

PART I

Group I – Getting to Know the House Where Handy Harry Lives

These lessons are for Handy Harry’s ‘support system’– the whole body. You can teach them to an individual pupil or a group, either away from or at the piano. Teachers may be leery of giving such ‘touchy-feely’ lessons to youngsters, but kids are fascinated with their bodies: once you awaken their curiosity about this or that sensation, they’ll love the experience.

Lesson I-1 – A Tall Swaying Tower

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart, and do what we call a ‘body scan’: pay attention to specific sensations that bring you more in touch with yourself.

- First, feel the soles of your feet, how they press into the floor. Do they press more on the balls of your feet, or the heels? The outside edges or the insides? There isn’t any right or wrong in this, any good or bad – the idea is simply to feel your own feet with greater precision and detail.
- Feel the curve of your lower back. How much indentation can you detect there? Experiment with making that curve a little more or a little less... When you change the curve in your back, what changes elsewhere in your body? Do you have to strain to change that curve or can you find an easy way?
- Can you sense a ‘plumb line’ that goes from the crown your head down through your shoulders, through your pelvis, knees and ankles to the floor? How straight is that line? What could you do to make it less straight or more straight? Don’t try to find any one particular ideal position, just try to sense which parts of yourself change their degree of curvature to change how that plumb line hangs. You are learning through *sensation*.
- Pretend the wind starts to blow you lightly, and you sway over a little onto your left foot. How does your standing change? Are you comfortable with your weight more on one foot? Does your hip joint feel squished or compressed, or do you feel a straight line running from your left foot... to your knee... to your hip joint... to your spine... to your rib cage... to your neck... to the crown of your head?

And now the wind blows the other way, you sway onto your right foot – what changes in the way you stand? Do you feel taller on your right side or more collapsed? Does the same part of your right foot bear your weight as your left foot, or is your weight more on your toes, your heels, the outside or inside of your foot? Noticing the differences in sensation between left and right helps activate the crucial process of *kinesthetic learning* – how we learn and refine movement.

- Now stand in the middle again and begin to sway in a small circle, left... forward... right... back... all the way around... Like a flagpole in a changing wind... And the other way... And now make the size of the circle a little bigger.... How could you change something in your standing to make these circles smoother, more exactly round? Don’t *force* the circle to be smoother; instead

sense how it might get smoother by loosening something here in your knee or firming up something there in your hip joint...

Let the bones do the work

The circle gets smoother when your skeleton does more of the work and your muscles less. When the bones sense more exactly the alignments that hold your body up easily, the muscles let go. They no longer feel the need to hold, and so now they can *let* the circles be more perfect – you'll never achieve it by force, but by refined perception.

- Now when you stand in the middle again, is it the same 'middle' it was a few minutes ago, or has it changed? Can you sense how *neuro-sensory learning* has helped you to stand differently now, perhaps more erect or more centered?

Lesson I-2 – Ropes Swinging From the Tower

In this familiar exercise we try to get more specific about the sensations involved – to learn something new from an ‘old standard.’

- Stand up and raise your arms way up above you – try to touch the sky!
- And now let them flop down like ropes so they just hang and swing back and forth. Try that a few times.
- Now do something funny: count how many times they swing before they come to a stop... Can you sense what makes them stop? Could you loosen something in your body somewhere so they don't stop swinging so soon? Don't *make* them keep swing by making an effort; just *let* them swing longer by letting something go somewhere. Stop doing whatever it is that stops them swinging! If you really relax your arms so they are totally like ropes, they should swing 13 times!
- Leave your arms hanging like ropes and turn your head and upper body to the right to look behind you – and sense how your ‘arm-ropes’ start swinging too. Do this gently a few times, just enjoy the feeling of your ‘arm-ropes’ swinging lazily...
- Now turn to the left a few times with the same lazy arm swings ...
- Now turn back and forth, first one way then the other, feeling your ‘arm-ropes’ idly wafting through the air...
- Gradually increase the speed of your turning. What happens to your ‘arm-ropes?’ Do they begin to slap against your body when they can't swing any further? Do your ‘limp rope’ arms behave the same on each side, or on one side do they slap a slightly different place on your body, a little higher or a little lower, a little more in front or behind?
- Now turn this way and that as strong and as fast as you can, leaving your arms hyper-loose so they really slap vigorously.
Again, do they slap your body in exactly the same place on each side, or not? Don't try to make the two sides identical, just let your arms go wherever they want to, but *notice* where they go.
- Slow down again, always paying attention to the details of just exactly where your arms slap. The more details you noticed, the more your movements should be smoothed out as you speed up again. How fast can you swing your arm ropes one way and the other, and how smoothly can you make them swing, by letting them go more and more?
- Go back to the first movement: raise your arms above your head, let them flop and swing without turning your body to the side. How many times do your arms swing *now* before they come to a stop? Is it even more than 13???

