

# *Kiddie Craft – Technical Exercises for the Young (And Not So Young) Pianist*

*Based on Alan Fraser's The Craft of Piano Playing*

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## Contents

<b>PART I</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>GROUP I – GETTING TO KNOW THE HOUSE WHERE HANDY HARRY LIVES</b>	<b>9</b>
LESSON I-1 – A TALL SWAYING TOWER	9
LESSON I-2 – ROPES SWINGING FROM THE TOWER	11
LESSON I-3 – PUSH THE WALL OVER!	12
LESSON I-4 – THE THREE CARDINAL DIRECTIONS OF MOVEMENT	13
LESSON I-5 – MAKE YOURSELF INTO THE LEANING TOWER OF PISA	17
<b>GROUP II – HANDY HARRY MEETS SOME FRIENDS</b>	<b>19</b>
LESSON II-1 – HANDY HARRY LYING DOWN	19
LESSON II-2 – HANDY HARRY ROLLS OVER FOR THE FIRST TIME	20
LESSON II-3 – HANDY HARRY SLIPPING AND SLIDING	21
LESSON II-4 – HANDY HARRY AS SWAMP MONSTER: HELLO LOUIS LUMBRICAL!	22
LESSON II-5 – HANDY HARRY STICKS HIS BOTTOM IN THE AIR	24
LESSON II-6 – HANDY HARRY FOLDS HIMSELF UP TO DO A SOMERSAULT: HELLO FREDDIE FLEXOR!	25
LESSON II-7 – FREDDIE FLEXOR HELPS HANDY HARRY CRAWL LIKE A CENTIPEDE	27
LESSON II-8 – LOUIS & FREDDIE HELP HANDY HARRY SIT UP!	28
LESSON II-9 – FREDDIE AND LOUIS GET TOGETHER: AND HARRY'S BOTTOM RISES EVEN FURTHER!	29
LESSON II-10 – HANDY HARRY BONKS HIS HEAD – HELLO REX WRIST!	30
<b>GROUP III – LOUIS LUMBRICAL HELPS HANDY HARRY STAND UP</b>	<b>31</b>
LESSON III-1 – FINGERS BECKON “COME HERE”, WAVE “BYE BYE”	31
LESSON III-2 – LOUIS LUMBRICAL SAVES HANDY HARRY FROM FALLING OFF A CLIFF	32
LESSON III-3 – HANDY HARRY COMES UP ONTO ALL FOURS	32
LESSON III-4 – HANDY HARRY ON ALL FOURS ON THE KEYS	34
LESSON III-5 – HANDY HARRY ON THE TRAMPOLINE	36
LESSON III-6 – HANDY HARRY ON THE KEYBOARD TRAMPOLINE	36
LESSON III-7 – HANDY HARRY IS A ROLY-POLY	37
LESSON III-8 – HANDY HARRY STANDS UP!	37
LESSON III-9 – FREDDIE FLEXOR SAVES HANDY HARRY FROM FALLING OFF THE CLIFF	38
LESSON III-10 – FREDDIE FLEXOR AND LOUIS LUMBRICAL WORK TOGETHER TO PULL HANDY HARRY UP	39
LESSON III-11 – HANDY HARRY SCRATCHES HIS LEG WITH HIS ‘FIFTH FINGER FOOT’	40
LESSON III-12 – HANDY HARRY SLAPS THE GROUND WITH HIS FOOT	41
LESSON III-13 – HANDY HARRY LAUNCHES HIMSELF FORWARD	41
LESSON III-14 – HANDY HARRY REVS HIS LEGS	42
<b>GROUP IV – TOM THUMB TAKES HANDY HARRY ON SOME BIG ADVENTURES</b>	<b>43</b>

