

Improving Accuracy by Developing Keyboard Awareness

by Bob Hinz

In their study of the piano, students want the music to sound good and enjoy the satisfaction of playing the correct notes. At first, students do a better job when they use their visual sense to find keys. However, this habit often gets carried too far, and students become overly reliant on their visual interaction with the keyboard. Rather than being helpful, the habit of regularly looking down tends to be more of an impediment than a benefit.

Perhaps most important, try not to look at your hands or the keyboard when you are practicing, regardless of whether the music is memorized or you are sight-reading. This is really important! It's not easy and the approach requires discipline. Moreover, you will need to play slower and you are likely to make more mistakes. Through time, however, your overall ability at the keyboard will grow as you will develop your *tactile* sense (the feel of the keys and key relationships) and your *kinesthetic* sense (your sense of motion and of distances that the hands travel in relation to each other and your body).

Developing these two senses offers many benefits. First, your reading will improve. Students who are always looking down at their hands often lose their place in the music, which interrupts the flow of the piece. While it might be necessary to look down for large leaps, as well as octave passages, students can easily adjust to most of the music they are playing. I often find that students usually have no problem playing their pieces when they are asked to play them without looking at the keyboard, even though they have the habit of looking down for almost every note.

Second, you'll be focused more on the sound of what you are playing; ultimately you will find your playing more musical. Looking at the keyboard is a distraction since the visual element (the visual keyboard patterns) takes away from the pianist's ability to listen to the music. Without this distraction, the pianist hears the music more from a listener's perspective.

It may not be possible to play all the time without looking at the keyboard, but after a while you may surprise yourself with how well you can play intervals, scales, chords, and even large leaps without looking down. Playing a recital without looking at the keyboard is probably not a good idea, since negotiating the keyboard is best accomplished through a combination of sight, sound, and touch. As you actively practice these skills on a regular basis, however, your ability to play without looking at the keyboard will grow. Moreover, the tactile and kinesthetic skill you develop will add to and support the basic technique you have when you look at the keys. Finally, you may find that practicing without looking at the keyboard may draw your attention toward aspects of the music (and the keyboard) that you were previously unaware of.

Developing Your Tactile Sense of the Keyboard

Developing tactile awareness of the keyboard is an essential aspect of piano study. It enables the player to develop the ability to play without looking at the keyboard, which is an important part of playing musically. The skill also enhances aural and reading skills, and increasing the security of the fingers.

One of the first things to notice about the keyboard is that each of the white keys is separated from an adjacent white key by a small groove that can be easily felt as the finger slides across the

keyboard. An awareness of this groove will be helpful to the pianist in maintaining a particular hand position. It also helps the pianist to maintain the habit of playing keys at the center of the key rather than near an edge. This promotes accuracy.

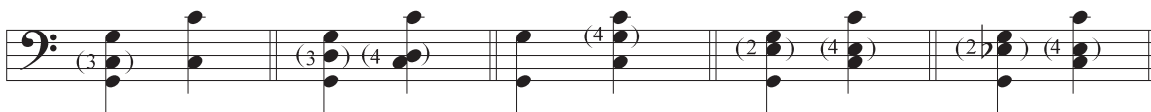
Perhaps the most useful element of keyboard topography that enables the development of a pianist's tactile skill is the arrangement of black keys (in their groupings of two and three) and their relationship to the white keys. Being actively aware of how the fingers relate to the arrangement is what enables the pianist to play tactily. The index finger, for example, plays an important role in navigating the keyboard terrain while playing octaves. For instance, when playing a C major arpeggio in octaves, it is useful to play attention to the index (second) finger of each hand and how it feels as it is positioned against any black key on either side of it. For the right hand, this grazes D# (for the C octave), F# and Ab (for the E octave, and/or Db for the G octave):



