



Academy of Music and Drama

The route to an effective piano technique

How a new approach to piano playing made me aware of my limits and helped me overcome them

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ABSTRACT

In this work, I analyse a new piano technique that I am in the process of studying. I applied it to three of Chopin's Préludes Op. 28, namely no.1, no. 10 and no. 12. This technique was developed by the pianist Tiziano Poli, and described in his book *Happy Fingers: La via fisiologica e naturale per la tecnica pianistica*, Varese: Zecchini Editore: 2010. Its basic concepts are described in the first chapters of this thesis, together with a look on my previous approach to piano technique that lead to overuse syndrome. I describe the learning process of each Prélude over a period of four to five months, and how, in the end, Poli's technique helped me increase relaxation, control and awareness of the movements.

Key words:

Piano technique; Chopin; Chopin's Préludes Op. 28; Practice;

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Many thanks to my piano teacher at the Academy of Music and Drama, Bernt Wilhelmsson, who gave me all his support from the very beginning, and kept inspiring me each lesson.

Background

During the autumn semester 2018, I got increasingly dissatisfied with the way I practiced at the piano. I noticed that learning a new piece took too much time, and could not overcome some difficulties that I had encountered many times before. I felt like I was not improving, and my solution was to practice as much as possible. I've been told plenty of times that the most important thing with practice was quality, and not quantity. In spite of this, I kept focusing on increasing the hours spent on the piano rather than the efficiency of my daily studies.

The reason I didn't work on quality rather than quantity, was that I had no idea how to do it. I slowly realised that the main problem I had, was my piano technique. I became aware of the fact that it had plenty of flaws, so I did some research. Unfortunately, I was only left with a few ideas and notions on piano technique which I didn't know how to develop, so I kept on practicing as before. In the beginning of January 2019, after a day of ineffective practice, I was forced to stop due to pain in my right hand. I was not unfamiliar with it, but this time rest did not make the hand feel better. I took the decision to have it checked by a specialist. The pain was not severe, but I wanted to have it diagnosed before going back to practice. In the next three months I regularly saw a physiotherapist, who diagnosed me with an inflammation of the tendons in both arms. I also visited the Hand Centre in Gothenburg, did blood tests and an MRI, only to find out that I did not have any pathology or visible injury. I had three common cysts simply too small to cause me any pain.

During the spring semester 2019 I managed to perform one piece at a piano recital at the concert hall of the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg, though with constant pain. I continued with physiotherapy, tried cortisone, gels and medications to alleviate the pain.

Nothing seemed to work, and I could not even imagine a way out. Not knowing who to turn to, my mother did some research on the internet. With determination and luck, she found an Italian pianist called Andrea Manzoni, who, in an interview, mentioned an injury he had developed in his youth caused by too much practice. It was so severe that doctors thought he would have never been able to play the piano again. Fortunately, he had met a teacher, Tiziano Poli, who had revolutionised Manzoni's approach to the piano with a new technique Poli had formulated. In the process of learning this technique, Manzoni was able to start playing again, and later fulfilled his dream of becoming a pianist. My mother sent Manzoni an email explaining the situation and he answered right away willing to help.

We arranged a meeting in the coming month in Milan. After the first lesson I was convinced that with patience I could develop a new technique that would not only allow me to play again with no pain, but also to play better and overcome all those difficulties that had seemed impossible to solve.

Together with the lessons, I also studied the book written by Tiziano Poli about the technique he had developed¹. Poli spent many years researching the fundamentals of piano technique. According to him, knowledge of physics and anatomy are essential for playing the piano in the most natural way.

Every activity expressed through movement is developed with scientific training, built according to specific laws, which aim to increase the efficiency of movements. Athletes and dancers have a very strong awareness of their movements, which they try to refine more and more. Pianists do not! Why is that? Their movements are even smaller and more refined, and their purpose is to express their thoughts and musical cleverness!²

¹ Tiziano Poli, *Happy Fingers, La via fisiologica e naturale per la tecnica pianistica*, (Zecchini Editore, 2010).

² Poli, *Happy Fingers*, 1.

Purpose

The purpose is to analyse the potential of the new playing technique for the piano that I am in the process of learning, while developing it on a selection of Chopin's Préludes Op. 28 that are completely new to me, namely no. 1, no. 10 and no. 12.

