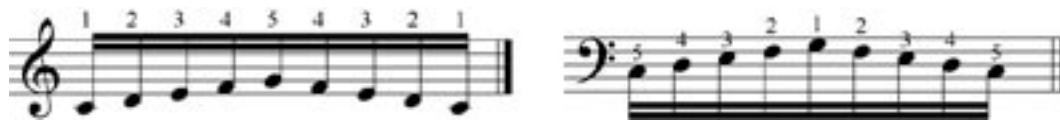


Introduction

This book presents a practical and effective technique to help pianists to improve passagework. The goal is to play with ease and with control over the finest dynamic shadings in even the fastest passagework. This will create the preconditions for playing passagework in an expressive manner in all musical styles.

The Golden Fingers Technique uses a simple basic sequence and scales in all tonalities to arrive at a series of tangibly interlinked, disciplined postures and movements and to achieve subtle tension regulation of muscles in passagework.

The basic sequence used in this book is as follows:



The basic sequence

The limitation of material involved in concentrating on the basic sequence allows the player to focus clearly on acquiring a refined balance and coordination of the fingers, hand, wrist and arm. This makes it possible to eliminate undesirable muscle stress and muscle imbalance, the overuse of the same muscle groups (agonists), combined with underuse of the opposing muscle groups (antagonists), and so achieve free and natural passagework.

Two matters - developing a healthy basic muscle tone and acquiring complete control over dynamics in passagework - are closely connected to a functional approach.

The functional approach of The Golden Fingers Technique is based on effectiveness, efficiency and logic of postures, movements and muscle activity. The aim of this functional approach is purely to execute passagework with ease, in a simple, calm and natural manner, as the basis for the most refined tone control. The economical and effective use of postures and movements paves the way for an effortless technique for passagework.

Piano books with finger exercises, especially dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are popular material for pianists who want to improve their finger dexterity. Much use is made, for example, of the finger exercises of Charles-Louis Hanon (1819-1900). These exercises are usually no more than variants of the basic sequence:



Exercise 1 from 'The Virtuoso Pianist', Hanon

The way in which such exercises are played is vital. If such finger exercises are played without paying sufficient attention to posture and movement habits they might on a superficial level lead to higher finger speed but will also increase the risk of more stress in the hand and arm.

M.F. Alexander (1869-1955), the inventor of the Alexander technique, observed that people tend to make more movements than necessary. He was referring to movement habits in general, but the point is certainly also true for the movements one makes when playing the piano. On the level of the motor activity of the fingers, Berkhout spoke of 'an uncontrolled reflex movement'. Controlling the basic sequence by making conscious, well coordinated and disciplined movements will increase the impact of these standard motor exercises, so that they can contribute far more purposefully to efforts to improve technique, particularly at motor level.

Four aims are dealt with in four sections.

The first aim is to discipline the fingers, hand, wrist and arm on a bio-mechanical level. One of the results is the correct basic tone of the arm muscles.

In practice this often means eliminating agitation from the actions of the fingers, hand, wrist and arm. Often it also involves remedying unsatisfactory muscle tone and a defective set of blueprints of movements. This is because 'despite constant practice, many pianists' hands move inefficiently' (Berkhout, p. 34). Fatigue, tension and pain are symptoms of uncoordinated, inefficient finger, wrist and arm movements. If ignored, it is not uncommon for bad posture and movement habits, in the long term, to have a damaging effect on technique: they may lead to chronic physical problems, as well as producing bad musical and expressive results.

The second aim is to play dynamic shadings in passagework with ease. The ability to play a single beautiful note is one thing. Quite a different skill is required in order to have complete control over the refined use of dynamics in rapid passagework rather than remaining at the primitive level of purely mechanical playing. This is a skill which can be specifically learned: there is no mystery about it.

Playing with expression is often accompanied by unconscious, inappropriate movements and muscle activity, causing unintended and undesirable muscle tension. In order to avoid this, first of all the correct technical execution of basically simple dynamics has to be learned, using consciously functional postures, movements and muscle activity.

The third aim is to play a scale efficiently. A highly disciplined scale technique provides the best basis for playing with the finest dynamic shades.

Scales are often played with superfluous wrist and arm movements and careless use of the thumb, which disturbs the fine posture and movement balance. The fact that students tend to make such mistakes shows that playing a scale is not an action which comes naturally. Eliminating superfluous movement begins with awareness of these mistakes. The reward for good disciplined practice is a fluent scale technique, which has overcome all the tricks and half-solutions.

The fourth aim - a twofold one - is to play passagework in the most subtle and expressive-sounding manner and to apply The Golden Fingers Technique to pieces of music.

One of the tasks is to play pieces expressively while remaining aware of body activity. Old ineffective playing habits are always liable to reassert themselves when learning a new technique. It is best to start the integration process with simple though lyrical technical repertoire. Studies in the tradition of Czerny can be approached with fine nuances of tone and dynamic shades, and in this respect they are more advanced than Hanon exercises. It is also necessary to play repertoire which calls for more subtle shading and tone colours - such as Debussy's piano music - in order to develop a high degree of sensitivity of touch.

