Melanie Spanswick

Fruitful Fingering Part 2

> **Our goal, as teachers, must be to equip our students so that they can eventually think for themselves**

Teachers all know the importance well-placed fingering has in the context of learning a new piece, and this fact remains true irrespective of a student's level or ability. My previous article examined several expected fingering techniques, and in this article I will endeavour to venture a little off-piste, with a few different ideas around this vast subject. Our goal, as teachers, must be to equip our students so that they can eventually think for themselves, writing their own fingering on every score.

Firstly, I return to reiterate perhaps the most vital concept when learning to finger fruitfully, and that is the assimilation of scales, arpeggios and broken chords; if students have thoroughly learnt these patterns, then adding fingering to most piano pieces will feel simple and natural. This point cannot be stressed enough, as without these symmetrical note patterns and their fairly rigid fingerings, pupils simply won't be able to grasp the basics of piano playing. If your student hasn't been taking exams, it might be prudent to suggest the acquisition of a scale manual – both the ABRSM and Trinity College London publish separate volumes with all keys, scale permutations, and fingerings.

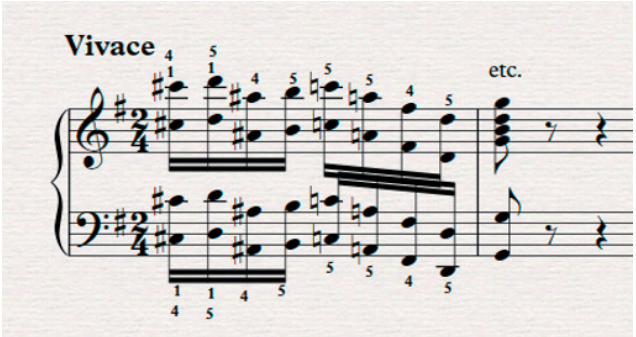
Knowing your fingering is paramount, and as a general rule, once a fingering has been chosen, written into the score and played through, it's highly advisable not to change it. This cardinal rule certainly rings true for less experienced players. Our brains seem hard-wired to play patterns or sequences, but once these patterns are even slightly distorted, it causes us much grief and cancelling them altogether will feel very unnatural.

Practice tends to make 'permanent' as many teachers will attest, so aim for students to be quite sure of their finger selections before they leave the lesson. Try going through a piece slowly with them, hands separately, checking that they are actually using the fingering which has been added to the score. This will be key to successful absorption of each hand's fingering, and will stop the inevitable corrections which will occur at the following lesson if this stage in the learning process has been side-stepped.

After advising our students to stick religiously to one fingering for their pieces (especially for any fiddly figurations), it can be extremely liberating to throw out this rule when returning to study a piece for the second or third time. This may only apply to more advanced pupils. Occasionally students will play a piece, leave it for a while, only to return at a later date to find that the fingering which once fitted like a glove, now feels less than ideal. In this case it's time to revise the original fingering and search for something more convenient. Whilst it may appear akin to climbing Everest, a more advanced student can reconfigure passages with relative ease, especially when they are able to work out the new fingering for themselves.

Smaller hands inevitably struggle with certain elements, namely wide intervals and large chords, which can be challenging, particularly when playing extended passagework. Fingering must be very carefully applied when taking this fact into consideration. Sometimes the only option is to 'rearrange' passages, leaving out notes which don't disturb the flow or the construction of a piece. Adding a spread chord where the original is too large, or rewriting chords in some cases, may provide a simple solution. Dividing passages between the hands is another beneficial tactic. It may appear as though cheating, but it can be a workable option if the sound and character of a piece remains largely unaffected.

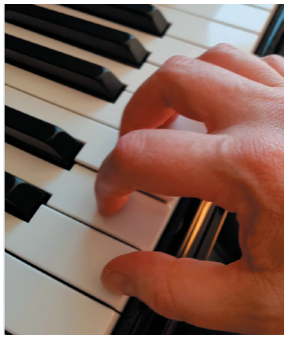
Octaves are renowned for causing smaller hands grief, but with regular flexibility exercises and a relaxed wrist and arm, most students can handle them. There is much debate over the fingering of octave passage work. Some schools of thought are insistent on using the thumb and fifth finger for all such passages, whereas others believe the thumb combined with a fourth or fifth finger provides a better option. Certainly when playing fast chromatic passages, the fourth is a welcome addition (and if a student has a large hand, a third finger may also be used):



This passage from *Study No. 49* of Czerny's *Art of Finger Dexterity Op. 740* illustrates how the fourth finger, if implemented scrupulously and only with a relaxed or loose arm and wrist, can be an excellent method of moving quickly around the keyboard.

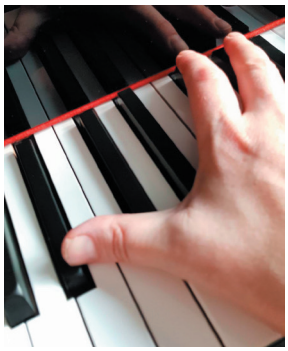
Sliding from two black keys when playing octaves, can be a helpful way to join notes smoothly (I've written about 'finger sliding' in more detail in my previous article: *Fruitful Fingering Part 1*). It should also be remembered that using the thumb on black keys is now regarded as acceptable, whereas previously, this practice was sometimes considered 'unsuitable' fingering.

