

Feldenkrais Method® and Piano Somatics: From the General Towards the Specific in Piano Technique

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Abstract

This article is built around an extract from *Play the Piano with Your Whole Self*, my fourth in an ongoing series of books on piano technique. The series is titled “Natural, Artistic Piano Playing,” and to date contains over 250 Piano Somatics ATM® lessons. The hand on key functions much like a little person with legs (fingers), pelvis (hand) and torso (forearm). This analogy lends itself to Feldenkrais Method-style exercises which develop the relationship between the hand’s innate structure and function and the complex actions required to move a piano key artistically. Piano Somatics, the science and art of movement at the keyboard, addresses certain thorny problems in piano pedagogy that have exasperated generations of pianists. The Feldenkrais Method, with its understanding of skeletal mechanics, biological cybernetics and learning, offers the context for Piano Somatics’ new approach to piano technique.

Keywords

Feldenkrais Method, piano technique, classical piano, piano & Feldenkrais, Alan Fraser, hand movement development, hand arches, hand as mini-body, movement developmental approach

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This article is built around an extract from *Play the Piano with Your Whole Self*, my fourth in an ongoing series of books on piano technique. The series is titled “Natural, Artistic Piano Playing,”¹ and to date contains over 250 Piano Somatics ATM® lessons. The hand on key functions much like a little person with legs (fingers), pelvis (hand) and torso (forearm). This analogy lends itself to Feldenkrais Method-style exercises which develop the relationship between the hand’s innate structure and function and the complex actions required to move a piano key artistically. Piano Somatics, the science and art of movement at the keyboard, addresses certain thorny problems in piano pedagogy that have exasperated generations of pianists. The Feldenkrais Method, with its understanding of skeletal mechanics, biological cybernetics and learning, offers the context for Piano Somatics’ new approach to piano technique.

My Feldenkrais Method training has had a profound influence on my understanding and teaching of piano. Indeed, I decided to become a practitioner with the express intent of developing a new approach to piano technique, though at the time I had no idea how that would look. I intuitively knew that the structural-functional underpinnings of the method, applied to piano playing, might offer one a way of freeing the art from the overly academic, creatively ham-strung playing of so many modern pianists – playing that is not even a pale reflection of the glorious interpretive powers of the past masters.

I had help from my professor, Phil Cohen of Montreal (1926-2018), to my mind the Moshe Feldenkrais of the piano world. He moved my arms as a practitioner would, *while I was playing*. One reason I did a training was to find out *what he was doing* as he evoked new sounds, new touches, new phrase shapes and expressions, often simply by guiding me physically. Sometimes his subtle touch on my forearm, almost a non-touch, would evoke a deep let-go within my body, a visceral release that could be almost painful, something wonderfully disturbing and mystifying.

When I discovered Feldenkrais Method, Functional Integration® began evoking similar sensations. What thinking, what logic lay behind these experiences? Why was it “learning how to learn” rather than learning in the classical sense? How could I bring this learning style to

¹ <http://www.alanfraserinstitute.com/natural-artistic-piano.php>

piano pedagogy? Could Feldenkrais Method help me to understand and replicate Cohen's genius?

The experience and study of Tai Chi offered a preliminary bridge between Feldenkrais Method and the piano. Resistance in Tai Chi is a form of parasitic contraction. The reduction of resistance and the refinement of a movement's trajectory through more precise bone alignments allows for increased power with less effort. Replace one's opponent with a piano key, establish the same dynamic, and a new mode of musical control appears – a strikingly different way of relating to the key – skin to skin, flesh to flesh, bone to bone – that offers one a *tabula rasa*, an artistic process free from habitual assumptions, where all is called into question, all interpretive strategies must be established anew. I recall experimenting with this in concert, using movement to specify the created sonorities in Debussy's *Images*, and my teacher commenting afterwards, "You weren't even playing the piano; you were doing Tai Chi on the keys." I knew I was on to something.

The next step, studying with the Croatian virtuoso Kemal Gekić in Yugoslavia offered me further clarification. Gekić's optimal use of skeletal dynamics results in a pianism of exceptional power, variety and expressive depth. As he rebuilt my technique from the ground up, I began to understand in a practical way the perceptual and skeletal organization needed for virtuosity.

Transmitting this developing practice to other pianists presented an obstacle. Although one cannot guide the arm of a pianist reading a book a thousand miles away, I tried to communicate Cohen's magic, Gekić's wizardry through the printed word. My first attempt, *The Craft of Piano Playing* (Scarecrow Press, 2003/2011), dealt mainly with maximizing the innate potency and function of the hand's arch natural structure. *Honing the Pianistic Self-Image* (Maple Grove Music, 2010) raised that structure up into a state of unstable equilibrium to make it more functional and more a reflection of the elegant sophistication of human movement. *All Thumbs: Well-Coordinated Piano Technique* (Maple Grove Music, 2012) dealt with the specific problems of the opposable thumb – a question so complex that indeed it merits a complete book. *Play the Piano with Your Whole Self* (Piano Somatics Press, in press) combines these issues and others in a series of integrative exercises that relate hand function on key back to the quality of movement in the whole body.

All along, the goal had been to develop a series of exercises for the hands, arms and body that would evoke a movement style similar to the one evoked by Cohen's and Gekić's interventions – and the metaphor of the hand as a little person with legs (the fingers), pelvis (the hand) and a torso that breathes (a forearm that moves) has been a perfect vehicle. The skeletal dynamics of the hand and the human body are amazingly similar: virtually any Awareness Through Movement® (ATM) strategy for the whole body has its equivalent for the hand – the trick is the divining.

One aspect of Feldenkrais's developing line of thought offers a particularly intriguing blueprint for these exercises. His wife Malka had been a paediatrician, and he had spent an inordinate

amount of time observing babies and their development – not only physical growth but the development of movement. He could perceive sequences in the learning process: certain aspects of skeletal mechanics and function needed to be established before other abilities could be built on that foundation, and so on through many stages. Feldenkrais based much of his method on mirroring those sequences to improve adult movement, perhaps most elegantly in the Amherst training where the entire series of ATMs in the first year follows the movement evolution of the infant from its very first voluntary action, sucking on the breast.

This book chapter² was inspired by Feldenkrais's mapping of infant movement development onto improving adult human movement. The included ATM tries to do the same for the pianist's hand.

How Babies Move

This view of the hand as bones linked in an elastic, dynamic chain of movement is new – but the fact is not. Hands have always been such, and infancy and childhood have always been spent learning 'skeletal' movement throughout the body. This chapter draws a parallel between the first stages of human movement and the first stages of learning in a pianist's hand. For every new movement 'baby' learns, the hand is given an equivalent. Do the movements gently, speculatively: offer the hand the sensations and impressions of a pre-standing apprenticeship.