These four central aims are dealt with in four sections.

Section A: The building blocks of passagework: motor activity

The foundations are consolidated by first concentrating primarily on effective and functional postures and movements when practising the basic sequence. New functional postures and movements for the fingers, hand, wrist and arm are designed to restore and recognise the natural muscle tone of both coarse and fine motor activity. *The Three Golden Fingers Exercises*, designed for the development of finger dexterity, are the starting point for a challenging technical journey.

Not uncommonly, students have built up some kind of subtle stress in their muscles, often without being clearly aware of it. The importance of working purely at posture and movement in order to develop a proper functioning set of blueprints cannot be emphasised enough.

The aim of the training in piano technique is to build up an effective set of blueprints, so that your body becomes an instrument through which musical intentions can be transmitted optimally. An effective set of blueprints for piano-playing is created by establishing postures and movements fully and precisely so that the central and peripheral nervous systems work together in the best possible way. In the process, it is important to ensure that postures and movements require the minimum of effort and energy, so that the sensory and motor system can develop and be used in a refined way.

Section B: The transformation of passagework: dynamic shades

Combining disciplined arm and finger activity will develop the ability to play fast passages with dynamic shading. A natural application and understanding of fixation and relaxation will reveal undesirable muscle tension. This technique of fixation is learned both in a functional biomechanical way and in a musical context by using the technique of 'tonisation', where the degree of muscle fixation is carefully harmonised with the fluctuating intensity of the music. Instructions will be provided for fine muscle control.

Playing the basic sequence with a natural crescendo and diminuendo is an important aid to good listening. The aim is to do this without allowing the continuity of the sound to be disturbed.

Section C: The backbone of passagework: scales

Although these may be reduced to two essential points, there are no fewer than eleven principles which must be respected in order to play a scale perfectly. They constitute the essentials of passagework. The purpose of learning to play scales is to attain dexterity in longer passages over several octaves. Refined economy of movements will then ensure that control over dynamics can be maintained.

Section D: Mastery of passagework

The technique of playing dynamics with expression will be developed on the basis of natural, simple and efficient movements. The aim is a 'sublimated technique'. Once the basic principles of posture and movements have been mastered and the right muscle tone has been achieved, alternative technical habits can be explored, so long as the aim is to play a piece of music with the right sound and intensity. Cultivation of tone quality and expression go hand in hand.

Practising the exercises in this book is likely to reveal some hidden interdependency of fingers, wrist and arm. These interdependencies usually conceal muscle stress and are easily overlooked. Eliminating them is an important investment of time and effort. Then the fingers, wrist and arm can collaborate and interact with greater freedom and without tension patterns. This book contains 141 exercises and many photographs designed to achieve these aims.

The core of The Golden Fingers Technique comprises four topics.

- 1 The attack function of the fingers
- 2 The arm-support function of the fingers
- 3 The full arm weight
- 4 Graduated use of the arm weight

This book directly links these topics, bringing together physical technique and mental awareness and enabling pianists to remedy shortcomings in their technique. Integration of these four topics will cure and avoid injuries and at the same time develop optimum skills for technical and musical use in piano pieces. This makes this book suitable for teachers, students and performing pianists.

Such subjects as legato, staccato and phrasing are practised with the aim of further refinement of the collaboration of the fingers and arm.

Ample attention is devoted to the thumb, a topic which is generally underestimated in discussions of piano technique. The aim is to unlock the full potential of the thumb and to identify its bad habits by distinguishing the free thumb from the limited functioning of the hyper-extended thumb.

The function of the wrist is carefully examined, for example in relation to fingerwork.

These topics are not only important when playing the basic sequence or a scale but are also applicable in all manner of technical and musical situations.

A technical foundation based on an inconsistent approach or using bits of different methods can lead to an unclear and fragmented set of blueprints. This is fertile ground for injuries. Using other technical approaches can be successful if the basic set of blueprints of The Golden Fingers Technique has been clearly and consistently adopted. Where injuries are concerned, a distinction is made between *specific and aspecific CANS*. CANS (Complaints of Arm, Neck and/or Shoulder) is a complex of complaints (a syndrome) which involves pain in the neck, shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, hands or fingers, or, in technical terms, the 'upper extremities'.

The pragmatic aim of this book is to enable the arm and fingers to function better so that students can play the piano with greater ease, improve their technical and expressive skills and overcome physical limitations. In addition, this will prevent injuries. Control, analysis and discipline will lead to an art of playing which feels free and relaxed. Movements will once again become instinctive, but different from the original untrained and unruly instinctive movements due to the process of conscious study and attainment of maximum efficiency. Ultimately the result should be pure music-making. This in fact is the higher aim of this book: to help you on your way towards mastery of your instrument, towards the attainment of effortless musical and technical virtuosity.

The purpose of the rest of this General Introduction is to indicate how The Golden Fingers Technique is to be learned. It is important to do the exercises as attentively as possible in order to remain consistent and avoid adopting a lax attitude. At what speed can one work through the various Chapters? What is the best balance between learning movements with feeling and understanding?