

Important Role of Basic Finger Training in Piano Learning

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Abstract

Piano beginners mostly suffer the similar basic finger problems due to their own and external reasons. Basic finger training can improve the problems during playing and finger capacity is also required as the basis for the playing skills needed in piano works. This paper analyzes the current situation of beginners' finger basis and combines the significance of basic finger training in piano learning to make the beginners emphasize basic training and develop good piano practicing habits.

Key words: Piano learning; Hand pattern; Finger support

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INTRODUCTION

Marguerite Long, a famous pianist once said: "A pianist needs talking fingers if he hopes to clearly and expressively say something with music." Namely, having vigorous fingers is the key to play piano with excellent timbre and emotion. However, everyone has different finger conditions such as long, short, big and small fingers, all such different factors may result in the favorable condition or poor condition for some people. In spite of this, such differences will be shortened through basic finger training and finger capacity will be greatly improved and intensified accordingly. Therefore, it is said

that the basic finger training plays a vital role in piano learning.

1. CURRENT SITUATION OF PIANO BEGINNERS' FINGER BASIS

There are a widespread age range of piano beginners including children, young teenagers and even retired old people. The young beginners have the biggest disadvantage of excessively soft fingers, but they have the strong learning and absorbing ability. The children beginners, who look like a piece of white paper, are the group who are most suitable for accepting piano enlightenment and also most needy parents or teachers' supervision for their basic finger training. The young piano learners' finger capability may be much stronger than that of teenagers or adult beginners after basic finger training for a long time. However, teenagers have stronger understanding ability and limb coordination ability, so their finger capability can be largely improved if they insist on correct basic finger training. As for adult beginners, it is not easy to correct their finger pattern because one's skeletal structure is almost finalized after growing up; besides, some adults get engaged in work which may damage their fingers, this also affects their finger flexibility.

Generally speaking, beginners usually involve in the following problems: Incorrect hand pattern; the palm and phalangeal joints fail to support themselves; subsidence of the whole hand pattern; rickety fingers on keys; all such problems need to be avoided.

2. ANALYSIS ON THE CAUSES FOR CURRENT SITUATION OF PIANO BEGINNERS' FINGER BASIS

Students' incorrect hand patterns during playing have the following causes:

2.1 Self-Causes

2.1.1 Students' Poor Consciousness

Perhaps, the teacher repeatedly emphasizes the importance of hand pattern in class, but they don't pay attention to it during after-class practices; they usually only pay attention to the sound but completely ignore their hand-pattern problem.

2.1.2 Students' Weak Understanding Ability

Some students are muzzy in class perhaps because they are nervous or something else. Therefore, even though the teacher teaches them how to correctly do finger practices by demonstrations, they will immediately forget it after the teacher finish it. Thus, they don't know how to practice after class.

2.1.3 Students' Poor Finger Conditions

It is true that a student with big hands is more advantageous than a student with small fingers. For instance, when playing the interval above octave, they fingers "stand" but students with small hands cannot even reach the octave; if they try hard to stretch their palm, they may reach the octave with an effort but their fingertips can only lie on the keys.

2.1.4 Students' Lack of Patience

The basic finger training includes many items such as scale, arpeggio, etude, lazy arm and finger lifting. Such practices are very boring and each practice must last for no less than 30 minutes. Although students make practices, they do them at a rather fast speed and with an attitude of finishing a task, so they don't pay attention to their hand pattern and don't lift their fingers high. Such practices are purely wastes of time.

2.2 External Causes

2.2.1 Teachers' Varying Professional Qualities

Some teachers with low professional qualities fail to correctly guide students to conduct correct basic finger training and they even fail to point out and correct students' hand pattern problems in class, this misleads the beginners, who cannot make practices consciously and correct their errors when they have no idea of what is right. Generally speaking, it is normal that students are stiff during piano playing because they feel nervous in the first several courses. Then, a piano teacher needs to guide the students to relax themselves, move their bodies and then do some lazy-arm practices. However, some teachers fail to correctly guide their students during lazy-arm practices, so students don't feel their arms relaxed. Perhaps, students don't do lazy-arm practices when they practice the piano in private, because they don't think it is important. For this reason, they always play piano in a stiff way and will suffer aching pain of arms no matter how slowly they play piano. If they practice the piano in such a wrong finger status, their muscle memory of this

will finally result in the difficulty in solving this finger problem.

