration of the notes is, as you know, expressed by the fingers being *held down* on the keys; that of the rests, on the contrary, by the fingers *being kept off the keys, and free*; and we must take care not to confound these two things; for each note must be held exactly as long as its prescribed value requires, and the key must not be quitted either sooner or later. Simple and easy as this rule appears, it is often sinned against by much better players than yourself. This arises from the circumstance that most persons are neglectful on this head when they are first taught; partly out of carelessness, and partly also because the holding down of the keys appears tiresome and inconvenient; or, on the contrary, sometimes because the fingers are too unapt and sluggish to quit the key at the right moment.

Those who hold down the keys *too long* accustom themselves to a lingering, adhesive, indistinct, and often discordant manner of playing. Those who quit the keys *too soon*, fall into an unconnected, broken style of playing, which is without melody, and which at last degenerates into mere hooking and thumping the keys. That both modes will conduct us into the wrong path I need not further explain to you.

The art of subdividing the notes consists in introducing the quicker notes, exactly at the right moment, among the longer ones.

But, as groups of notes occasionally occur which must be played *very quick*; if we are to observe the exact movement and the length of the bar, you will see how necessary it is that the fingers should early be accustomed to play with readiness and rapidity. For without this, even with the best knowledge of the subdivision of notes, we are at every moment in danger either of lagging behind in the time, or of scrambling over these quicker notes in any way we best can.

You perceive here, again, that the diligent practice of finger exercises and scales is of the highest importance; for the quick *perception* of the different values of the notes requires only a *practised eye*; while for the rapid and correct *execution of them* we also require a well practised finger.

It is of great advantage to you that, in every piece, your teacher either counts aloud each separate bar, or beats the time with a pencil or bit of stick, by which you are compelled to continue always in the right time.

Equally useful is it, that you have already studied several easy pieces as duets for four hands, occasionally playing the lower or bass part.

The two following capital points are most essential, and must not be overlooked.

First. *Strictness in taking the right keys.*

For false letters produce intervals which generally sound very disagreeably, and strike as unpleasantly on the ear as a spot of ink on a white frock does on the eye.

Secondly. *Correctness in keeping time.*

For, without time, music is unintelligible, and lost on the hearer.

To *keeping time* belong also the following points: -

At the first deciphering of a new musical piece, the beginner cannot of course easily play in time; since he must bestow great attention on *taking the notes correctly*, and on the fingering, and must stop at each wrong-taken key to set himself right. As soon, however, as this is amended, he must endeavor to play through the piece; at first slowly indeed, and then continue to practise it, till he can go through it as quickly as the composer has indicated.

If you can accustom yourself, while playing, to count *aloud* it will be exceedingly advantageous to you. Beating the time with the foot cannot well be recommended, because it often settles into a bad habit.

When long rests occur in both hands, counting mentally or aloud is exceedingly necessary; for you know that, in every musical composition, each bar must occupy exactly the same section of time as the rest, whether it consists of notes or rests.

Hitherto I have only spoken of that sort of keeping time in which we neither come to a stand still, nor omit, nor pass over anything. But there is another sort of keeping time, in which we may observe all this very correctly, and you commit errors against time.

These faults consist in this - that, in the course of the piece, we either continually play *quicker and quicker*, or *slower and slower*; or else, that we sometimes play too quick, and then again too slow.

Into the error of *accelerating* the time, just such young and lively persons as yourself are most apt to fall; and who knows whether I have not guessed right when I imagine that you sometimes begin a piece which goes off pretty fluently, at first very quietly and sagely; but then, becoming excited as you go on, you play quicker and quicker, and at last, finish with such rapidity as if your fingers were holding a runaway pony? Have I not guessed right?

To avoid this, you must practise even those pieces which you *already play well*, as composedly and as attentively as when you first began to study them; and in so doing, you must not allow the fingers to indulge their own fancies, or to be in the least degree inattentive.

The opposite fault of *hanging back*, or dragging in the time, generally proceeds from our having begun too fast; and by that means stumbling against difficulties which we cannot overcome in that quick degree of movement.

Hence this capital rule: *never begin a piece quicker than you can with certainty go on with it to the very end.*

There are exceptions to this rule, which you will be taught by and by, when you learn the higher branches of expression and execution.

You will already have remarked how necessary correct fingering is in playing. A single ill-chosen finger may often cause the complete failure of a whole passage, or at least make it sound coarse, unequal, and disagreeable. As doubtless you have studied all the elementary pieces exactly with the fingering indicated, your fingers are, to a certain degree, already accustomed to a regular system of fingering. But as, in other compositions, you may, by and by, be often in doubt on this head, I will impart a few rules on this subject, as to what must be *observed or avoided* in every regular system of fingering.

