

Teaching Students How to Find Comfortable Fingering

BY ROBERT HINZ

After pianists have played a piece for many years, they often discover another fingering that is better than what they had used and question why they hadn't learned the best fingering in the beginning. Sometimes we are unaware that there might be more efficient fingerings than whatever we chose. Teachers often suggest a fingering to students and different editions suggest other fingerings, but pianists are too quick to choose a fingering instead of experimenting with different possibilities.

The left hand is often neglected as a possibility to play some of the notes written for the right hand. Purists may suggest that whatever the composer wrote for the right hand should be played by the right hand, but the choice of fingerings should be based on whatever will be technically proficient and musical and not according to any rigid rule or self-imposed obstacle. The left hand should be considered for any passage written for the right hand.

Chopin's Etude in A Minor, Op. 10, #2, has many right-hand chords that can be taken by the left hand, such as measure 2, beat 4; measure 3, beat 4; or measure 4, beats 1 and 4. The right hand can work a little less so this piece maintains a relaxed style.

Accepted practices, such as changing fingers on repeated notes or using finger 4 on black-key octaves, are not always necessary or effective.

While pianists should avoid removing melody notes from a piece, a single note can be left out of a supporting chord, making it easier to play, rather than impair technique trying to play all the notes. Both the ear and a knowledge of the overtone series are helpful when deciding which note to leave out of a difficult chord: overtones (unplayed but audible pitches) occur at the octave, the twelfth, two octaves, and two octaves and a major third, making it possible to omit a difficult-to-play pitch that is part of the series without any impact on listeners. In Chopin's Etude in A Minor, Op. 10, #2, the right-hand chord on the third beat of measure 18 may be difficult for a small hand given the stretch between finger 2 on C and finger 4 on G \sharp .



The passage is easier to play by leaving out the A4, which is possible because the bass note generates an audible overtone for A4 that prevents it from being missed. Similar chords are in the right hand on the third beat of measures 20 and 22.

Measure 20:



Measure 22:



Often fingerings feel comfortable at a slow tempo but are less effective when played faster, so try playing a passage up to tempo to make sure the fingering works. Different editions of a piece may suggest different fingerings. The Joseffy edition of Chopin's "Fantasy" Impromptu, Op. 66, gives one fingering, and the Paderewski edition another.

(other possibility) 2 3 2 1 2 3 5 3 2 3 2 1 2 3 5
 (Joseffy) 1 3 2 1 2 4 5 3 1 3 2 1 2 4 5

(Paderewski) 2 3 2 1 2 4 5 3 2 3 2 1 2 4 5

There are still other possibilities, all of which may seem reasonable at a slow tempo but may not be comfortable at a faster tempo.

One practical approach to finding a fingering is to work backwards from a section that has a definite fingering. Sometimes one phrase will suggest a fingering for a phrase in a preceding section where the composer or editor did not supply a fingering.

When working out a fingering for a phrase, consider the type of articulation to use and whether the articulation will add a sense of unity to the music. One problem students face is that fingerings that unify articulation and phrasing may be more technically difficult than those that move the hands comfortably around the keyboard.

Another area to watch is repeating the same fingering for a diatonic or transposed sequential pattern, because the sequence's last figure usually changes, requiring a shift in hand positions. For students, a fingering that contributes to technique may be more appropriate than one that contributes moderately to articulation, as the phrasing can usually be played effectively with different fingers if the student is trained to listen carefully to what is played.

A series of staccato or portato repeated notes can be played with the same finger, relying on the wrist for articulation. However, using one finger for a detached scale passage with equal pitches in articulation and dynamic level is inefficient. Relying on fingering for articulation is never a bad idea, but a well-thought-out fingering that is guided by the ear, along with the logistics of the keyboard, can bring about an appropriate articulation. In Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, pianists could use identical fingerings to play the right hand of measures

51 and 52 so each two-beat phrase has the same articulations and rhythmic emphasis, but the passage makes this impractical.

When the passage appears later in the tonic, the fingering is reversed without any change in phrasing or rhythmic articulation.

The opening theme in Op. 2, #1, appears in several different keys, making it difficult to use the same fingering throughout.

Allegro
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The goal should be to have a uniform articulation without using the same fingering. Although identical motives and themes may appear in each hand, the left hand never uses the same fingering as the right. The articulation should be guided by the ear to produce a consistent sound.

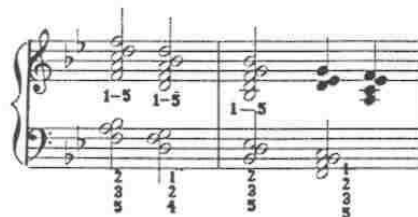
There should be a balance between stretching the hand to play large intervals and shifting the hand position when large intervals become uncomfortable. The opening two measures of Chopin's Etude in F Minor, Op. 25, #2, have at least two possible fingerings, depending on the size of the pianist's hand.



The second fingering might be uncomfortable for a small hand, but a pianist who finds little difficulty with the stretch should use the first fingering, which blocks each half of the measure and uses a single, stable hand position.

Pianists should use fingerings that take in as many keys as possible in one hand position rather than two, without strain or uncomfortable stretching. This technique is known as blocking and gives security to playing. Blocking allows students to explore alternative fingerings for a particular phrase. Pianists can use forearm and upper arm movement in single hand positions, articulating and supporting the fingers more effectively than a hand shift.

