

Pianimals Pointers

Quick Solutions to Basic Problems in Beginning Piano Technique

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Problem	Solution	Exercise
<i>Weak hand arch</i>	'The Monster' – draw the flat fingertips towards the heel	Baseline (TM 2, 8, 27)
<i>Arm too tense, too rigid</i>	Float a loose arm; float the finger into the key	Variation 1 (TM 1, 8, 12, 15)
<i>Thumb too tense, too curled, too high</i>	Oppose thumb to fingers; straighten thumb to engage all of it – especially the metacarpal bone	Variation 2 (TM 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)
<i>Hand doesn't stand</i>	Grow the hand's arch: 'grasp' to stand the hand on key	Variation 3 (TM 10, 27)
<i>Finger loses structure when it tries to move</i>	Slide to evoke a taut feeling in the finger – a <i>bit</i> closer to stiff than to limp.	Variation 4 (TM 8)
<i>Weak, wobbly, crumpling finger</i>	Poke the keys to enhance finger structure alignment	Variation 5 (TM 3, 6, 7, 16)
<i>Arch collapses when pupil 'walks' on key</i>	Transfer the weight from one firmly-standing finger to another	Variation 6 (TM 8, 21, 27)
<i>Phrase plods note by note</i>	Walk smoothly – combine finger standing, hand rolling, and lateral arm movements	Variation 7 (TM 5, 11, 14, 18, 19, 24)
<i>Awkward leaping from key to key</i>	Hop – use finger power to leap with alacrity	Variation 8 (TM 25, 26)
<i>Lack of agility in position shifts</i>	Lie down & roll – preparation for large leaps	Variation 9 (TM 5, 18)
<i>Weak fingertips</i>	Hook the fingertip	Variation 10 (TM 28)
<i>Inactive curling</i>	Flick the fingertip under to 'turbo-charge' the hooking motion	Variation 11 (TM 4, 28)
<i>Hand arch collapses when playing</i>	Overhold – the classic 5-finger exercise	Variation 12 (TM 23)

A developmental approach

The Pianimals Method approaches piano technique from a developmental point of view, with lessons for the hand that help it lie down, stand up, walk, run and jump on the keys as if it were a child learning to do the same.

Pianimals Pointers presents the most frequently used of these in bullet form with copious photo illustrations, helping the studio teacher perceive, address and solve technical problems in a jiffy.

Keep this handbook near the piano, and use the chart opposite to zero in on your pupil's difficulty. Take them through the exercise, and notice the immediate improvement!

'TM' numbers refer to the equivalent lessons in the Teachers Manual.

A



The Basic Exercise: Arch Creation

Improve a weak hand arch – TM 2, 8, 27

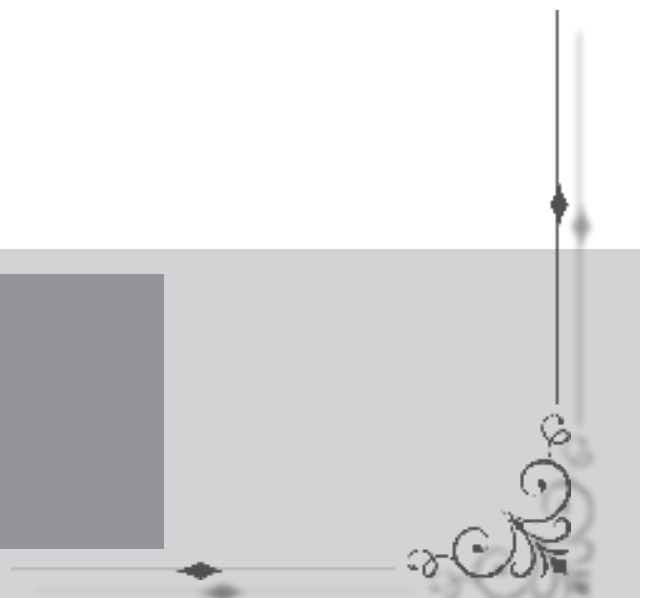
Think of the prone, flat hand as a sleeping swamp monster. Sense the slightest possible internal grasping impulse, felt more than seen, signalling that he may be waking up... Grasp so slightly that there's no visible movement, but your contact with the table increases in intensity... little by little... increase the intensity further... ever-so-gradually... by grasping more... making the MCP joint rise in millimeter increments... each time just a little bit more... Take twenty or more tries to bring the hand into a triangle shape, the base of which is the flat thumb.