The developing sense of self is sensorially based

A baby's sensory experience makes a crucial contribution to its sense of self. Lying prone stimulates the belly and the entire front of the body; lying supine does the same for the back. Without this sensory input, there would not even be a sense of self as we know it – but sensation alone is not enough. Baby's interface with the world is created through movement. Without movement, there is limited interaction with one's surroundings. Movement is a response to stimulus that confirms the sense of self by establishing *relationship*.

Sensation combines with intention to beget learned movement

Baby's first movements are random; they lack purpose. When baby sees and wants, it conceives an intention, and moves to fulfill it. The first attempts miss the mark; intention remains thwarted – but sensation records all the failures and refines the movement, calibrates it until eventually it hits home: intention is fulfilled. That movement is recorded in the brain, 'soft-wired' for future reference, and with enough repetition becomes 'hard-wired' into permanent storage in a cycle of

² Extract from Fraser (in press, a: 73-106).

- sensation
- perception
- intention
- movement
- intention fulfilled (or not)
- wiring in (or not)
- recalibration
- new sensation
- new perception
- new intention
- new movement, etc.

The sensory-motor feedback loop

These are the elements of the *sensory-motor feedback loop*, the fundamental neurological process underlying learning. The initial sensory self image is the background against which all the baby's subsequent motor apprenticeship takes place. Sensation feeds the brain the information needed to fulfill intentionality, creating ordered, elegant movements out of chaos. Enriched sensation leads to a better sense of self, a more detailed and accurate perception of movement, and thus more profound, organic learning.

Healthy movement wastes no energy

Good alignment is an essential component of healthy movement. Misaligned bones cause friction in the joints, eventual wear and tear, strained muscles and chronic tensions that can lead to injury. By contrast a well-aligned skeleton is ergonomically efficient: the bones transmit forces cleanly and easily. Babies *must* align bones to transmit forces effectively, because they are too weak to do it any other way. Necessity forces them to learn easy, elegant and efficient movement.

Preliminary elements of complex actions

Sitting, standing and walking are as remote from a newborn baby as the Andromeda Galaxy is from Earth – but many of its preliminary movements become crucial components of those more complex and demanding activities that appear much later.

Nobody learned to walk by walking

Those components are learned most effectively in a stress-free environment. The leg first flexes and extends while baby is lying down, in comfort. Many muscular segments calibrate their degree of contraction to make the action effective – the coordination is finer in a leg free from the stresses of standing. Leg flexion and extension is much easier even in crawling, a more exploratory activity than in walking. The hip joints don't stiffen because they are bearing so little

weight. Lying on the back and pushing the ground with the legs is also free from weight-bearing – the hips just transmit kinetic energy. Even thrusting the pelvis up into the air is relatively stress-free, an important intermediate step towards full weight-bearing.

The long apprenticeship is informed by whole body sensory experience

Sliding along the ground as we first move enriches the sensory experience of our torso. Without the rich sensory stimulation from the back or the belly in lying and sliding, the kinesthetic sense of self would be relatively impoverished, and the leg muscles would push more mechanically. When the sense of self derived from the torso's sensory input informs the flexing and extending of the limbs, there's a more sophisticated and subtle interaction between the various muscle groups. Flexion and extension develop an organic quality because the learning is both stress-free and sensorially enriched. Enhanced sensation of self improves the functioning of the sensory-motor feedback loop.

Context of comfort and security

As a baby acquires its movement skills, there are many false starts, many wrong paths – but it's all fine. There's no hurry, and there's no stress – baby is lying down. Baby flexes and extends its arms and legs, its hands and feet, its fingers and toes, effortlessly and easily as it feels the floor or its mother's body supporting its entire skeleton.

The first 'making peace with gravity' is capitulation. Gravity wins hands down and baby is fine with that. It lies down, cools out, and enjoys the contact with the sand, the ground, the water, its mom. All the while the brain is developing a sophisticated, complex set of coordinations which will afterwards serve as templates for the child's developing gait. The brain will refer back to these constantly, bringing their sophisticated, organic quality to standing, walking, running and jumping.

After the long apprenticeship: finally, full verticality

Standing for the first time at about one year, baby keeps her hip joints fluid. Her innate intelligence senses that stiffening them would make her lose her balance and fall. She must stay malleable to stay upright, allowing for the continuous adjustments that keep the body in balance. She can do so if she has acquired all the requisite movement components – but if she stands before they are fully developed, baby will stiffen unduly. Standing will be mechanically inefficient.

A full seven years to learn adult walking

Although the hips don't lock in standing even initially, many other joints do – the act is still relatively undifferentiated. Another full six years will pass before baby acquires the sophisticated, complex motor organization of adult walking (Brenière and Bril 1998: 1-2). There is a world of difference between the first halting, undifferentiated steps of an infant and the

subtle, three-dimensional flattened figure-eight movement of the pelvis that appears in its mature form only at age seven. Adult walking takes so long to develop because that sophisticated gait must integrate so many movement sub-components.

Standing and moving: an inherent contradiction

In walking, the hip joints must simultaneously hold the torso erect and initiate the legs' free, fluid movement. Hip tonus must be high enough to keep the body erect – but not completely stiff. High tonus allows smooth, but not unwieldy movement through the torso: the hips remain fluid when subtle adjustments to the body's shifting weight ripple through the entire frame. It's the need to develop this complex and delicately balanced organization that makes for such a long apprenticeship – both pre- and post-standing.

“As above, so below”: as for the whole body, so for the hand

The hand of a beginning pianist is in a similar situation to a newborn baby. The actions that move the keys are a pianistic *tabula rasa* for it. If the hand could lie down and crawl on the keys before walking – acclimatizing itself to the keyboard before being subjected to the stresses of standing, walking, running and jumping on the keys – it could profoundly improve its pianistic sense of self. Correlating baby's pre- and post-standing movement experiences to those of the beginning pianist's hand on key shows us why many hands are over-relaxed or too stiff, and why they could benefit from a pianistic pre-standing apprenticeship.

The hand, missing out on the equivalent of baby's entire first year of sensorial experience, is forced to stand and walk on key its very first pianistic day. A child's hand may be dextrous, but not adept at walking on piano keys, let alone exerting precise control over the descent and ascent of those keys. 'Standing' and 'walking' causes many pianists to stiffen their hands despite their best intentions to relax – when there has been no pre-standing apprenticeship.

The pianist's hands have been denied their movement birthright

The beginner forced to play immediately, like the baby forced to walk prematurely, forgoes a rich experience of sensual contact with the key that could inform his or her apprenticeship to pianistic standing, walking, running, hopping and leaping. Without it, flexion and extension of one's pianistic legs don't develop organically. The pianist lacks the baby's abundance of time and its stress-free environment.

