

Octaves



Melanie Spanswick shares tips on how to approach one of the most distinctive and effective of piano textures, the playing of octaves.

Octaves add the most thrilling virtuoso element to piano playing. Romantic composers, particularly, thrived on their inclusion, frequently imbuing works with rapid octaves, which cascade impressively and flamboyantly around the keyboard, providing drama and excitement to engage and captivate the listener. They are a joy to behold and, played with power and élan, are amongst the most effective of all piano tools, assisting any composer in creating the appropriate expression, whether that be anger, sadness, love, passion or sheer jubilation.

Octaves are probably the most well-known and recognisable technical texture in the whole gamut of piano playing, and they emerged from the early nineteenth century onwards, as pianos became stronger, and produced richer, more vibrant sonorities. Such passagework played with aplomb, combined with the sustaining (damper or right) pedal, can indeed contribute positively to a pianist's reputation. As Hungarian composer and pianist, Franz Liszt (1811–1886), knew only too well, octaves not only add brilliance to a composition, but they could also attract, beguile and mesmerise an adoring audience too.

Many aspects of piano technique can cause grief, and playing octaves is often one of them, sadly. As octaves involve stretching to some degree (usually between the thumb and fourth or fifth fingers), pupils must be able to reach or stretch to the appropriate hand position fairly effortlessly before attempting to play them. Otherwise, injury can be a problem, causing tightness and pain in the hand and wrist. If for any reason players feel uncomfortable or 'tight', octave passages must be halted immediately, allowing students to wait until their hand grows slightly larger. Most young players are able to assume the necessary hand position eventually.

There are copious octave permutations prevalent in piano music, and whether fast and furious, or slow and legato, with a suitable approach and the correct physical movements, they can be negotiated relatively effectively, even for those with smaller hands. As they form a vital role in piano music, they cannot be ignored; the quicker students get to grips with them, and learn to feel comfortable and relaxed whilst playing them, the better.

So what is the best way to approach octaves? Here are a few ideas which, if implemented carefully, will help students cope with octaves, as

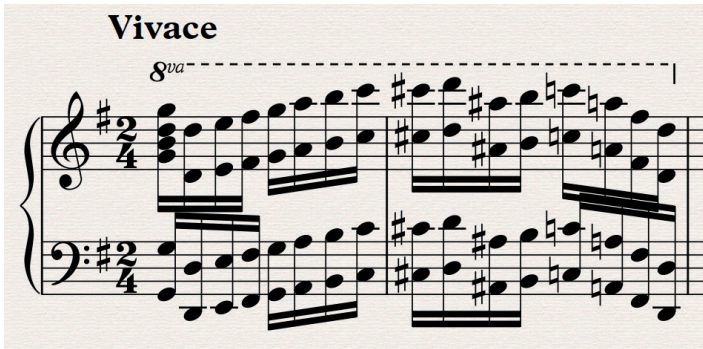
well as learn to explore and enjoy this area of piano technique. Once the required hand stretch has been mastered, there are several useful 'tools' for practising accuracy, speed and control, as well as producing a full, rich timbre.

The basis of octave technique begins in the wrist (as with many other technical areas). Before any fast playing commences, allow the hand to rest on the keyboard and stretch out to the full octave span; do this using the thumb and fifth finger on two white notes. As the notes are played, be sure to 'relax' the hand; only the thumb and fifth finger should be engaged and in an active position; the rest of the hand and other fingers must be totally free and comfortable. To ensure this is the case, feel the fleshy area of the hand as it is placed on the notes; do the muscles feel supple or are they tensing up and rigid? Once they are wholly free, drop the wrist completely, but yet still hold on to the notes being played by the thumb and fifth finger. The wrist should ideally be able to rotate freely as the octave is still held in position, once this can be done, then total flexibility has been thoroughly achieved. Admittedly, it takes a while to become accustomed to this, as it will almost certainly feel alien to start with, especially if a different motion has been previously employed to play octaves.