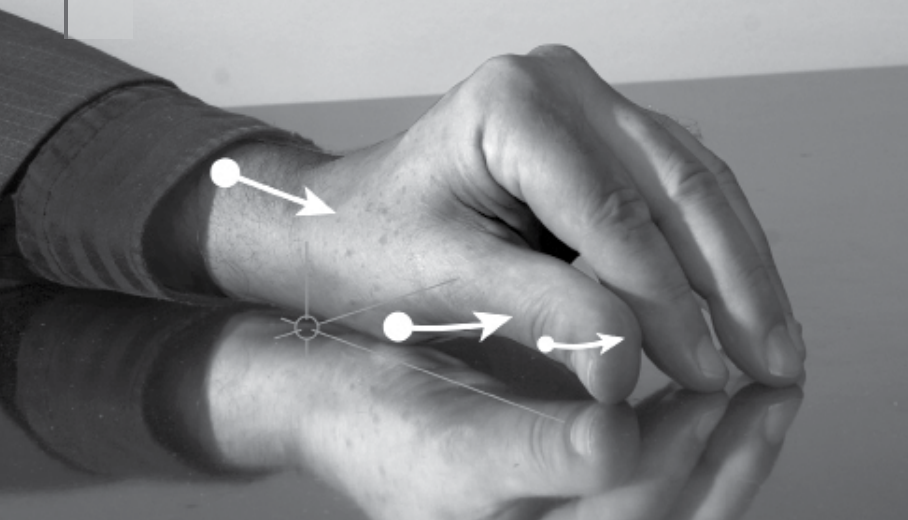
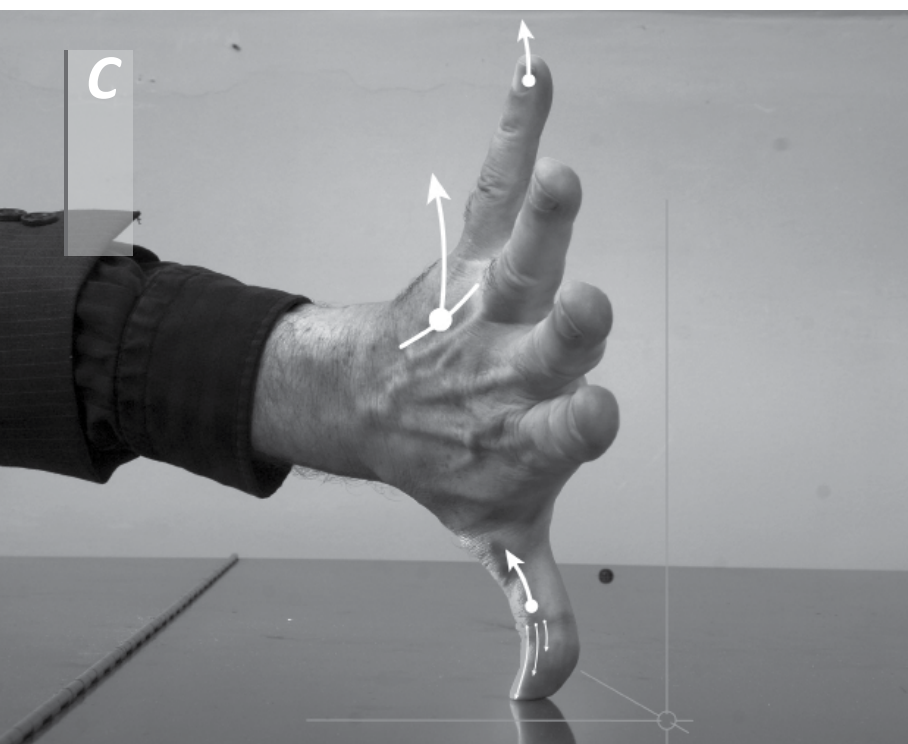
Bring this same incremental approach to the following steps:

- ◇ Place the hand palm down on a table top.
- ◇ Leave the heel where it is and, keeping the fingers straight, slide the fingertips towards the heel while drawing the straight thumb towards the fingertips to create a triangle shape. Sense internally the power and moveability of the resulting arch structure (Series A).
- ◇ For a richer kinesthetic experience of the same, place one palm on top of the other – use the other hand as the table top. Stimulate the undersides and insides of both the active and passive hands (Series B).