LESSON IV-1 – THE WOODPECKER	43
LESSON IV-2 – HANDY HARRY SCRATCHES HIS OTHER LEG WITH HIS ‘THUMB FOOT’	44
LESSON IV-3 – THUMB ROLLING: HANDY HARRY DOES A SOMERSAULT	45
LESSON IV-4 – HANDY HARRY DRAWS A SQUARE ON THE GROUND	46
LESSON IV-5 – HANDY HARRY DRAWS CIRCLES IN THE AIR	47
LESSON IV-6 – REVERSE OPPOSITION: HANDY HARRY DOES SOME STRANGE SIDEWAYS ROCKING	48
LESSON IV-7 – HANDY HARRY-ALLIGATOR MAKES A BIG YAWN	49
LESSON IV-8 – ALLIGATOR GROWS SOME NEW TEETH.	50
LESSON IV-9 –TOM THUMB AND THE ARTICULATED SCREWDRIVER	51
LESSON IV-10 – TOM THUMB HELPS HANDY HARRY TAKE SOME GIANT STEPS	53
LESSON IV-11 – TOM, FREDDIE & LOUIS HELP HANDY HARRY TAKE EVEN BIGGER STEPS	54
LESSON IV-12 –THE HANDY HARRY LEG SLIDE EXERCISE	54
<b>PART II</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>GROUP V – HANDY HARRY TAKES HIS FIRST STEPS</b>	<b>55</b>
LESSON V-1 – HANDY HARRY WALKS WITH HIS LEGS TIED TOGETHER	55
LESSON V-2 – HANDY HARRY PADDLES HIS FEET IN THE WATER	56
LESSON V-3 – HANDY HARRY WALKS LIKE DADDY LONG LEGS	57
LESSON V-4 – HANDY HARRY TESTS THE WATERS	57
LESSON V-5 – HANDY HARRY SKIPS SLOWLY	59
LESSON V-6 – THREE-LEGGED HANDY HARRY SKIPS	59
LESSON V-7 – SLOW SKIPPING ON FOUR NOTES	60
LESSON V-8 – ALL FIVE NOTES –WHOOPS, DON’T FALL OVER!	60
LESSON V-9 – STACCATO I: LET’S GO HOPPING	60
LESSON V-10 – STACCATO II: LET’S GO PECKING	60
LESSON V-11 – THE BELLOWES	61
LESSON V-12 – WATCH OUT FOR THAT ALLIGATOR – SNAP!	62
<b>GROUP VI – HANDY HARRY FINDS FRIENDS TO PLAY WITH – CHORDS &amp; “OCTAVES”</b>	<b>63</b>
NEW LESSON 1 – THUMB PUSHUP MORPHS INTO “BRIDGE WALKING” M D L V	63
LESSON VI-2 – CAN YOUR BRIDGE TIP WITHOUT COLLAPSING?	63
LESSON VI-3 – USE YOUR BRIDGE TO “GO FISHING”	64
LESSON VI-4 – JUMPING AND ROLLING IN THE ICE AND SNOW	64
LESSON VI-5 – SHAKE THE PIANO	65
<b>GROUP VII – HANDY HARRY CAN NOW WALK ALL OVER THE PLACE – SCALE PREP.</b>	<b>66</b>
LESSON VII-1 – CROSS-LEGGED WALKING – PASSING YOUR THUMB UNDER	66
LESSON VII-2 – HANDY HARRY GETS READY TO RUN	68
<b>GROUP VIII – HANDY HARRY DRINKS TOO MUCH “RASPBERRY CORDIAL” – ROTATION</b>	<b>69</b>
LESSON VIII-1 – HANDY HARRY DOES SOME WARM-UP LEG STRETCHES	69
LESSON VIII-2 – HANDY HARRY NEEDS TO LIE DOWN	70
LESSON VIII-3 – DRUNKEN JUMPING	71
LESSON VIII-4 – HARRY GENTLY TESTS SOME VERY THIN ICE	71
LESSON VIII-5 – LOOKS LIKE THE ICE IS JUST THICK ENOUGH – BUT NOT TOTALLY FIRM	72
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>73</b>
APPENDIX 1 – WHAT TO DO BESIDES TEACHING KIDS TO PLAY A PIECE BY READING THE NOTES AND PLAYING THEM ON THE KEYBOARD...	73



## Note to the Teacher

When I wrote *the Craft of Piano Playing*, many studio teachers told me they loved the book but they couldn't wade through it – it was just too dense and detailed. The practical realities of teaching life required a simpler approach, and so this book began to take shape. I wanted to gather together the most effective and straightforward exercises from my previous books (now three in number), and put them into simple, concise terms that even a child could grasp. But the book's shape transformed along the way, as I came to see more and more how the most effective way of empowering the young pianist's hand is to hearken back to the functional development of a child overall.

