

## PREFACE

*The Craft of Piano Playing* presents a new approach to piano technique based on the innate structure and function of the human hand. Published in book form 2003, it was followed in 2006 by the DVD version. Each chapter of this Study Guide contains a

- section summary
- list of key themes
- concordance of thematic links between the DVD, the book, and my second volume on piano technique, *Honing the Pianistic Self Image: Skeletal Based Piano Technique* (to be published later in 2009)
- list of sample study questions
- list of suggested additional reading (some chapters only).

In Serbia, where much of *The Craft of Piano Playing* was developed and written, university examinations look very different from what we are used to in the West. The student receives a list of 20 to 80 questions beforehand that cover the entire body of material studied through the semester. At the exam, the student draws three of the questions from a hat and must answer those three. The sample questions included here are designed to make the student really think about the material, not just spew back memorized information. Thus the teacher is free to use these questions on an exam even though the student may have already read this study guide. If the questions are answered well, it means the student knows his or her stuff!

The student is encouraged to be flexible in her or his use of the Guide. You don't need to stick strictly to the 13-week plan; feel free to jump ahead or back and browse sections that are specially relevant to you. For instance, try skimming through week 3, *Legato*, while you are still familiarizing yourself with the introductory background principles. Or if you feel saturated with information on the physical, why not take a break and browse one

of the sections on musical content? And of course, going back to review material already covered never hurts...

*Reader participation in 'product development'*

I am hopeful that readers will participate in the development of future editions: if you notice questions arising in your own mind that you don't find here in the book, please formulate and submit them for inclusion in the next version of the Study Guide. This holds as well for *related reading*, a category that would have been more comprehensive and exact if I had had time to do the extensive research needed.

*Musical example substitutions*

I even propose an entire new category for some future edition: many pianists have asked for examples from the repertoire for each application that don't present quite so much a challenge as *Feux Follets* and the Rachmaninoff *C minor Concerto* etc. I would like to develop an extensive list of possible substitutions and to that end I invite you to start keeping a catalogue. When you come across some relatively easy passage, whether in your own work or especially in your work with less advanced students, that seems to fit particularly well to a certain application, make a note of it and eventually pass it along.

Make your submissions at

[www.craftofpiano.com/future-edition-reader-viewer-submissions](http://www.craftofpiano.com/future-edition-reader-viewer-submissions).

As *The Craft of Piano Playing* goes into its second edition, I sincerely hope this slim companion volume helps you to even greater success in applying its ideas, offering you an ever-increasing pianistic richness and an evermore satisfying musical expressive life.

*Alan Fraser*  
*January 2009, Novi Sad, Serbia*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	v
Week 1: Introduction to Some Key Concepts.....	1
Week 2: Piano Technique and Movement.....	5
Week 3: Legato: The Physical Foundation of Piano Technique.....	9
Week 4: The Special Role of the Thumb.....	13
Week 5: Octaves and Chords.....	17
Week 6: The Role of the Arm.....	19
Week 7: Rotation.....	21
Week 8: Natural Finger Shape & Some Other Touch Strategies.....	23
Week 9: Musical Entasis – Rhythm.....	27
Week 10: Musical Entasis – Phrasing.....	31
Week 11: Musical Entasis – Orchestration; Thematic Review.....	35
Week 12: Maximal Articulation.....	39
Week 13: Emotional & Spiritual Content in Piano Playing.....	43
Answers to Questions (Selected).....	47
Bibliography.....	51

## WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO SOME KEY CONCEPTS

### TABLE KEY:

**Film** – *The Craft of Piano Playing* video

**Book I** – *The Craft of Piano Playing* book

**Book II** – *Honing the Pianistic Self Image*

<b>Film</b>	<b>Book I</b>	<b>Book II</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Introduction</li><li>· Chapter 1, i</li><li>· Chapter 2</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Section I</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Section I</li></ul>

### Summary:

The introduction presents the thesis of *The Craft of Piano Playing*, that a new approach to piano technique is needed in order to codify the secrets of physical organization that allowed the great masters of the past to play with exceptional richness of sound and emotional expression. Certain new discoveries about the nature of human movement are discussed, and related to piano technique in a preliminary way. Some strategies as to how to use the book are suggested. A justification for focusing primarily on physical issues of technique is offered.