First. When several keys are to be played one after another, either in ascending or in descending, and five fingers are not sufficient for this purpose, the four longer fingers must never be turned over one another; but we must either pass the thumb *under*, or pass the three middle fingers *over* the thumb.

Secondly. The thumb must never be placed on the black keys.

Thirdly. We must not strike two or more keys one after another with the selfsame finger; for each key must always retain its own finger.

Fourthly. In runs, the little finger should never be placed on the black keys.

Fifthly. In chords and wide extensions, however, the thumb, as well as the little finger, may occasionally fall upon the black keys.

Sixthly. The fingering given for the *scales* must be resorted to every where, and as much as possible.

Seventhly. At each note that we strike, we must consider whether, for the following notes, the appropriate fingers stand in readiness.

In general, that mode of fingering must be chosen by which we may most easily and naturally be able to maintain a tranquil and fine position of the hands, a firm and perpendicular percussion, as well as a correct holding down of the keys, and a beautiful and connected performance of the melody and of the scales and runs.

I am so convinced that an exact observance of what I have hitherto laid down will, in a short time, enable you to conquer all elementary difficulties, that I trust, in my next intelligence from you, to receive the assurance of this being the case.

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Three Months Later

*On Expression, and Graces or Embellishments.*

Have I not already told you that the zealous practise of all the finger exercises, and the quickly studying of a good many musical pieces, would soon bring you very forward? You write to me that your fingers have already acquired very considerable facility and certainty; that you now begin to study pieces of more importance, development, and difficulty; that you are already able to play, at sight, many short, easy movements, intelligibly and without stopping; and that even keys with a good many sharps or flats do not easily confuse you.

You are now arrived at the epoch where the art begins to proffer you true, noble, and intellectual pleasures, and in which the new and continually more and more beautiful compositions with which you will now become acquainted, will give you an idea of the inexhaustible riches and variety in music.

But do not neglect to still continue practising, with equal or even greater zeal, the finger exercises, and especially the scales in all the keys.

The utility of this accessory practise is infinite; and, in particular, the diatonic and chromatic scales possess peculiar properties, which even the most skillful players have yet to fathom.

I also request you most earnestly, while you are studying new pieces, not by any means to forget those already learned, not even the earlier ones.

*New pieces serve but little if, on their account, the preceding ones are forgotten.*

For the adroitness and expertness of the fingers, the eyes and the ears must of necessity repose firmly and fundamentally on the experience which we have already gained; while these qualities are to be enlarged and refined by new acquisitions. If, for example, you forget a piece which it took you three weeks to learn, these three weeks are as good as lost. You should therefore retain, as a sort of absolute property, all the pieces you have ever learned; keep them safely, and never lend or give them away.

"Yes," say you, "if it did not take up so much time to continue practising what I have already learned, and also to study new pieces."

My dear Miss, you cannot imagine what may be effected in one single day, if we *properly avail ourselves of the time.*

If, with a fixed determination to excel on the pianoforte, you dedicate to it, *daily, only three hours*, of which about half an hour shall be appropriated to the exercises, as much more to playing over the old pieces, and the remaining time to the study of new compositions - this will assuredly enable you, by degrees, to attain a very commanding degree of excellence, without necessarily obliging you to neglect your other pursuits.

Your instructor has already accustomed you to observe, in general, the marks of expression; as *forte, piano legato, staccato*, &c. The more you begin to overcome all the mechanical difficulties of pianoforte playing, the greater attention you must give to this important subject - *expression*.

Expression, feeling, and sensibility are the soul of music, as of every other art. If we were to play a piece of music with exactly the same degree of forte or piano throughout, it would sound as ridiculous as if we were to recite a beautiful poem in the same monotonous tone in which we are used to repeat the multiplication table.

In every composition, the marks of expression, *f.*, *p.*, *cres.*, *dim.*, *legato*, *staccato*, *acceler.*, *ritard.*, &c., are so exactly indicated by the composer, that the performer can never be in doubt where he is to play loud or soft, increasing or decreasing as to tone, connected or detached, hurrying onwards in the time, or holding it back.

The same exactitude with which you are obliged to observe the notes, the marks of transposition, the fingering, and the time, you must likewise employ with regard to the marks of expression.

But the most difficult part of the business is *always to observe the proper medium* at each mark of expression; for you already know that there is great diversity in the shades and degrees of forte, piano, legato, staccato, accelerando, and ritardando.

The utmost fortissimo should never degenerate into mere hammering and thumping, or into maltreating the instrument.

