

*Dr. Paul Wirth*

# **The Art of Fingering**

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### Is fingering an important part of technique?

Fingering is EVERYTHING! Right there, from the get-go if we don't get it right, it can certainly become the single most insidious stumbling block to successful playing. So many great composers, pianists and teachers - among them C.P.E. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Paderewski, Godowsky and others - have stressed its importance. Yet how many of us as teachers have been stressed "out" by students who underestimate that importance? I personally like to identify these students as "finger blind" because there's really no other explanation for how they manage to miss those little numbers we so carefully pencil into their scores. I actually go and get an examination light, shine it into their eyes and make the dreaded diagnosis; "You have finger blindness Emily, and the performance prognosis is, well... bad." If only they could visit the great music conservatories of the world and see how those students share their teachers' fingerings like medical interns excitedly discussing the latest surgical techniques!

In fact to answer the question posed; there is no other aspect of piano playing more important to the making or breaking of a performance than that of fingering. It's where the rubber meets the road; where the musical content in our hearts and minds meets the material world of the instrument, transforming matter into "music in the air!" And it's also one of the least written about subjects in piano pedagogy, no doubt because it's so complex and controversial - so many different sized hands, varying techniques and musical approaches can be intimidating even to the bravest of would-be "experts." Yet, there are general principals common to all pianists and hand sizes, and there are useful precepts to share!

#### "Ten General Precepts of Fingering:"

**1. Use standard, pre-learned fingerings where possible. (scales, chords, arpeggios, ornaments, glissandi, etc.)** How much easier it is, especially in music of the 18th and 19th centuries if we have a strong grounding in these basic fingerings! Our hands just "know" what to do in so many instances, falling into these pre-learned patterns. For example, the scales and four-note chord fingerings in \*Excerpt 1 should be well known to all students by the end of the intermediate level of study - before taking on advanced pieces.

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## Excerpt 1:

### Scale Fingerings (Major and Harmonic Minor)

C Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	A Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321
F Major:	RH - 12341234 LH - 54321321	D Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321
B-Flat Major:	RH - 41231234 LH - 32143213	G Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321
E-Flat Major:	RH - 31234123 LH - 32143213	C Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321
A-Flat Major:	RH - 34123123 LH - 32143213	F Minor:	RH - 12341234 LH - 54321321
D-Flat Major:	RH - 23123412 LH - 32143213	B-Flat Minor:	RH - 41231234 LH - 21321432
G-Flat Major:	RH - 23412312 LH - 43213214	E-Flat Minor:	RH - 31234123 LH - 21432132
B Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 43214321	G-Sharp Minor:	RH - 34123123 LH - 32143213
E Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	C-Sharp Minor:	RH - 34123123 LH - 32143213
A Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	F-Sharp Minor:	RH - 34123123 LH - 43213214
D Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	B Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 43214321
G Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	E Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321
A Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	F-Sharp Minor:	RH - 34123123 LH - 43213214
D Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	B Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 43214321
G Major:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321	E Minor:	RH - 12312345 LH - 54321321

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## The Chord Chart

5	5	5		5	5	5		5	5	5	
3	4	4		3	4	4		3	4	3	
2	2	2		2	2	2		2	2	2	
1	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	
<b>Root</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> inv.</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> inv.</b>	C G F F#	<b>Root</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> inv.</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> inv.</b>	D A E B	<b>Root</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> inv.</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> inv.</b>	b f# c# g#
			a e d d#				D <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>				b <sup>b</sup> f c g
1	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	
2	2	2		2	2	2		2	2	2	
4	4	3		3	4	3		4	4	3	
5	5	5		5	5	5		5	5	5	

### Excerpt 2: Beethoven Sonata in C-Sharp Minor Opus 27, #2 (the “Moonlight”) Mvt 1 mm. 32-36

32 1 3 2 4 3 5 1 3 2 4 3 5 1 4 2 5 1 2 1 4 2 5 4 2 1 3 2 4 3 5 1 3 2 4 3 5

35 1 3 2 4 3 5 1 3 2 4 3 5 5 3 4 2 3 1 5 3 4 2 3 1 etc.