Questions

- Will this technique improve my skills in playing the selection of Chopin's Préludes?
- How will it affect my speed, relaxation and endurance in demanding pieces?
- How will the new technique affect my ability to control the keys, which also influences my interpretation and the possibility to easily adapt to different pianos?

My previous approach to piano technique

My technique at the piano was the result of years of practice, in which I never focused on the way my hands and fingers moved and felt. I did not actually use a specific technique. I thought that the only way to improve was through repetition. Now that I've been developing a whole new approach to the keyboard, I realise what some of my flaws were.

First of all, I have joint hyperextension, which means that I have an unusually large range of motion in some joints. This causes the joints to be more flexible, weak and susceptible to injuries. Since I never developed the muscles to keep those joints connected, my fingers would easily collapse playing the piano (Fig. 1).

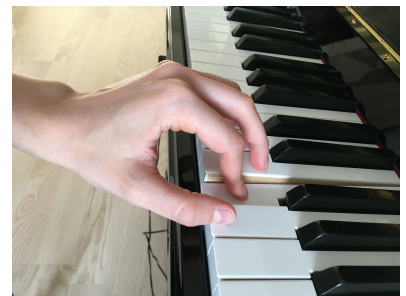


Fig. 1. Collapsing fingertip

According to Poli, this is counterproductive.

Each unit in the body, in order to work, needs to have all its joints coordinated with each other. Through a gentle muscle action, the joints need to be kept steady. If one of the elements is not steady, a loss of work is created, together with an inaccurate mechanical action. This causes a mechanical disadvantage and differences in terms of the quality of the sound. The work that is not used has to be regained with the action of another joint that takes the burden.³

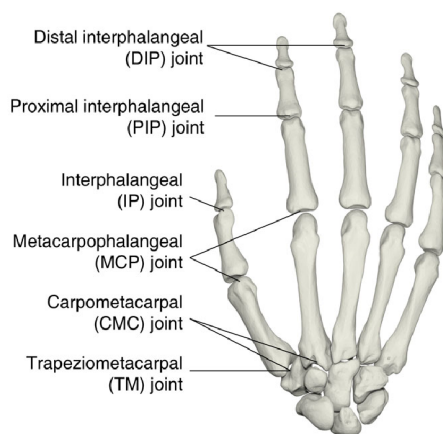


Fig. 2. The hand's carpal and interphalangeal joints.

My hands' joints which used to collapse were the distal interphalangeal joints (Fig. 2⁴), the ones at the tips of the fingers, and the metacarpophalangeal joints, that connect the fingers to the palms.

Furthermore, when playing I used to push down to press the keys, which lead to the simultaneous activation of the flexors and extensors of the forearm. A muscle, in order to move, contracts, which means it shortens increasing its volume. In

order to relax after the action and go back to its original length, it needs another muscle, called antagonist, which acts in the opposite direction. Every joint in our body has pairs of agonist and antagonist muscles, that act in the opposite direction from one another.

Many issues in piano technique are caused by the simultaneous action of two muscles of the same antagonistic pair, violating the physiological alternation of agonist and antagonist muscles. This creates tension in the hands, wrists and arms, and, as in my case, it can spread to shoulders, neck and jaw. The tension

³ Poli, *Happy Fingers*, 10.

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/Figure/Joins-of-the-right-hand-dorsal-view-Note-that-the-terms-trapeziometacarpal-TM-joint_Fig1_257045252.

built up throughout each of my practice sessions made it impossible to play demanding pieces without discomfort or pain.

Another aspect of my piano playing that was holding me back was how I approached the thumb-under technique. Since I had no muscles supporting the movement, not only did the knuckle (metacarpophalangeal joint) collapse, but I also lifted the wrist and hand. This led to unnecessary activation of the wrong muscles, which made my scales and arpeggios slow, uneven and, in the end, harmful.

Tiziano Poli's technique: basic concepts

Here below I summarise some of the basic concepts of Poli's technique.

Muscle dissociation

Muscle dissociation is the capability to activate a specific muscle whilst relaxing another. It is necessary to be aware of this concept, since the activation of two opposite muscles (agonist and antagonist) can create a great deal of tension.

An example of agonist and antagonist muscles are the flexors and extensors (Fig. 3⁵) situated in the forearm. These muscles allow us to lift and lower down the wrist, as well as the fingers.

