

EDUCATION

In a later chapter of *The Rational Principles of Piano Technique* devoted to wrist technique, Cortot declared that one of the major difficulties of playing the piano is combining the vertical descent *into* the keyboard with the lateral movement *across* the keyboard. He came up with a series of exercises to practise isolating the one dimension from the other.

These exercises fall in to the category of what one might call 'playing gestures' – certain movements of the finger, wrist, forearm and arm that facilitate the playing of a particular passage or in creating a pianistic effect. As well as finding the right gesture, there is the additional problem of gauging its optimum size. Cortot quoted Rameau's advice: 'guard against all unnecessary movement. No large movement should be made where a smaller one is sufficient.' Often the gesture required will be slight, with minimal movement and carried out so rapidly that it is difficult to see what is happening.

According to Guthrie Luke, who also studied with Cortot, one of Cortot's favourite maxims was, 'Find the right gesture and the passage will play itself.' Once a particular gesture is mastered, the difficulty is then to link the playing gestures into a continuous flow. Aldo Ciccolini, a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, reflects: 'There is a moment practising where each gesture of the hand has to be thought out. What is so difficult is that one can never separate a gesture – even visually. The gesture is continuous, one thinks one has it and it has already changed because it is going towards the next gesture. The most important thing is the moment between two gestures, that mysterious transformation.'

For lateral movements, Cortot distinguished between two types of leap (*sauts*): the rapid lateral shift, and the leap in the form of an arc (*courbe*).

Exercise No 9: In this exercise, from the preliminary gymnastic exercises, Cortot concentrated on the rapid lateral shift in which 'the keyboard is skimmed to cross the interval which separates two notes or two intervals. It is analogous to a silent glissando in which one hears only the first and last notes when it is played.' The purpose of this exercise is to develop *souplesse* and speed in lateral forearm movements. Cortot wrote, 'This exercise, which has as its objective development of the lateral mobility of the forearm with a view to acquiring the technique of rapidly changing the position of the hand on the keyboard, is practised in the following way:

'Placing the right hand on the keyboard as far as possible to its left, rapidly flick the forearm to the right towards the highest notes of the piano. Then flick the forearm back to the original position. Mark a short pause at each point. The left hand is then exercised in the opposite direction – mirroring the right hand movement (i.e. the hand is placed as far as possible to the right and the forearm flicked to the left). Repeat each gesture 20 times at a speed of 60 for each movement.' For this exercise, the hands should be exercised separately. In making this movement, the wrist is projected by the impetus given to the forearm. In the right hand it flies initially to the right as an extension of the forearm movement and then to the left on its return. Cortot believed that one must develop lateral as well as vertical freedom in the wrist. Manshardt added, 'The forearm sets the hand in motion, the hand adds its own capacity to swing from the wrist to this movement.'



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The movement must be quick and decisive, with the elbow acting as a pivot for the forearm. The elbows must not swing away from the body. Once this lateral movement of the forearm is mastered, the classic waltz pattern in the left hand will become much easier (Chopin Etude op 10 no 2, for example).

Best posture

Cortot stressed the importance of a student sitting at a height ideally adapted to his body shape – the length of arm rather than that of the upper body (*buste*) determining the best posture at the keyboard. 'The arm must follow a natural line, avoiding any awkward angles which might paralyse the muscles in the forearm and the hand.' Furthermore, 'as a general rule the wrist should be lower than the hand.' By adopting the correct posture, which is determined in part by the height of the piano stool, one avoids exaggerated (finger) articulation and disabling muscular tension.

Chopin believed with 'a supple hand, the hand the wrist, the forearm, the arm, everything will follow the hand in the right order'. He advised that 'the elbow should be level with the white keys' (which dictates the ideal height of the piano stool) and 'the hand turned neither to the left or the right'. Following on from this, Manshardt wrote 'The elbows should be about six inches in front of the body for if they are only at the sides only the forearm is brought into play; the advancing of the elbows ensures participation of the whole arm'.

Near the end of his life (he died in 1962), Cortot noted in his diary: 'Appeared, to date, more than 6,000 times in concert'. Interestingly, even other pianists with equally long careers put Cortot on a pedestal. Vladimir Horowitz, after hearing Cortot play the 24 Etudes and 24 Préludes of Chopin as a single programme in Paris, declared that: 'the execution and interpretation of these masterpieces seemed unsurpassable.'

Claudio Arrau once said, 'Cortot practised a lot. D'Albert and Ansoerge didn't practise. But Cortot knew exactly how to do everything. He wrote all those exercises...'

Michael Stembridge-Montavont, a student of Jean Micault (Cortot's former assistant), offers a course on Cortot's piano method. For details, go to www.normandypianocourses.com

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