A well-organized 'hand hip joint,' the metacarpal-phalangeal joint, can simultaneously stand firm and move fluidly, but many pianists' hands remind me of the stressed-out infant forced to walk too soon without having learnt how. The hand holds itself stiffly in its arch shape, the arm moving this stiff structure into the key; or the arch collapses in an attempt to stay relaxed, as if

the hand had a sort of pianistic polio. This 'pianistic preemie' simply doesn't know how to stay erect, stiffening and impeding movement or staying ineffectively limp.

The high incidence of piano disabilities is a natural outcome

Who could expect the hand's 'hip joint' to master an incredibly complex set of skills the first moment it touches the piano? Is it any wonder there are so many technical problems? Is it any wonder we develop tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, focal dystonia and all the rest, when our hands are denied their pianistic birthright?

A new regime for developing capable, healthy hands at the keyboard

This next ATM, and in a larger way, much of this book, addresses the dilemma, offering our hands the incalculable benefits of a sensorially rich pre-standing keyboard apprenticeship. The developmental exercises stimulate the beginner's hand to move at the keyboard naturally, organically, biologically. Advanced pianists can also benefit, finally freeing the hand from the stress it has experienced all its pianistic life: the learned response to the stress of standing and walking too soon.

ATM *The Hand Like a Baby Learning Movement*

Sucking

A baby needs first to satisfy its hunger: it learns first to suck on the breast. No sucking, no survival.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 1: Baby breastfeeding

The contraction of the lips activates extensors all through the neck and spine, preparing these muscles for their eventual role in straightening the whole body to verticality.

How could the hand imitate the reflexive contractions of sucking?

Step 1: Rub each finger pad in turn against the thumb pad. Where do you feel muscular activity – only in the fingers or elsewhere as well? Rotate the forearm and flex and extend the wrist as you rub. Which hand position helps you most clearly feel reciprocal activity in the upper arm and shoulder area?



Photo: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 2: Rub fingers & thumb against each other

Step 2: Explore a similar movement on key: rub the entire surface area of a key with each finger pad in turn, sensing muscular effort in the finger hand ---> wrist ---> forearm ---> elbow ---> upper arm ---> shoulder ---> around the shoulder blade ---> elsewhere in the back ---> and the neck. Do the same with the thumb ---> and then with combinations of fingers and thumb. Vary the pressure: sometimes rub lightly, other times press quite firmly – what changes in the sense of muscular activity throughout yourself?

The bell hand

Baby's sucking evokes an echo of flexion in its fingers – the “bell hand” movement of many Feldenkrais Method Awareness Through Movement lessons.

This primeval, elemental grasping motion is a deep-seated reflexive component of human movement – and at best it suffuses most of the movements of the hand on key.

Step 3: Rest your elbow on a surface. Lean the forearm forward slightly, and let the hand droop. Gently bring fingers and thumb together while the hand moves back, reaching the vertical and even passing it slightly as thumb and fingers touch, while the forearm comes to the vertical as well. Then droop the hand again, letting the forearm move forward as fingers and thumb separate from each other. Move the hand gently in the air like seaweed waving in a soft ocean swell, without curling the fingers, just letting them form a bell shape on their own – or perhaps helping them out just a little. Where else does the bell hand movement evoke muscular activity?



Photo: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 3: The bell hand motion

Extension

The baby begins to see, and interests itself in things other than the breast. It wants things. Lying on its stomach, it lifts its head to see more, allowing the torso to develop the rudiments of extension.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 4: Raised head with arms curled under

How would your hand ‘raise its head?’

Step 4: Cup the hand, fingers and thumb quite closely bunched, and lay it palm down on the table. **Slide the finger pads away from you so the hand flattens.** Do this several times, attending to the physical sensations elsewhere in your arm and body.

Step 5: Repeat step 4, **flattening the fingers more and more until the tips leave the table to ‘look up,’ as if the fingertips are baby’s head.** The straightened, sliding fingers, their tips rising slightly in the air, recall a bobsled moving so quickly that its front end becomes airborne. Don’t extend the fingers in isolation: feel supportive muscular activity in the hand ---> wrist ---> forearm ---> upper arm ---> shoulder ---> back and torso helping the fingers fan out and up. Let the arm go to allow these muscles to participate more subtly and effectively. Find the easy way.



Photo: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 5: The fingers 'raise their heads'

Grasping and flexion

Baby's exploration of the world is primarily sensorial: to understand something, in addition to seeing it, she must grasp it and bring it to her mouth.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 6: The mouth is the primary sense organ

Step 6: Flop your hand on a table and 'glue' the fingertips to the surface. **Move the heel of the hand toward the glued tips, sliding the forearm and curling the fingers while the MCP³ joints stay fairly low.** Curl the fingers and slide the arm more and more until the tips come unglued from the table to nestle in the palm, and the 'backs' of the medial phalanges lie on the table. The fingertips have been put into the 'mouth' of the hand, deep within the palm. Curl the fingers passively by sliding the heel forward, or curl them actively to pull the heel forward. The pull can be non-existent, gentle, or so strong that it transmits up the arm into the body, even pulling the torso.

³ Metacarpal-phalangeal joint



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 7: The hand slides forward to nestle the fingertips in the palm (the hand's 'mouth')

Propping

Baby straightens its arms, pushing the body into a stronger extension.



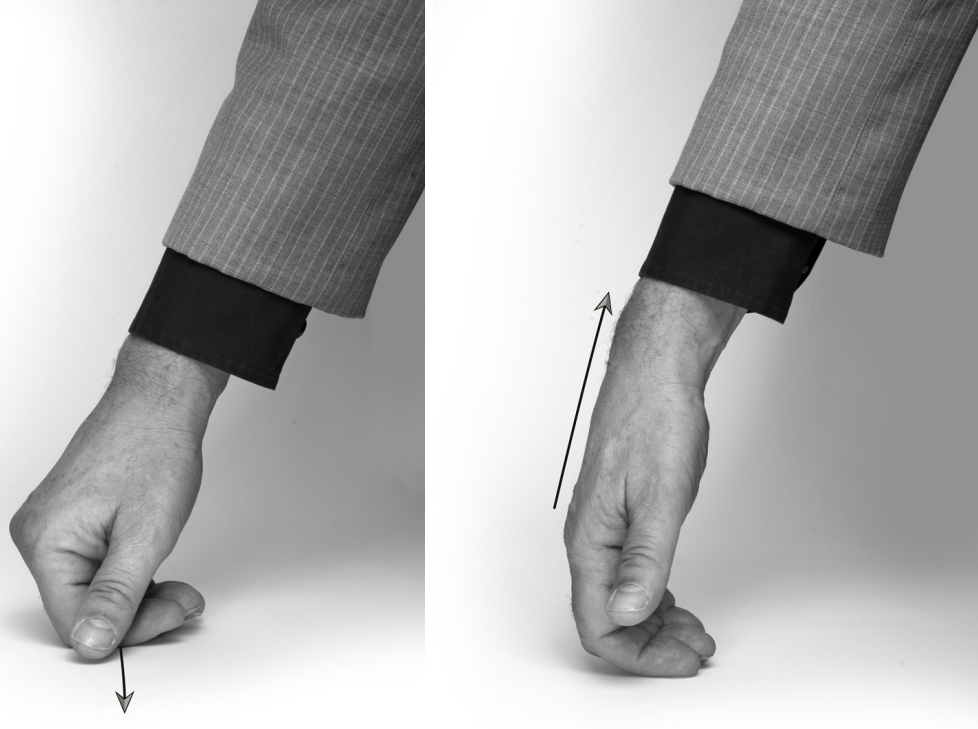
Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 8: Straightened arms raise head farther

How could the hand imitate propping?

