

Fresh Fingers

For most of his distinguished concert career **Anton Kuerti** has given particular thought to the artistic application of fingering. Here he shares some of his conclusions

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In making gestures, let us say to an enraged driver, we had best be quite careful as to which, if any, finger to use. But to summon a lift or ring a doorbell, it matters not – even the nose or the elbow could perform the task, though some elegance might be sacrificed.

In principle, one might well conclude that the choice of appendage ought not to make any difference on the piano either. Indeed, the great Arthur Loesser used to demonstrate how he could play the melody of the early Chopin Nocturne in E-flat with exquisite expression and sound, using the rubber on the end of a pencil – his way of debunking mystical, occult approaches to sound production, and proving, as Josef Hofmann made clear in his famous remark, that we do not play the piano with our hands, but with our minds.

Yet, the choice of which digit is to touch which key has to be made, and it does affect the performance – profoundly. In fact, fingering profiles the performer's attitude toward the instrument, toward the music, and yes, even vis-à-vis life itself. Does he always seek the simplest, safest solution, or is he inclined to take absurd risks? Does she usually follow the fingering in her scores by default, or disdainfully ignore them and categorically refuse advice from others? Does he prefer the conventional or the radical? Will she scrupulously contrive to mould her fingerings to conform to the composer's articulations, or arbitrarily override those in favour of convenience or brilliance?

Will he respect the composer's allocation of notes between the hands, or redistribute them whenever it provides a helpful facilitation? Is she more interested in how it looks or how it sounds – or how it feels? Does he always use precisely the same fingering, or will he sometimes improvise, fly blind and trust instinct? Given all this information, you would hardly need a Rorschach test to get a handle on the individual's personality.

In string playing, fingering and bowing are of supreme importance to the artist's musical and expressive development. How lamentable is the rampant tradition of having students copy, from their teachers' scores, fingerings and bowings presumably already inherited through several generations of masters and scholars. Thinking about and experimenting with these variables should be

central to string instrument studies, as they are near the core of the player's musical personality.

I contend that it is not so different on the keyboard, though we have far fewer options – we can't decide which string to play a particular note on, which part of the bow to use, nor how fast to draw it, and any analogues we may have to up-bow and down-bow pale by comparison – not to mention the enviable possibilities inherent in vibrato and intonation. But despite our more limited parameters, a fine pianist should develop a fingering culture and style to suit his or her musical personality. In this context I mean fingering to include 'wristing' and 'arming'. The myriad questions as to which part of our physical apparatus to use, when and how high to lift it, how hard to press against the keyboard, these and others are hard to separate from the pure assignment of particular fingers to particular notes. As they say, 'different folks, different strokes', and in this case, the word 'strokes' is particularly apt.

The evolution of fingering

I like to compare the evolution of a person's fingering to the evolution of species. For natural selection to take place, there must be a chance for mutations – chance errors arising in the DNA chains – to occur. If these are very rare, there will be little or no change, and the organism will stay remarkably stable, as is the case with some of the most successful ancient species. On the other hand, if there are countless mutations in each generation, most of which are inevitably adverse, the species may become extinct and no stable framework will remain for future development.

So during practise (but perhaps not during performance, unless you are particularly brave, and willing to suffer the consequences) it is good to allow the fingers some – but not too much – autonomy and latitude to experiment and stake out new configurations and options. The frequent resulting blunders will be a small price to pay for the occasional splendid discovery. The fingers do seem to exhibit a certain intelligence of their own, though perhaps not as much as the arms of the octopus, each of which has its own mini-brain. So let us not engrave our fingerings in stone – nor even mark them in ink – and thereby give mutations a fighting chance.

We do have a signal advantage over evolution: we can think and guide the process and even inherit acquired characteristics. I am constantly searching for improvements, even in pieces that I have performed countless times, and it is a rare practice session – even on the day of a performance – during which I do not find and incorporate at least one or two new ideas that allow me more naturally and effectively to express the character of the music. So don't marry your fingerings!



Example 1: Beethoven Concerto No 1, piano entrance

**It should feel and look the way
you want it to sound**

In presenting my arguments, I will explore my reasoning for each detail, but I don't want to leave the impression that I arrive at all my decisions through cold-blooded logic and analysis. Experimenting, allowing evolution to take its course, listening, comparing and evaluating the results is what has created my fingerings, for better or for worse; whether the reasoning I justify them with is always pertinent may be open to debate. I do *feel* them to be in wholesome accord with the character of the music, and I *feel* that they allow my body best to experience the music's emotional spirit. This is such an important point: if the tactile sensation of our playing – meaning of course not just the fingers but the whole body – matches the feeling we wish to convey, the feedback from this sensation will make it easier to immerse ourselves in the music, reinforce our musical emotions, make us feel more comfortable and even help free ourselves from the adverse effects of tenseness and anxiety which plague most performers. The listener too, will enjoy the performance more if the motions look the way they sound.

