



ROBERT FUCHS

Soldiers' March, No 14 from Album for the Young op 47

Teacher and author **Melanie Spanswick** explains how 'scratching the surface' will make the right finger staccato for keeping this robust march on track. A flexible wrist will help too!

Ability rating Beginner/ Intermediate

Info

Key: D major
Tempo: Allegro
Style: Romantic

Will improve your

- ✓ Rhythmic grasp
- ✓ Finger staccato
- ✓ Articulation

This delightful work by Austrian composer Robert Fuchs is essentially Romantic in character. *Soldiers' March* (*Soldatenmarsch* in the original German), requires deft finger technique and much attention to detail. A fairly swift speed is best, so I've suggested a metronome marking of crotchet = 132, to capture the *Frisch und munter* ('Fresh and lively') marking at the top of the score.

Much of this piece sits in the upper part of the keyboard. Composers often seem to favour this for children's music. This means that sitting appropriately will be crucial in order for the left hand (LH) to feel comfortable. Allow your upper body to swivel to the right freely, rather than changing positions or moving to the right on the piano bench.

Repeated notes are another major feature. This, combined with the need to play quickly, suggests that you will want very careful, thoughtful practice or you will risk tension issues. As with all fast pieces you play, start very slowly (ideally around a quarter or a third of the intended final speed), working at a couple of bars at a time, then line by line or section by section [read Tim Stein's article on practising, page 74]. The fingering on the score advises constant finger changes on repeated notes. At first this might seem challenging, but with practice will make sense and feel convenient.

For bar 1 you must use all four fingers in the right hand (RH), starting with the fourth finger, to play the opening four Ds. Practise this with the RH alone, using a very deep touch, ensuring every D is totally even in terms of rhythm and sound. As you continue your slow practice, aim to find the bottom of the key bed for each note, every time. Working with a deep touch and full sound will make playing fast and light that much easier, as well as more even.

On the second bar use your fifth finger on the A on the first beat. This note is accented, so special attention will be



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needed to articulate it with power and clarity. Ensure the fifth finger doesn't collapse, that is, all finger joints must be fully engaged so each finger can 'stand' alone easily. Aim to play the A with the tip of the fifth finger. The fifth finger can be easily supported with arm weight and a slightly different wrist and arm position – one where the arm is turned outwards, away from the body, and thereby aiding the weaker part of the hand, i.e. the fourth and fifth fingers. Many black key notes will also require this kind of wrist and arm support as a different position is needed to play them than is needed to play white notes. With the right support, each note can be fully articulated and will not sound weak or uneven.

You will need to understand the constant finger changes in slow motion, with both hands throughout. Practise hands separately to start with. Once you feel comfortable with this, turn your attention to the staccato passagework that pervades the entire march. The lightness of your articulation will be key. Begin by using wrist staccato: short, detached, bouncy movements from the wrist on every note. This approach will encourage total wrist freedom and flexibility between every note and will allow the shapes and patterns of the passagework to be fully absorbed.

Once you have grasped wrist staccato, try to change to finger staccato: quick movements by the finger only as opposed to the whole hand. Like wrist staccato, finger staccato demands a flexible wrist especially when turning under or over the hand as in fast extended passages such as scales. One way of playing finger staccato is to use a 'scratching' movement; as the note is played, the finger assumes an inward motion as though it is 'scratching' or 'scraping' the surface of the note. This movement becomes easier as fingers

gather more strength. The quicker the 'scratch' the better the clarity of any note!

Finger staccato is the cause of much tense playing. Aim to find places to break the tension, allowing the wrist and hand to relax completely. The ideal way to do this is to move the wrist in a quick

Learning Tip

To find the perfect tempo, imagine that you are marching.

rotational motion, allowing the arm to feel light and weightless. You'll usually find these places at the end of phrases, but sometimes they'll be in the middle. In the first line, bar 4 might be a good place to free the hand, just before the last beat, as this is a new phrase. Bar 11, just before beat 4 (or before the final E), where a quick wrist movement could free the hand, is another place. As the speed increases, tension breaks become more important, but by practising in small sections, and building up endurance, these breaks can be painlessly implemented.

Performing this piece successfully requires the right pulse, particularly with regard to the 'marching' quality.

A metronome may prove helpful, but first try counting in semiquavers. This will establish a very firm rhythmic grip and also discourage any rushing (or slowing down) where the dotted quaver and semiquaver figures occur (for example, at bars 2, 6, 10, 14, 18 and 22).

Accompanying chordal figures can be quick and light. Try to balance the notes in chords, so they all sound together at speed. As this work is mostly detached, the pedal doesn't play a key role, but a little may be added to the ends of phrases, such as at bars 8 and 24. A very soft colour is needed in the last phrase to bring this miniature to a close. ■