Similarly, the most gently pianissimo ought never to become indistinct and unintelligible.

You possess an excellent pianoforte by one of our best makers; and you will already have remarked, that the most gentle pressure of the finger on a key produces a perceptible alteration and modification in the tone; and that we may play with great power, without any excessive exertion, and without using any unnecessary and ridiculous movements of the hands, arms, shoulders, or head. For, unhappily, many, even very good pianists, are guilty of these and similar contortions and grimaces, against which I must warn you.

Many, too, have the detestable habit, when they wish to strike a note with peculiar emphasis, of elevating their knuckles so much that the hand seems to form waves, like troubled waters.

Others endeavor to manifest their feelings by widely jerking out their elbows; or they mark the commencement of every bar by making a low bow with their head and chest, as if they were desirous of showing reverence to their own playing. Others, after every short note, suddenly take up their hands as far from the keys as if they had touched a red-hot iron. Many, while playing, put on a fierce and crabbed countenance; others, again, assume a perpetual simper, &c. One of the worst faults is carrying to excess the ritardando and accelerando, so that we are often several minutes without knowing whether the piece is written in triple or in common time. This produces nearly the same effect as it some one were addressing us in a strange, unintelligible language.

To all these faults we may accustom ourselves, in the zeal of practice, *without knowing it*; and when, to our mortification, we are made to observe them, it is often too late wholly to leave them off.

Do not suppose, however, that you are to sit at the piano as stiff and cold as a wooden doll. Some graceful movements are *necessary* while playing; it is only the *excess* that must be avoided.

When we have to play in the highest or lowest octave, a gentle inclination of the body is at once necessary and appropriate. When we have to play difficult passages, chords struck loud and short, or skips, the hands are and must be allowed a moderate degree of movement. As we must sometimes look at the notes, and sometimes at the hands, a slight movement of the head is, if not necessary, at least very excusable. Still, however, you should accustom yourself to look rather at the notes than at the fingers.

But the elegant deportment of polished life must always be transferred to the art; and the rule applies generally, "that every movement which conduces really and essentially to our better playing is allowed;" here, however, we must avoid all that is unnecessary and superfluous.

At present it would be too early to direct your attention to certain more refined rules of expression. In the mean time, I beg of you to observe, in the strictest manner, all that each composer, has indicated on this head in his works; and to try to execute each piece in a pure and flowing manner, and in the time indicated by the author. Towards effecting this last object, Maelzel's metronome will afford you very great assistance in most modern compositions.

The *graces* - namely, the trill, the turn, the appoggiatura, &c. - are the flowers of music; and the clear, correct, and delicate execution of them, embellishes and exalts every melody and every passage. But when they are played stiff, hard, or unintelligibly, they may rather be compared to blots of ink or spots of dirt.

The trill is peculiarly important; and to a pianist, the elegant, equal, and rapid execution of it is as much an ornament and a duty as the equal and pearly execution of the scales. In the right hand, at least, it ought to be played alike well *with all the fingers*. The equality of the trill can only be attained by lifting up both fingers to an *equal height*. and striking the keys with equal force. You ought to devote a few minutes daily to this particular practice.

## Czerny's Letters on the Art of Playing the Piano

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Two Months Later

*On the Keys, on Studying a Piece, and on Playing in the Presence of Others.*

You are now will acquainted with all the twenty-four keys, and with the scales and chords belonging to them, and it is with pleasure I learn that you even now daily play through all the scales and passages in them as diligently as you formerly did those in the twelve major keys; and that you acknowledge the many advantages of these exercises, by which also you save yourself the labor of wading through so many tedious *études*, or professional studies.

One of the most necessary acquirements for a pianist is to be *equally practised and ready in all the keys*. There are many who are as much startled at a piece having for or five sharps or flats for its signature as though they saw a spectre. And, nevertheless, to the *fingers* all keys are in reality of equal difficulty; for there are as difficult compositions in C major as in C sharp major. Only that the *eye* and the *memory* must be early accustomed to this great number of marks of transposition.

As, in such unusual keys, the black keys must be principally employed, and as they are narrower than the white ones, and therefore less certain as to the striking of them; it is absolutely requisite, on the part of the player, that he should keep his hand particularly firm, and somewhat higher than usual over the keys, and employ a very decided touch in order to acquire the same degree of certainty as on the white keys.

You complain that the studying of difficult pieces still costs you much time and labor. There is a certain remedy against this, which I may call the *art of studying*, and which I impart to you, as far as it can be done in writing.