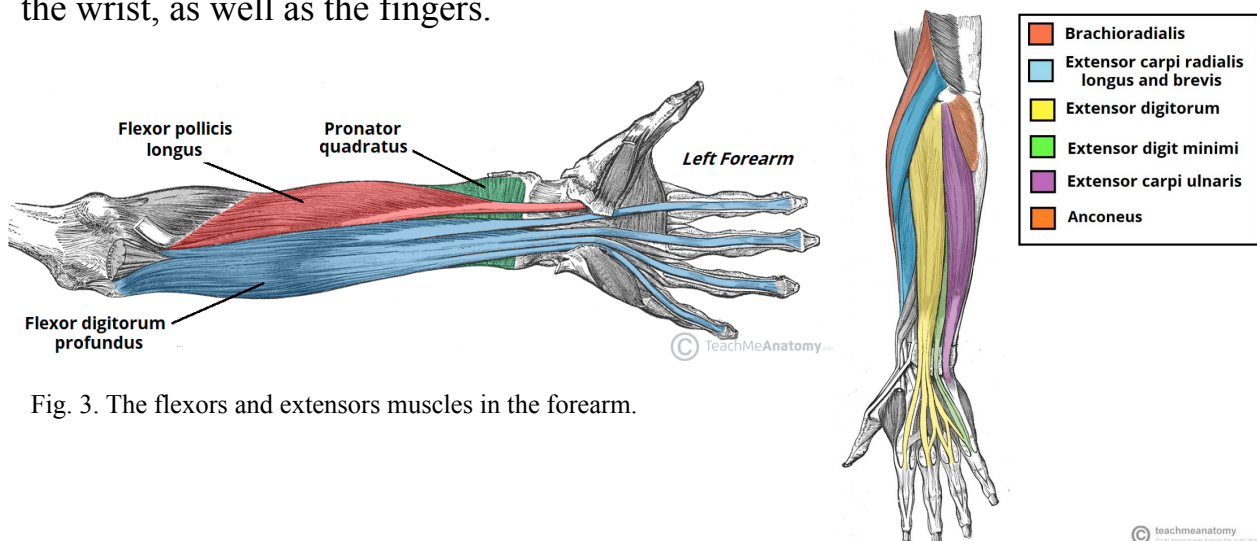


Fig. 3. The flexors and extensors muscles in the forearm.

⁵ <https://teachmeanatomy.info/upper-limb/muscles/anterior-forearm/>
<https://teachmeanatomy.info/upper-limb/muscles/posterior-forearm/>.

Relaxation

The ability not to influence a specific joint with muscle action.

Weight

The weight is the amount of work that a body exerts downwards thanks to relaxation. The source of this work is gravity. In piano playing, gravity can be used together with an adequate amount of muscular action. Weight, relaxation and muscular action are interdependent, and the line between them is very thin.

The arm's weight, with all the joints relaxed, is on average 1.5 kg. Each piano key opposes a resistance of around 40/70 g. This means that there is not any need to push the key in order to create sound.

The amount of work that our arm's weight gives us, in order to be transmitted to the keys, needs a foothold: the finger. In order for the finger to bear this weight, each phalanx has to support the other, which means that the finger joints require connected muscular action. The connection is the ability to coordinate more joints in order to create a single element, which in this case is the finger. The balance between muscular action and gravity can create a great deal of energy that would be hard to obtain with sole muscle action.

Lever

A lever is a mechanical principle that acts as force multiplier. Most joints in the human body are third class levers. As pianists, we can transfer the weight we get from the relaxation of the arm to the key thanks to this mechanical principle.

A lever is made by three elements:

- the resistance (load)
- the fulcrum
- the effort

The resistance is the force we want to contrast, the fulcrum is the supporting point, and the effort is the force we apply in order to create the movement. In third class levers, the fulcrum and effort are very close, almost in the same spot.

Let us analyse how this mechanical principle applies to piano playing.

The metacarpal joint (Fig. 4⁶) is the fulcrum. The effort is applied by the finger's flexor, which hooks up right under the metacarpal joint, so in the fulcrum proximity. The flexor's action creates the movement and lowers the resistance point, which corresponds to the key.

If there is weight applied to the fulcrum, this weight of the arm, wrist and hand can be transmitted to the key.