Lesson I-3 – Push The Wall Over!

Find a wall and make sure it's a strong one because you are going to push on it and you don't want it *really* to fall over! Put your ten fingers straight out in front of you so they 'stand' on the wall.

- **A)** Press the palms of your hands into the wall so they are flat (if your wrist doesn't bend easily to do this, don't force it – just skip this part of the exercise). Keeping your arms straight, use your whole body to *press* the wall – really try to push it over! Try to sense where the power comes for this movement. Can you feel that the less local the effort is, the more powerful it is without straining? In other words, if the effort comes from your shoulders, you strain quite a bit. If it comes from the middle of your back, you strain less but push more powerfully. If you feel the sense of power coming from the core of your body, even all the way down to your pelvis, the strain is even less, the strength more. And if you put one leg back and the other forward and feel the power coming up from the floor through your legs, you get the greatest power of all with the least strain.
- Bend your elbows a little and push again – can you feel how much more strain is involved? The bent elbow damps the power of your body and prevents it getting through to the wall, so muscles in your arms and shoulders must work harder. Can you sense exactly which muscles work more? Experiment with different degrees of elbow bending, noticing how the amount and the locality of the strain changes depending on the angle.
- Now straighten your arms again and sense how your skeleton pushes with far greater strength, but far less effort. That's your *bone power* at work!

- **B)** Gently press into the wall, but now so only your fingertips are pressing. Your palms stay floating far away from the wall. Sense how the straight bones of your fingers can also act as an effective skeletal structure to push the wall with little effort from your muscles.
- Bend your elbows as you push into your fingers, and again notice how much more muscular tension develops in your arms and back.
- Now straighten your elbows again, and put one leg a little further back than the other: organize your whole body – its skeletal structure – to really *push* that wall but with hardly any effort at all. Learn the feeling of all your power coming from your bones instead of your muscles.

Lesson I-4 – The Three Cardinal Directions of Movement

The three cardinal directions of movement in the body are flexion/extension, side bending and rotation (twisting). These exercises are designed to unlock the amazing amount of flexibility our spine can possess when we fully utilize each of the three cardinal directions. This lesson can be done sitting either at or away from the piano.

Turn Yourself into a Lobster – Flexion & Extension

- Sit in a chair and keeping your whole body erect, move your head up and down the way they do in athletic warm-ups. Your head moves but your body doesn't.
- Try looking down again, this time gently feeling your head gently pulling your whole spine into a slouch. When you look up, feel your head pulling your back straighter as well. In fact, try to feel that it's not your neck doing the work of lifting your head at all, but rather it's the middle of your back working to lift your head, or even lower down your back. This action feels radically different when your back really takes over the work usually done by your neck.
- To sense yet another element of this movement, put one hand on your breast bone (the *sternum*), the other on the hard bone at the very bottom of your spine (your *sacrum*). As you look down and slouch, your breast bone sinks while your sacrum moves backwards and down. As you look up, your sacrum rocks forward and your breast bone rises. Now your head's movement is even less isolated, more connected to your whole body.
- Switch your hands around. Does your spine flex and extend along a slightly different path now? Try to feel how your sternum and sacrum are connected through your spine. Feel how your sternum *presses* your sacrum backwards and down as you look down, and how your sacrum reciprocates by lifting your sternum up and forward as you look up. They communicate through the links in the chain of your spine, your vertebrae, which bend and straighten in a new way when this chain connection is felt.

Wow, you started curling and straightening like a lobster!

- After doing this supple, whole body movement for some time, try nodding your head the first way again, where your body remains fixed and unmoving. Do you notice how uncomfortable and unnatural this feels once you've gotten used to the more functional way of doing it?

