

## **The Fingers Are the Last to Know – Hand Position Shifts, Rotation, and Borrowing from the Taubman Method**

When I had birthed a child, my joints and ligaments had needed to alter themselves, becoming loose and flexible to make room for his passage into the world. Some of that alteration remained after it had ceased to be valuable. Hyper-extension and wobbliness in my fingers joined forces with new demands on my arms and hands – incessant holding of an infant I was afraid I'd break, carrying too many things in a single load, sometimes with a grocery bag hooked on one finger so as to also be able to open doors; I was typing more, and operating on an erratic practice schedule that used my digits when they were cold and creaky – resulting in a slow-growing injury. My right hand, and especially my ring finger, stopped obeying me, lost its facility. I had always been so proud of my crystalline right hand execution, and here was a brutal obstacle presenting itself the minute I started an ascending scale. This injury would take a few years to be fully diagnosed as a cocktail of ulnar nerve entrapment and tendonitis (specifically trigger finger) – we had to relocate from rural Iowa to the land of the Cleveland Clinic Sports Injury Institute to find the words to call it what it was. But in the period immediately following Ezra's birth, with my itch to stay on the horse of my performing life, I was less concerned with medical treatment and more concerned with navigating my playing to a healthier, more fluid state. I guess this was backward, but I credit myself for immediately seeking ways to simply tune in and *feel* BETTER when playing. I had been prone to a repetitive and insistent way of solving technical problems, and I had always brought a huge amount of tension and nervousness to my playing.

I drew upon a little money that had come my way to take Alexander technique lessons with Babette Lightener, a practitioner in Minneapolis. Through my work with her, I learned about continuity of motion and the mindset to support it – to not alter oneself and one's physicality when shifting from what the mind thinks is easy to what it identifies as difficult. I started to notice all around me, in so many areas of my life, the tendency to quickly, almost violently, change myself in anticipation of something I had problematized. Walking along the trail that ran along the Upper

Iowa River, I would be propelled by a fluid, relaxed stride, and then someone would approach from the opposite direction. As they drew closer, my thoughts would spiral through so many vaporous anxieties about my appearance, mind-reading the approaching walker's perceptions, and the ease of my motions would disperse, I'd feel my weight lumpily imposing itself upon my feet, my arms would stop swinging, my face would tighten. I became a different person. This is how it was when I was playing the harpsichord – I'd be bouncing along, singing and dancing, being pleased with myself, and then I approached a passage, a section, even just a trill, that my thoughts (and practice habits) had trained my body to respond to with fear – the more I had labored at tackling the difficulty in my preparation, the more powerful was this response. Again, I became a different person. Babette helped me to move through such menacing shifts in my psyche, to remain the same person going and coming.

I took another little bit of that money and arranged to have some lessons with a teacher of an approach to the keyboard called the Taubman Method. I had learned something about this school of thought during my two years of late-teenage identity crisis at Sarah Lawrence College – the best student pianist there evidently had sustained some damage through hazardous technical practices and overuse. She had started taking lessons with Dorothy Taubman in the city and had quickly become a zealot. As a child of the 70s, growing up on a pretty crunchy university campus, I had encountered lots of young enthusiasts cultishly clinging to new movements that were meant to change everything (EST Training, Re-evaluation Co-Counseling, Contact Improv, The Young Spartacists) so, in my cynicism, I didn't really absorb much of the information this pianist provided about how Taubman's approach had saved her musical life. And a year later, having transferred to the University of Michigan, I was quickly transformed into a harpsichordist so what good would an approach to piano technique be to me? 15 years later, it did me quite a bit of good indeed.

In the simplest terms, this method advocates for using various types of rotation from the forearm to provide the impetus for creating sound and establishing solidity at the keyboard. The focus was on the use of arm weight, the unimpeded arc of motion as the hand/arm shifted position, the beauty of gravity. There was no force, there was no interest in brute strength - I remember my wonderful childhood teacher proudly showing me the mass of muscle that had developed in the flesh of his hand, a trophy which, by Dorothy Taubman's assessment, would have stood for a lifetime of endangering his musical wellbeing by using the wrong mechanism.

Most importantly, of all the types of natural movement encouraged by Taubman and her followers, of all the ways in which the body could imitate the laws of physics through gravity, momentum, inertia, and leverage, using the fingers as little hammers was staunchly discouraged. In fact, finger activity was kept to a minimum, as was the stretching of the hand to reach across large intervals. As the teacher I worked with said, “The fingers are always the last to know”. In other words, the fingers were along for the ride through groups of notes that made up shapes, leaps, chords. The result may not have always been perfectly tidy, but it was stunningly natural, and there was never any pain, because there was rarely any tension. Over these past ten years, as I’ve found myself drawing more and more in my harpsichord teaching on the Taubman concepts, the most troubling impasses with my students have stemmed from my insistence that the fingers hardly needed to move, they could so easily be led around by the contours being drawn in the arm’s rotations, arcs, and releases. Many of these students, accustomed to truly sparkling at the piano because of their digital facility, had been trained since infancy that the accuracy and evenness of passages was an end in itself. I was defying something almost biblical by encouraging them to accept the natural irregularity that resulted from this more organic use of weight and motion.

One interesting nuance to what I absorbed from my study of Taubman practices came from my second teacher of this method who taught at Cleveland State University – she introduced me to the idea of ‘necessary tension’. There was a flexibility of mindset shown by allowing for any tension at all – it spoke to the unquestionable need to sometimes make extra effort, use small muscles, control your motion. Embracing the possibility of a ‘necessary tension’ creeping into one’s playing on occasion is dependent upon a total awareness of what it feels like to be *free* of tension. To know that your starting point is complete relaxation and motion only through natural forces is to be able to recognize anything that intrudes upon that basic state. Like so many revelations in a quest to find health, to reverse injurious trends, this transformation of technique is about establishing a new normal, one that resides within physical ease, fluid movement, and the absence of pain.