

FREEING THE CAGED BIRD



Developing Well-Coordinated,
Injury-Preventive Keyboard Technique
with
BARBARA LISTER-SINK

*Script from Scenes 6-8
with Barbara Lister-Sink*

Exercises for Cultivating
Sensory Awareness & Motor Control

STAGE 1

Away from the Instrument

When we sit down at the piano, we need to recapture and maintain the freest state of mind and body possible. But in order to achieve that freedom, it is helpful to cultivate an overall awareness of the body, both at rest and in motion. So the first step in training is to become aware of the body away from the instrument and to begin observing how the body mechanism works.

IMPORTANT NOTE: All body awareness exercises should be done gently with careful attention to ease, comfort and sensation at all times. If an exercise hurts, do not do it!

A. Breathing/lying down

- Lie comfortably on your back on the floor with a medium sized throw pillow resting on the chest
- Take a moment to simply breathe and feel the pillow rising and falling on the chest
- Sense internally how you are, sense internal movement
- Think of yourself as an underground river system, invisible on the surface but always moving underneath the skin

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

B. Finding the axial support and suspension of the arms/lying down

- While on your back, slowly raise your right arm over your chest, fingers gently pointing upward
- Gently circle the arm
- Find the balance point where the arm feels suspended and weightless
- Repeat with left arm

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

C. Identifying the carpal (arm) and metacarpal (hand) arches/lying down

- While lying on your back, gently raise your lower arm from the wrist until the weight of your lower arm is balanced on the floor through your finger tips
- Slowly shift your arm weight from one finger to the other, starting with the thumb
- Repeat with left arm

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

D. Warm-ups/standing

- Stand comfortably with knees “soft,” well-balanced, feet parallel, and legs the width of your hip joints

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

Shoulders

Shoulder rolls - Right, left, then together, forward and backward 5x each

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

Neck

Slowly look to the right, then look to the left. Repeat and look further behind yourself.

Let head and neck slowly sink toward chest. Feel stretch through the spine

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

Arms

Arms outstretched, gently circle whole arm 5x forward, then 5x backward

Arms outstretched, gently circle wrists 5x forward, then backward

Arms outstretched, “shoot” fingers out

Reach toward the sky with right, then left arm. Feel the stretch throughout side of body. Hold the stretch for several seconds. Alternate 5x

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

E. Exploring Joints

- One at a time, explore the mobility of the following:

fingers

wrists/hands

lower arms from elbows

upper arms from shoulder ball and socket joint

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

- Arms hanging freely at sides, gently begin an easy swinging motion, right, then left
- Gradually widen arch of swing until arm swings, windmill style, full circle
- Bend knees gently and slightly. Repeat twice.

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

F. Feeling Balanced

- Feel your weight evenly distributed between your feet.
- Slowly shift your weight from one leg to another.
- Observe the quality of the muscles in both the supporting leg and the “free” leg.

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

STAGE 2

Exercises for Body Awareness

Specific to Piano Playing

IMPORTANT NOTE: These exercises are carefully sequenced to help the pianist cultivate awareness and control of the arm muscles and joints. All exercises are done gently, with mindful, continuous awareness of how the body feels. The pianist should take as much time on each exercise as needed (sometimes a period of days) to master the movements and sensations.

A. Controlling the arm muscles (with partner)

Learning how to control the muscles of the arm begins with the ability to relax the arm muscles completely. This is the state of release to which the pianist must always return. Returning to this state insures that the muscles are always refreshed and tension is never accumulated.

- Partner places hand gently on the pianist's shoulder as reminder to release the shoulders.
- With free hand, partner raises pianist's completely released arm to "playing level"
- Partner feels when the arm is completely relaxed by the heaviness of the arm and by the freedom and mobility of the joints
- Partner checks the joints for maximum mobility by gently moving each joint and sensing any resistance which might signal some muscle tension.
- When the partner is assured that the muscles are completely relaxed, let the forearm all freely. This gives the pianist the first experience of free fall of the forearm.

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

B. Controlling contraction and release in the arm muscles

- Stand comfortably in an alert, well-balanced posture, shoulders relaxed and arms hanging pendulously by the sides
- While counting to 4 slowly inhale and gradually contract (or tense) the entire right arm.
- Begin by tightening the fingertips, then trace up the arm, gradually contracting each segment of arm muscles, including the shoulder.
- Feel the sensation of total tension throughout the arm
- Trace back down the arm, gradually releasing muscles
- Gently shake arm and feel freedom in joints, lightness in arm
- Repeat with left arm
- Practice the same exercise with both arms, but shorten the time for contracting and releasing.
- And-Contract-2-3, release-2-3
- Contract-2, release-2
- Contract, release