Grow a thumb-finger-hand triangle:

- A) on a table top
- B) against the other hand palm to palm



A**B****C****D**

Variation 2: Empower the thumb

*Resolve a tense thumb that is held up to the inside and curled –
TM 7, 8, 9, 10, 11*

A tensely lifted or overly bent thumb denotes a digit divorced from its function. The thumb just makes matters worse when it lifts to try to help the fingers – it usurps their power.

The thumb *can* help the fingers stand on their own, if it stands on *its* own: *under* the hand. The thumb empowers the fingers by *opposing* them.

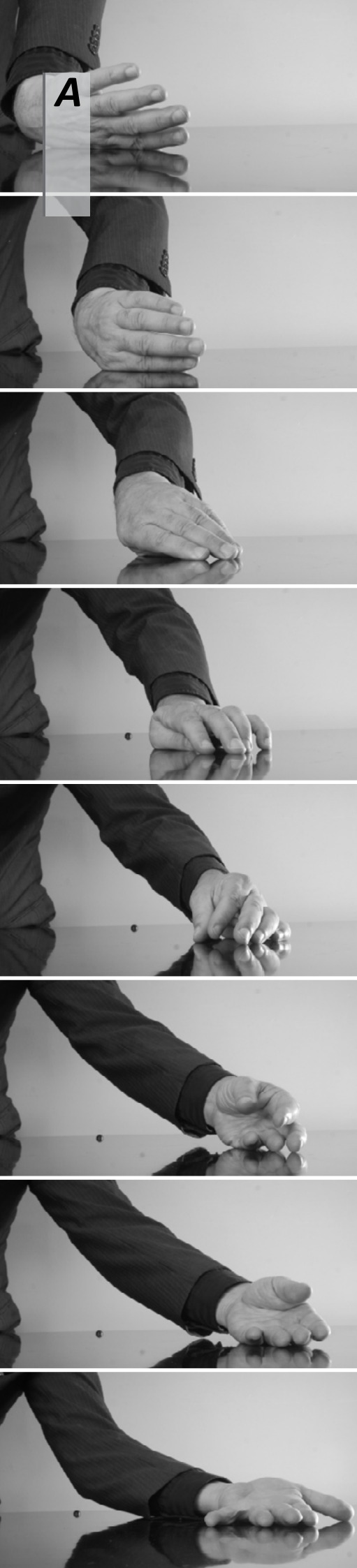
- ◊ **Heel slide:** In the basic palm down position, create a basic triangle not by drawing the fingertips toward the heel but by sliding the straight thumb and heel *forward* towards the finger pads which remain glued to the table top (Photo A). It's the basic grasping action with a different internal initiation. As usual, the fingers remain straight.
- ◊ **Hand roll:** Get the straight thumb even farther under the hand by rolling the hand over the thumb to the inside as the thumb is drawing itself under (Photo B).
- ◊ **Thumb pushup:** from position B, '*reverse oppose*' the thumb. Push it down into the table top, such that it pushes the hand up into the air. Separate the hand from the standing thumb, spreading the fingers as high as possible (Photo C).
- ◊ **Thumb-finger walking:** Stand on the straight thumb with the fingers tightly curled. Slowly open the fingers high, arching them up, out, and eventually down to stand them on key, creating a finger/thumb arch structure (Series D). Create the arch with all the fingers together, some of them, or any single finger. Stand more and more on the finger(s) until finally the thumb comes off its key to hang closer to the fingers. Rock back onto the thumb to recreate the arch, then stand on the thumb to bring the fingers back up into a fist. Rock like this between the standing finger(s) and standing thumb many times.

Thumb power!

