

# FOCUS ON PIANO

In this, the first in a new series taking a look at some of the highlights from our new piano syllabus, Melanie Spanswick explores Rachel Grimes' Bloodroot, from the Grade 7 handbook

# Bloodroot

Piano technique is a gargantuan subject and one which can feel overwhelming. How can the skills to play certain pieces be acquired without first toiling through exercises and studies?

You can assimilate various techniques simply by working at them in a detailed, focused manner within selected pieces. Over time, these will feel comfortable and assured, and the skills can then be applied to a host of other works.

## Overview

Bloodroot, from the American composer Rachel Grimes' Book of Leaves, is a hauntingly beautiful gem, juxtaposing contemporary classical music with indie rock. Set in A minor, exuding distinctly minimalist overtones, the piece begins with a sweeping improvisatory passage, before introducing patterned melodic material. A gradual crescendo and thickening texture drives the music forward to the climactic point, followed by a reflective coda. Bloodroot necessitates several important piano techniques: a smooth touch, strong outer fingers (fourth and fifth), a relaxed rotational or circular wrist motion and the ability to play combinations of notes altogether (or double notes).

## Bars 1 to 4: Clear articulation, sparkling semiquavers

The opening phrases (Example 1) demand even, rapid passage-work. Once fingering is secure, concentrate on the right hand. For practice purposes, work at slow speeds, employing a heavy touch on every single note, using the fingers optimally, delving to the bottom of the key bed.

To play with a full rich sound, try to support the fingers; employing a relaxed wrist and arm, using arm weight behind each note at slow speeds. This will help to develop finger strength and promote a smooth, equal tone. By thinking of notes as separate entities and paying attention to the subsequent release of the keys, clarity will eventually be implemented. Avoid any physical stiffness or locking-up of the hand or wrist by 'letting go' of taut muscles or tendons after each note has been played (whilst still keeping the key depressed). This feeling will be similar to releasing a clenched fist.

Observe finger movements; aim to keep the joints of each finger fully engaged (not collapsing), with the fingertips making a strong connection to the key. Avoid surface playing or skimming over the top during this stage. For rhythmical note placing, try counting out loud, perhaps in semiquaver (or even demisemiquaver) beats for accuracy, and take care not to rush.

**Example 1:**  
Bloodroot,  
opening phrases

**Example 2:**  
Bars 3 and 4,  
places to release  
any tension or  
stiffness in the  
hand and wrist

Take time for phrases, with rubato

mf

LH RH

LH

rit.

3

1 4 2 5 1 4 4 4 4 5 2

Red. \*

Once secure in a slow tempo, put the hands together and add speed, but continue to use a heavy touch. Identify key points in order to release muscles; for example in bars 3 and 4. The arrows (Example 2) mark possible spots to relax the hand when playing at speed. This is easier to implement as the hand makes a large but flexible movement whilst turning over the thumb (or whilst the thumb turns under the hand).

Try this slowly at first, creating small gaps (up to a second or two in length) to loosen or disengage the wrist; as it becomes accustomed to releasing its grip after playing groups of notes the breaks can be progressively shorter, until imperceptible. The suggested tenuto marks will help keep such a passage rhythmical.

After a period of practice, play up to tempo and lighten your finger touch to reveal sparkling, clear and even semi and demisemiquaver runs, as well as a more relaxed arm, wrist and hand.

mf

LH RH

LH

rit.

3

1 4 2 5 1 4 4 4 4 5 2

Red. \*

5 **Regular** ♩ = 96

**Example 3:**  
Bars 5 to 7

### Bars 5 to 20: Rotational wrist movement and the fourth and fifth finger

Rotational or circular wrist motion encourages flexible movement and helps to guide fingers to the correct notes. These bars are similar in many respects to a Bach prelude (Example 3). The melody from bar 5 is played by the thumb (beats 1 and 3). Example 4 illustrates two possible fingerings. If the lower fingering is selected, the fourth and fifth will probably need extra practice, as they tend to be weaker — to achieve this apply a heavy finger touch as already discussed in bars 1 to 4.