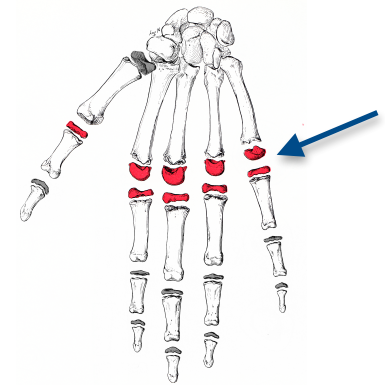


Fig. 4. The metacarpal joints.

Weight shifting

With the correct use of the weight, it is possible to perform what Poli calls “weight shifting”. The easiest form of weight shifting is done by transferring the weight of the hand, wrist, or arm from a finger to another.

The metacarpus is where the weight is loaded, and where the movement begins. The finger joints are connected with minimum muscular action in order to sustain the weight of the arm. [...] The next finger is already touching the key, and the weight slides from one finger to the other, lowering the next key. There is no downward muscular action in the finger. [...] The sound is created thanks to an action of the weight which shifts from a metacarpus bone to the other with minimum muscular action possible.⁷

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metacarpophalangeal_joint.

⁷ Poli, *Happy fingers*, 29.

An unintentional action downwards would be caused by the contraction of either the finger's flexors, the palmar's flexor, or the tricep (Fig. 5⁸). The only actions needed are the ones that keeps the fingers' joints from collapsing, and the one

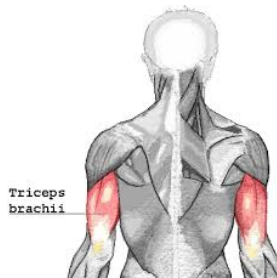


Fig. 5. The triceps.

that decreases the angle between the metacarpus and the proximal phalanx (Fig. 6⁹), so that the finger is loaded with the weight we want to use. The extensors are also relaxed since we do not need to lift the fingers before playing. The other fingers are completely relaxed.

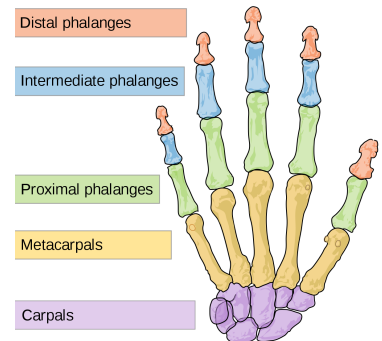


Fig. 6. The bone structure of the hand.

Articulation

The complete relaxation of the muscles is the fundamental physical condition for the muscle dissociation between flexors and extensors which is the basis of the “articulation” technique. At first the extensor lifts the finger, then the flexor lowers it down. It's the normal alternation between agonist and antagonist muscles. This technique differs from the weight shifting, since in the latter there is no intentional upwards movement.

Since this technique allows us to hit the keys from a higher distance, which means at higher speed, we can produce high sound intensity.

In fact:

The sound intensity on the piano is caused by the speed at which the hammer hits the string.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is important to mention that in the case of chords or passages that require wide positions, the fingers' movement happens in both vertical and

⁸<http://sandrabostream.blogspot.com/2012/07/m-triceps-brachii.html>.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phalanx_bone.

¹⁰ Poli, *Happy Fingers*, 35.

horizontal directions. Because of the knuckles structure, the movement we do when opening the hand (abduction of the proximal phalanx) is hard and creates a lot of tension if the other phalanges are bent.

Suspension

In piano playing, depending on the piece of music we're facing, we do not always need the entire weight of our arm. In order to work only the weight we need, we have to use the mechanism of suspension, a muscular action that takes away gravity from the joints we don't need. For example, we can suspend the forearm with the bicep (Fig. 7¹¹) so that we only use the hand's weight. This is muscle dissociation - contracting one muscle relaxing another.

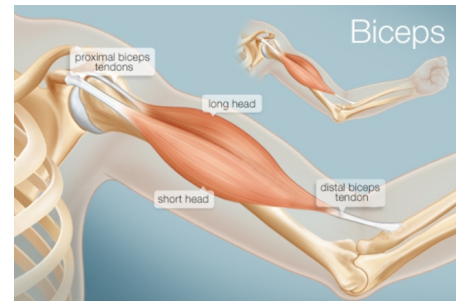


Fig. 7. The bicep.

The thumb's movement

Another important issue in this technique is the movement of the thumbs. The thumb is the most mobile finger, and its actions are flexion, extension, abduction, adduction and opposition.