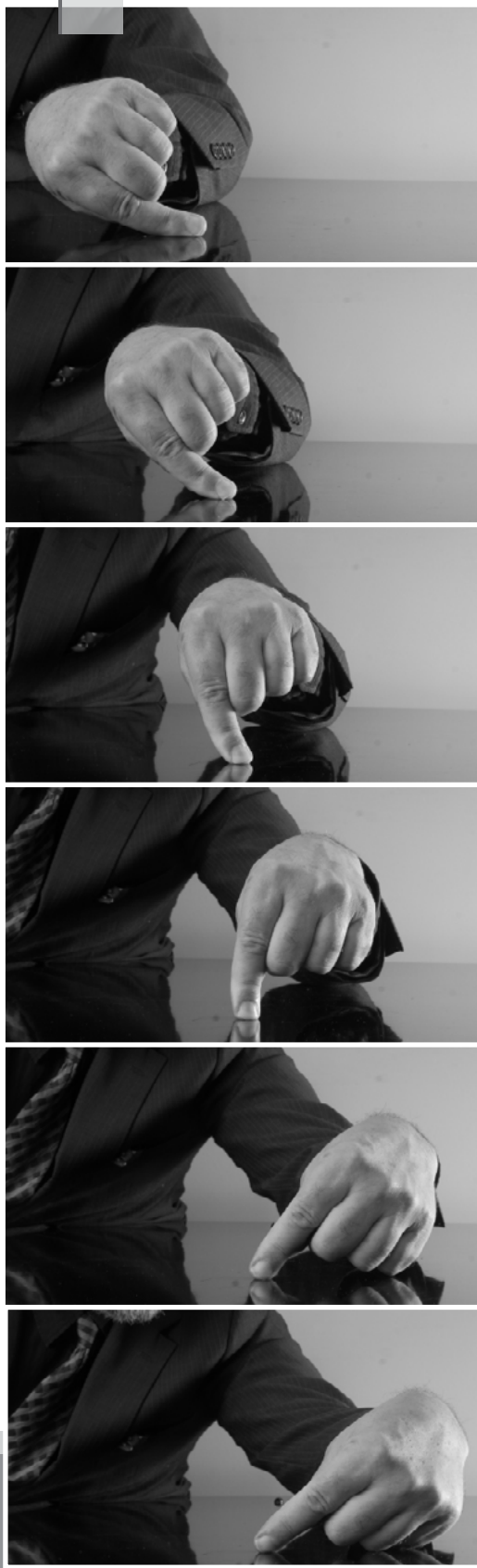
- A) Slide heel forward to form a triangle
- B) Roll the hand onto the thumb
- C) Separate hand from thumb – thumb pushup
- D) Stand on thumb, uncurl fingers, stand on finger