Step 7: With the fingers curled and lying on the backs of the medial phalanges, begin to **straighten them, making the wrist rise a little**. Do this many times, increasing the range by small degrees to sense in as much detail as possible the inner workings of this unusual movement.

Perhaps get out of your chair and stand by the table, making it easier for the wrist to rise farther.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 9: Uncurl fingers to 'prop' the arm up

Extending the legs

In its first attempts to move about, baby straightens its legs, pushing on the ground with its foot.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 10: Baby pushes legs to raise pelvis

If it is lying on its back, this pushes its pelvis up into the air.

Step 8: Lie your hand on its back. Extend the fingers, straightening them so much that the fingernails push on the table, pushing the metacarpal-phalangeal joints up into the air. Leave the elbow hanging so the extensors get a good workout and the lumbrical-interossei really stretch.

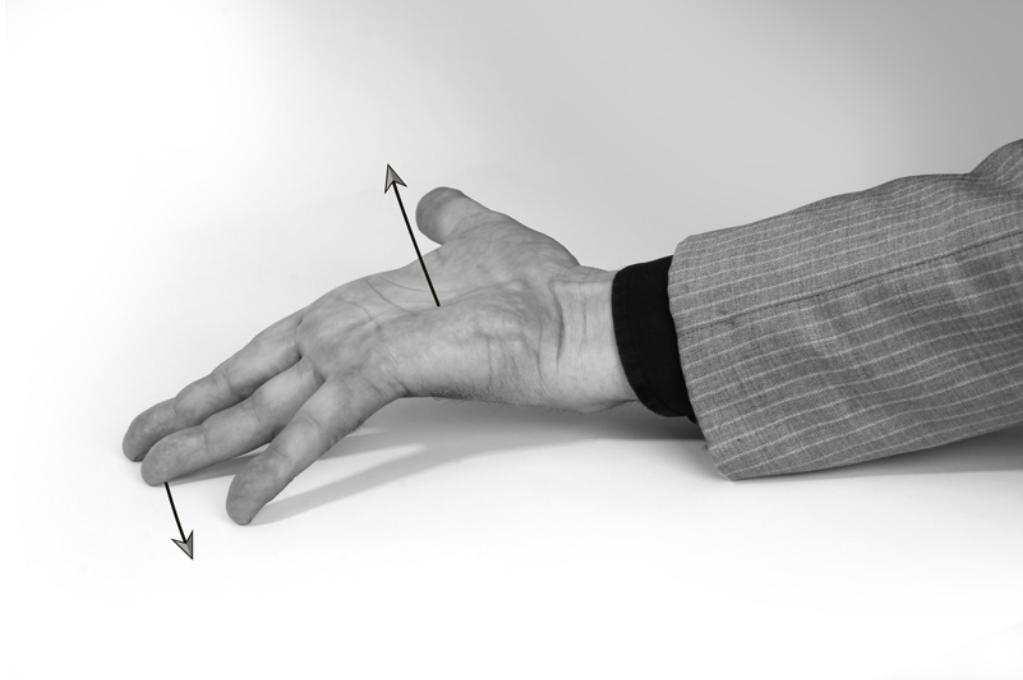


Photo: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 11: Fingers extend to push the 'hand-pelvis' up

Commando crawling

If baby lies prone, it begins to creep ('commando crawl') on its belly.



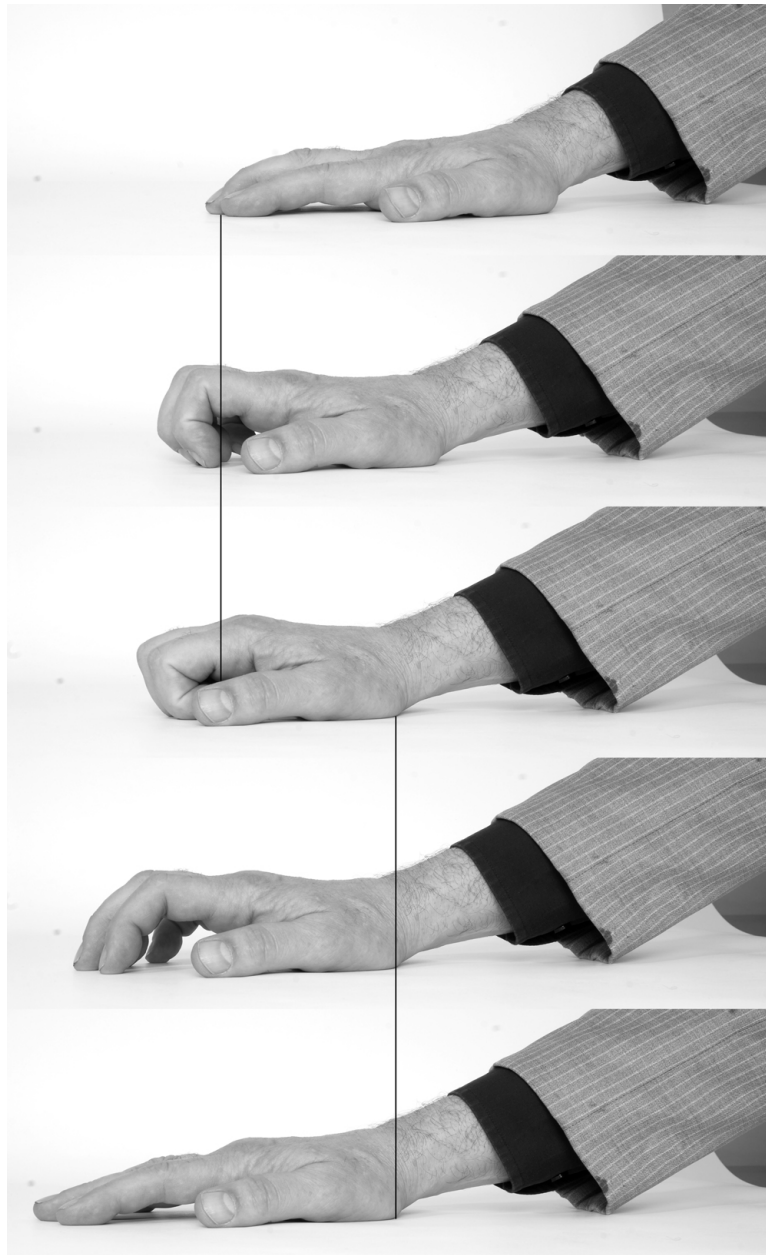
Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 12: Baby commando crawling

How could the hand creep along the table top?