The abductor tendon allows us to open the hand, so that we can reach wider positions on the keyboard. Furthermore, its action gives us the possibility to use the intermediate phalanx as the metacarpus' fulcrum. From this fulcrum, we can complete a vertical movement to lower the keys and a horizontal one to move under the hand (thumb under) or to open the hand. The independence that the thumb can develop allows us to play more evenly and reach wider positions. Furthermore, we can observe that when we use the thumb's abductor to open the hand, the pinky's abductor is automatically activated, which means that we can reach even wider positions.

The opposition allows the thumb and pinky to touch. This movement creates some difficulties in the thumb-under piano technique. When we bring the thumb

¹¹ <https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/picture-of-the-biceps#1>.

under the hand, the pinky's knuckle moves lower than the horizontal line created by the other knuckles. This is the cause of unevenness in scales, arpeggios, etc., so it's important to get used to move under the hand without causing the pinky's knuckle to lower down.

Reaction

To each action corresponds another one in the opposite direction.

When we make a quick and powerful muscular action, we induce a reaction in the joint where the movement started. This happens when the movement's intensity is superior to the energy required to keep the joint in place, and when there aren't any other muscular actions contrasting the movement.

This principle allows us to use a significant amount of intensity in our movements, while avoiding tension and fatigue. In piano playing, it means we can create intense sounds whilst keeping our muscles relaxed. Since harsh sonorities come mostly from tension, this principle, if applied correctly, can also improve the quality of the sound.

Applying the technique

Introduction

It is possible to change one's way of playing by practicing small movements every day. When we are used to do something in a specific way for years, it takes time and patience to change it. Our habits are something we have repeated over and over again, creating a deeper and deeper line in our brain. During his coaching sessions, Manzoni likened this with a vinyl record track; in order to change them and create new lines, we need to do the same thing, but with the correct movements. Eventually, we will be able to recreate them with no effort, since they will become new habits.

I started the process of changing my piano technique in May 2019. For a few months after the first lesson, practice mostly consisted in repeating small exercises, both on the piano and without the piano.

Because of the pain, I could only practice around 45 minutes a day, with breaks every 15 minutes.

The exercises aimed mostly at building strength in weak muscles and creating awareness in my shoulders, arms, hands, and fingers. I noticed some improvements as soon as after one month. It was just the beginning of a much bigger transformation, but I could already see my hands slowly changing position on the keys. They looked more stable and somehow more similar to many professional pianist's hands on the keyboard. Furthermore, I began to realise how much tension there was in my entire body while sitting on the piano bench. Being able to notice which muscles I was needlessly activating, made it easier to relax.

Together with the exercises, I started reading some new pieces. It was a really big challenge not to get back to my old habits, since getting rid of them can take a very long time.

The first weeks learning new pieces while developing the new technique were quite monotonous. It was necessary that I kept focused in order to improve.

Even though I had already spent months on the new technique, I had not yet interiorised the movements and sensations I needed.

The beginning of the process

In the beginning of the autumn semester 2019, I started reading some of Chopin's Préludes Op. 28. Since it's an incredible set of pieces that I think every pianist should have in their repertoire, I decided to study a few of them with the goal of playing them at my examination concert in May 2020.

The pieces I chose to write about are the Préludes Op. 28 no. 1, no. 10 and no. 12. I felt like they were a good challenge for me since they all have fast tempi, in which relaxation is crucial. I also thought that those were the kind of pieces that I would have avoided in the past because they seemed too difficult for me, in spite of my desire to learn them.

Manzoni showed me how to approach two of the pieces, the Préludes no. 1 and no. 12. With no. 10 I decided to try on my own. I wanted to see if I could apply Poli's technique on a new piece by myself. If I succeed, I will be more confident that I will be able to use the technique on my own in the future.

From the very beginning of the process, I took notes on what was happening every day in my practice routine. After a few days I realised that I was struggling with a few specific aspects, so I decided to focus on those: the strength in the finger joints, relaxation, the use of the weight of the forearm, weight shifting or articulation, stamina and how different it felt depending on the piano I was practicing on.

Prélude no. 1 Op. 28

1. *Agitato.* *mf* F. Chopin.