A



B



C



Variation 7: Roll on key

*Increase rotation in the lateral forearm movement –
TM 5, 11, 14, 18, 19, 24*

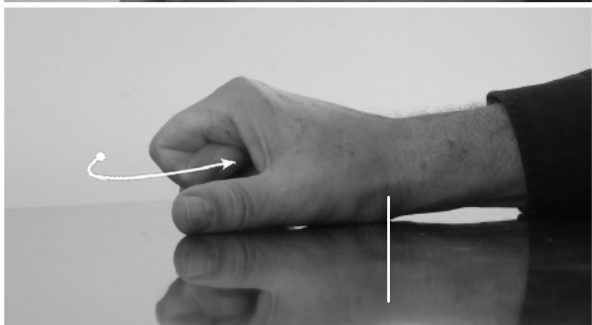
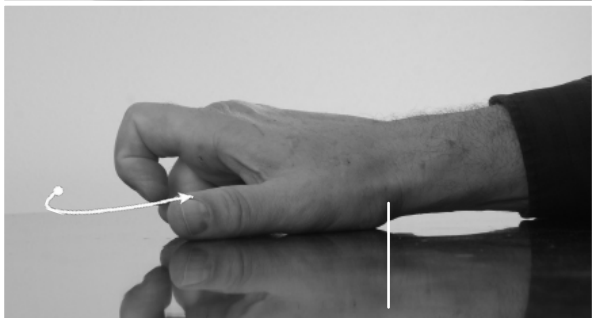
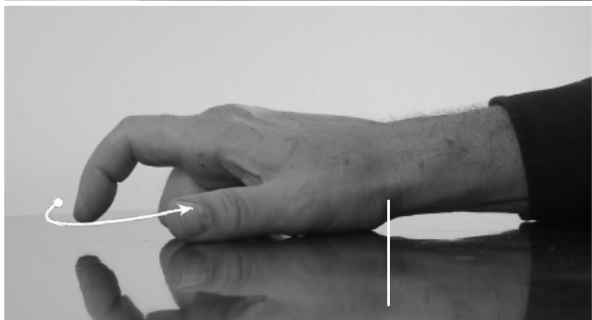
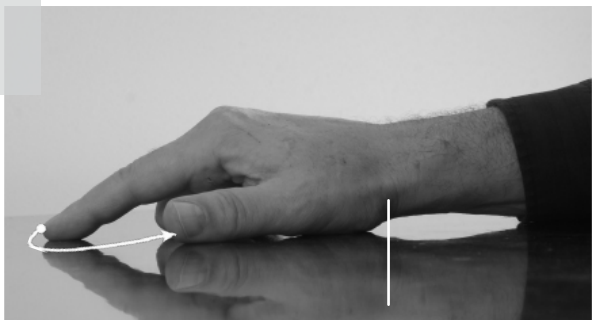
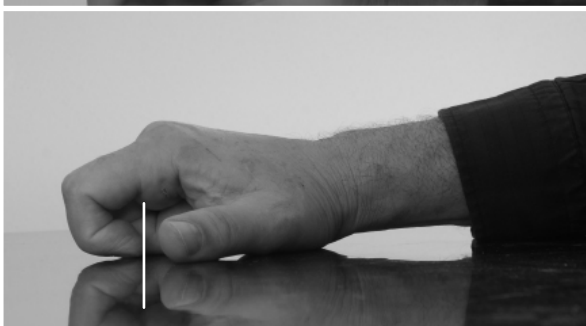
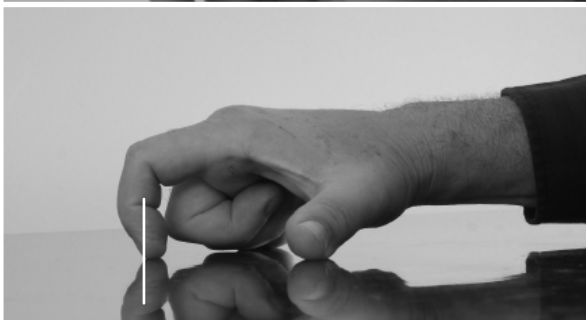
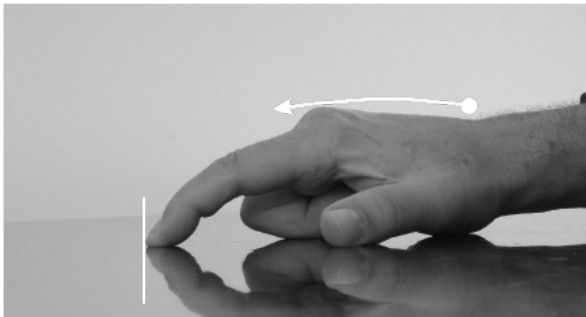
A further exploration of lateral arm movement with more rotation added to the mix, in two contrasting modes:

- sensitization
 - structuralization.
-
- ◇ Flop the hand on a table top. Roll it right and left like a hibernating bear. Pronate and supinate as far as you can comfortably. How far does the forearm move to the inside and outside? Don't lead with the elbow; leave it neutral in the middle (Series A).
 - ◇ Stand on the bird beak hand. Move the arm to the inside and outside as far as you can comfortably. Tilt the bird beak this way and that to an extreme angle, but don't fall (Series B).
 - ◇ Stand on a thumb–5th hand arch. Sway sideways between them. *Exaggerate* the sway, moving the arm well to the outside of the 5th and far to the inside of the thumb – first on the table, then on key. Again, don't lead with the elbow (Series C).
 - ◇ Walk the same way between thumb and any other finger, and finally between two fingers.

Rock 'n roll

- A) Roll the hand like a hibernating bear
- B) Sway the arm on a standing bird beak
- C) Walk like a 'bow-legged cowboy coyote' between thumb & 5th



A**B**

Variation 11: Do a ‘cat scratch’

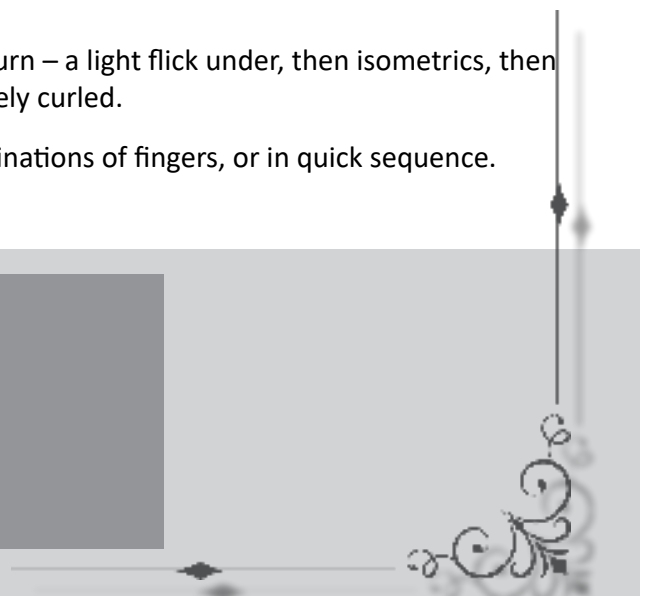
Activate the nail joint more vigorously & lightly – TM 4, 28

From a sensitized, subtle distal flexion, develop a more robust, quick, integrated nail joint flexion.