A common issue when playing any wide stretch is the notion that the wrist needs to be raised in order to 'reach' the chord or octave, and whilst this is understandable, it discourages flexibility. Muscles tend to 'lock up' and this stops any possibility of moving quickly from octave to octave, as high wrists generally impede movement. Resist this temptation by focusing on moving very slowly, building a slight break, or hiatus, between each octave, making sure the wrist remains loose and free, rather than at an elevated angle. Applying this kind of practice tool is akin to the usual tension and release idea employed when negotiating any other demanding area of piano technique.

The finger and thumb being used to play the octave also require a certain grip in order to assume the correct position, thus avoiding note splits or inaccuracies. So there is a need to develop the necessity for building a 'bridge' position within the hand (knuckles slightly raised) whilst keeping the arm and wrist all very flexible and relaxed. This is the challenge for teachers when coaching and evolving a proficient octave technique.

As mentioned above, start slowly and build up, working on either octave scales or exercises containing octave passages, such as the following from Czerny's *Art of Finger Dexterity* Op. 740 (depending on the level of student). Once flexibility has been achieved whilst playing single octaves, try to play a string of them altogether. A passage such as the following (from *Study No. 49 Octaves – Bravura, Art of Finger Dexterity* Op. 740):



may be broken up like this:



Breaking the pattern every four semiquavers (or even fewer notes to begin with, such as every two semiquavers) really helps to develop a strong, consistent technique. This is because the hand is afforded an opportunity to rest. If it assumes the same wide-spread vista bar after bar, it understandably feels tired and exhausted. It's this constant strain or body stress which can often lead to muscle pain and repetitive strain injury. However, if the hand is given plenty of time to rest (i.e. to stop holding the position), it quickly builds up a resistance, and eventually learns to feel comfortable and even relaxed after and during repetitive octave figurations. I encourage students to put their hand down by their side (or rest the hand on either leg) during the rests, as this promotes absolute freedom. Always remember to practise octave passagework in the left hand too, because whatever is worked at in one hand should be mirrored in the other, building strength in both hands equally.

Once pianists have a feel for the stretched position, and how to control their hand freely whilst it is outstretched, more wrist motion and arm weight can be employed. Wrist motion plays a crucial role in octave movement, and if a springy, rapid, yet loose movement can be mastered, then fast passagework and repeated note patterns can be played with ease. Practise these body movements with care. Maximum arm movement and a malleable body alignment all help to create a relaxed stance. Working at keeping a free arm (upper and forearm), shoulder and torso is vital in order to obtain economical movement around the keyboard; this is more important than moving the hand in fact, because it allows flexibility which ultimately increases speed.

To obtain this feeling, start by practising single notes, specifically the

outer notes of each octave. Do this with either repeated notes or scale passages to start with, employing the fifth finger only. The little finger then becomes accustomed to playing each note with a full sound without relying on the thumb for support. The hand and wrist will also get the feel for the necessary quick, repetitive motion needed for each note i.e. a slight, but quick, loose bounce in the wrist for every note. As progression is made, so the bounce becomes smaller and quicker, yet just as supple.

Once comfortable with the above, add the thumb creating the octave, but only when the fifth finger can accurately and flexibly play every passage up to speed on its own. Then repeat the same passagework with the left hand, and finally play both fifth fingers on either hand together, thus creating the outer parts of each octave. Try this two octaves apart. Start slowly and build up speed, concentrating on varying the dynamics and articulation (experimenting with legato, non-legato and staccato touches). It's the outer notes of each octave which are most important as they give the impression of fullness of sound and often provide the melodic interest.



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As pupils acquire the skills to play octave scale passages and repeated notes in a relaxed manner with absolutely no tension, introduce pieces with octave skips. Octave skips can be approached in a similar fashion to the repeated notes and scales suggested above; work at the outer parts first and foremost, taking extra care when negotiating the jumps. When adding the thumb (creating the octave) allow space or rests after each beat, taking note of the shape and pattern of every upward or downward passage. The simple example below, demonstrates this point. Arpeggio figures are an ideal vehicle for practising octave skips (here using only fifth fingers):



