

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Level 3B: Playing Fast

BY RANDALL FABER

This is what the student has been waiting for—a chance to play fast. “Now I can really show off!” Then we tell the student, “The first lesson in playing fast is ... slow practice.” We’ve just taken the wind out of his sails. Well ... almost. There are *secrets* to playing fast. And if we let students in on these secrets, they are usually more than willing to go through the necessary paces to achieve fast playing.

We designed Level 3B with two purposes in mind.

- ◆ To elongate the bridge to the intermediate level. Thus we accommodate the quasi-motivated student, the youngster who does not practice an hour a day but who yet wishes to continue piano study.
- ◆ To develop the skill to play fast—to build speed. We’re not looking for virtuosity yet, as that will come in stages. We are looking to guide the student into the mechanics of fast playing and to offer the experience—indeed the thrill—of rapid tempo and flying fingers.

Building a Bridge

Much of what is taught in *Piano Adventures*® Level 3B is reiterated in Level 4. As discussed in the previous newsletter issue, review is essential. How often are you surprised by a student’s inability to name the relative minor? Or failure to recognize the dominant in a familiar key? We can’t send the student back, but neither should we push blindly ahead. Certain concepts are fundamental to intelligent piano playing. These need to be mastered before moving into the intermediate repertoire. We would be mistaken to blame the student for not retaining a concept on first hearing. Instead, we recognize the importance of review and the instructional need for follow-up presentations. For this reason, relative major and minor key relationships and chord inversions are presented as new concepts in Level 3B, then are fully revisited in Level 4.

Building Speed


It is tempting to push for virtuoso playing when we see potential, but it almost always backfires if we fail to ramp up through pre-requisite stages. In fingerwork, for example, the student must develop coordination that allows *instantaneous* contraction followed by relaxation, and *precise* contraction that does not affect the relaxation of neighboring muscles. This takes time to develop and requires specific practice routines. Virtuosity cannot be forced; virtuosity unfolds naturally with knowledge and correct practice.

Pulsing

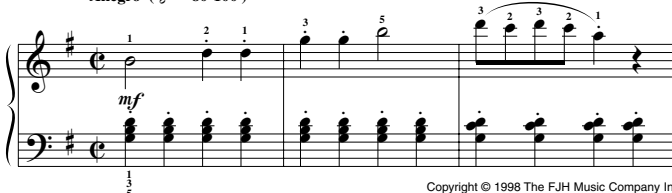
The Level 3B Lesson Book opens with Beethoven’s *Rage Over a Lost Penny*, providing a review of cut time. Why does cut time so effectively increase speed? Because it invites pulsing every two beats instead of pulsing every beat. Consider a set of four eighth notes. If we provide a metric pulse on both quarter-note beats, the passage bogs down with heaviness, as if running with

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boots in the sand. If we pulse only on the first of the four eighth notes, we get fluency and musicality.  **Video 1**

Allegro (♩ = 80-100)



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Measure 3 invites a drop of arm weight into the first of the four eighth notes (beat 1) and a wrist float-off at the end of the slur (beat 3). Match this “down-up” motion in the left hand: The four quarter-note chords are played as “DOWN-and-UP-and.” The down-up motions match that of the right hand and the “ands” are played with a light ripple. Notice how the half-note pulsing of this down-up gesture matches the feel of cut time. It propels the beat, not only through half-note pulses, but from measure to measure.

In the Leopold Mozart Minuet in F on page 7, we find similar pulsing, but in 3/4 time. Both hands synchronize to a “DOWN-up-up” pattern that matches the triple meter. As a general rule, the hands should make the down or up motion together, as if playing both hands in a large, ten-fingered glove (analogy by Dorothy Taubman).  **Video 2**

Andante (♩ = 96-108)



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Rotation

Page 6, Interval Review, provides a review of rotation, which we address in *Piano Adventures*® Level 3A Technique & Artistry. Rotation refers to the back-and-forth turning of the forearm, as if turning a doorknob or a key in a lock. The efficacy of forearm rotation is that it plays two notes with the effort of one. In Interval Review the tenuto notes are played with the forearm rotating toward the thumb and the recurring Cs are played effortlessly on the rebound. The many notes of the passage are thus reduced to a simple descending major scale. Efficiency is gained by employing the natural fall of a turned hand and its rebound.


R.H. 