There are pupils who study such compositions attentively enough, it is true, but so slowly, and with such frequent interruptions, that these pieces become tedious and disagreeable to them before they have half learned them. Such pupils often take half a year to learn a few pieces tolerably; and by this wasteful expenditure of time, always remain in the background.

Others, on the contrary, try to conquer every thing by force; and imagine that they shall succeed in this by practising for hours, laboriously indeed, but in an inattentive and thoughtless manner, and by hastily playing over all kinds of difficulties innumerable times. These persons play till their fingers are lamed; but how? confusedly, over-hastily, and without expression; or, what is still worse, *with a false expression*.

We may escape all this by keeping the right medium between these two ways. When, therefore, you begin to learn a new and somewhat difficult piece, you must devote the first hours to deciphering the notes strictly and correctly in a slow time. You must also fix upon the fingering to be employed, and gain a general insight over the whole. This, in a single piece, can at most require but a few days. Then the whole piece must be played over quietly and composedly, but at the same time attentively, and without any distraction of ideas, till we are enabled to execute it without trouble, and in the exact time indicated by the author.

Single passages of great difficulty may be practised apart. Still, however, they ought to be often repeated in connection with the rest of the piece.

All this too may be completed in a few days. But now begins the time when we must also learn to *play with beauty and elegance*

Now all the marks of expression must be observed with redoubled attention; and we must endeavor to seize correctly on the character of the composition, and to enforce it in our performance according to its total effect.

To this belongs the very important quality, *that the player should know how to listen properly to himself, and to judge of his own performance with accuracy.* He who does not possess this gift, is apt, in practising alone, to spoil all that he has acquired correctly in the presence of his teacher.

But I must one more remind you that we can only study new pieces quickly and well, when we have not forgotten those already learned. There are, alas! many pupils who play only that piece well which they have just been taught. All those acquired before are neglected and thrown aside. Such pupils will never make any great progress. For you must own, that those persons who play fifty pieces well, are much more clever, than those who, like a bird organ, can only play two or three pieces in a tolerable manner: and that the first, by a proper employment of our time, is very possible, I believe I have already said to you.

Your teacher has acted very properly in early accustoming you to play occasionally before others. At first this, as you write to me, was very disagreeable to you, and you felt much frightened in so doing. " But now," say you, " I think nothing of it; nay, it generally gives me great pleasure, particularly when all goes off well." And there you are quite right. To what purpose do we learn, but to give pleasure, not only to ourselves, but also to our parents and friends? And assuredly there is no higher satisfaction than in being able to distinguish one's self before a large company, and in receiving an honorable acknowledgment of one's diligence and talent.

But, to bring matters to this point, we must be thoroughly sure of our business; for want of success is, on the contrary, as vexatious as tormenting and disgraceful. Above all, you must select, for this purpose, such compositions as are fully within your powers, and respecting the good effect of which you can entertain no doubt. Every difficult piece becomes double difficult when we play it before others, because the natural diffidence of the performer impedes the free development of his abilities.

Many half-formed players imagine that every thing will be right, if they do but step forward at once with a difficult piece by some celebrated composer. But by this means they neither do honor to the composition nor to themselves; but merely expose themselves to the danger of exciting ennui, and, at best, of being applauded from politeness and compassion.

Many, otherwise very good players, have in this manner, by an unsuitable choice of pieces, lost both their musical reputation and all future confidence in themselves.

When playing before others, you should particularly endeavor to execute your *well-studied* piece with tranquility and self-possession, without hurrying, without allowing your ideas to wander, and *more especially without coming to a stand-still*; for this last is the most unpleasant fault which we can commit before an audience.

Before you commence, the fingers must be kept quite warm; you must avoid any inconvenient mode of dress; and you should, if possible, always play on a pianoforte with which you are well acquainted; for an instrument, of which the touch is much lighter or much heavier than that which one is accustomed to, may very much confuse a player.

But it may often happen that you are suddenly required, in the company of intimate acquaintance, to play over some trifle to them.

It is very necessary, therefore, that you should study and commit to memory a number of easy, but tasteful pieces, so that, on such occasions, you may be able to play them *by heart*; for it appears rather childish to be obliged, for every trifle, to turn over one's collection of music; or, when in a strange place, to be always obliged to draw back, with an excuse "that you cannot play any thing by heart."

For this purpose, short rondos, pretty airs with variations, melodies from operas, nay, even dance tunes, waltzes, quadrilles, marches, &c., are perfectly suitable; for *every thing does credit to the player which is well played.*

The playing before others has also the great advantage that it compels one to study with unusual zeal. For the idea that we must play before an audience, spurs us on to a much greater measure of diligence than if we play only to ourselves.