Example 1

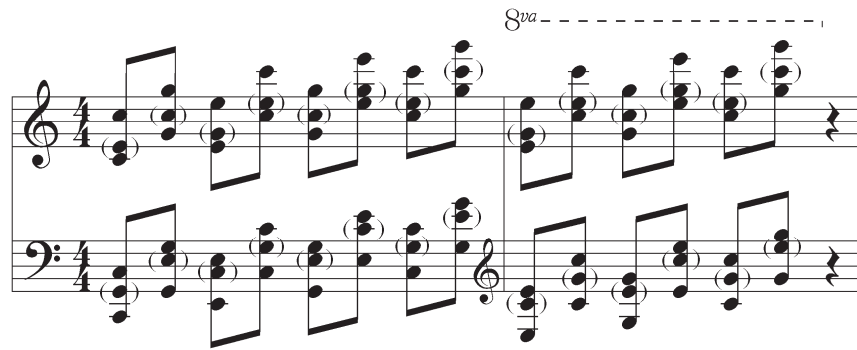
Depending on the size, shape, and position of the hand, the index finger may graze other black keys. For example, if 2 is positioned over B (for the G octave), it may contact A# on the left side of B.

In general, white keys that are not played (which may have proximity to black keys) are useful in establishing a tactile footing. For example, in movement up from a G octave to a C octave in the left hand, a particular white (or black) key may be used as a tactile reference that is common to both octaves:



Example 2

Similarly, in Hanon exercise #57, the right hand index finger, given its proximity to one or two adjacent black keys, can be used to negotiate the keyboard tactily without looking at the hands. The left hand index finger can be used the same way. Other fingers on other keys can also be used to establish keyboard position in this passage.



Example 3

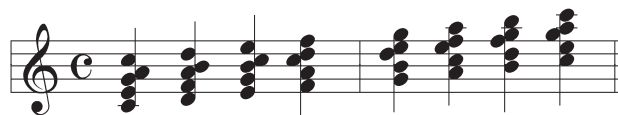
Also notice any black keys that the index (2), middle (3), or ring (4) finger may directly contact the surface of. For example, when the right hand shifts up an octave from middle C (or down to the middle C octave from an octave above), it may be useful to use F#, G#, A#, or any combination of these black keys to establish a footing for the next hand position:



Example 4

After a while, the overall feeling of the keyboard, with respect to each octave, becomes more familiar. Conscious practice, that includes a tactile awareness of any and all features that can be used to establish keyboard position, will go a long way in improving reading and technique.

Tactile awareness can also be practiced by practicing scales or chords in octaves, and actually playing other notes within each octave. For example, a C major scale, in octaves, can be played as block chords. The first chord would consist of C, E, G, A, and C, or any other variation with two or more notes between the two notes that form the octave:



Example 5

Although this might be difficult for some, since the pianist is forced to become aware of how the terrain around each octave feels (particularly the feeling of the black keys that are grazed with each octave), he or she will know what to feel for when a particular octave is played. The technique is most effective when practiced without looking at the keyboard. It also plays an important part in playing octaves and other structures with accuracy, and developing the tactile sense that is so important for many aspects of piano playing.