Example 1, Frédéric Chopin, Prélude no. 1, Bars 1-6, *Sämtliche Pianoforte-Werke*, Band II (p. 489) (Editor: Hermann Scholtz (1845-1918) Leipzig: C.F. Peters, n.d.[1879]. Plate 6206)

November 2019 (starting from the 7th)

The piece requires both hands to be in quite wide positions, which means that the fingers have to be quite straight, paying attention that the fingertips do not

collapse. I played slowly articulating the fingers like explained for the articulation movement, using the extensor to lift and flexors to lower down

Manzoni's method for studying this piece consisted in playing slowly and pianissimo with the fingers flat on the keys and articulating the bichords and octaves. After a few days of practice with this method, I realised that the sound coming out of the piano was similar to the one I had in mind for this piece. I recorded a video and heard that I could bring out the melody with no effort, creating the dynamics I wanted depending on how much I lifted the fingers. (Video 1). I was also able to reach a good speed considering the short time I had spent on this. The only thing to hold me back was that I obviously did not know the notes very well at that time.

I then focused a lot on the articulation movement, trying to make it as relaxed as possible. By doing so, I took away the focus from not letting the fingertips collapse and reaching the bottom of the keys. When I became aware of it, I tried to focus on all those things at the same time, which was quite challenging.

Furthermore, a day of practice on a piano I seldom use, made me realise that it took less time for me to get used to a different keyboard than before. This is probably due to the fact that, before, I did not have the sensibility to understand how the keys on different pianos were behaving as I pressed them, nor the ability to adapt consequently. I was not sure why I was able to do it then, but I am guessing it was my capacity to control my movements, slowly improving.

December 2019

During this month I still had to remind myself to keep my fingers stable and not collapse, and to reach the bottom of the keys. In the meantime, I began to become more aware of the weight of my arms, which allowed me to use the mechanism of suspension when needed depending on the dynamic I wanted. I then began to experiment using it in the piece. I did not have enough control

then to do it relaxed, but I could definitely see how much it would impact my future playing.

January 2020

After Christmas break, I felt as if I had more weight in my arms, more relaxation and more stable fingers when playing. My hands did not have to make any effort, and it seemed as if the octave position shrank. My fingers could grasp the keys more easily, in a way that allowed me to reach their bottom without effort. However, even if I was slowly assimilating these movements and feelings, I still had to focus on those things I struggled with in the past two months, such as not letting the fingertips collapse and using the weight of my arms without getting tense.

I kept the speed low for most of my practice. This, towards the end of the month, made me gain more and more relaxation, which allowed me to play the whole piece several times without muscle fatigue.

I also tried practicing on different pianos to see if my ability to adapt got better. I realised that I always had the same feeling on each of them. I could notice the differences for each keyboard under my fingers, but it did not affect my playing at all.

February 2020

I figured that using more weight of the arms in order to increase the sound was not always working, so I increased the articulation movement instead when needed. I took a video and I am quite satisfied with it (Video 2). There was definitely a difference between the movement of the fingers in the different dynamics. I simply noticed that I was much more relaxed.

March 2020

I started focusing more on the interpretation. I feel like I have the tools to change the sound and dynamics according to my own musical taste. (Video 3)

Prélude no. 10 Op. 28

10. *Molto allegro.*
p leggiero

Example 2, Chopin, Prélude no. 10, Bars 1-3, *Sämtliche Pianoforte-Werke*, Band II (p. 498)

November 2019 (from the 19th)

In this piece the left hand fingers should be kept quite straight, so that it's possible to reach a wide position. The hand should not close after every chord, but it should not become stiff either. Each note can be grasped with the fingertips.

The right hand plays a descending pattern marked with bichords. These are quite wide, so the fingers should be kept straight in this hand as well.

I began studying this piece slowly and pianissimo, like Manzoni advised for no. 1. Since the piece should be played “leggiero” as indicated, and in the recordings I heard the sound in the right hand is brilliant and staccato, I decided to use the articulation rather than weight shifting. After just a few days, I did not feel any tension in the thumbs or forearms; they were actually rather relaxed. Like for Prélude no. 1, I had to think about not letting the fingertips collapse and about reaching the bottom of the keys. On the video I recorded (Video 4), I could definitely hear that a lot of the notes played by the right hand were missing. I figured that it was probably due to some of my fingertips collapsing and not pressing the keys properly, which cause the unevenness.

December 2019

From the beginning of the month, I managed to have more stability in the fingers from time to time. When I managed to keep that in mind, I did not miss one single note, and the melody became more even. If I lost focus, my fingertips still easily collapsed.

January 2020

Since after Christmas break I developed a better awareness of my arms and hands, I managed to not tense up and play the piece at fast tempo. However, I still could not keep the fingers stable and not let them collapse. This meant that the melody was still uneven, like I could hear in the recording (Video 5).