Step 9: Flop the hand on the table with fingers curled enough to make them stand on their tips. Make the distal phalanges stand vertically. Glue the fingertips to the table and straighten the fingers to **push the heel of the hand away from them, sliding the heel along the table towards yourself**. Then glue the heel and curl the fingers to slide the tips closer to the heel. Then glue the tips again and repeat. The hand moves like an inchworm.

Step 10: Commando crawl in the other direction by curling the 'glued' fingers to pull the heel of the hand closer to them, then gluing the heel to the table and straightening the fingers to slide or flop them farther out in front. Repeat.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 13: The hand commando crawls forward (step 10)

Toe differentiation

The toes learn to flex independently of the foot, increasing the degree of differentiation in crawling.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 14: The toes curl, the better to feel the ground

Step 11: Creep again (steps 9, 10), stopping many times mid-movement to **flex and extend the fingertips isometrically**. Glue the tips to the table, curling and uncurling the distal phalanges alone without letting them slide. Don't flex the whole finger – only the tips. Curl them isometrically to dig them gently into the table top, then release.

Rolling – prone to supine

If baby looks sideways and up, she begins to roll, eventually flopping over onto her back (surprising herself as much as anyone).

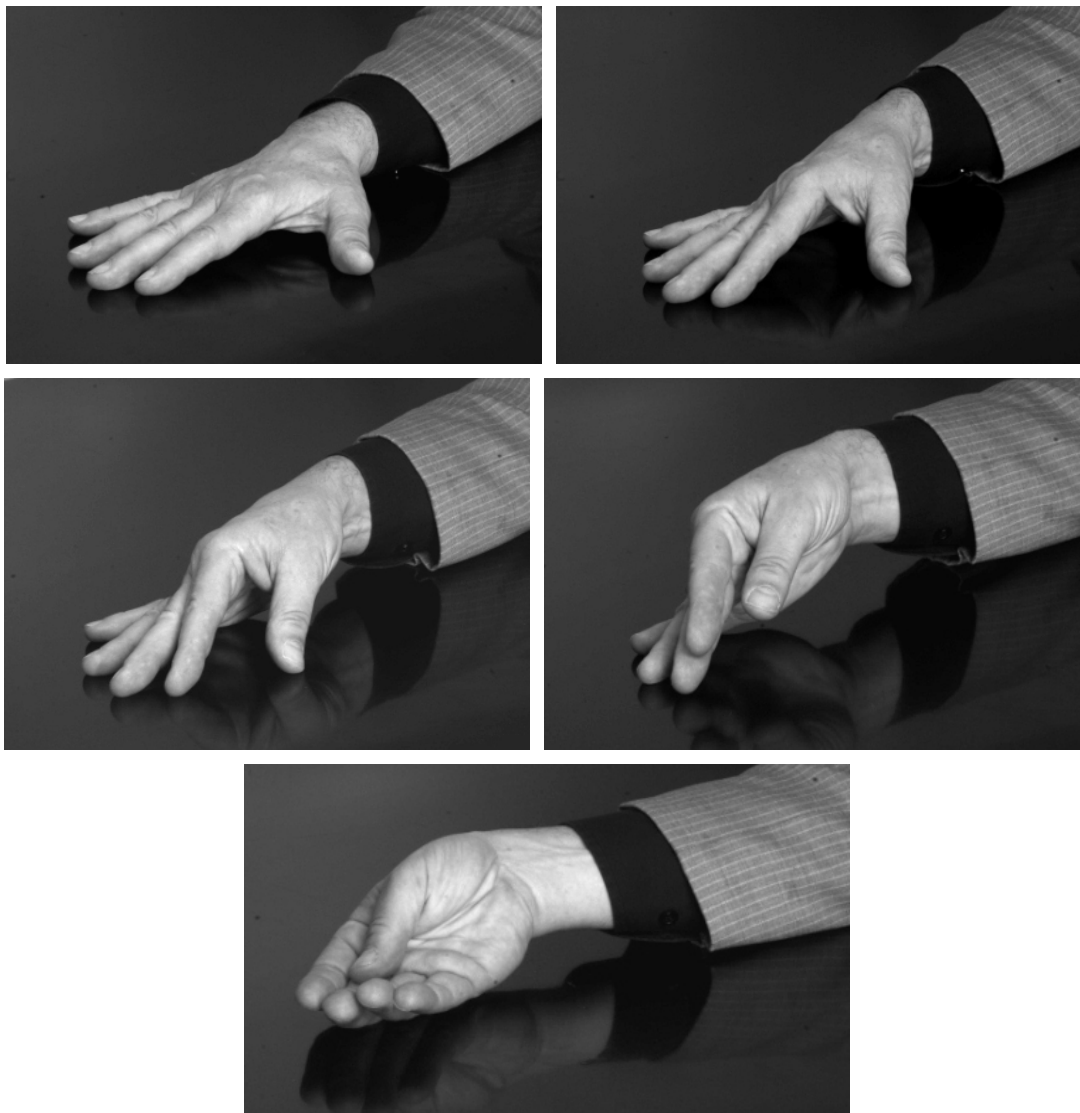


Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 15: Baby looks up, rolls over

How could the hand imitate baby's first rolling experiences? First let's explore a movement from prone to supine.

Step 12: Lay the hand prone with the fingers quite straight, but not stiff. Begin to **oppose the thumb to the fingers while supinating the forearm so the hand folds in on itself, drawing the thumb toward the fingers**. Glide the thumb along the table towards the fingers so it moves under the hand, causes the hand's arch to rise. Let the thumb leave the table when it wants to; don't force it to maintain contact. Eventually the hand rolls onto its back, the fingers bunched loosely. Where does the thumb end up? Does it float loosely in the air, or does it touch the underside of the fingers? If so, where? Each time you roll, fold the hand a little more or a little less – how do the trajectories change? How many variations can you develop?



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 16: Draw thumb to fingers to roll from prone to supine

Rolling – supine to prone

Rolling the other way, let's introduce a preliminary movement towards 'sitting.'

Step 13: Before returning from supine to prone, let the hand (except the thumb) rest more completely on its back. Pronate to flop the heel, thumb, palm and fingers onto the table. Repeat several times.

Step 14: While pronating from supine, move the heel towards the fingertips so the hand folds in on itself and comes to 'sitting.'