### *The extensive apprenticeship – a child's long preparation for standing, walking and running*

As infants we first lie down, roll over, then crawl on our bellies for a long time before coming up onto all fours. Then there is another extensive preparation before standing – and more preparation again before beginning to walk and finally run. But at the piano we universally bypass these preparatory stages, making our hands walk and run immediately on the keyboard, and inadvertently creating a set of holding tensions therein that often lasts our whole lives. Imagine what technical prowess, what expressive freedom we could achieve were we free from this limitation!

### *Reset the hand to default values – retrace the evolutionary steps of learning to move on the keyboard*

This book aims to give us that freedom by filling in the blanks in the pianistic hand's functional development. Returning to the functional beginnings of movement can teach the hand to stand, walk and run more effectively by restoring to it the preliminary sensory and motor experiences it needs to develop those abilities effectively.

### *We aim for complementarity*

This book does not aim to replace other methods but to complement them – not to change young pianists' entire technical regime but to help them follow the path of technical development you are offering them more effectively and successfully.

### *The crux of the problem – accessing the inner moveability of the hand*

A young adult beginner I worked with recently had good hand shape (he had seen my DVD), but I saw his arm consistently *pushing* the key down instead of whole finger flexion that would make the key descend – his hand did not *grasp*. When I helped awaken his hand's essential grasping function, his ability improved by leaps and bounds but he said it felt strangely unfamiliar. Sadly, it's an action unfamiliar to many of us: grasping – the fundamental action of the human hand, so crucial to piano playing – is too often absent from the young pianist's technique. As my student put it, "I learned to play without that action because it *looks* like pianists push the key down: they don't *seem* to be grasping and activating internally."

### *Aural difference between pushing and grasping to move the key*

The grasping action in a pianist's technique may not be easily visible, but you can certainly *hear* it in

their sound. Notes played without grasping tend to be harsh, shallow, small, one-dimensional. Add grasping and they become more gloriously rich and colorful, both powerful and warm, both speedy and sparkling – all the characteristics most pleasing in a pianist’s sound.

*Cultivating the crucial balance between whole-finger flexion (a slight curving) and curling*

Thus this book on technique for beginners explores the basic grasping action of the human hand and brings it to its practical use on the keyboard. Pupils are introduced to Louis Lumbrical<sup>1</sup>, the muscle that engages the entire finger in ‘pulling’ the key down. A healthy, robust whole-finger flexion in the young pianist can dramatically enhance his or her sonority and capability in a surprisingly short time. Louis then learns to work in tandem with Freddie Flexor, responsible for curling the fingers – a movement often needed for precise manipulation of the key at faster speeds.

*A tiny little bit of anatomy*

[illustration]

The *lumbricals* are located in the hand itself, functionally connecting the metacarpal bones to the proximal phalange<sup>2</sup>. To ‘curve’ your fingers using the lumbricals, bend them from the top knuckle leaving them virtually flat.

The *flexors* on the other hand aren’t in the hand at all but the upper part of the forearm, and connect down to the medial and distal joints through long tendons. To ‘curl’ your fingers using the flexors, don’t move the whole finger but flex the nail joint alone (the medial phalange will automatically flex as well).

In pianists you’ll often see Freddie Flexor working very well, but his partner Louis Lumbrical sadly asleep. By emphasizing Louis’ work this method aims to restore the balance between these two actions both vital to healthy piano technique.

*First do the exercises yourself*

To best teach these exercises, first sense them. Explore each one in detail yourself before you try it out with your pupils. Though you may be able to do some exercises easily, they might be totally foreign to a beginner. Try to put yourself in their place, imagining what it would be like to feel your hand doing *that* for the first time.

*Aim to improve internal ability, not just external shape*

Try to sense *internally* how each exercise works – what muscles it stimulates to new action, what new bone alignments it cultivates, always keeping in mind that there’s no one ‘right’ shape of the finger or hand but rather a *right function*, a ‘right’ feeling. Instead of just ‘repairing the shape,’ try to develop a

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Paul Wirth for the idea of giving names to the relevant parts of our anatomy.

