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What are some of the problems faced by small-handed pianists? *

Lora Deahl and Brenda Wristen

Small handedness is a complex problem that cannot be solved in the space of a few paragraphs. Moreover, the severity of this problem has increased over time. Since the invention of the piano circa 1700, the keys have increased not only in width but also in length. The height of the ebonies over the whites and the depth of the keystroke have also increased, along with the heaviness of the action. Because these developments present formidable challenges for small-handed players, there is a need for heightened awareness concerning their specialized technical problems.

Most of the repertoire written for elementary and early-intermediate level students has been composed for a child-sized, and therefore small, hand. However, the movements that will eventually constitute a healthy piano technique are built from the earliest lessons in ever-increasing complexity. Building a coordinated technique is

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important for all pianists, but is paramount for the small-handed player.

What motion principles are most important when playing the piano?

Some of the most important principles of body motion at the piano include using forearm rotation to cover distance and for power, lining up the forearm with the active finger, and of special importance for small-handed players, keeping the hand as compact as possible. Students can experience these three motion principles separately or in combination by using simple five-finger position drills or repertoire pieces.

The sequence of instruction is an important consideration in helping students develop healthy motion patterns. For example, while piano instruction has traditionally focused on developing a true legato touch, it may be better from a motor skills development standpoint to allow students to separate each note. This allows the student to use a whole arm motion while giving him or her time to learn to control the movement of each finger.

Choosing repertoire for students with small hands

It is extremely important to consider the student's hand size, technical development, and musical capabilities when choosing repertoire. Students are often eager to play pieces that are too difficult, or that are inappropriate for their physical or musical development. The teacher needs to serve as the "voice of reason," weighing potential physical consequences against possible musical and technical

benefits. Often, a less-taxing piece can be found that will be equally attractive because it maintains the overall sound or features of the more difficult piece. If mastery of healthy motion patterns is emphasized from the earliest stages of study, the student will have a solid base for addressing the greater challenges of intermediate-level repertoire.

Problems related to small-handedness become more apparent as the student progresses to the late-intermediate and advanced repertoire where he or she will encounter contrapuntal textures, large chords, extended arpeggios, wide-spread melodies, broken octaves, double notes, and situations demanding simultaneous combinations of speed and power.

Helping students technically "reinterpret" the score

The teacher's assistance is sometimes needed to help students technically "reinterpret" the score. The following general observations might prove helpful:

1. *Return the hand to anatomic neutral (its natural compact position) as soon and as frequently as possible.* We need to remember that the span of anatomic neutral in a small-handed player might be as small as the interval of a 4th or 5th. We also need to watch our students' hands closely for signs of stretch or stress, and work to minimize stretches in the hand.
2. *Edit the score if necessary to eliminate stretches.* Judiciously eliminate note doublings, reduce 10ths to 3rds, rewrite notes in a different octave, or redistribute notes between the hands.

3. *Choose repertoire carefully.* This is necessary for the physical benefit of the student and to maintain the integrity of the music. In this way, rewriting can be kept to a minimum.
4. *Re-finger passages to eliminate stretch where possible.* For example, use 1-3 instead of 1-2, or 1-5 instead of 1-4. Favor the stronger fingers (1,3,5); don't be afraid of using thumbs on the black keys. Re-finger arpeggiated passages using smaller hand spans even if this necessitates more frequent hand shifts.
5. *Look for situations where notes can be released early or played staccato,* for example the lower notes of big chords or inner parts in a contrapuntal texture. Early release allows the hand to return to its preferred compact position.
6. *Use the pedal to make legato connections between octaves, chords, or notes of a widespread melody.*
7. *When playing fortissimo, remember that volume is a product of force AND speed.* Instead of crashing down into the keys with a harsh sound, recommend increasing the speed of key depression (not to be confused with tempo, which should remain the same). Emphasize that dynamics are continuums, not absolute values, and will vary from one player and from one piece to the next.
8. *Do not prescribe exercises which stretch or stress the hand as these often lead to serious injury.*
9. *Consider purchasing a reduced-size keyboard manufactured with a 5-1/2 inch to 6 inch octave instead of a standard 6-1/2 inch octave.*

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