**2. Strive for simplicity ... “comfortable for the music, fingers and mind.”** A good example of this can be found in the first movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” (Excerpt2) Maintaining a simple four-note diminished right hand chord fingering (1-2-3-4-5) for each half measure pattern from measures 32-37 would be more straightforward than all the published fingerings for this passage. It also adheres to the next precept:



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audience out of a beautiful performance - whatever it takes! Redistribution can be divided into two categories: 1. For necessity because of small hands and, 2. For judicious technical facility:

1. In the first case of small hands size, a lot of repertoire is often ruled out which students could otherwise play very well with redistributions. This was demonstrated over a decade ago as then elementary aged pianist Helen Huang performed the Mozart's "Concerto #23 in A Major, K488" with orchestras all over the world - and her playing was full of many necessary redistributions wisely put in by her teacher. This is the Mozart concerto which I've certainly taught the most to my students, and there are numerous changes which can make this wonderful piece accessible to smaller handed people - starting right off with the first phrase of the piano entrance, where the thirds in the right hand can be split up in measure 69 for easier voicing of the top notes. (Excerpt 5)

## Excerpt 5 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 69-70

Further along, there are some left hand octaves at mm. 95-97 where the top notes - or thumbs - can be eliminated without losing too much of the sonority. In fact when I saw a videotape of Helen Huang play this about eight years ago when she was ten, I saw she was doing this at times throughout the piece - and you wouldn't have noticed it if you hadn't been looking right at her with the close-up camera shots! (Excerpt 6)

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## Excerpt 6 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 95-98

95

3 1 2 5 1 1 2 5

1 2 1 3 1 2 3

1 5 3 4 3 1 5 3 2

5 1 1 1 5

The same would be doable in the recapitulation at mm. 225-227. Also in the exposition and corresponding recapitulation at mm. 108, 110, and 112 are some “broken octaves” which can be taken in both hands. (Excerpt 7)

## Excerpt 7 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 108-109

108

4 3 2 1 2 1 2 3 2 3

*l.h.* 1 2 3 1 3 1 3

And toward the end of the exposition is another awkward spot for smaller hands - the right hand passage from bar 131-132. As the left hand isn't busy for much of it, the left hand can help out here - taking every other two 16ths. (Excerpt 8)

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## Excerpt 8 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 131-132

131

2 4 5 (2 1) 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 3 4 2 1 2 3 1 (2)

*l.h.* 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 2

2

Now, one of the most helpful redistributions is found in the development section at mm. 158-159 and at 162-163 where the right hand has a rotation technique with an octave stretch. Taking the right hand thumb notes with the left hand solves this problem for little hands! (Excerpt 9)

## Excerpt 9a - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 158-160

158

12 3 5 4 5 1 3 5 4 5 4 5 3 4 3 4 2 3

*l.h.*

3 1 4 1 3 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 5 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 5 1 (4)

## Excerpt 9b - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 158-160

(Rewritten to reflect the redistributed fingering)

158

12 3 5 4 5 1 3 5 4 5 4 5 3 4 3 4 2 3

3 1 4 1 3 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 5 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 5 (4)

And one other spot in the development is another right hand rotation in stretchy octaves - at m. 188. The solution here is to take the first notes of the second and fourth beats into the left hand. (Excerpt 10)

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## Excerpt 10 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, m. 188

Musical notation for Excerpt 10, Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488, Mvt I, m. 188. The score shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and fingerings: 5 1 5 1 4 1 4 5 1 5 1 4 1 4. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings: 1 3 5, 1 2 4, 1 2 4.

The next notable helpful fingering is in the first theme of the recapitulation - where Mozart varies the theme with some tricky, skippy arpeggiations in mm. 207 and 208. Again, the left hand can come to the rescue by taking the first notes of the third and fourth beats in m. 207 - and EVERY first note in m. 208: (Excerpt 11)

## Excerpt 11 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, mm. 207-208

Musical notation for Excerpt 11, Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488, Mvt I, mm. 207-208. The score shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and fingerings: 1, 2 3 5, 1 2 5, 1 2 5, 5. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings: 5 1 2 1, 1 5 2 1 3, 1 4.