Turn Yourself into an Accordion – Side Bending

- This time bend your head sideways so your right ear approaches your right shoulder and then your left ear approaches your left shoulder. Again, try first moving your head in *isolation*, that is, keeping your body still as you move your head – the way you did in gym class.
- Now try to feel what movement your head *wants* your body to do when it bends right of left. Your head is very heavy – can you feel its weight pulling you over to the right when you bend your right ear to your right shoulder? Maybe that’s why you stiffened your body, to stop your head pulling your body so far to the side that it falls over. Does your head’s weight pull your body similarly on the left, or does it feel different?
- But there’s another way to keep yourself from falling over. You won’t have to strain at all once you learn this more elegant and easy way. But it’s a little strange and requires a new coordination: when you bend your ear to the right, raise your right hip to approach your ear, so your weight goes on to your *left* sitz bone instead of the right. When you get the hang of this strange movement, you’ll feel your left ribs fanning out like an accordion while your right ribs draw in together.
- Try this a few times, get used to it, before doing the same on the other side.
- Finally rock back and forth with your hip joint rising to meet your ear which is bending towards your shoulder first on one side then the other, and notice how your center of gravity stays in the middle: you no longer want to fall to the right or left, but remain ‘in balance.’
- To feel this movement even more extremely, sit with your right sitz bone off the edge of the chair. When you put your right ear to your right shoulder, your right sitz bone rises. But when you put your left ear to left shoulder, your right sitz bone can go much lower than the seat, thus increasing the bend dramatically!
- Still can’t really feel it? Still sitting with your right sitz bone hanging in midair, curl your left arm over the very top of your head so your left hand reaches down to grab your right ear. When you let your right sitz bone drop, gently pull your right ear to the left with your left hand, further increasing the ease and scope of your side bending.
- Now do *those* last two variants on the other side...
- Finally return to sit normally on the chair, and do the movement on alternate sides once more. How much easier and suppler has it become? What new sensations can you notice developing in this movement?

Turn Yourself into a Corkscrew – Twisting

- Turn your head to look left and right, without your body moving – isolate your head from your body as we did before, but now in twisting. How far behind you can you look on either side? Find a spot on the wall where you can turn to comfortably look, and remember that spot as a measuring point.
- Keep turning your head, but now imagine that someone behind you has their hands on your shoulders. Their hands very gently help your shoulders to enter into the turning of your head... Can you now turn a little more? Don't strain, but can you gently feel how the spot on the wall may shift a little further behind you?
- Now imagine those hands just under your arms, on your ribs. Do you turn the same amount, or is there another increase in range? Can you now look even a little further behind you? On which side is the increase of range greater?
- Now imagine those hands on your lowest ribs – the so-called floating ribs. Even more turning? On which side is the greatest improvement?
- Now with those hands on your waist, do you turn... even MORE?

By now your entire body is entering into the turn – but try not to feel your torso moving like a block. Try instead to feel how each part of your spine in turn enters gently into the twist. The trick is to evoke flexibility in your spine. Can you even detect how each individual vertebra of your spine in turn enters into the gentle twist?

Notice that your legs are now moving: one knee moves forward while the other moves back. Do your sitz bones slide on the seat, or do they remain rooted in their spot while your hips and legs move?

- Now imagine those hands even lower, on your hips, helping you turn. Notice how your legs move even further forward and back – whoops, don't corkscrew yourself right into the piano bench!

Let's combine these three now to integrate all the cardinal directions of movement in the body.

Gyroscope Circles

- Move your body a little forward, then to the right, and back, then to the left, and forward again. Make a big circle with your body. There are two ways to do this.
- 1) Pretend there's a clock in the air just above you and your head is travelling around the edge of the clock face. Don't make the clock too big or you'll fall over!
- 2) Now pretend you are sitting on the clock, and it's your pelvis that rocks out to the edge of the clock then gradually rolls all the way around the circumference of the clock.
- When your pelvis goes around the clock, do you still want to fall over or can you find a way to maintain your balance? What would you have to do differently?
- Can you make circles with your pelvis in such a way that your head stays in one place, in the middle? Feel all the interesting ways your spine can twist to help your body move in this unusual way.

Your head remains in the middle – as if your head is attached to the center of the clock where the hour and minute hands are attached. Try stopping your pelvis at each particular hour on the clock circumference and returning to the center... How does your spine bend and twist and straighten to adapt itself to each new variation, each new shift in position? Can you find other patterns of movement on the clock face to play around with?

Lesson I-5 – Make Yourself into the Leaning Tower of Pisa

Optimal Sitting Position:

Position on the bench: Some students put the bench so close to the piano that a lot of their thigh ends up on the bench, constricting their movement. But if you have them sit further forward on the bench, they might move the bench so far back they have to scoot right out to teeter on the edge! A happy medium is best: the sitz bones, the two hard protuberances that press into the chair, should be 1 to 2 inches from the edge of the bench. This makes you both stable and able to move freely. If the legs dangle, a box should be inserted under the feet so they can lie flat.

