

HOW TO PRACTICE ON THE PIANO: REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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How to Practice on the Piano: Reflections and Suggestions by H. Ehrlich

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H. EHRLICH

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THE PIANO: REFLECTIONS
AND SUGGESTIONS**

How to Practise on the Piano

REFLECTIONS
AND
SUGGESTIONS

BY

H. EHRLICH

WITH PRECISE DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROPER
USE OF THE
TAUSIG-EHRLICH "DAILY STUDIES"

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

J. H. CORNELL

SECOND EDITION REVISED BY

DR. TH. BAKER

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1901

HOW TO PRACTISE ON THE PIANO.

It is not, by any means, the aim of this work to set up a new Method of Piano-playing in general, or to supersede or oppose any method already established; but, on the contrary, to form a *Supplement to all methods*, and to call the attention of unprejudiced experts to a manner of *practising*, not of *executing*, which has hitherto not been attempted, and from which the author has obtained the best results. At the outset it certainly presents some difficulties; but it provides, within a short time, the surest means for the pupil's guarding against a wrong position of hand and wrist, and for unerringly regulating the various positions for the *Legato* and *Staccato*, for octaves and double trills in one hand, and also of forming a correct fingering, which is attainable, in fact, only through a correct position of the hands; precisely in this matter of teaching his pupils to finger passages for themselves, the author has obtained results which were often surprising.

Every teacher and learner has experienced how difficult it is, so to regulate the position of the fingers, hand and wrist, and of the arms, that each may act independently of the others. To attain this end, years of practice by the pupil and the unremitting attention of the teacher are often necessary. All kinds of machines, hand-guides, etc., have been invented for promoting the proper hand-position. They may do some good, but labor under this disadvantage, that the

pupil depends too much on them, so that after they are given up it is long before he can do independently what with their aid was easy enough. This independence from the very outset, without the aid of any apparatus, is what the author aims to promote. The method of practising which he here presents, renders every incorrect position of the fingers, and more especially of the wrist, and every objectionable movement of the arms, impossible *from the beginning*. It is adapted for beginners — of course with great caution and moderation; but with more advanced pupils, who have had one and a half or two years' instruction, it may be carried out strictly, with perfect confidence. Always, however, even in the case of very advanced pupils, due moderation must be strictly observed and prescribed to the pupil for practice by himself.

In presenting this method to experts, teachers and learners, the author must most emphatically declare, and will often repeat, that he submits it, not as an *authoritative* system of instruction in itself, but as an important aid to *practice*, standing in the same relation to piano-study as gymnastic exercise to the ordinary motions of daily life. Such exercise does not teach walking, dancing, graceful deportment, etc., nor does it give any particular expression to the countenance; but it nevertheless develops each single muscle of the body to such a degree as to secure perfect equilibrium, perfect co-operation of the several powers, so that the gymnast does many things with ease, which even a strong but untrained man can accomplish only with great difficulty, or not at all. The present method has this additional similarity to gymnastics, that it is really profitable only when applied in moderation and with slow motions. For gymnastic exercise

develops and strengthens the muscles, promoting health and giving great certainty in all movements ; but as soon as it is practised beyond a certain wholesome limit, exhaustion and relaxation result, often rendering its discontinuance necessary.

The method I lay down, in conjunction with the practice of the "Daily Studies" by Tausig-Ehrlich, strengthens the fingers and wrist in the highest degree, but this kind of practice should not exceed 5 to 8 minutes at first, afterwards say 10 to 15, perhaps three times daily ; otherwise, especially in the beginning, before the hands and fingers are used to the method, the pupil will become so exhausted that he may even have to give up playing for some time.