***Key Themes:***

- 1) We cannot play *like* Horowitz; we aim to play *as well* as he did, by understanding on the deepest level the inner workings of his supernatural physical ability.
- 2) Everything you *do*, *sounds*.
- 3) the Background: the emotional and dramatic content of music
- 4) the Middleground: musical paradigms such as phrase, rhythm, articulation and orchestration – the musical tools we use to create emotional tone in sound
- 5) the Foreground: the physical organization needed to produce sounds possessing these qualities
- 6) *Do* the exercises if you want to get value from the book – just reading about them will not help your hand develop its ability.

***Film Questions***

- 1) Construct a working definition of *skeletality*.
- 2) What key idea of skeletality finds its expression in our way of standing vertical in the field of gravity?
- 3) How do various styles of walking correlate to styles of moving one's hands on the keyboard?

***Book I Questions***

- 1) What are the three stages of evolutionary learning as described by Moshe Feldenkrais?
- 2) Who best exemplifies the benchmark in pianistic ability that we aim to develop, and what were the outstanding elements of his technique?
- 3) Name a key element of the background level of musical craft, and describe how best to invoke that element.
- 4) Name and describe briefly four key elements of musical rhetoric.
- 5) Name three more key elements of the middleground level of musical craft.
- 6) Name five key elements of the foreground physical aspects of piano technique.
- 7) What is the relationship between physical ability and musical expression?
- 8) Why is it important to return to the basics of movement in piano technique, and why is it important to place one's primary focus on the physical aspects of technique?
- 9) When is it important to reduce effort in doing the exercises?

***Book II Questions***

- 1) What makes the human body different from any non-living machine form of locomotion?

***Related Reading:***

**Reginald Gerig, *Great Pianists & Their Technique*** (Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1974)

*For a survey of past schools of piano technique, Gerig has written what is basically the bible: this is recommended as a primary resource throughout the semester.*

**Moshe Feldenkrais, *Awareness Through Movement*** (Harper & Row, New York 1977)

**Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self*** (Harper & Row, San Francisco 1985)

*Feldenkrais's ideas suffuse much of *The Craft of Piano Playing*, and greater familiarity with this source can only help one's grasp of their application to piano technique.*

**Matthias Alexander, *The Use of Self*** (Dutton, New York 1932)

*Many of Feldenkrais's key concepts are rooted in *Alexander Technique*, thus this earlier masterwork is another important reference.*

Finally, a course of weekly or twice-weekly lessons in Feldenkrais *Awareness Through Movement* (ATM) lessons, *Functional Integrations* (FI) lessons, and/or Alexander Technique lessons will give the student crucial practical insight into the movement principles underlying this approach to piano technique.

## WEEK 3: LEGATO: THE PHYSICAL FOUNDATION OF PIANO TECHNIQUE

<i><b>Film</b></i> · <i>Chapter 2</i>	<i><b>Book I</b></i> · <i>Section III</i>	<i><b>Book II</b></i> · <i>Sections II chaps. 3, 4, 5, 6</i> · <i>Section III chaps. 10, 15</i>
--	--	---

### *Summary:*

The physical and musical benefits of a true legato touch are discussed in detail; it is shown why a true physical legato affords the pianist the greatest capability in making the piano really sing. The acoustical physics of legato are discussed – how the blending of tones fools the ear into thinking that a percussive instrument, made of keys, hammers and strings, really is singing.

***Key Themes:***

- 1) The integrity of the hand's arch structure is the basis for a healthy legato.
- 2) The reverse also holds: true legato touch is the basis for good hand arch function. If one really overlaps the holding of the keys to create a physical legato, his or her hand arch structure will be empowered.
- 3) The hand's arch structure forms naturally as the fingers stand and walk on the keyboard. The hand is like a mini-pelvis, the metacarpal-phalangeal joints like hip joints.
- 4) Overholding several keys at once in a melodic line brings to light the hidden weak points where your hand's arch inadvertently loses its potency.

