

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Level One: Articulation and the Wrist

BY RANDALL FABER

Level One of *Piano Adventures*® might be summarized by two primary objectives: 1) introducing beginning articulation, and 2) teaching the remaining notes of the grand staff. In this article we focus on articulation and the implications for wrist gesture.

After completing the Primer Level (see “Synergy at the Primer Level,” *The Piano Adventures® Teacher*, February, 2003), the student is introduced to legato and staccato touches in the first unit of Level One. The terms *legato* and *staccato* are so familiar to us as music teachers that we might easily overlook the importance of these touches in building technique and in developing expression. Let’s examine the technical building blocks for these touches and consider how to sequence them at the elementary level.

Perhaps you have noticed that there are no articulation marks at the Primer Level—no slurs and no staccato marks. We delay teaching legato (for young to average-age students) to ensure that a modicum of finger independence develops before insisting on connected touch. When a student’s finger and small muscle coordination is undeveloped (common, and not a cause for concern), an insistence on legato playing can cause tension in the hand. This happens when *pressure* is maintained against the keybed. In most cases, the playing of a key should be followed by immediate relaxation, maintaining only sufficient balance of the hand and arm to keep the key depressed.

We commonly hear young primer-level students play all notes detached, poking at each key with a pump of the wrist or a stab with the elbow. While we want to minimize (but not necessarily eliminate) the wrist pumping, this non-legato touch inserts a relaxation between each note, which can be beneficial. The student is naturally building coordination by practicing a relaxation response after each finger plays. Granted, it doesn’t *sound* good to a musician’s ear, but it does seem to improve coordination (and rhythm as well).

Because of this, we choose to delay the teaching of legato until Level One, and we wait to eliminate the “pumping” mannerism. (Some students naturally play legato at the Primer Level. This is good, and usually indicates sufficiently developed coordination to explore the touch.)

Wrist Gesture Presented in Sequence

What does it mean to play legato? Yes, it is a connected touch, but—more importantly—it is the playing of *several notes in a single gesture*. It is initiating a phrase with a drop of arm weight and passing (transferring or “rippling”) that weight from finger to finger.

We have all attempted to teach two-note slurs to elementary students in a single lesson, complete with this new wrist gesture and the softening of the slur ending. Experience reveals this to be frustrating for both student and teacher—and the student is not interested in the sound or the motion. In *Piano Adventures*®, the component parts of the slur gesture are isolated and sequenced over several levels, so that each element can become an automatic

skill. This spiral approach offers both review of a previously learned skill and expansion of the technical concept, polishing the gesture and practicing its applications over advancing levels.

◆ **Height of the wrist** This is established at the Primer Level with the Technique & Artistry secret called “Thumb Perch.” Playing on the *side tip* of the thumb (instead of a horizontal thumb) eliminates a sagging wrist, which is so common at this level.

Thumb Perch

The thumb should play on the **side tip** of the fingernail. Do a “thumb perch” by silently placing your right hand on the white keys with the thumb “**perching**” on the **side tip**. Your other fingers should rest gently on the keys.

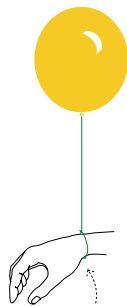
Then do a “thumb perch” with your left hand.

Note to Teacher: Finding the correct thumb position also eliminates a sagging wrist.

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◆ **Range of wrist motion** “Relaxed Wrist,” the Level One Technique & Artistry Secret No. 2, establishes the range of motion for the wrist in the exercise “Wrist Float-Off.” With hands on the closed keyboard lid, an imaginary balloon pulls the wrist upward until only the tip of finger 3 is in contact. This precludes a locked wrist and models the gesture for a phrase ending.



2. The second secret is a RELAXED WRIST.

Wrist Float-off (on the closed piano lid)

Set your hands in a rounded hand position.

Pretend a balloon on a string is slowly pulling your wrist upward.

Let your wrist rise in slow motion until only the **tip of finger 3** is touching the surface.*

Then return to a normal playing position.

Do 2 “wrist float-offs” with your R.H., then your L.H.