Towards the end of the month, I began to internalise the stability in the fingers more and more. The right hand sounded slightly more even.

I also assimilated the articulation movements, and the keys started to feel as if they were lighter than usual. Furthermore, the less movement I did with the fingers, the faster I could play the piece.

February 2020

I was able to play a quite satisfying version of the piece, technically speaking. However, even if I did not miss any notes, there was still something that did not convince me in evenness of the melody. I met Manzoni who advised me to move my right arm away from my body when playing in the high register. This improved my playing significantly, since the hand was in a better position at the start of the descending pattern (Video 6).

March 2020

I started working more on my own interpretation of this piece. Thanks to a constant improvement on the control of my fingers, I gained more and more control over the sound. Dynamically it got easier and easier to create a softer sound when needed thanks to the concept of suspension. It was slowly becoming automatic whenever I think of the music in piano or pianissimo.

Towards the last couple of weeks of the month, I managed to get to a faster tempo. I believe that it was made possible by a smaller movement of the fingers. (Video 7)

Prélude no. 12 Op. 28

12. 

Example 3, Chopin, Prélude no. 12, Bars 1-6, *Sämtliche Pianoforte-Werke*, Band II (p. 500)

November 2019 (from the 19th)

This Prélude is the most challenging of the three. The left hand requires a wide position throughout the whole piece, which means straight fingers. It is also important that, while the fingers always have to be strong and stable, the forearm is relaxed in order to easily move fast.

The difficulty in the right hand consists in keeping it relaxed on the repeated notes. Since the melody is connected with slurs two by two, I could think of taking advantage of the weight shifting concept, shifting the weight of the arm from the note on the beat to the next. Furthermore, the weight should be directed on the fingers that play the melody in order to bring it out and not let the other notes cover it.

On the first lesson with Manzoni on this piece, he advised to begin practicing with the left hand slowly, in pianissimo, relaxing the wrist and grasping the keys with the fingertips. The same thing should be done with the right hand, with active fingers and relaxing the wrist.

It was hard to not let the finger tips collapse, especially in the right hand. Playing with both hands was a challenge, probably because of all the things I had to keep in mind about the technique. A significant issue was keeping the wrist and hand relaxed. This made it impossible to think that I could ever reach the speed I had in mind without getting tense after only three bars.

In spite of all the difficulties, I noticed right away that the balance between the voices was just right, and bringing out the melody was never an issue. This seemed to be true no matter which piano I was practicing on.

December 2019

The left hand, even when I brought up the tempo a little, did not get tired at all. The difficulties lied in the right hand: I had to focus on not letting the finger tips collapse, reach the bottom of the keys and use the whole weight of the arm, and still got very tense. The reason could have been that I did not take enough time playing slowly and pianissimo, so that I could find the feeling of relaxation that would have allowed me to reach a higher tempo faster. I therefore took a step back and practiced it that way.

January 2020

In the beginning of the month, I still had a really hard time not tensing up in the right hand. In order to find the right feeling, I tried playing with separate hands slowly and dividing the piece in small parts. It seemed to help with relaxation, even though it still was not enough to play more than six bars without feeling any discomfort. I still had to think about relaxing the wrist, not let the fingertips collapse, straighten the fingers in wide positions and use gravity to gain more weight in the arm without forcing it. The latter got better towards the end of the month: I could play in louder dynamics thanks to the weight of the arm. Using it correctly, together with stable fingers, allowed me to play more relaxed. In fact, I slowly managed to play more bars without discomfort, but I still had to keep the focus on each movement.

February 2020

Playing this Prélude without tension was slowly getting easier. However, I still could not see myself playing it comfortably any time soon.

Manzoni gave me some more tips on how to study this. First I should practice it with the left hand leaving from the keys instead of landing on them by playing only with the fingers and let the wrist “react”, and the right hand lowering down the wrist in a more relaxed position and closer to the keys, with stable fingers like I’ve always done (Video 8). Then I should practice it with the left hand landing on the keys and jumping right up with finger action. The last tip

Manzoni gave me for the right hand was to practice it executing a fall on the beat and use weight shifting to the upbeat, and stay there with all the weight of the arm. All these tips were definitely helping. I practiced a little part at the time, and Manzoni told me not to force the speed, it'll come by itself like with the other pieces.