***Film & Book I Questions:***

- 1) How is T'ai Chi walking similar to a true legato touch on the keyboard?
- 2) Describe 'fingerstands' (and 'thumbstands') and explain why they are such a potent preparatory exercise for the development of a true physical legato.
- 3) Describe the fundamental differentiation between the functions of the standing and moving fingers in legato – what is the nature of *yin* and *yang* in pianistic walking?
- 4) What are the four points of the tetrahedron that form when the fingers' true legato manifests the hand's natural arch shape?
- 5) Is a true physical legato felt only at the fingertip?

***Additional Book I Questions:***

- 1) What major writer about piano technique especially emphasized the importance of legato touch? (chapter 3)
- 2) How does he describe the sonic beauty of a true melodic legato? (chapter 3)
- 3) Why is overholding called the ‘Sherlock Holmes’ of practice techniques? (chapter 12)
- 4) Why is it easier to cultivate the smooth legato joining of notes when the thumb is not involved? (chapter 12)
- 5) Is overholding merely a practice technique or something you can do in performance as well? (chapter 12)
- 6) How should the arm most effectively support the fingers’ overholding? (chapter 12)
- 7) Describe the ‘which came first, the chicken or the egg’ phenomenon in the relationship of hand and arm in overholding. (chapter 12)

***Book II Questions:***

- 1) When the hand stands on its four fingers without the thumb, how should the top knuckles of the second and fifth fingers relate to each other? Should one be higher than the other or should they be equal in height? Why? (chapter 5)

## WEEK 13: EMOTIONAL & SPIRITUAL CONTENT IN PIANO PLAYING

<i>Film</i>	<i>Book I</i>	<i>Book II</i>
· <i>Chapter 7 – vii</i> · <i>Chapter 8 – viii</i>	· <i>Section XIII</i> · <i>Section XIV</i>	· <i>Section VI</i>

### *Summary:*

Emotions are the heart of musical expression, but musical craftsmanship dictates that performers must not lose their *self* when they *appear* to be losing themselves in the music. The more one has mastered all the elements of one's musical craft, the more one can let oneself go totally, *without* losing that essential sense of centeredness, of awareness, of a core that remains an entity unto itself even while the music expresses the widest possible gamut of emotions and characters.

***Key Themes:***

A player focused on his own emotional experience is distracted from the sounds he is producing. A melody will speak more profoundly when the interpreter listens for the emotions inherent in the vibrational frequencies of the notes themselves.

***Film Questions:***

- 1) Why does listening occupy pride of place in the pianist's technical approach?
- 2) Why must the physical aspects of technique eventually be "forgotten," in the words of one great Canadian pianist?

***Book I Questions:***

- 1) How can wise orchestration in polyphony enhance not only colour and sonority but also emotional expression?
- 2) Why must all melodies not be played with a similar expressive strategy? What gives each melody unique expressive possibilities?
- 3) Discuss aspects of the process that gives an interpretation emotional depth instead of a merely superficial expressiveness.
- 4) Describe what happens physically when emotions get in the way of musical expression instead of enhancing it.

***Book II Questions:***

- 1) What is the relationship of listening to physical sensation in the body?
- 2) How can exactitude of touch enhance your ability to produce 'terraced dynamics,' a truly differentiated, orchestrated sound, at the keyboard?
- 3) What constitutes the sensuous beauty of a truly legato melody, and what writer waxed especially poetic about this phenomenon?
- 4) Why is it dangerous to feel emotions so intensely that you lose touch with physical sensation and listening as you play?
- 5) What perceptual process can lead you to the most profound expression of music's emotion?

***Related Reading:***

**James Francis Cooke: *Great Pianists on Piano Playing***

*Especially chapters 7, 14, 16, 21.*

## ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS (SELECTED)

### WEEK 1:

#### *Film & Book I Questions*

- 1 – natural, individual and methodical
- 2 – Vladimir Horowitz
- 3 – “tell a story”
- 4 – long notes longer, short notes shorter, entasis, melodic inflection, rhythmic inflection (syncopation).
- 5 – pulse, legato, orchestration (basic sound).
- 6 – single finger structure & function, thumb strength & independence, the arches of the hand, the arm’s supportive role, rotation.

### WEEK 2:

#### *Book I Question:*

- 1 – improved hearing, improved sensing, improved feeling & understanding