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 17: Rolling from supine to prone, fold hand to 'sit' on the backs of the fingers (step 14)

Folding the leg in and under

Baby learns to flex its leg and draw the leg up underneath itself in preparation for a stronger push.



Photo: iStock Photos

Illustration 18: Drawing the leg up and in towards the torso

Step 15: With the heel on the table and the loosely curled fingers lying on the backs of their medial phalanges, **make a stronger fist to make the MCP joint more pronounced.**

Step 16: With their 'backs' still glued to the table, uncurl the fingers slightly to push the MCP joint a little higher, but leave the heel on the table. The fingers will now lie on the backs of the distal phalanges, and the thumb will straighten and move slightly away from the hand. This imitates baby's pushing her body with her legs instead of her arms.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 19: Extend the fisted fingers to lift the hand's 'pelvis' (step 16)

Folding the body

But when it draws its leg up, it also begins to fold its body.



Photo: Irina Saygina

Illustration 20: Baby folds body to half-roll, half-sit

How could your hand fold to imitate the folding of a baby's torso?

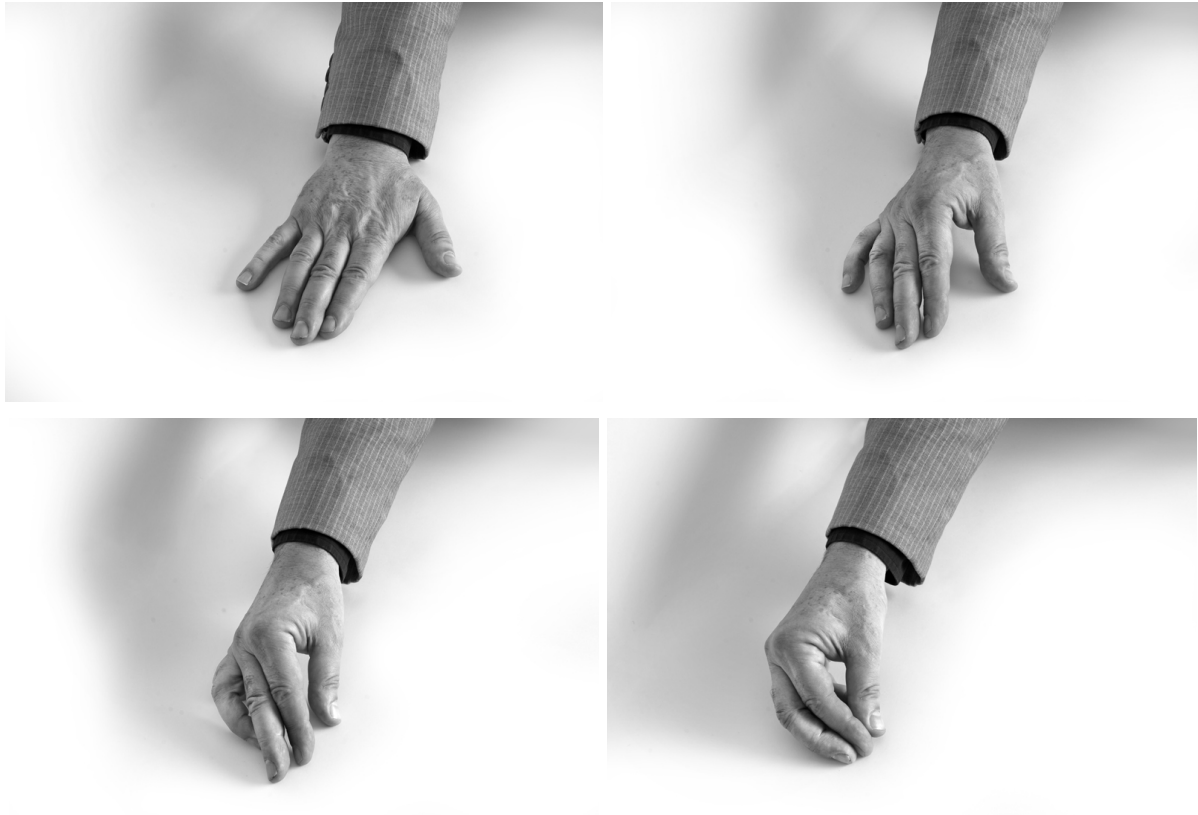
Step 17: Lay the hand prone on the table top. **As you roll it onto its back, fold it so by the time the backs of baby's 'legs' touch the ground, baby's 'torso' is curled over them.**



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 21: Roll to fold the hand onto the backs of the fingers

Step 18: Lay the hand flat on the table. **Combine commando crawling with a partial roll by drawing the thumb tip towards fingertips while supinating the hand.** Leave the fingers straight. Finally thumb nestles against the 2nd finger. Where is there effort: in the hand ---> forearm ---> upper arm ---> shoulder ---> back? Intensify the hand's internal effort by drawing all 5 fingers together as you supinate.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 22: Roll to fold thumb into curved fingers



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 23: Roll to fold thumb into flat fingers

Sitting

Folding leads to a whole new series of developments – baby folds the torso until it can't fold any more, so it begins to unfold. Flexion transforms into extension, and baby comes to sitting.