March 2020

During this month I have had practice sessions in which it felt like everything was working as it should, and others in which I had to take a step back.

During the last week and the beginning of April, I finally managed to find the right feeling in the right hand in most of my practice days. As movements became more and more relaxed, I could decrease them in order to play faster without losing control over my fingers, wrists and arms.

April 2020

I could finally focus more on the interpretation rather than the technique. I still sometimes had to find relaxation in the movements from time to time, but it was getting easier and easier. However, I needed more time in order to being able to perform this piece like I wanted. I took a video and noticed how much I moved the fingers in spite of the speed, which might have been the reason why I still got tense and wasn't able to play faster (Video 9). However, it was satisfying that I could finally play the entire piece from beginning to end avoiding muscle fatigue.

Conclusion

Summary of the process

Playing the three Préludes with Poli's technique exceeded my expectations. I can definitely say that there have been a lot of improvements in these months. In the beginning I had to think about a lot of issues at the same time in every

Prélude, such as keeping the fingertips from collapsing, not pressing down the keys involving muscles that are not needed, being as relaxed as possible and using the weight of my arm.

I slowly overcame some of these difficulties, which allowed me to focus on the most demanding ones and improve them as well. I was able to strengthen the muscles in my hands, which resulted in a more stable position on the keys. My fingers are now able to move freely on the keys without needless effort. Moreover, I was able to grow awareness of how each muscle works. I can now reach the speed I want for at least two of the pieces without getting tense. I manage to keep my arms and fingers relaxed so that I can perform the pieces from beginning to end without pain or discomfort. I believe that it will soon happen the same for the Prélude no. 12, since it is still improving.

I never mention pain in my notes, due to the fact that it was not my main focus. In fact, as long as I was doing the movements compatible to Poli's technique, I did not feel any pain.

The process took a long time and it is still on. It takes weeks before the right movement becomes natural. In fact, when I notice an improvement, it usually lasts for a brief moment and I have to wait days before being able to consciously apply the technique, and weeks before it becomes my own competence.

In these months I didn't work on the interpretation of the pieces as much as I wanted, since my focus was almost exclusively on technique. I could start working on my own version of each piece only towards the end, so that I could begin to examine how my interpretation was affected by this technique. I notice that it is considerably easier than before to change the sound according to my own musical taste, thanks to a better control of movement in the hands and arms.

Furthermore, I am not as scared as before to practice or perform on a piano I've never touched. I get used to how the piano responds to my touch and adapt almost effortlessly, even though it still depends on the quality and condition of the instrument.

What I have learnt

Changing technique and approach to the instrument you've been playing for many years is not easy, and it takes a lot of time and patience.

Even if some small changes can occur at the first stages, a big part of the process consists in working towards your goal even if nothing seems to happen.

Over the course of these months, I often fell out of track and almost gave up. In the beginning especially, it was hard to create a routine to follow every day: it was not easy to be focused repeating something that did not work over and over again. However, every once in a while, I could see that something was improving. These small changes and the fact that I trusted my teacher Andrea Manzoni and his method, motivated me.

This journey I started last May will take a long time, and this work can only describe a small part of it. Many of the improvements I wrote about were just small steps towards a bigger change in my piano technique. There's always something new that I assimilate day by day, and it will take months, if not years, before I will be able to put my hands on the keys and make music without thinking about every movement.

With this new approach to the keyboard, I am building a set of tools that will make it easier and easier to learn new pieces. I am already able to recognise some patterns in different pieces and parts in which I can use a specific technique's concept or another, depending on my own interpretation.

I am grateful for what happened to me last year. If I didn't question my technique, I might never have undertaken this process and got to where I am now. I am looking forward to see what will happen in the next few months and where this journey will take me.

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Links

Fig. 1 https://www.researchgate.net/Figure/Joints-of-the-right-hand-dorsal-view-Note-that-the-terms-trapeziometacarpal-TM-joint_Fig1_257045252

Fig. 2 <https://teachmeanatomy.info/upper-limb/muscles/anterior-forearm/>
<https://teachmeanatomy.info/upper-limb/muscles/posterior-forearm/>

Fig. 4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metacarpophalangeal_joint

Fig. 5 <http://sandrabostream.blogspot.com/2012/07/m-triceps-brachii.html>

Fig. 6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phalanx_bone

Fig. 7 <https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/picture-of-the-biceps#1>