2.2.2 Some Training Institutions' Seeking Quick Success and Instant Benefits

At present, piano is the most popular musical instrument in China, so many parents hope to cultivate their children to learn piano as a strong point. Such a tendency supports the survival of many music training institutions. In order to attract more students, some training institutions use passing exams quickly as their enrollment advertisement. Originally, the piano grade examination is an exam to test a student's level of piano ability, which can only be achieved through a long-term painstaking down-to earth practices. However, when parents bring their children to apply for piano courses, a training institution will tell them that they can help their children to pass higher grade examinations, so parents also let their children to learn piano at such irresponsible piano training institutions, in the hope of quick success. The training institution teachers' so-called method to help students to rapidly pass higher grade examinations is to directly teach them works for grade examinations, so that students almost have no basic finger training. Such a teaching mode by destroying the very conditions upon which students' piano ability progress depends misled numerous young students. The wrong teaching is very influential for children and also wastes their precious time.

2.2.3 Parents' Insufficient After-Class Supervision

Parents need to supervise the young students' practices due to their poor understanding ability and self-consciousness. Some parents do well in this aspect and they almost accompany their children in almost every piano class, make records of what the teacher says, write down both the questions and requirements raised by the teacher, urge their children to practice as required by their teacher after class, allow no chance for their children for petty trick or cheating on practices, can timely correct their hand pattern and fingering problems caught and help them to develop good after-class practice habits. However, only a few parents can insist on supervising and urging their children. Most parents play their mobile phones or something else in class so they don't know the teaching content, the requirements on their children and the problems needing to be corrected after class. Because of this, they don't know which points need to be corrected during their children's practices. Besides, children also easily form a psychological resistance in such a condition and they won't correct the problems pointed by their parents because they don't think their parents understand piano playing. As a result, children will continue the problems in the last class and some problems even have become their habits, which are very difficult to be corrected.

3. IMPORTANCE OF BASIC FINGER TRAINING

3.1 Importance of Finger Supporting Training

Practicing the finger supporting is similar to practicing how to stand. Only when one learns how to stand, can he learn how to walk. Only when one learns how to walk slowly and steadily, can one learn how to run. Running is the most fundamental technique during basic piano playing. If one's fingers cannot run flexibly, his road to learn piano will thus stagnate. We can say that finger supporting is the priority among priorities, because staccato, legato and non-legato cannot be divorced from finger supporting. Its importance is more significant in interval

chord. Chord stresses the "orderliness". Regardless of triad or seventh chord, each sound must be generated simultaneously with the same volume. One needs to continuously play piano in spite of the intensity requirement of *f* or *p*. This needs the player's finger supporting force; namely, one's fingertips need to "hold" the keys.

For instance, the first three bars in the first movement in Beethoven's sonata of "Pathetique" include a series of chords (see Score 1). As for the first beat of chords, the chords need to come straight to the point and to be orderly. Even though the intensity of the remaining three beats is *p*, the sounds must fall down; if the player's fingers have no supporting force, the sounds generated during his piano playing must be gossamer or heavy and inflexible.

Example 1



It shows an emotional climax from 8th to 23rd bars (see Score 2). Fingers need to rapidly play a series of continuous intervals and chords in a rapid and nimble way; besides, during the ascending process, the intensity of fingers increases gradually and decreases during descending process. It requires the control of fingertips. If one's fingers have no supporting force, the sounds generated during one's playing will have no penetrating power and one cannot play fast.

This piece of works, which is full of continuous intense chords, tests the player's finger supporting force. If the player has a weak finger supporting ability, he can play the whole works relying on his wrists, arms and shoulders. Not only the timbres generated by playing the piano in this way are cumbersome, but also the player may feel aching pain in the arms. Originally, playing chords need a small movement of fingertips moving forward, but the sounds generated will show a feeling of obvious "smashing" if the player exerts his strength with arms instead of fingers.