- ◇ Lay the hand on a table top, 3rd, 4th and 5th fingers curled loosely into the palm. Point the relaxed 2nd forward, and quickly curl it, flicking the tip under so it slaps the palm. Flick lightly and ultra-quickly (Series A).
- ◇ In the same position, glue the 2nd fingertip to the table top. Very gently and slowly try the same flicking motion. The fingertip is now blocked. It cannot move. Sense the resulting pull through the entire arm. Don't let the arm slide: internalize the curling effort, make it isometric. Although the main effort is in the distal joint, sense all three finger joints trying to curl. Don't let the MCP joint sink.
- ◇ Glue the fingertip again and gently pull with the nail joint, now allowing the hand and arm to slide toward the fingertip. Still leave hand and arm passive; make the fingertip feel its right work. Ensure that all three finger joints still flex (Series B).
- ◇ Quickly flick the tip under again. Does it work better now?
- ◇ Flick the tip under allowing the hand to “cock back” – extend the wrist. Does this make it easier for the MCP joint to stay on top?
- ◇ Repeat the cat scratch exercise with each finger in turn – a light flick under, then isometrics, then flick again – always leaving all the other fingers loosely curled.
- ◇ Do the cat scratch-isometrics-cat scratch with combinations of fingers, or in quick sequence.

The Cat Scratch

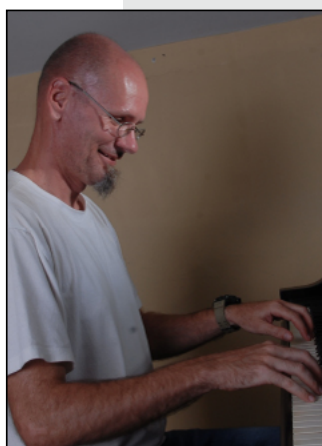
- A) flick the finger under quickly, slapping the palm lightning fast
- B) Curl the glued finger to pull the arm – gently introducing more stress – slowly



These exercises access the organic nature of movement and learning in a new way. Classic relaxation exercises or old-school finger action exercises work to isolate movements mechanically, whereas these relate each element of a movement to the whole, and the function of the whole movement to that of creating tone. Let these exercises feed your reflexes, awakening your ear as well as your fingers, hand and arm. Let them help your physical self better fulfil your musical conceptions and emotions in performance.



Canadian pianist Alan Fraser has written several books applying the Feldenkrais Method to piano technique. As a concert pianist he has performed in Canada, the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Russia, Yugoslavia/Serbia and China, and as a clinician he has presented at many music and piano conferences worldwide. In 2020 he retired from his position at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia but continues directing the *Alan Fraser Institute of Piano Somatics*, enhancing artistry by linking the physical and musical dimensions of piano performance.



Igor Peyovitch has had a long and many-faceted career as a graphic artist in Novi Sad, Serbia. For years he touched up photos and created state-of-the-art layouts for some of Yugoslavia's premier fashion and auto magazines. Then he got behind the camera, mastering photography and most recently videography. He has typeset almost all of Alan Fraser's books on piano technique, and provided the photography for the last three. His contribution to piano pedagogy has been great – but he has never had a lesson.

Deepen your *Pianimals* prowess by reading Fraser's earlier books on piano technique:

- ***The Craft of Piano Playing***: establishes potent hand structure and function.
- ***Honing the Pianistic Self-Image***: brings the hand to a state of *unstable equilibrium* to improve its movement.
- ***All Thumbs: Well-Coordinated Piano Technique***: focuses on that problematic, potentially empowering digit.
- ***Play the Piano with Your Whole Self***: lays the hand down for a pre-standing apprenticeship.
- ***Transform the Pianistic Self-Image***: integrates many previous strategies into a new gestalt.

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