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

C. Lifting and lowering the arm in varying states of contraction

Easy lift

- While letting the upper arms hang freely from the shoulders, lift just the forearm from the elbows.
- Relax the wrist muscles as you lift so that the hand is hanging from the wrist joint
- Make circles with the hands from the wrist joints to feel the freedom of the wrist joints
- Lower the arm gradually
- Relax both arms completely
- Feel how the arms are hanging pendulously from the shoulders, all muscles released and all joints liberated to move

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

Feeling the biceps while lifting

- Now place the left hand on the biceps of the right arm and feel it contract as you lift the forearm
- Lower the arm and feel how the bicep muscle changes

- Next place the left hand on the triceps (the back of the upper arm) and feel them lengthen as you lift the forearm
- Lift and lower the arms now as quickly and with as much muscle effort and stiffness around the joints as possible
- Now gradually lower the forearm and feel the triceps return to a state of relaxation

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

*In trying to learn a new sensation of freedom and effortlessness, it is often helpful to create a complete contrast or opposite sensation. The following exercises demonstrate the difference between **effortless and effortful** sensations.*

- Lift and lower the arms now as quickly as possible and with as much muscle effort and stiffness round the joints as possible.
- Now, in contrast, raise and lower the forearms with as little muscle tension as possible. Notice the different sensation and feeling of effortlessness.

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

D. “Free Fall” of the Arms

*Free fall is a physical sensation. In playing the piano, it's the feeling of letting go (of the muscles that lift our arm) as we fall. It's the easiest, most efficient way to lower the arm. The following exercises help the pianist sense the sensation of letting go of the arms after raising them. It is **important for these sensations and motions to become automatic away from the keyboard**. Free fall at the keyboard is far more challenging and requires the ability to aim, and also a certain fearless state of mind and body.*

- First raise the forearms easily directly in front of the body while the upper arms hang pendulously from the shoulders and the hands hanging freely from the wrist joints
- Feel how the torso supports the arms, but how they begin to feel heavy as they are suspended and defy gravity
- At the count of three, let all the muscles go in the arms and “free fall.”
- Notice how the arms bounce gently and naturally against the torso

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

Now practice the opposite sensations to feel the contrast of moving with effort.

- Tighten the arms and raise them with as much resistance and effort as possible.
- At the count of 3, push them down as quickly as possible with great effort and tension.
- Notice how shocking the sensations are
- Now raise the whole arm, elbows bent, and hands hanging freely from the wrist joints.
- At the count of 3, let go of all muscle tension throughout arms and let them fall freely.
- Enjoy the sensation of release in the arms.
- Remember this sensation and return to it as much as possible.

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

E. Controlling the Weight of the Arms (with partner)

One of the most important components of piano technique is the ability to transfer weight from the body through the arm levers to the key and back to the torso. (This skill is also responsible for regulating the weight of the arm as it falls and rests on the keys) This ability also helps the pianist control the gradations of volume in a piece --from softest to loudest sound. (For an organist, the sensation of dynamic shading helps in the all-critical timing of the notes in a phrase and in various articulations.) In order to gain this coordination, the pianist must learn how to coordinate the

movement through the whole arm, regulating the weight of the arm as it falls freely and moves from key to key. This assumes a definition of playing as a coordination of the whole arm, not just its various independently moving levers.

- Let your partner lift your right arm from the wrist so that the arm is aligned as if you are about to play. The hands are hanging freely from the wrist joint, the shoulders and elbows are relaxed, and the fingertips and elbow are the same height from the floor.
- Let the right arm relax completely. It should feel very heavy to your partner.
- Place your left hand on your breastbone and press in slightly to feel the state of the muscles.
- At the count of 8, let your partner trace a finger up your arm to the end of the arm muscles—the sternum or breast bone.
- While the partner traces, without visibly moving the arm, gradually lighten the arm during the 8 counts so that by the 8th count, the arm is weightless and supported by you from your torso. (Notice the quality of the muscles in the collar bone area where the arm muscles end, as your torso takes over support of the arm)
- Move the arm all around you and explore its lightness and the suppleness of the joints.
- Return the arm to your partner and at the count of 8 gradually relax the muscles of the arm into your partner's hand.
- By the 8th count, your arm should be completely relaxed, heavy and completely supported by your partner.
- Notice the change in the quality of the muscles in the collarbone area as you let your partner support your arm.
- Now repeat the exercise, but shorten the time of transfer of support from 8 counts to 4 counts to 2 counts, to 1 count, to an instantaneous release.
- Continue to experience the heaviness alternating with the weightlessness in the arm

STAGE 3

At the Instrument

Neuromuscular Programming for the “Basic Stroke”™

(Remember: OLD HABITS ARE USUALLY STRONGER THAN YOUR DESIRE TO BREAK THEM. Stay attuned to your body. Pause long enough between strokes to relax fully. If your mind is not alert and aware of your state of body, the exercises are useless.)