The Fresh Finger Technique

Example 1 beautifully conveys the essence of my most important principle of fingering, what I call the 'Fresh Finger Technique': whenever a pattern of the type 'A-B-A' occurs – in this case, in the first bar, C-B-C, linked to C-D-C, linked to C-E-C, I want to take a fresh, different finger when the same note recurs.

There are many reasons for this, but the overriding one is to optimise the legato. For example, in the initial CBC figure the fifth finger can remain on the C until the very last moment, when the third finger has already started descending to play it again. If the same finger must lift and re-

descend, it tends to start lifting sooner and higher than necessary. This will degrade the legato, and look, feel and sound more mechanical.

C is played four times in that first bar, and yet each C needs to mould the line in its own, subtle way. This is much more natural when it is a different finger each time, for each has its own personality, weight and strength. This also encourages the hand to move gently from side to side, making it feel pliable, harmonious and friendly, instead of rigid and symmetrical. Such an approach dignifies the individuality and importance of each note, allows a moment of respite for each finger (not that exhaustion could yet prevail in this opening bar!), and helps prevent the fingers from becoming blasé: 'Oh yeah, gotta play that stupid note again, so what?'

Affirmative Action for Weak Beats

Example 2 starts with the third finger, not only to allow a fresh fifth finger on the next F, but also because I find it almost demeaning to play the first note of a piece with that wallydrag of a little finger (assuming it can easily be avoided). This choice also reflects my own (perhaps occasionally perverse) tendency to emphasise the weak beats rather than the strong ones. Indeed, I believe a sort of 'affirmative action' for weak beats is a supreme requirement to prevent piano-playing from sounding square and mechanical, with thumping accents at the beginning of every bar and on each respectable appoggiatura or high note falling on a strong beat.

This requirement is quite specific to the piano, in contrast to all those lucky instruments whose sound does not decay instantly and whose notes can wax as well as wane. Fingering decisions are of course intimately bound to interpretative intentions, so if you want the piano entrance to sound wimpy and thin, by all means start with a weak fin-

ger, but then preferably use 4-3-5, so you can at least still have a fresh finger on the second F!

Several factors can justify using the third finger instead of the more obvious thumb, at the beginning of the second bar. It is not only because the thumb is the heaviest finger, and combining that with a downbeat is a perfect recipe for an unintended accent. Despite its weight and the historical prejudice against it (old scores used to mark it with an X, and leave the number 1 for the index finger, as in string music), with the right guidance and intentions, the thumb can play as gently as any of its kin. But I want this opening to sound light and airy, and by leaping to the third finger it will feel as though I am flying, and help express the fact that this is the largest interval in the opening, and the only long note. Using the third finger will guarantee that F the VIP treatment it deserves.

It is essential to observe the phrase articulations, but remember that an articulation does not imply that the previous note becomes a staccato, as is the habit of a few supposed early music experts. Rather, the articulation is analogous to a change of bow on the violin, or a new tonguing on a wind instrument; we simply want to hear the hint of a consonant on the beginning of the new slur. Due to bowing and breathing necessities, other instruments are forced to make many articulations, whereas pianists are able to largely ignore them, which can make the music mumbled and characterless, indeed inarticulate...

To prevent too large a gap between slurs, I will often pedal the last note under the slur until just before the next note. Should the articulation then be blurred by raising the pedal too late, at least lifting the hand will show the phrasing visually and force the hand to feel it, thereby influencing the attack on the next note. Even the (almost negligible) additional surface noise created by the landing from our lift may help.



Example 2: Beethoven Concerto No 2, piano entrance

Force yourself to articulate

I often ensure that articulations are at least given 'hand service' (à la 'lip service'), by re-using the finger that ends one slur to start the next. Thus one could happily change the fingering of the second group of notes in example two to 3-2-1-2-3-3-2, thus forcing an articulation by repeating the third finger. The reason I do not opt for that is because this group rhymes with the following one, so it is aesthetically most pleasing to repeat the same fingering, but impossible here because of the different position of the black note.

The upbeat to the trill employs a different finger from the one starting it, because the desired difference in character between the two is profound. For once I do want an accent to start the trill, so a drop onto it with the thumb from three or four centimetres will encourage that. For a sparkling trill, starting clearly and rapidly is more than half the battle, so naturally I advocate using a fresh second finger on the third note. The same applies to the afterbeat, where three will replace two on the E-flat. And then, I skip the fourth finger, of which I am anyway not a particular fan, and use the stronger and more reliable five on the high F. Generally, wherever practical, I use 3-

ally implying that notes connected by them form some sort of special caucus that distinguishes them from adjoining groups or notes, when in fact they are just an arbitrary convention to indicate metric value.