Useful exercises for developing finger strength on the fourth and fifth fingers may include the addition of different accents or touches (Example 5). This can be applied from bar 5 to 20, but only practise in short bursts.

For precisely placed upper notes, allow the wrist to guide the fingers via a swift rotational motion. Move it sideways along the keyboard, with a slight circular, upward movement, towards the right, away from the body. Keep the wrist completely loose, but fingers should ideally remain firm.

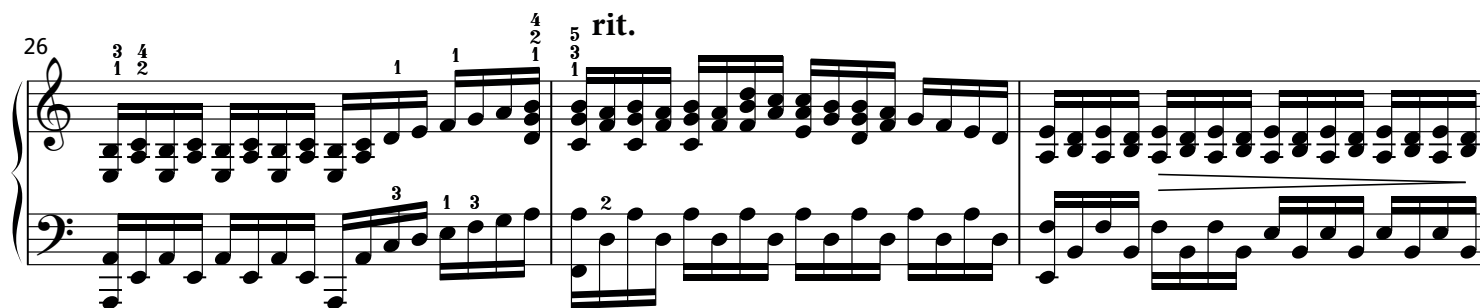
Left hand chords are sometimes widespread. Redistribution may be beneficial, aided by swift wrist movement from the left to right, guiding the thumb into place (Example 6).

**Example 4:**  
Bars 5 and 6, possible fingerings

Allow the wrist to move to the right with a circular movement

**Example 5:**  
Bars 5 and 6, practising with different accents of touches

**Example 6:**  
Bar 7, possible chord redistribution for smaller hands



### Example 7:

Bars 26 to 28

#### Bars 21 to 28: Double notes

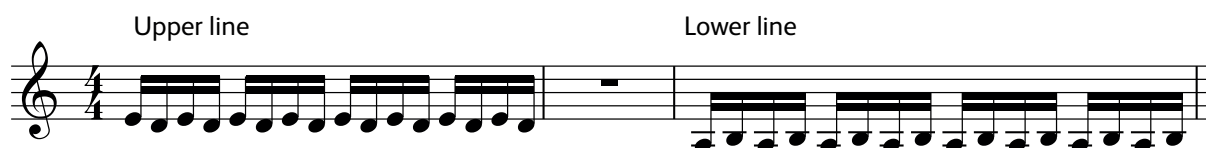
Cascades of semiquavers signal the work's apex (Example 7). When practising double note passages, play the upper part alone at first, then the lower part (Example 8), developing a firm touch, using the intended fingering.

When combining both parts, play the top line with a full sound and the bottom silently — placing the fingers on the notes but not depressing the key, and then vice versa, for exact coordination. Note patterns in three parts, like those in bar 27, may need similar isolated work too.

Figurations in the right hand at bar 23 will benefit from a quick wrist movement (akin to turning a door knob) in order to place the fifth finger rhythmically.

### Example 8:

Bar 28, practising the upper and lower lines in the right hand separately



These practice methods can be applied to a wide variety of piano pieces. They will prove fundamental when establishing a strong piano technique.

Melanie Spanswick is a pianist, teacher, author, writer, adjudicator, presenter and composer. She is the author of many of the performance notes in our current piano handbooks.

Bloodroot, from Rachel Grimes' Book of Leaves, is included in our current Grade 7 piano handbook, available to buy from our online shop:

[lcmusicshop.uwl.ac.uk](http://lcmusicshop.uwl.ac.uk)