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A more subtle application of forearm rotation occurs in *Snowfall* on p. 10. Again, the rotation allows the student to concentrate on the three descending scale tones of each measure


instead of all six notes. Here the rotation is toward the finger, with the thumb playing on the rebound. Notice also how the turning back of the hand toward the thumb (finger 3 in the air) shortens the preceding third (fingers 3-1) to set up the contracted second (also fingers 3-1). The rotation actually facilitates the contracted second without a physical hand contraction. This is much more efficient and more comfortable than crab-like hand contractions along the surface of the keys.  **Video 4**

Gently moving (♩ = 100-112)



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Gesture

Much of what enables speed at the keyboard is the playing of several notes in a single gesture. In Phantom of the Keys (3B Lesson Book, p. 13), we find two excellent examples that illustrate this. The RH eighth-note gesture at measure 5 must be initiated by a single drop of arm weight that carries through the entire measure. This drop takes the wrist rather low as it transcribes the lower half of a “wrist circle” (see Technique & Artistry Level 3A, p. 34), not coming up until the following measure. In contrast, imagine the feel and the sound if beat 2 (thumb on A) were to be accented. All sense of lilt and dance would vanish. Beat 2 in the LH accompaniment must be similarly light. As noted earlier, the gesture of both hands should match, so play both hands with a drop, then a rising wrist. (For more on “accompaniments that dance,” see the Level 2B Pedagogy of *Piano Adventures*® article in Issue 4. Also, the Level 3A Technique & Artistry Book, pp. 14, 15.)  **Video 5**

Mischievous, with energy (♩ = 88-100)



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The brisk three-note slurs at measures 7 and 8 are almost ornamental, much like the grace notes being taught with this piece. The single gesture not only gives speed, it allows the performer to concentrate on the descending scale played by finger 3, in parallel 10ths with the left hand.

What do pulsing, rotation, and slur gesture have in common?

All of these techniques carry many notes on a single impulse. This gives efficiency and motion, technical fluency, and musical artistry.


Slow Practice

So, how do you practice slowly, yet execute the gesture? The simplest way is to use slow practice to *exaggerate* the gesture. Slow practice just for finger work has limited workability because the gesture required for speed and expression may be absent. Bringing the gesture into the slow practice makes slow practice exponentially more valuable. Sometimes you need to “sprint” with a passage to find the gesture, then execute it in slow motion.

With a facile technique, this can all be done in very little time. But students need yet to develop a facile technique. Developmental steps need to be taken to build fundamental finger coordination. Note, however, that we’re not going for building muscles or “finger power.” We’re looking for instantaneous, precision “firing” of very specific muscles, with simultaneous relaxation of the surrounding muscles. Thus, coordination is key; strength is not. (Arm weight, rotation, and forearm thrust provide sources of impact that are much more effective than finger strength.)

For students at the early stage, the firing of a finger generates many contractions in a generalized area. Specificity is weak; generalized tension is high. Slow practice can provide a relaxation immediately after the note is played, thus allowing the inappropriate contractions to relax. Over time, generalized tension diminishes and finger contractions become very specific with concurrent relaxation of proximate muscles. This is how slow practice, done correctly and over time, can build the neurological basis for speed. Adding the correct gesture provides the formula for expressive virtuosity.

Play-Relax

In *Piano Adventures*®, we accelerate the development of this sophisticated neurology through specially developed exercises. Flying Fingers and Team Players in Technique & Artistry Level 2A build “fast fingers” by incorporating the process of “play-relax” with slow practice and repetition. A simple pattern is played four times *slowly/forte*, then four times *quickly/piano*. For the slow executions, have the student relax immediately after each finger plays, but not collapse the arch. In fact, each finger strike can carry the hand slightly forward (toward the fallboard), increasing the hand arch and tall bridge. The immediate relaxation will lead to more specific fine-tuning of the muscle groups needed to play each finger. For the quick executions, the pattern is played lightly—all notes played in a single gesture. Notice how the exercise first develops the muscle specificity of the finger attack, then adds the gesture. Both are essential for fast playing.  **Video 6**

3. The third secret is FAST FINGERS.

Flying Fingers (on the closed keyboard lid)

A pianist must be able to play **finger patterns** quickly. Practice this **finger pattern** with your R.H.


||: 1 - 3 - 2 - 4 :|| “Play” 4 times SLOWLY, *forte*.
“Play” 4 times QUICKLY, *piano*.

Now repeat with your L.H.



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Alignment

We open the Level 3B Technique & Artistry Book with a secret called “Closed, Cupped Hand for Scale Passages.” Here we contract  **Video 7**