Enter here – Exit there

Both pedestrians and motorists often exit at a different place from where they entered a destination. Substituting a new finger to hold a note already played by a mate permits the same manoeuvre on the keyboard, and it is not used nearly enough. The considerations for arriving on a note can easily conflict with the best tactic for connecting it to (or separating it from) the next note(s), and if the note is long enough, there is no reason (except laziness) to avoid substituting a new finger. A good exercise to develop this habit is to depress a whole-tone scale with the five fingers, and then replace two with one, three with two etc, and when four nudges five off his note he can play the next higher note in the scale; then reverse this with five pushing four off her perch. Try to flow effortlessly and gently, which becomes much more difficult with other configurations, say a diminished chord. Notice, incident-

fourth, when possible, and take a fresh finger on the final note, even after two intervening notes.

Inevitably, though still pianissimo, there will still be some moderate pressure on that G-D chord, the first long, melodic note of the piece. I abhor the so common habit of releasing the pressure and letting the wrist bubble up on every long note as soon as it is struck, as dictated by some schools of piano-playing. I need to feel that I am still connected to and involved with that chord, as an oboist must continue to blow as long as her note remains alive. I will not release that pressure until I start to play the next notes, which will cause them to lighten and whisper discreetly.

The next motive needs a particularly clever pair of fingers to play the chirp C#-D – the grace note very short, in fact almost together with the D, and perhaps a few decibels louder than it. C# being a black key, 2-3 is the obvious solution. One could of course proceed simply, and continue the descending semi-quavers 2-1-3-2. Not bad, but I prefer to avoid crossing over with the strong third finger in the middle of the descending figure and opt, alas, for a more complicated solution. I slip five onto the D, replacing three, and – maintaining the pressure as described above until the very



Example 3: Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata

5 instead of 3-4 or 4-5, which are our weakest combinations, made even less nimble by the joining of the retractor muscles on three and four.

The lift from three to three over the barline following the trill will not only insure observance of the articulation, it will also help differentiate neatly between the two attacks, as the first will be lifting and the second descending. The final run starts with a standard (at least for me) double fresh fingering, 3-1-2-3-1, which feels clever and gives a fine legato. And the run continues with two groups of 3-2-1 with the third finger always on the black key, which makes it especially smooth. I reject the not so very different solution 3-1-2-5-3-2-1-4-3-2-1 because it will tend to cluster and accent each group of four semi-quavers by crossing over the fourth finger exactly on the fourth beat.

Unless it is clearly the composer's intention, I detest hearing the beams that connect note stems, either through accents on each first note or through the beamed group being rhythmically compressed together. Beams are a central feature of musical notation, and subliminally do great damage to our musical perceptions by visu-

tally, how much easier this is with the pedal down, which reduces the number of grams needed to keep each key down from about 65 to around 50.

In Example 3, notice that Beethoven wrote no staccato marks over the repeated notes. While this does not necessarily imply that they must be long or pedalled, it should at least make those who play it with a chattering, ostentatious staccatissimo think again. I pedal the fifth and sixth bars, to colour their astonishing B-flat Major fainting spell. But this wanders far afield from our subject.

Using four rather than three on the repeated chords helps keep them pianissimo and maintain an even balance between their upper and lower notes; three, with its greater length, would dig deeper, probably play louder, and cause the hand position to be a little more tense. This is particularly true of the first chord in the third bar, which feels distinctly more comfortable with four than three. But to connect to the finishing snippet of the motive, four would be very awkward, so we will flow through the third finger on this G and end up with two, to allow an elegant ending: 5-3-1 – reinforcing two above-mentioned principles, skip the

end of its term – finish with a weightless 3-2-1-3. The last note is a crotchet, which must be discernibly longer than the quaver ending the preceding figure, notwithstanding the fact both are staccato; so here is a good place to let the wrist lead the way north, leaving the third finger to linger on the key just long enough to give it a short ring rather than a brusque staccato.

I had collected – almost arbitrarily – about a score of examples to marinate with these musings, but I am afraid my verbose sauce has run over and there is no room for more, though I do not rule out an eventual continuation. Nolens volens, even this very small sampling of my fingering ideas has perhaps given more insight into my character than I might usually wish to divulge to strangers, but then that is inherent to the act of performing, and indeed, communicating in any modality. And in an important way, after a heart-felt performance, the listener should no longer feel quite a stranger.