A. Easy, Efficient Lift of Forearm

- Sit easily, balanced on the sitting bones, spine lengthened, facing the piano.
- Rest arms on thighs and lift forearms about 6 inches, leading with the wrist
- Remember to keep hands relaxed and hanging at all times, fingers “dripping”, completely released and free
- Pause 5 seconds between lifts to relax hands, arms, and shoulders fully.
- Repeat 5x, mindfully aware of the body

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

B. Free Fall of Forearms

- After lifting easily from the elbow, let the forearms fall freely onto thighs. •Do not force, thrust or “float” down.
 - Pause 5 seconds between falls to relax fully.
 - Repeat 5 times mindfully aware of the body
 - Repeat A but allow hand to fall onto middle part of keyboard (Middle C to G •RH or C to G below Middle C, LH), fleshy part of palm first.
 - Make sure hand is completely relaxed during the fall and landing.
 - Pause 5 seconds before repeating
 - Repeat 5x, mindfully aware of the body
- SENSE INTERNAL FLOW & BALANCE

C. Supporting Arm Weight on Finger Tips in Optimal Alignment

- Let arms and hands hang by your side.
 - Observe in a mirror the “carpal” and “metacarpal” (arm and hand) arches from the elbow to the fingertips.
 - Sit facing the piano, hands resting on thighs
 - Lift forearms easily and fall freely onto fingertips.
 - Feel the weight of the arms balanced lightly on all five fingertips
 - Check in a mirror to see if hand and arm arches are in optimal alignment on landing
- SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

D. Releasing Arm/Muscles Instantaneously

- Lift forearm and fall freely
 - On landing, release hand-arm-shoulder muscles instantaneously and completely
- SENSE INTERNAL FLOW
- Repeat 5x with mindful awareness, relaxing muscles completely between strokes

E. Integrating All Components of the Basic Stroke into One Smooth Gesture

STEP 1

- Place completely relaxed hand on keyboard. Lift easily, fall freely and land on all a fifth (Middle C and G)
 - Relax hand immediately and return it to the resting position on your thighs
- SENSE INTERNAL FLOW
- Continue up the diatonic scale one octave
 - Take as much time as necessary between each fifth to relax arm fully

STEP 2

- Repeat exercise with fifths but now remain poised & balanced on the keys
 - Continue up the diatonic scale one octave, pausing long enough to relax arm fully
- SENSE INTERNAL FLOW DURING EACH PAUSE

STEP 3

- Place completely relaxed hand on keyboard.
- Lift easily and land, balanced and supporting arm weight on the third finger only
- Make sure all other non-supporting fingers are relaxed and resting on keys
- Now relax hand completely on keyboard

- Continue up to G and back to C
- Pause between each stroke long enough to release arm muscles fully

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

STEP 4

- Practice the above exercise, but now using all fingers (CDEFG/12345 and back)
- Return hand to thigh between each stroke
- Pause long enough to relax completely between strokes

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

STEP 5

- Practice the previous exercise but without returning hand to thigh
- Allow fully relaxed hand to remain on keyboard between strokes.
- Continue to pause as long as necessary to relax completely before initiating new stroke

SENSE INTERNAL FLOW

STAGE 4

Programming the Basic Stroke into Increasingly

Complex Movement Patterns

A. Exercises in Normal Hand Span - One Note per Stroke

- 1, 2, 3, and 4-Note Scale Pattern
- Intervals, up to a 5th
- Broken triads in 4 octaves

B. Scales - One Note Per Stroke

- Divide right hand, major scale into two blocks 123 12345 or other fingering, as needed.
- Practice each block as slowly as needed to release between note, one note per stroke, 3x each block.
- Divide left hand major scale into two blocks 54321 & 321 or other fingerings as needed. 3x each block
- Practice each block as slowly as needed, one note per stroke.
- In right hand, practice the link between blocks 3 1, 31, 31, then 1 3, 1 3, 1 3.
- In left hand, practice the link between blocks 1 3, 1 3, 1 3, then 3 1, 3 1, 3 1
- Connect both blocks hands separately with the same stroke on each note.

C. Sight-Reading Exercises - One Note Per Stroke (Other elementary pieces may be used.)

- 1) Hannah Smith *Progressive Sight-Reading Exercises* (5 to 10 lines per day)
- 2) Bela Bartok *Mikrokosmos Bk. 1* (2 to 3 per day)
- 3) *International Library of Piano Music, Vol. 11* (5 lines per day)

The student should play these exercises as slowly as needed to make sure the whole arm is released between each stroke. Play each twice. First time, allow the arms and hands to relax completely between each one-note stroke, all the way up through the shoulders. Second time, maintain the carpal and metacarpal arches but release the arms as completely as possible. **REMEMBER: PRACTICING WITHOUT MINDFUL AWARENESS OF THE BODY IS A WASTE OF TIME AND CAN EVEN BE COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE.**