Distance from the piano: There is no standard distance to sit from the piano. Some people like a feeling of open space between them and their instrument; others like to hug right up close. Either of these two extremes, or anywhere in between, can be more or less *functional*.

The position is functional if the pianist can move freely within it. It is a true, useful neutral point if it's easy to depart from it (somewhat) and return without strain. As a general rule of thumb, if I sink the heel of my hand into the white keys, I may well be most comfortable leaning very slightly forward to do so. Then I can push into the keys, straighten my arms so my body is pushed away from the piano and I lean back; I can slump forward even further to get my hands to some more distant parts of the keyboard – my position doesn't constrain my movement in any way but rather frees me to orient myself comfortably to meet any pianistic requirements.

When you help a student find the best sitting position, take into account their movement style: put them in a certain position and see if they look and feel comfortable. Then shift till together you find the optimal place. Never dogmatically put someone a certain distance and insist it's 'the right one.'

Height: The same goes for the bench height –the forearms 'should' be more or less horizontal when the hand rests on key, but it's the comfort of the student that's of paramount importance: if he or she likes to be a little bit higher or lower, it's better to 'go with the flow' than to force them into an (for them) awkward posture.

Make Yourself Into a Tower While Sitting:

- Sit at the piano and sense how the weight of your body presses down through your sitz bones into the bench. Does your weight press more through the front, or the rear of your sitz bone, or smack in the middle? Is it more on one sitz bone than the other?
- Rock very gently on your pelvis a little forward and back, sensing how your right sitz bone rolls on the chair. Imagine it is an ink ball that draws a line on the chair each time it rolls. Try to get a clearer picture of the exact shape of your sitz bone by sensing how each part of it presses into the chair in turn.
- Rock and roll a little to the left and right to further clarify just what shape that sitz bone is. Is it round like a ball, or more oblong like an egg? Is it regular or not?
- Slip your right hand in underneath your right sitz bone so it mashes your hand into the bench: cup your sitz bone in the palm of your hand. Do you now feel a little like the Leaning Tower of Pisa? With your hand there, you can feel the actual shape of your sitz bone much more exactly.

If you imagine your body gently swaying in the wind, does the rolling around of your sitz bone on your hand help you to sense its shape even more clearly? Do this for some time, and make up your own movement variations to give yourself as three-dimensional a sensory picture of your sitz bone as possible.

- Finally take your hand out from underneath you and sit normally. Sense how differently your two sitz bones press into the piano bench now! When your hand felt your sitz bone so much more clearly, your brain decided to help it get even better, and softened the muscles so you could feel even more detail. When you took your hand away, those muscles stayed super soft which is why that sitz bone feels like it's almost sinking through your chair! Imagine if you could make any muscle in your body do that!
- Now sway in the wind again, feeling how your torso's weight shifts between your two sitz bones. What has changed in the way you do this because of the hand-sitting exercise? Now do the hand-sitting exercise on the other side. Are the effects more or less spectacular here, the changes in sensation more or less dramatic?
- Move your body forward, then to the right, then back, then to the left, then forward again so it move in an entire circle. Sense how your body can make adjustments, where your spine wants to bend or straighten to do this smoothly and easily. When you reverse the direction, does it get more or less smooth?
- Move your body in a circle again, but now leave your head more in the middle so your ribs make larger circles than your head. Can you feel how this keeps your center of gravity balanced, making it feel easier and smoother? Try it for awhile, trying to sense where you can relax some part of your body to smooth out the movement even more.
- Pay a little attention to your feet now, but don't entirely forget your sitz bones. Try to feel both feet and both sitz bones all at the same time. Which presses more, your sitz bones into the bench or your feet into the floor? Rock forward and back – does that make your feet press the floor more and less, or do they press the same all the time?

Finally, just sit comfortably and ask yourself: are you sitting the same as you were at the beginning of this lesson? Are you more or less upright? Are you leaning more forward or more back? Do your eyes look in the same direction as before or are they looking more up? More down? More to the right or the left? And has the way you feel changed since the beginning?

Most of the time we won't consciously do these movements as we play, because we would tend to overdo them. But becoming familiar with them will help you stay supple and capable when you bring your hands to the keyboard.