Try it hands together!

*Teacher Note: The shoulder should not rise, but stay relaxed.

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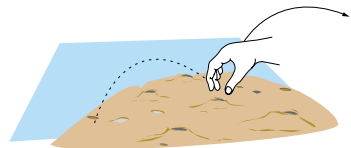
◆ **The wrist gesture** At Level 2A (Technique & Artistry Secret No. 5), the exercise “Moon Walk” applies the Wrist Float-Off to playing keys across the keyboard.

Moon Walk (with damper pedal down)

Pretend you are walking on the moon.

Play a Middle C on the piano with **R.H. finger 3**.

Let your wrist rise in s-l-o-w m-o-t-i-o-n (float-off) and land gently on each HIGHER C.



Repeat with **L.H. finger 3** moving down the keyboard playing C’s.

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◆ **The slur gesture** The drop and release of arm weight through several notes is specifically practiced at Level 2B with the Technique & Artistry exercise called “Painter’s Brush Stroke.” Here the student perfects the “down-and-up” motion of the slur gesture.

2. The second secret is a SLUR GESTURE.



Painter's Brush Stroke

A pianist can play several notes with a single motion. This smooth wrist motion is called a slur gesture. As you play, imagine the smooth brush stroke of a painter. Your wrist will rise slightly through the slur.

Musical notation for R.H. and L.H. slurs with 'wrist: down and up' and 'mf' markings.

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◆ The tapered ending At Level 3A, the focus is on "rounding off" the phrase ending. The wrist gesture carries the weight off the key to soften the last note of the slur.

Legato and the Wrist

So what do we expect of the student at Level One? We want a flexible, relaxed wrist that freely moves up within an established range of motion. We don't focus on down motions of the wrist here, as these tend to collapse the fingertip and lock the wrist low. We do focus on the up motion. It is the flip side of the arm-weight drop. The student drops into the phrase with arm weight and releases the weight with the Wrist Float-Off. This needn't be complex. We simply encourage the student to apply the wrist float-off at certain points in the music.

Legato Skips

Musical notation for Legato Skips with lyrics: 'Skip on the keys, le-ga-to, please.' and 'Left Hand can play with ease.'

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In Legato Skips, for example, the Wrist Float-Off is used at the end of each slur. In addition to tapering the phrase, the wrist lift prepares the hand for the subsequent phrase which is sequenced a step higher. (Notice how the sequential fingering promotes the wrist lift.) The use of the Wrist Float-Off is tremendously valuable for preparation. This is explicitly practiced in Smooth Take-off (Technique & Artistry pp. 6, 7) where the Wrist Float-Off carries the hand up an octave for the repeat. It applies in such pieces as Kite in the Sky (Lesson Book, p. 21) to prepare the LH crossover and in Rain Forest (Lesson Book, p. 24) for the concluding RH fifths.

There are countless applications of the Wrist Float-Off which both student and teacher can find. Look beyond just phrase endings. The rising wrist can add grace to ending chords

or intervals. In Legato Skips, for example, a Wrist Float-Off adds finish to the RH third that concludes the piece. Long-held notes come alive by replacing a static hand with a wrist that slowly rises through the duration of the note. (See Floating Balloon, Technique & Artistry, p. 13) This conveys a continuing tone, reinforces rhythmic direction, ensures appropriate relaxation, and presents visual and kinesthetic elegance.

Much of the music of Level One is written to encourage the Wrist Float-Off. The phrases in Merlin the Wizard (Lesson Book, p. 32) and The Super Secret Agent (Lesson Book, p. 34) each end on a black key. The Wrist Float-Off aids in playing the black key and, conversely, the topography of the black key invites the Wrist Float-Off. For a more refined gesture, the knuckles should roll forward, toward the fallboard, as an integral part of the Wrist Float-Off. This forward roll ultimately becomes the key element of the wrist gesture.

Merlin the Wizard

Use the right foot pedal for the entire piece. Heel on the floor!

Musical notation for Merlin the Wizard with lyrics: 'Deep in the forest, Merlin appears. He's the magic wizard with the long white beard!' and a 'DISCOVERY' question: 'Which measure has the most F sharps?'.