In order to acquaint himself with the physiological explanation for the peculiar consequences of his method, namely, the great fatigue at first, the unfailing success in a short time, the author applied to Professor Kronecker, director of a physiological department in the Royal University of Berlin, and Dr. Remak, private tutor in the University, requesting them to favor him with their views on the subject. They kindly gave him the information, that the movements of the muscles of the arms, wrist and fingers (like the movements of all joints) are most extraordinarily complex. Dr. Remak demonstrated to the author how every movement of a joint is dependent on the appropriate co-operation of several muscles ; furthermore, this co-operation has for its result not only that movement which outwardly appears as the one intended, but also (in the interior structure of the muscles) movements in a direction contrary to those that appear outwardly. Thus, when the pianist merely raises his finger for

the stroke, he sets in motion not only that muscle which stretches the finger-joint nearest to the hand, but also a series of other muscles which act partly in contrary motion. An enumeration and description, however incomplete, of all the muscles brought into action in piano-playing, would occupy too much space, and does not come within the scope of this work. The author will, therefore, confine himself to explaining why the particular position of the upper arm which his method prescribes produces results so extraordinary.

In piano-playing the upper arm is in so far active, that it keeps the elbow in position. But the exact and steady control of the position of the elbow and the forearm does not by any means proceed from the mere will of the player, but is the result of long habit, practice, and great watchfulness on the part of both teacher and pupil.

Holding the upper arm *free*, as recommended — and, at the proper time, quite rightly — to pianists, is, especially in the first years of study, often detrimental to a correct position of the fingers, hand and wrist, as it induces obliquity of the forearm, a bad position of the hand, and an uneven raising and lowering of the wrist — *faults* which would *escape the pupil's notice*. Such faults are, however, rendered impossible if the upper arm is, *during practice*, for a short time robbed, as it were, of its freedom of motion, and forced to maintain a fixed position. Through the contraction hereby imposed upon a part of the muscles of the upper arm, the movement of the flexors of the upper arm is also in great part prevented; the player is forced to give up the oscillating motions of the elbow, and to move only the wrist or the fingers, as may be required. That the upper arm can be

kept inactive for a considerable time, the player will best realize by pressing that member tight to the body, *holding the elbow not against the side, but more to the front*, and playing the following :



The contrary motion of the hands does not prevent the upper arms from retaining their position. Only when the passage is *extended* upward and downward, must the upper arms be freed from restraint.

From these considerations, it will be evident to the reader that the chief aim in developing mechanical skill in piano-playing must be, at the outset, to reduce to a minimum the motions of the upper and forearm, and to concentrate activity in the fingers, hand and wrist; to look after the right position of the fingers, hand and wrist, and that of the arm *at the same time*, is for pupils of the middle stage a very difficult task, seldom perfectly accomplished, and only after a long time and great painstaking. The incorrect position of the fingers, now too straight and again too much bent, causing them to touch the keys either with the middle joint, or with the nails; the turning the elbow outward, by which the position of the hand is changed every instant; the drawing the forearm forward and back, whereby the wrist is prevented from being quiet and from ever attaining to even and

regular motion; the pushing with the upper arm, which places the hand either too far back on the keyboard or too far forward;—all these are drawbacks which every one would like to be able to remove. The method now under discussion enables the pupil *in a short time* to master the chief difficulties, *to escape the danger of contracting* most of the aforesaid bad habits, and to acquire easy and sure control, during practice, over the position of the hand, wrist and arm. The extremely simple basis of this method is this, that in slowly practising all the passages that are to be played with the hand at rest, and all those in which the wrist comes in motion, but especially in practising the “Tausig-Ehrlich Daily Studies,” the upper arm should be held against, or as close as possible to, the front of the body. That this position of the upper arm is not to be rigorously observed in playing pieces more rapidly, must be stated emphatically, to avoid all misunderstanding; but experience will teach that strength will be developed in quite another way, even in more rapid playing. In order to give the arm, and thereby the fingers and wrist, the best position at the present stage, and at the same time to *exercise the most perfect control over all their movements*, the following directions should be observed.

First, lay the fingers of both hands *flat* on the keys *c e g a c*,¹ yet so that the round, fleshy part of the finger tips, but by no means the *nail*, touches the keys. The *thumb*, of course, does not lie perfectly *flat* on its key, but is turned *edge-ways*. The fingers having been thus set on the keys, the

¹ Smaller hands will have to take *c d e f g*, and here the thumbs of both hands will, of course, lie more with the outer edge on the keys.