

Warm-up exercises

In *The Rational Principles of Piano Technique*, Cortot described nine preparatory exercises. We'll consider Nos 5, 6 and 9.

Cortot recommended that Exercises 5 and 6, which are explained at length below, should be practised on a series of chords with the note value of a semibreve. The hands should be exercised together. Additionally, the exercises should be done in a new key and different part of the piano each day.

Start with your arms loosely hanging by the side of the body and then lift them directly up on to the keyboard, keeping a comfortable, relaxed space between your hands. Manshardt said that this avoids 'the somewhat cramped position of playing in the very middle of the keyboard' and that 'the movements are more easily free with the hand at whatever part of the keyboard it reaches when the hand hangs loosely at the side and is carried to the keyboard at the same longitude'.

For both exercises, begin by placing the left hand on the first five consecutive notes of the scale of C major – C-D-E-F-G below middle C (fingers 5-4-3-2-1; thumb on the G). The right hand to be placed on C-D-E-F-G above middle C (fingers 1-2-3-4-5; thumb on the C). The keys are softly depressed (at a *piano* dynamic) ensuring that the fingers are together.

Exercise No 5: Having played the chord, advance the wrist towards the piano, tipping the fingers forward so that the wrist is above the hand – then pull the wrist back towards one so that the fingers are flat on the keys'

Repeat this back-and-forth movement, which must be executed decisively and with *souplesse* (which translates as 'suppleness' or 'flexibility'), the tips of the fingers keeping their initial position on the keys, one movement per quaver at a tempo of 60 (eight back-and-forth movements). Keep a constant pressure on the keys.

Exercise No 6: Same exercise but in the opposite direction. Slide the hand down so that the inside surface of the fingers touch the outer case of the keyboard, then return the hand to its original position. The wrist is first lowered and then raised when bringing the hand back to its original position.

Manshardt clarified Cortot's intentions by describing the way these exercises should be played:

- the keys must be pressed down
- there must be constant arm pressure on the key-bed (the bottom of the descent of the key) while doing the exercise
- the arm pressure must remain precisely the same at every instant from the beginning to the ending (of the series)
- beginners will do well to avoid any but the most subtle of pressures. Virtuosos on a good day can stay loose with a pressing that would register some kilos on a weighing machine
- the wrist should be lowered (or raised) to a position as far as physically possible (without straining)
- the movement should be carried out slowly, taking care that the elbow does not swing away from the body or the shoulders will lift up
- these exercises should be played very slowly and calmly, thereby aiding the peace of mind of the pianist.



'Avoid playing with unprepared muscles... To play without proper muscular preparation can be harmful if not dangerous'



In his *Relaxation Studies*, which may have been one of Cortot's inspirations, Tobias Matthay offered a similar exercise but with one highly significant difference: the keys must not be pressed down, instead, 'the hands rest on the keys.' Consequently, the weight of the arms has to be supported. This can only increase any muscular tension already present in the body.

Discussing supported arm weight, Cortot's pupil Manshardt remarked that 'those who play while carrying the weight of the arm must find practising extremely fatiguing. Anyone required to hold up the arms for three or four hours would be justified in complaining of being tortured. Yet piano teachers who advocate muscular support of the arm think nothing of prescribing that torture.' No doubt Cortot understood this danger, as Manshardt makes clear: 'Those who practise long hours while they support the weight of the arms tend to have what are nowadays called "muscular problems". It is at this point that some pianists give up playing altogether.' ▶