Photo: iStock Photos

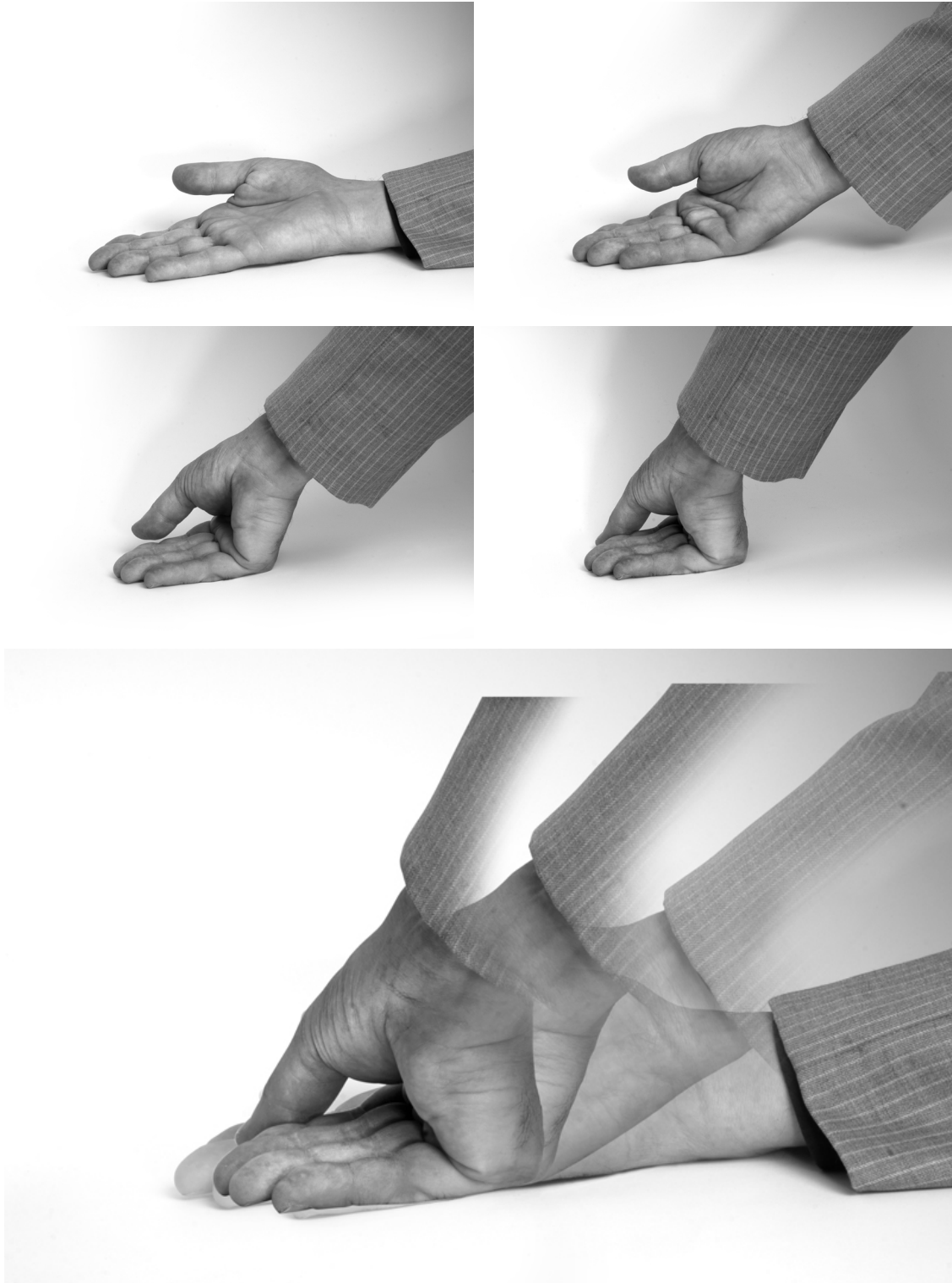
Illustration 24: Baby sitting fully upright

When was the last time any of us sat like this, with such wonderful verticality, such complete ease, with a torso naturally soaring high and happy?

How would your hand sit up?

Step 19: Rest your loose fist on the table and **roll further forward to lie on the backs of your proximal phalanges**. Now bring your hand to the vertical while all three phalanges of all the fingers extend to press their backs into the table. Sit forward in your chair, or even stand up to do this more easily.

Step 20: Alternately, lay your hand on its palm. **Roll to the outside until the hand and fingers lie on their backs on the table**. Next, fold the hand while the finger backs remain glued to the table so the heel of the hand and the completely supinated forearm move forward, away from you. Get out of your chair and stand by the table to feel more comfortable.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 25: Hand sit-ups

Here the fingers are baby's legs, the hand its torso, its head where your wrist is.



Photo: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 26: Fingers lie on their backs, hand vertical

Standing – bottom half only

The legs eventually flex so well that baby stands right up – but since her top half isn't ready, only her derrière becomes fully vertical.



Photo: Irina Saygina

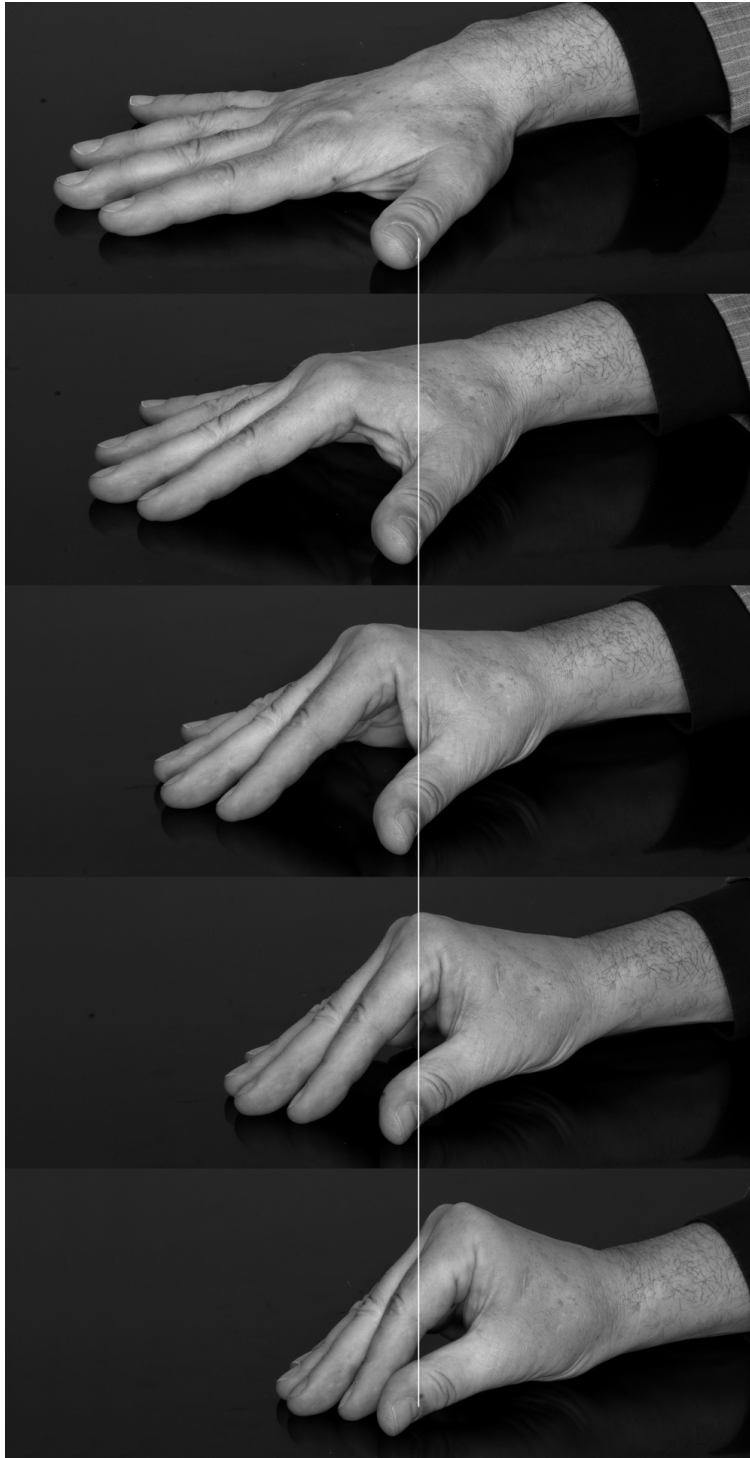
Illustration 27: Tush higher than everything else

Notice the ninety-degree angle between legs and torso: she's using her structure in the best possible way – albeit for a questionable goal.