## Czerny's Letters on the Art of Playing the Piano

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*On the Selection of Compositions most suitable for each Pianist.*

In the choice of musical pieces, we should always bear in mind the following points: -

First. That we ought always to proceed from the more easy to the more difficult as to execution.

Secondly. That, as far as possible, we should make ourselves acquainted with the works of *all* the great composers, and not by any means tie ourselves down to any favorite author.

Thirdly. That, by degrees, we should also thoroughly learn the classical and truly valuable works of the earlier composers.

Every distinguished composer requires to be played in a style peculiar to himself. With many, there predominates a brilliant, showy, and strongly marked manner; with others, an expressive, quiet, connected, and gently style of playing is most generally called for; others, again, require a characteristic, impassioned, or even fantastic or humorous expression; and, in many compositions, a tender, warm, playful, and pleasing mode of execution is most suitable. Lastly, there are pieces which include all these different styles, and which therefore compel the player to adopt corresponding alterations of manner in his performance. Thus, for example, *Hummel's* compositions require an extraordinary and pearl-like mode of execution, which is produced by a lightly *dropping* of the keys. In *Beethoven's* works this style will seldom be suitable, as in them great characteristic energy, deep feeling, often capricious humor, and a sometimes very *legato* and at others a very marked and emphatic style of playing are requisite.

A piece which is played too fast or too slow loses all its effect and becomes quite disfigured. Where the time is not marked according to Maelzel's metronome, the player must look to the Italian words which indicate the degree of movement, as *allegro*, *moderato*, *presto*, &c. and likewise to the character of the composition, and gradually learn by experience to know their real significations.

No less important is the proper mode of treating the *pedals*.

By a proper employment of the forte or damper pedal, the player is enabled to produce effects which would seem to require that he should have two pairs of hands at his command. But, used at an improper time, this pedal causes an unpleasant and unintelligible noise, which falls on the ear as disagreeably as writing on wet paper falls on the eye.

I have already explained how important to the pupil is a gradual and easy progression, as to difficulty, in the selection of pieces intended for him: and I shall now add a few words more on this head. Every composer, as well as every player, founds his art and his science on what his *predecessors* have already done; adding to that the inventions of his own talent. By these natural steps in advance, it is evident that the compositions of the present distinguished pianists are in many respects much more difficult than those of times gone by; and that whoever desires to study them must already possess great knowledge of music, and a very considerable degree of execution.

Many pupils, however, as soon as their fingers have acquired some little facility, are led astray by the charms of novelty, and run into the error of attacking the most difficult compositions. Not a few who can hardly play the scales in a decent manner, and who ought to practise for years *studies* and easy and appropriate pieces, have the presumption to attempt *Hummel's concertos* or *Thalberg's fantasias*.

The natural result of this over-haste is, that such players, by omitting the requisite preparatory studies, always continue imperfect, lose much time, and are at last unable to execute either difficult or easy pieces in a creditable manner.

This is the true cause why, although so many talented young persons devote themselves to the pianoforte, we are still not so over and above rich in good players, as, beyond all doubt, was the case formerly; and why

so many, with the best dispositions, and often with enormous industry, still remain but mediocre and indifferent performers.

Many other pupils run into the error of attempting to decide on the merits of a composition before they are able to play it properly. From this it happens that many excellent pieces appear contemptible to them, while the fault lies in their playing them in a stumbling, incorrect, and unconnected manner, often coming to a stand-still on false and discordant harmonies, missing the time, &c.

You have no doubt frequently been placed in this situation, and, perhaps, you have sometimes impatiently thrown aside a piece which did not much promise to please you. In this manner you must, in the sequel, have often lost that exquisite enjoyment which the ingenious and elaborate works of the great masters offer to you, if you have the patience to overcome the difficulties generally inseparable from them.

Here more particularly belong compositions in what is called the *strict style*; as, for example, the works of *Handel, Bach*, and other masters of this stamp. For the execution of such pieces, generally written in several parts, and in the *fugue* style, and of such single passages in the same style as we often meet with in the most modern compositions, there are required a strict *legato*, and a very firm and equal touch; and also a clear enunciation of each single part; and for the attainment of all this, the employment of a peculiar mode of fingering, which, in general, deviates very much from the usual one, and which chiefly consists in quickly and adroitly substituting one finger for another on the same key, while it is held down, and without sounding it anew.

By this substitution, the five fingers are in a manner multiplied *ad infinitum*, and we are enabled to play each of the four parts, of which such passages in general consist, as smoothly, connectedly, and in as singing a manner as though we had so many hands.