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Staccato and the Wrist

There is no single way to play staccato. Staccato playing is always contextual—that is, the execution of the staccato depends on the musical context: How short a duration? How much of the touch is initiated by the finger? How much by the hand hinging at the wrist? How much by a thrust of the elbow and arm? It is important to note that the wrist staccato taught in the Level One Technique & Artistry Book (Secret No. 3, "Light Hand Bounce") is only one type of staccato. Other contexts call for a quite different handling.

Teacher Note: The next secret teaches staccato, allowing the hand to bounce lightly from the wrist. The student should be coached to relax while tapping, so as not to stiffen the forearm.

3. The third secret is a LIGHT HAND BOUNCE.

Woodpecker Taps (on the closed piano lid)

Place your R.H. in a rounded hand position. Perch your thumb on the side tip so your wrist doesn't sag.

Lightly tap the rhythm below with your R.H. fingertips. (all fingers tap together).

Musical notation for Woodpecker Taps with lyrics: 'Tap - ping, tap - ping on the tree,'

Repeat Woodpecker Taps with your L.H. Then tap hands together.



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For this early level we choose the wrist staccato, a technique that essentially dribbles the hand from a slightly elevated wrist. Notice how well this ties in with the Level 1 theme of relaxing the wrist and finding its appropriate range of motion. Introduced as a “Light Hand Bounce” with the exercise Woodpecker Taps, this staccato technique applies fittingly to the repeated notes and repeated intervals that characterize much of the repertoire at this level: for example, Haunted Mouse (p. 11), Young Hunter (p. 13), and Russian Sailor Dance (p. 33) from the Lesson Book and Mouse on a Trampoline (p. 16), Legend of the Buffalo (p. 20), and Sidewalk Game (p. 35) from the Technique & Artistry Book.

Scampering along

3 on ___?
1 on ___?

p I'm a lit - tle mouse that's in a haunt - ed house.

2 on ___?
1

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This gentle hand bounce not only relaxes the wrist, but it also provides a technique for playing soft, accompanying chords. This has big payoff at Unit 8 where chords are first introduced. Instead of loud, clunky chords that overwhelm the melody, the left hand effectively plays soft staccato chords in the first pieces with block chord accompaniment (Song for a Scarecrow and My Pony, Lesson Book, pp. 41, 42). This is possible because of the technique acquired early in the level (and the compositional placement of the accompanying chords on beats where the melody is sustained, not played).

Expanded Note Reading

The Level One expansion of note reading to the entire grand staff is paced to parallel the technical sequence. After reinforcing the note recognition taught at the Primer Level, an orientation to the space note names F-A-C-E leads the student to the notes of Treble C Position. This allows the mimicking of a melodic phrase in a higher octave. As implied earlier, the movement of the hand from one octave to another can be executed using the Wrist Float-off. So this new range of notes allows a repertoire that invites use of the wrist gesture and, consequently, preparation and arm weight.

Importantly, the simultaneous introduction of all five notes of Treble C Position requires the student to read by interval (by step/skip). This is intentional, and offers a powerful opportunity to ensure that note-name recognition is paired with intervallic reading. This intervallic review of step/skip conveniently leads to introduction of the fourth and fifth in the next unit. This pedagogy is reiterated in the final unit, which introduces Bass G. The three G positions invite intervallic reading, carry the hand to different octaves, and present a repertoire with increasingly sophisticated articulation.

In summary, the Wrist Float-Off and the Light Hand Bounce constitute essential wrist gestures that derive from their counterparts—legato and staccato. These gestures provide a technical foundation on which more refined technique can be developed. And, importantly, whether through shaping a phrase, softening an accompaniment, or adding elegance to an ending, these gestures add a great degree of musical artistry ... which is especially appreciated at this early level. ■■■

PIANO

Adventures®

by Nancy and Randall Faber

Level One Piano Adventures®



Lesson Book FF1078

The Primer Level strategy of note recognition plus step/skip recognition is expanded at Level One to include 4ths, 5ths and the remaining notes of the grand staff.



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