<sup>2</sup> The lumbrical does not actually originate in the metacarpal bone but in the deep flexor tendon – but its action is to close the metacarpal-phalangeal joint.

new *ability* that will automatically improve hand shape. There'll be an accompanying sense of internal empowerment in the hand: a gain not so much in strength (although the hand may indeed feel stronger), as in aptitude. Sense these developments in yourself to best guide your pupils in this functional growth process. Even when it is familiar territory for you, it never hurts to review – these exercises foster an organic growth process, and as Moshe Feldenkrais put it, “there are no limits to improvement.”

*Be sensitive to the pupil's 'missing pieces'*

You can't run before you can walk.

You can't walk before you can stand.

You can't stand before you can crawl on all fours.

You can't crawl on all fours before you can commando crawl.

You can't commando crawl before you can lie on your belly.

You can't lie on your belly before you can roll over from lying on your back.

You can't lie on your back before you've been born.

These lessons aim to help the student's hand retrace each of these developmental steps on the keyboard. When you watch your student play, try to figure out, from the attitude of his or her hand, which of these steps the hand might have missed – which steps it would be most useful to retrace, to bring the hand to full functionality.

*Foster a learning experience*

If a pupil inexplicably can't do a particular exercise, don't judge or feel frustrated. Make it a learning experience. Try to figure out what's missing in the student's 'kinesthetic self-representation' that would lead to this lack of ability. Search through earlier exercises (or even later ones) to find the one you feel would best help fill in that missing piece.

Approaching the exercises this way is an ideal opportunity to cultivate an analytical and pro-active pedagogical style instead of mechanically applying old solutions. It's a chance to think and sense in a new way, and it's fun!

*Introduce the whole-body exercises selectively*

Beginning pianists need to get in touch with both their entire body and their 'pianistic body' (fingers, hand and arm). It is not mandatory to do the whole body exercises of section I in the exact order or to do all of them – just pick the ones you feel would best help the individual or group you are working with.

*Gauge the rate of new exercises according to lesson length, pupil ability, etc.*

Introduce the hand exercises that follow at the rate of about one per lesson, but again, be flexible. How much can each pupil cover in one session? How much time do you have in the lesson? What is the student's level and ability... his or her concentration span? It's better to make these fun, an experience of self-discovery, than a chore, so don't overdo it!

### *Why I call the exercises 'skeletal'*

An infant can't stand, walk or even crawl – she begins by lying flat – seemingly 'helpless.' But in this position she is learning with more richness and intensity than she ever will later on, acquiring a wealth of sensations and muscle control patterns that form the basis for all further, more capable, more complex movement patterns. She has a skeleton, and her muscles have just begun that wonderfully prolific process of learning how to manipulate it in space. The young pianist's hand, like a baby's body, may not be developmentally ready to 'stand,' 'walk' and 'run,' and may need to be taken through a process of physical self-acquaintance in preparation. We've made the metaphor overt by creating *Handy Harry*<sup>3</sup>, a little being with legs (fingers), a pelvis (hand) and a body (arm) who goes through all the same developmental stages of movement a human infant does.



So these exercises for the young pianist's hand – the pupil's 'baby' – hearken back to a real baby's learning process – they are based on the skeleton. If the neuromotor system is offered the chance to distinguish the actual sensations of bones and muscles, the learning will be richer, the resulting ability greater.

### *Acknowledgements*

I never dreamed I would write a children's book on technique, and it is certain I never would have without the encouragement of Katherine Faricy, who urged me to instigate this project and helped move it forward through the initial phases. She spent countless hours with me on both sides of the Atlantic discussing many aspects of this book's content and form, and many of the exercises came into being through our mutual discussion and exploration. My indebtedness is inexpressible. I am also indebted to the work of Louise Robyn (introduced to me by Madame Faricy), whose great books on technique for children provided the model for many of my exercises, and to Paul Wirth whose *Bubba*

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<sup>3</sup> For girls it could be *Handy Helen, Handy Hilda, or even Handy Hildegard... Handy Hortense? Handy Hermione??*

*Biceps* and *Tony Triceps* from his film *Gravity Technique* (shown to me by Madame Faricy) inspired my own cast of characters. Thanks as well to the many teachers in the project pilot group in Minneapolis (organized by Madame Faricy) and elsewhere who 'tried these exercises out' on their own 'guinea pig' students. Their feedback was invaluable in fine tuning the content and order of the exercises. Thanks as well to Dragan Jascur, whose captivating illustrations do so much to really make the book.

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