It is usually much easier to find fingerings for chordal passages than melodic passages because there are fewer fingerings available for each note in the chord. Blocking is nothing more than finding fingerings for melodies as one would for chords. The technique can be applied to the beginning of the Prelude and Fugue in B^b Major from Book I of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The Prelude's first two measures can be fingered using five blocks in the right hand and four in the left.



Five blocks can be used for the first five measures of the fugue.



Groups of notes become associated with fingerings (similar to associating scales and arpeggios with common fingerings used for them), providing the pianist with a feeling of stability.

Blocking can be effective even when groups of blocked pitches are interrupted by notes in a different register, such as the left-hand part in Chopin's Etude in A Minor, Op. 25 #4.



An understanding of keyboard symmetry can be useful for translating fingerings from one hand to the other. The keyboard to the right of D₄ is a mirror image of the keyboard to the left of D₄; thus an ascending E^b major scale from D to D in the right hand is the mirror image of a descending A major scale from D to D in the left hand. The fingerings for mirrored scales and chords will therefore be identical for the two hands.

When a fingering is needed for the weaker hand, the opposite hand can be a guide, inverting the musical pattern so the stronger hand plays with a comfortable fingering, which is then applied to the weaker hand. To find a left-hand fingering for a descending B^b major scale starting on D, search for an inverted musical pattern, which would be an ascending scale using the same intervals but in the opposite direction. The original descending left-hand pattern (D-C-B^b-A-G-F-E^b-D) becomes an ascending right-hand pattern (D-E-F[#]-G-A-B-C[#]-D). An easy fingering for the right hand, 1-2-3-1-2-

3-4-(5 or 1), easily becomes mirrored back to the left hand as 1-2-3-1-2-3-4-(5 or 1) for the original sequence.

If a pianist has difficulty finding a left-hand fingering for the opening two measures of Chopin's Etude in C Minor, Op. 10, #12, the pattern can be inverted and applied to the right hand.



Begin on the note that is as far above D as the left-hand's first note is below it (in this case, the right hand would also begin on A^b). Inverted, the passage would appear as:



Now the fingering possibilities for the right hand can be explored based on this symmetrically inverted passage; it can then invert back to the left hand once a fingering is found. This approach, which can easily be applied to more complex and difficult passages, provides an element of psychological security for a left-hand fingering that might, at first, feel uncomfortable.

Less-experienced students are often unaware of how useful it can be to slide from a black key to a white key, thus avoiding the habit of always playing a different key with a different finger. Given the appropriateness of the technique (in light of any musical considerations) students who become familiar with sliding are likely to find many uses for it, especially when sightreading.

Pianists commonly slide from a black key to a white key with finger 2 as in Chopin's Etude in G[♭] Minor, Op. 25, #6 for chromatic thirds.

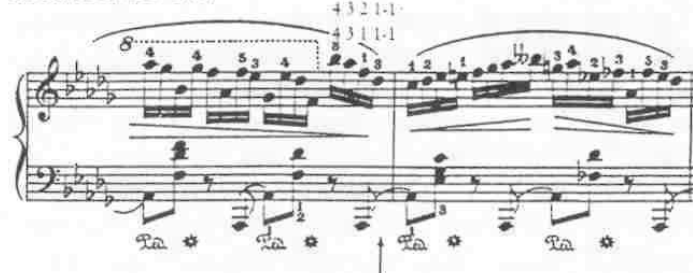


The technique is also helpful with the thumb in Chopin's Prelude in B[♭] Minor, Op. 28, #16, for the passages in measures 8-9 and measures 25-26.

Measures 8-9:



Measures 25-26:



Sliding the finger is often effective in Bach's fugues, such as measures 51 and 53 from the Fugue in B Minor in Book I.



The following exercise will help students become comfortable sliding with fingers 2, 3, and 4:

Ascending:



Descending:



Although working hands separately is effective for finding fingerings, when pianists combine the

hands new possibilities may surface. Sometimes a fingering that seems comfortable when the hand is alone may feel different when the other hand is added, so it is a good idea to experiment with both hands playing together. If the passage feels secure that way, it should remain so in performance.

A passage from Bill Dobbins' piece, *Yardbird Conversation*, went through a number of left-hand fingering changes as it was being readied for a performance.

The image shows two musical examples, each consisting of a treble and bass clef staff. The first example is for a D7 chord. The treble staff has notes D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. The bass staff has notes D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, and C4. Handwritten fingerings are shown above and below the notes. The second example is for a G7 chord. The treble staff has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, and F#4. The bass staff has notes G3, A3, B3, C4, B3, A3, G3, and F#3. Handwritten fingerings are shown above and below the notes.

Although both 2 and 3 felt comfortable on the E \flat on the second beat of the example's second measure, it felt awkward when combined with the right hand. In playing hands together, it became apparent that the left-hand fingering, by using finger 4, created a mirror image of the right-hand fingering. When changed, the left hand moved the exact distance up from the thumb to finger 4 that the right hand moved down from the thumb to finger 4, making the passage easier to play.

Allow time to lapse between practice sessions so new fingering possibilities can surface, and try alternative ideas, rather than use the first fingering that seems to work. Don't be afraid to change a fingering, but don't change a fingering before a concert unless there is ample time for the new movements to become automatic. Keep in mind that what seems to be an uncomfortable fingering may only be unfamiliar; many effortless passages were uncomfortable at one point in time. Changing a fingering simply because it feels uncomfortable is not always good.

Be sure to read about fingering approaches, such as those written by C.P.E. Bach, and remember that finding useful fingerings is an important part of practice. With the right fingering, a passage that might have been difficult can become quite manageable. □