Developing Your Kinesthetic Sense of the Keyboard

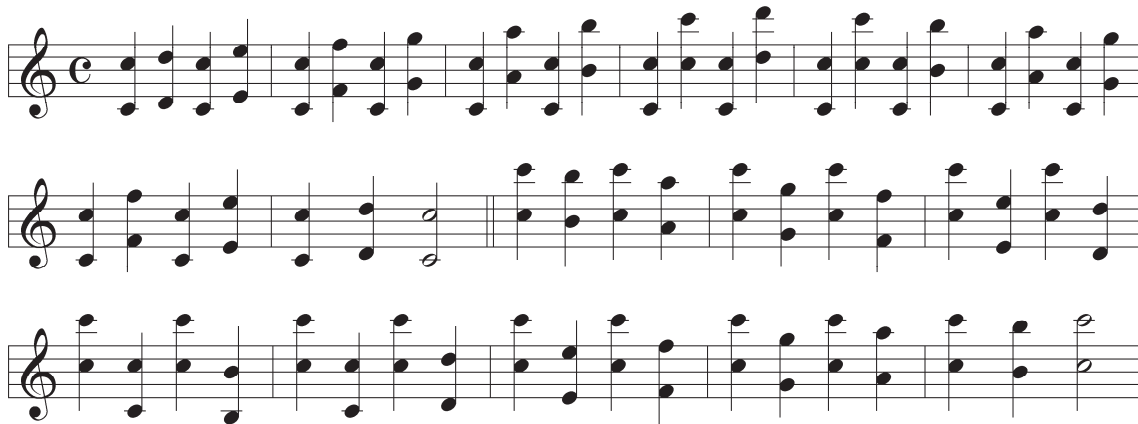
Kinesthetic sense is the awareness of presence, position, and movement of the body (or any of its parts). The ability to use this awareness to develop one's skill in negotiating keyboard hand position is an essential aspect of playing the piano well. Developing tactile awareness and skill is an important first step in gaining kinesthetic skill at the keyboard. In order to develop this skill, practice without looking at the keys. Initially, the movements will be small and the fingers may need to touch the keys before they are played, to play securely. After time, however, you will develop more of a feel for key position. As this begins to happen, you'll have a better idea of where the key is, and you will use your tactile awareness to confirm your hand position more so than to find it.



Example 6



Example 7



Example 8

A technique related to both tactile and kinesthetic skill at the keyboard is *pre-placement*. Pre-placement is used in large leaps that might be difficult to play accurately if the key descent occurs simultaneously with the leap to the key. Pre-placement involves simply setting the hand up ever so briefly just before the key descent occurs. This way, the pianist feels the notes that are about to be played and knows that the correct notes are under the fingers.

Most pianists who play well do so not only because they have a good spatial sense of the keyboard (and have a good imagery of how far they must move their hand when playing a leap), but also because there is an ever-brief moment in which they sense the keys *surrounding* the keys that they are about to play. If you have ever watched a blind person play the piano (particularly if they play well), you will notice that they negotiate the keyboard with small, quick, feeling motions that precede the striking of the keys that they are about to play. This enables them to establish their position—and the notes that they are about to play—with greater certainty and security than just going for the key.

Both the tactile and kinesthetic awareness of position work in combination to get the fingers to the correct keys. A good analogy to think of is finding your way around a dark room. You have a basic idea of where, for example, your staircase is, but you don't know for sure until you can actually feel it. Similarly, the pianist has a good idea where a key is spatially, but confirming the key position by touching it insures an accurate position. Initially, one may rely mainly on the sense of touch to find one's keyboard position, but as the player excels, finding keys in large leaps, for example, becomes more and more kinesthetic. The player can also rely on visual cues, although it is best to practice without looking at the keyboard when possible.

Points to remember:

1. Actively work to develop your sense of the topography of the keyboard: always be aware of how a hand positions *feels*. This includes an awareness of the grooves between the white keys, the black key/white key relationships, and so forth.

2. Practice as much as possible without looking at the keyboard. Besides tuning you into the sense of feel and position, it also allows you to focus on the *sound* of what you are playing.

3. Notice how the black keys stabilize and solidify your position on the keyboard. Keep your wrists relaxed and get the sense of how the black keys splay the fingers into each hand position.

4. Become knowledgeable and aware of intervals and how they feel and appear on keyboard. Actively *think* about the interval distance when you move your hand from one position to another.

If you're playing a bass note/chord/bass note/chord pattern, actively think about the interval between the bass note and the chord, the interval between the two bass notes, and the interval between the two chords.

5. Be gentle. Notice that most of the tension that gets created when playing comes from not knowing where the key that you want to play or move to is. Stay mentally focused--this is the most important element to develop skill in leaps and general keyboard orientation.