

Teaching Principles in Piano Tone Production – Tobias Matthay

By Gloria Chu

Gloria Chu is a dedicated pedagogue, RCM examiner, festival adjudicator, composer and performer. She holds a Master of Arts in Piano Pedagogy and mentors students in piano, violin and voice. Gloria is passionate for music education and has explored learning with the Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Shenandoah University, the Juilliard School, and the University of Ottawa in vocal, string and piano pedagogy. She is excited about her upcoming adventures in the UK at the University of Chichester in String Pedagogy.



One of the greatest challenges of teaching piano students is to develop the potential for creative enjoyment while equipping students with skills for expression. In my exploration for teaching strategies of good tone, I was particularly attracted to the detail methods of Tobias Matthay. Matthay's publications are arguably the turning point of piano pedagogy, analyzing the muscular aspects, key actions and positioning of the various body parts to produce tone. In his book *The Act of Touch in All Its Diversity*, Matthay's intense dedication to discovering the fundamentals of piano playing is revealed in each of the four sections. Arm weight was no doubt a heavily emphasized factor in producing piano tone. In addition, Matthay is seen to be pivotal in his contributions and influence in England in the first part of the 20th century and continues to make its mark through the work of The American Matthay Association. The encyclopedic *The Act of Touch in all its Diversity* (1903) was promoted as being about natural music laws. With a strong emphasis on relaxation, his publications are filled with specific details which are at times redundant and inventive in terminology. He refers to "species of touch" and denotes an exploration of key speed manipulation. Weight is a concept heavily explored, inviting students

to explore the amount needed to depress each key. Matthay believes awareness of key resistance is essential in manipulation of intensity. Students are encouraged to determine how much muscular force will be required for each note. Resistance is defined as "it feels more difficult" to move quickly. Hence the teaching strategy is to coach students to know how much the key will resist before it gives way and while it is moving down under the finger. Matthay outlines a basic triad to be played as an exercise for students to experiment varying the speed in which they depress the keys to discover "how much each key resists being moved" so the student can play "what each key wants" (Matthay 1912, p.4).

Duration is defined as the control of energy to the end of the tone. Matthay suggests that duration is a second concept to be taught once intensity is managed appropriately by the student. In extension of skills learned in discovering intensity of tone, once awareness of the weight is taught, students are to extend this awareness to individual fingers beginning with the thumb and pinky. In an open fifth hand position, the thumb and pinky are to be played through rotary motion of the forearm. Extension of this technique is described by Matthay in various duration of notes. Students have understood the

only way to make tone is by moving the key, the next challenge in duration is guiding and aiming the energy, or force and weight, to finish the moment tone begins (for staccato) and longer for sustained durations.

In teaching strategies for good tone, Matthey focuses on “control intensity,” which means understanding how much weight to use and the roles of the finger, hand and arm. This results in what Matthey calls the “three species of touch.” Only once intensity is mastered are students advised to explore duration. Awareness to individual fingers then becomes the emphasis, calling upon its control to manipulate extra weight and force to release the keys in commanding tonal duration.

Weight-touch exercise

The writer then describes the value of arm weight in piano tone production. This includes clenching the hand lightly into a fist, allowing the fist to fall gently on two black keys with thumb facing upwards. Students are cautioned not to force the arm to go down, instead, the arm should go down naturally using their weight from the shoulder. The exercise should begin as quietly as possible, slowly increasing to a forte tone. This way, students will learn about added weight and its contribution to depressing the key (weight-touch exercise).

After this motion is conducted, students are invited to be aware of forearm rotation to turn the thumb facing up to touch the surface of the keys. This twisting motion is only for the forearm and not the elbow. Once the steps are mastered, students are to repeat the weight-touch exercise with the thumb on the side. The weight-touch exercise is then to be repeated with all fingers wrapping the thumb. This motion is then continued with a triad, being aware of the weight-touch required. The goal is to bring awareness that all fingers playing the triad are to do the same amount of work, and adjustments to rotary motion are required for even tone. The exercise is to be repeated at various dynamic intensity levels for students to learn the desired weight required for different intensities. These steps are correlated in his pedagogy literature of *The Child's First Steps in Pianoforte Playing* (1912) for exercises in developing tone production in an elementary piano student.

According to Matthey there are three important touch tones a student is to learn in production of tone (Matthey, 1939)

1. Finger touch
2. Hand touch
3. Arm touch

All touches are to incorporate elements of finger, hand and arm. The main distinguishing factor is timing and energy in favor of one of the elements over the other. The type of touch used depends on the speed and intensity required for passages.

Arm Touch

The arm touch technique is suggested to be the first touch to explore with students because it is the simplest. The whole arm is to lapse onto the keys with the fingers and hand to follow. Timing of the weight is to be attended to reflecting understanding of each key's resistance. This approach is recommended for cantabile single tones and chord passages. Speed across the keyboard is slower than other motions as the entire arm is commanded to release after each motion. The addition of the upper arm results in a louder intensity. For lighter chords, only the forearm weight is to be used. The arm is to feel as though it is unsupported to allow the weight to engage the hand and fingers.

Hand Touch

This approach is suitable for moderately paced passages. Tone with the hand is to more muscular since less weight is applied. The arm is to be carried loosely while the hand and fingers execute the muscular activity of depressing the keys.

Finger Touch

Without doubt, the hand and arm are to be engaged along with the finger. However, in this approach the finger provides the movement which generates the tone. For quiet intensity and fast passages, the hand and arm are to be passively hanging. In this motion, fingers will be seen to be slightly raised ready to strike the keys. Unlike the percussive tone definition of Ortmann, Matthey cautions for no percussion against the key's surface. Percussion is not required since students are to know ahead of time how much resistance is required for the key. No visible hand motion is required in this touch.

Matthey cautions students “... it is useless to squeeze the key upon the pad you can do nothing to alter the sound once the key is down, since the hammer flies back as soon as you reach the sound in key-

descent” (Matthay, 1912, p.2). Thus the sound will stop because the damper falls upon the strings; this will happen when a student releases the key. It is emphasized that the student makes the sound at the beginning when the key is depressed. Matthay reminds us that the sole means to produce a sound is to make the key move. In comment to intensity for beginners, “the quicker you make the key move the louder the sound” (Matthay, 1912, p.2).

In summary, Matthay invites teachers to coach students in understanding intensity, how much weight to use and the roles of the finger, hand and arm through the three species of touch. Upon discovering the approaches to intensity, students can develop an imaginative color of expression.

Farewell to Impromptu

Impromptu has been around for as long as I can remember, even when I was President of the Calgary Branch - so long ago that I can't remember the year. I always looked forward to receiving Impromptu in the mail and would read it from cover to cover. This magazine was a great communicator to our teachers when we were running the 2005 CFMTA “Peak Performance” Conference in Calgary. We had a huge team of volunteers who organized the many facets of this outstanding event over a span of 7 years, and Impromptu kept us connected. In addition, Impromptu and the members of ARMTA have supported the Calgary Arts Summer School Association, now operating as Cassa Musical Arts, since its inception in 1993. Thank you to all of the volunteers who created Impromptu, and kept it going.

Linda Kundert,
President and Artistic Director
Cassa Musical Arts

Impromptu has provided me with information about ARMTA Calgary activities, has had professional development articles, given me a chance to get to know members, and has been a connection for the approximately 200 ARMTA Calgary teachers. I learned early on that if it went in the “to read when I had time pile”, I missed deadlines, activities, meetings, etc. Now I read it as soon as it comes. Whether it is read online or in print, I believe it is a connection that we need to maintain.

Barbara Robertson,
Email convener

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