Half-standing

How would your hand stick its tush in the air?

Step 21: Flop the hand on table, and leaving the fingers absolutely straight, **flex them to draw the heel towards the fingertips**. Here the MCP joint is baby's tush, the fingertips its head, the wrist its feet. The straighter the fingers, the higher baby's tush can rise while head and feet remain securely on the ground.



Photos: Igor Peyovitch

Illustration 28: Fingers approach the stationary thumb by gradually flexing

Integration

Step 22: Let your hands hang by your sides. Sense the difference between right and left. Which hand feels warmer ---> larger ---> more sensitive ---> more alive ---> more potent?

Go to the piano and play a passage with your left hand, and then the same with your right. What did your right hand spontaneously do differently? Has this new version of its self-image changed how it stands, walks, runs and jumps on the keyboard?

Postscript

I have been developing a Feldenkrais Method-based approach to piano technique for over 30 years, almost 50 years if we count my initial experiences with Phil Cohen. The main group of “student-beneficiaries” has been my class at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, whose Art Academy was one of the top music conservatories in Yugoslavia. I also work with professionals, adult amateurs, university students and young, gifted pianists at the Alan Fraser Piano Institute,⁴ with editions of the institute in various European and North American centers. My glory year as a pedagogue was perhaps 1999-2000 at the Music Conservatory in Wuhan, China, where a whole flock of youngsters blossomed when exposed to these ideas. It was striking to see how untrue the old assumption was: that those from the East can’t really understand Western classical music. When their selves were brought into direct relationship to the music, their innate, human musicianship quickly found voice.

The hand’s basic function is to grasp. Turn the hand palm down and lay it on a surface; the same grasping action now creates an arch. The voice of the piano is reflected in the integrity, functionality and potency of this arch, which must be neither too stiff nor too relaxed. The Feldenkrais approach helps pianists avoid the two main factors impinging on arch integrity, relaxation and arm weight technique where the weight of the arm is used to move the key. A healthy arch allows the fingers to walk functionally, freeing the wrist and arm for their proper task, linking notes together in discrete lateral movements. This is a gross simplification of these seminal ideas which have far-reaching consequences in the empowerment of modern day piano technique.

Of course, a purely physical approach to piano technique would seem to neglect the crucial element of musical expression. One needs much more than a healthy arch and differentiated arm movements to make music. However, the rare artist who can trust her body to enact a musical conception, who can afford to avoid the distraction of “how,” has an exceptionally great

⁴ <http://www.alanfraserinstitute.com/>

talent, or has been trained so well, at such a young age, that now, in her maturity, she simply cannot remember that apprenticeship. Maria João Pires can afford to assert that “technique doesn’t exist” (cited in Maes 2014) – and she really believes it – because her body responds perfectly to her musical intentions. Those who attempt to live as if she were right, without the requisite flawless, effortless and complete technique, risk injury or even worse, boring, musically inept performances. One pianist, after discovering the immense potential of the hand’s arch in mastering Chopin’s *Etude in C major, Op. 10 #1*, said that he could finally play the etude musically, although we had not said a word about the music. We had simply taught his physical self how to fulfil his musical vision.

There is always a direct link between physical organization and musical result. Everything you do, *sounds*. Every gesture, every newly learned movement affects the quality of the music’s sonority and expression. This relationship is explored in depth in other chapters of *Play the Piano with Your Whole Self*, as well as in my other books on piano technique. The above excerpt neglects it only because I wanted to present the link between a baby’s pre-standing apprenticeship and the hand’s beginning steps at the piano as concisely as possible.

The world of pianists can be roughly divided into two camps, those who avoid the distraction of the “how,” and those who benefit by delving into it. Many sceptics will always remain, but thankfully there are many who eagerly greet new insights into the physical/musical connection. The Feldenkrais Method was initially brought to musical performance mainly to address injury, but it is hoped that for the developing group of musico-physico aficionados, the far richer aspect of interpretative development comes to the fore.

Everything you do, *sounds*

My students have noticed that the palpable sense of connection between “skeletal self” and one’s instrument begets artistic transformation. When there is no contradiction in the body’s relationship to the musical shape, nor the musical instrument, musical expression grows naturally out of the architectonic structure, instead of being imposed upon it. Starkly bold orchestrations on the piano become possible when muscular interference is absent and the bones align effectively to transmit kinetic forces efficiently. Movement rippling unhindered through the skeleton’s entire kinematic chain allows the whole self to take part in the artistic process, with an accompanying, astonishing blossoming of emotionally expressive content. Music can now speak from deep within the self.

When a piano key is a three-dimensional entity to be entered rather than an object to be depressed, it becomes an effective means of colour creation, an effective tool for rich orchestrations. The requisite precision can be obtained through Feldenkrais-style physical differentiations not only in the hand’s ‘mini-body’ but also in the body as a whole. The shape of every gesture affects not only on the sound, but also one’s basic inner state – the level of background tonus throughout the entire body that allows more sophisticated skeletal

differentiation, that experiences the music physically, not just intellectually, that seems to touch the very soundboard with artistic spirit.

In the past, piano technique has been seen as scales and arpeggios, Czerny and Hanon exercises, the diligent cultivation of mechanical dexterity through the slavish repetition of exercises. The “how” was expected to develop reflexively. Even the young Liszt put his newspaper on the music desk while he did his hour or two of finger exercises each day. Extending a Feldenkrais Method mindset into the realm of piano technique changes all that. Becoming aware of *how* one plays enhances the physical and mechanical result. When physical blockages melt away, one is more potent physically and artistically. It is crucial that this “how” be *felt* at the sensory level, not just understood intellectually – hence the Feldenkrais Method-style exercises, which become most effective not when done in isolation but when applied to the solution of specific musical and technical challenges presented in the repertoire.

The refining influence of the Feldenkrais Method for pianists and other musicians is not just about feeling good, not just about relaxing, nor even just about improving movement – it is about connecting the deepest parts of the artist to the instrument to create performances full of drama and sensitivity, power and subtlety, to engender a voice that speaks with true artistic command.

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Canadian pianist and pedagogue Alan Fraser has spent 50 years developing *Piano Somatics: The Art & Science of Movement at the Piano*, his approach that dovetails the principles of the Feldenkrais Method with the practicalities of piano technique. He studied with Phil Cohen in Montreal and Kemal Gekić in Novi Sad, Serbia, and completed a Feldenkrais Professional Training in Hawaii in 1992. He has outlined his approach in his series of books, *Natural*, *Artistic Piano Playing*, and works with students around the world at the *Alan Fraser Piano Institute*. He teaches at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia.

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