3.2 Importance of Independent Finger Practice

Each sound in a piece of piano works is important, so the player's each finger needs to be independent. Only in this way, the sound can be granular. Of course, the granularity of sound is not required in all piano works, but it is the most basic requirement to play each sound clearly.

Retention sounds usually appear in polyphony works, but students with weak finger independence opportunistically omit many retention sounds because they

feel it is difficult to achieve them; this largely reduced the completion quality of works. For instance, among the retention sounds (see Score 3) in No.17 fugue of Bach's *Equal Temperaments*, the F sound in the third beat in the treble staff needs to be retained for two beats and meanwhile the middle part also needs to be played; the G sound in the second bar and the F sound in the third beat are ditto. The students with weak finger independence will feel their fingers inflexible while playing polyphony. Especially, there are many retention sounds in polyphony and their fingers usually become stiff when playing retention sounds.

As a key part of independent finger training, finger lifting training is an absolutely necessary training, because it helps the practicer to figure out how to exert the strength and how to gather all the strengths to the fingertips; this helps one to make good timbres. Generally speaking, most people have relatively weak independence in their 4th and 5th fingers, which is determined by the finger structure. However, they can improve this condition through the finger lifting training.

For instance, there are notes testing the strengths and independence of one's 4th and 5th fingers in the third movement of Mozart's *Sonatine* K330 (see Score 4). The first beat in the treble staff of the 316th bar is a structure of a double dotted quaver plus two demisemi-quavers. The latter two demisemi-quavers are respectively played with the 4th and 5th fingers. If the player's 4th and 5th fingers have insufficient independence, the 4th and 5th fingers will easily get "sticky" with each other to cause vague sounds during playing.

Example 2

8 $\text{♩} = 149$
Allegro di molto e con brio

15

22 *mp* *mf*
p *sf* *sf* *sf*

Detailed description: This musical score for Example 2 consists of three systems of piano music. The first system (measures 8-14) is marked 'Allegro di molto e con brio' with a tempo of quarter note = 149. The second system (measures 15-21) continues the piece. The third system (measures 22-28) includes dynamic markings: *mp* (mezzo-piano), *mf* (mezzo-forte), *p* (piano), and *sf* (sforzando).

Example 3

dimin.

Detailed description: This musical score for Example 3 shows a piano piece with intricate fingerings and dynamics. The score includes fingerings such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. A 'dimin.' (diminuendo) marking is present. At the bottom of the score, there are two sets of fingering sequences: $\begin{matrix} 2 & 5 & 3 & 1 \\ 4 & & & \end{matrix}$ and $\begin{matrix} 4 & 5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 8 & 4 & 4 & 5 & 8 \end{matrix}$.

Example 4

316 3 4 5 3 4 5

319 3 5 4 3 4 5

Detailed description: This musical score for Example 4 shows piano music with triplets and slurs. The first system (measures 316-318) features triplets of eighth notes in the right hand, with slurs and accents. The second system (measures 319-321) continues with similar triplet patterns and slurs.

The independent finger practice also includes the speed training. One needs to slowly accelerate his playing speed based on independent finger practice so as to train the finger flexibility. Many students consider fast playing as good playing when learning piano, but neglect that it is required to play each sound clearly during the fast movement of fingers; it is incorrect to consider that many sounds can be neglected due to the fast speed.

Chopin's *Fantasy Impromptus* Op.66 is a piece of works needing fast playing speed (see Score 5). Except for the low speed of the middle comparison period, one

needs to make his fingers running fast for a long time and to show the strong and weak contrast during ascending and descending in fast playing. Technically, this works basically relies on fingers. Once the fingers become powerless or "cannot run", the speed, timbre and emotion of the whole tune will be affected; besides, the player will also feel the aching pain in the arms due to exert strengths. Therefore, it is required to pay attention to the fingering indicated on the music score, because it can help improve the playing fluency. Thus, this content cannot be ignored.

Example 5



3.3 Importance of Scale and Arpeggio Practices

As the scale and arpeggio are the types of phrases with a high frequency of occurrence in piano works and appear in almost all piano works, practicing scale and arpeggio well will largely help a player to learn a piece of new piano works. Besides, practicing scale and arpeggio can guide beginners to feel the ascending and descending strength changes and improve their musical sensibility. In addition, a player can train his finger flexibility when practicing scale and arpeggio, especially how to turn fingers.

