

Introduction

There are many schools of thought on piano technique. Since the piano was invented about 300 years ago, pianists have tried to find the best ways to coax music from what is essentially a percussion instrument. Almost all theories of piano technique are addressed to classical pianists. Jazz pianists generally rely on technical exercises designed for classical pianists, and while these have served the jazz pianist well, these exercises do not address the special needs and stylistic concerns of the improvising jazz pianist. A key difference is that classical pianists play written music and thus can prepare their movements, fingering, etc., while jazz players improvise most of what they play and cannot practice a piece ahead of time. The jazz pianist must have a technique flexible enough to adjust to continually changing situations. This book directly addresses the needs of the improvising jazz pianist through traditional exercises and specially designed exercises and etudes.

In the classical piano world, there has been a continuous debate over the merits of acquiring technical skills through practicing exercises versus practicing repertoire pieces. An argument often made is that exercises are boring—why waste time on them when any technical challenges presented by a piece being practiced can be directly dealt with specifically? Others argue that if one is technically prepared before studying a piece, most difficulties will be conquered with minimal practice. The argument against the practice of exercises does not hold much water for jazz pianists, however, since pieces are not prepared and rarely even played. The improvising pianist must make instantaneous note and finger choices and the best the jazz player can acquire are good fingering habits, technical preparedness, and keyboard awareness.

The exercises and etudes presented here act as calisthenics or conditioning for performing jazz. They are not ends in themselves and should not be considered as goals. The goals are the music itself and exercises should never replace the playing of real music. Doing push-ups may strengthen your upper body but will never make you a good athlete. However, push-ups can prepare you to become one. There is the danger of incorporating technical exercises into your playing that result in mechanical sounding music. **You should not let your ideas be limited by your technique, but you should not let your technique determine your ideas.**

An important way this book differs from traditional technique books is that the etudes are written to be played then improvised on. Chord changes accompany each etude and the process of improvising one's own music based on the technique studied better prepares the pianist for spontaneous creation than would just perfecting a written piece.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

POSTURE

Jazz pianists are not always the best models for *correct* posture while playing the piano. Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett, for example, have very *incorrect* postures, but ones that work well for them. The famous classical pianist Glenn Gould sat extremely low on a specially designed chair when he played the piano. Ultimately, it is up to each player to decide what works for them, but here are few basic pointers that work best for most players:

1. Place the bench at a distance that allows your knees to be slightly under the keyboard and your elbows slightly in front of your body, to allow lateral movement to both ends of the keyboard. Place your feet flat on the floor by the pedals.
2. Keep your back straight and lean slightly forward.
3. Adjust the bench height so the forearms are approximately level with the keyboard.
4. Keep your shoulders low and relaxed.
5. Keep your heels on the floor when using the pedals.