How the fingers physically play notes is another often forgotten factor when discussing fingering. I work with students until they can easily use their fingertips when playing fast figurations or scalic passage work. The tips are best incorporated via a flexible wrist and a 'hooked' finger position:

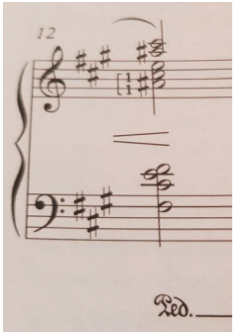


This fosters firmer finger and rhythmic control. However, flatter fingers can work well too, for chords, especially those on black notes, and they are generally more conducive to achieving a completely different timbre. Some impressionistic repertoire might be best played with this approach.

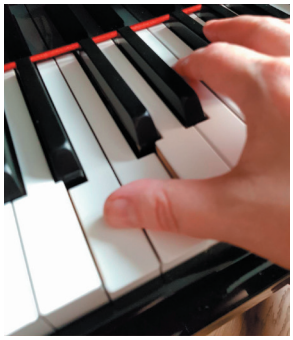
Two notes, one finger! An effective tactic for large chords, such as the following, which employs a spread thumb:



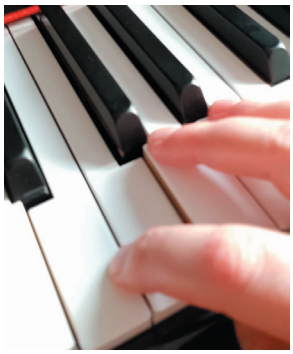
Chopin *Prelude* (*Op. 28 No. 7 in A major*), is easier to grasp when using the thumb over the C sharp and A sharp:



This also works for white notes:

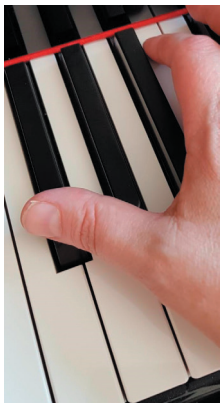


And, for certain repertoire, playing 'in the crack' might be a practical alternative:



Two fingers playing the same note can have a real impact on certain passages, carrying more weight and drama, and the thumb is also able to support the other fingers creating a deep, rich sound.

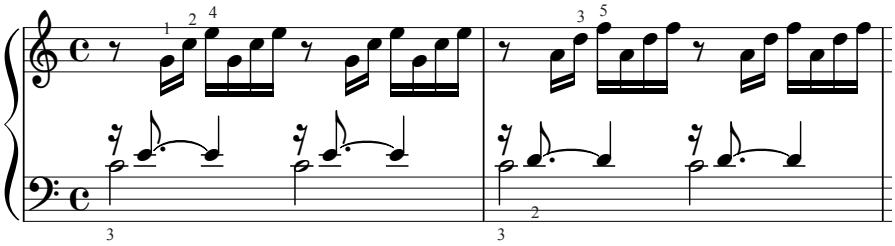
The thumb might also be extended slightly when playing back notes, therefore avoiding mishaps involving slipping off or missing notes:



Fingers have their own character and personality, and, again, this is a very personal element when considering how fingering might be applied to a passage. As a general rule, the thumb and possibly the third finger appear stronger than the others, perhaps due to their positioning on the hand. We aim to encourage students to 'strengthen' their fingers, but realistically everyone's hand is different, and this applies to finger strength as well. I ask students to examine their fingers, observing how they work at the keyboard, deciphering

which they feel is the strongest or most powerful. Once then have done this, they are in a better position to work at instigating a more secure technique; developing power in the fourth and fifth fingers especially. However, this must be done with great care, using flexibility in the wrist, arm and hand so as not to cause tension issues.

Finger pedalling is a topic which must be mentioned here. It's not pedalling as we know it, but it does create a similar effect, as if depressing the sustaining (or right) pedal. The technique of finger pedalling is essentially the over-holding of notes i.e. holding down the keys whilst continuing to play other notes over the top (or underneath). This was a popular technique used for the harpsichord and other early keyboard instruments before the pedal was invented, and as a result it is often synonymous with Baroque music. Before the sustaining pedal (which was implemented from approximately W.A. Mozart's time onwards), holding down the keys was the only way of sustaining the sound. The excerpt below is a well-known example:



Here, the two lower notes in J. S. Bach's *Prelude in C major* (No. 1 from the *Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues* Book 1), are held, as the top line (played by the right hand) plays the melodic material. This example has been 'written in', but it's often the case that a player must use their own artistic judgement when employing this technique.

Fingering can have quite an impact on tonal balance. A suitable fingering will enhance chordal balance, and will allow melody lines to come to the forefront of the texture. Guided practice is required when voicing any chord; whilst firm fourth and fifth fingers are generally a prerequisite for melodic playing in the right hand, much suppleness in the wrist and hand will be necessary behind this firmness, supported by the Bridge position or the knuckles. Where possible, it can be practical to introduce the thumb for melodic material, even if it involves much movement around the keyboard.

Finally, if we can guide students to think about fingering before the learning process begins, they will become aware of the fundamental impact this can have on their learning capacity.

"using the thumb on black keys is now regarded as acceptable

Melanie Spanswick is a pianist, teacher, writer and composer. Her two-book piano course ***Play it again: PIANO*** *has recently been published by Schott Music, and is intended for those returning to the piano after a break. Books 3 and 4 of this successful series will be published during 2019. www.melaniespanswick.com*