The scale has two forms in piano works, which are chromatic scale and model scale. For instance, in this period of Chopin's *Fantasy Impromptus*, there one short chromatic scale respectively in the 1st and 2nd bars in the score example and one chromatic scale with a length of three octaves in 3rd to 4th bars; besides, the works requires the speed of 84 for one beat. If one practices the chromatic scale during every basic finger training, he will feel easier to play the chromatic scales in this work. If one does not have sufficient chromatic scale playing skill, the non-uniformity and non-granularity etc. may be caused by the sounds during the process of playing chromatic scales.

Example 6



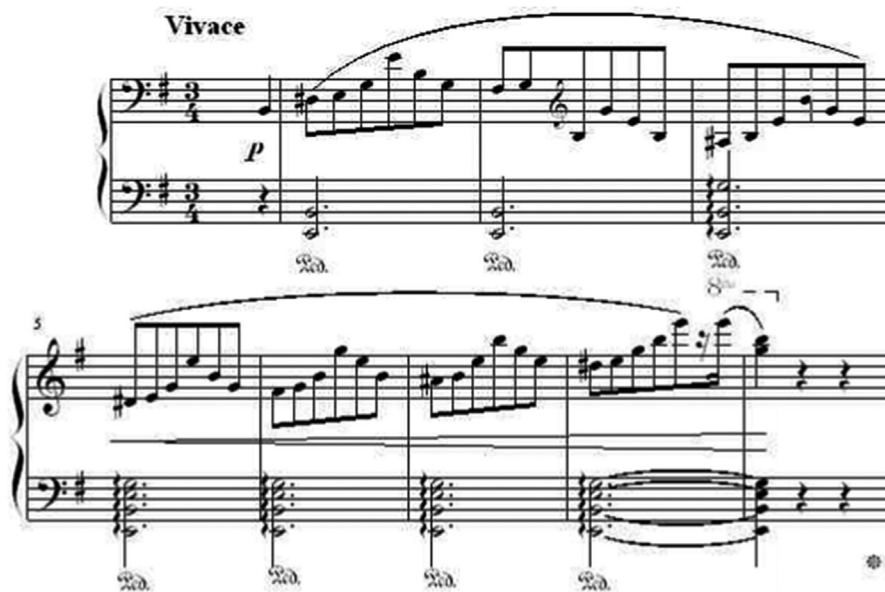
The arpeggio is also a basic technique with a high frequency of occurrence in piano works. The accompaniment of broken chord and melody etc. usually appear in the form of arpeggio. Therefore, this shows the importance of arpeggio practice. Students who practice arpeggio frequently are able to play an arpeggio without stopping, because they not get familiar with arpeggio but also strengthen their finger memory when practicing arpeggio. The students who fail to make arpeggio practices at ordinary times will often make wrong sounds when playing piano works; they may know which sound

is correct, but they usually press the wrong key.

3.4 Importance of Finger Extending Practice

Some piano works may involve some intervals, chords or mordents needing a large span of fingers. For instance, as for the mordents played with the left hand in *Waltz in E Minor*, it is ten scales between the root and high pitch. Those who can easily reach the ten scales don't need to turn fingers; on the contrary, those with small fingers have to turn fingers during playing. Besides, the group of mordents has 3 beats, so those with small fingers cannot keep all the sounds due to their small fingers.

Example 7



The finger extending practice can help practicer to maximally extend their fingers. For young practicers, their

fingers may grow longer based on the original growth basis through finger extending practices.

CONCLUSION

Piano playing involves various key contacting ways and sound control requirements, all of which cannot be separated from the basic finger training. The expression of works is extremely importing during piano playing, the player needs to have solid skills, which must be based on the solid finger basis. The students, who do not make basic finger training, will probably stagnate when playing any works, because they cannot achieve many techniques due to their weak finger capability, which is also their largest barrier. Everyone's fingers have their various advantages and disadvantages and basic finger training can provide everyone with targeted training for each of their fingers, it is vital to make scientific and correct basic finger training for piano learners.

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