There's also a really "quantum leap" in the right hand 1/16th note passage at mm. 270-271 which causes quite a problem for 1/16th note evenness. This can easily be smoothed out by taking the first 1/16ths of the first and second beats in m 271 with the left hand - remembering to make it sound organic to the rest of the right hand notes by not playing the single left hand notes too loudly: (Excerpt 12)

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## Excerpt 12 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, m. 270-271

270 1 1 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 5 1 2 5 1 2 5 3 4 3 2 1 4

Certainly that's one caveat in redistributions - and in all technique -- "Beware of inadvertent bumps!"

At the end of the recapitulation - in the buildup to the cadenza - the right hand has a few more problem areas for small hands, the first of which is at the diminished chord arpeggiation in m. 278, where the left hand can take the first and third 1/16ths of every beat - beginning on the second beat. (Excerpt13 )

## Excerpt 13 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, m. 278

1 3 1 5 3 2 1 4 2

2 3 1 2 3 1

Of course that's a spot where - with some extra practice it could be done well with just the right hand - so it's a close call. But the next one, only a few measures later is a "no-brainer." It's at m.281 where the left hand can help by taking the second half of the second and third beats. (Excerpt 14)

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## Excerpt 14 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, m. 281

281

Finally, in the second, fourth and sixth measures of the cadenza, the left hand is a great help in taking all the right hand thumb notes! (Excerpt 15)

## Excerpt 15 - Mozart Concerto #23 in A Major, K488: Mvt I, Cadenza, m. 2

2

And that pretty much characterizes the redistributions needed to successfully play this movement. with little hands. Of course, the musical and technical thinking beyond that is the same as any pianist encounters in expressing this movement.

2. The cases of judicious redistribution for technical facility are nearly ubiquitous. Some of my favorites are in the music of Chopin, beginning with the “A-Flat Polonaise, Op. 53” where the stretchy right hand trills in m. 27 (Excerpt 16) are strengthened by taking the bottoms of the octaves on the third 1/16ths of the second and third beats into the left hand.

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## Excerpt 16 - Chopin Polonaise in A-Flat Major, Opus 53, m. 27

Chopin's "Etudes" offer countless examples, as in the right hand passage at mm. 29-30 of the "Etude in C-Sharp Minor Opus 10, #4." (Excerpt 17) Taking the 1/4 notes on the second and fourth beats into the left hand improves accuracy and ease in this case ... and at the end of the piece in m. 79, the left hand can also take the first 1/16th notes on the second, third and fourth beats, increasing power in the ascending right hand "fortissimo" arpeggiation.

## Excerpt 17- Chopin Etude in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 10 #4, mm. 29-30

(Excerpt 18) Chopin's "Prelude in D-Flat Major, Opus 28, #15" has a reverse case of the right hand helping the left.

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## Excerpt 18 - Chopin Etude in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 10 #4, mm. 79-80

Musical score for Excerpt 18, Chopin Etude in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 10 #4, mm. 79-80. The score shows two staves: treble and bass. Measure 79 is boxed. The right hand has a melodic line with fingerings 4, 2, 5, 1, 2, 5, 1, 1 and a '8va' marking. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings 2+3, 2+3, 2+3. The key signature is C# minor and the time signature is common time.

In measure 9 (Excerpt 19), the right hand can take the F from the left hand - still rolling the left hand chord if that was indeed Chopin's intent (although the manuscript has no written roll).

## Excerpt 19 - Chopin Prelude in D-Flat Major, Opus 28 #15 (the "Raindrop"), mm.9-10

Musical score for Excerpt 19, Chopin Prelude in D-Flat Major, Opus 28 #15 (the "Raindrop"), mm.9-10. The score shows two staves: treble and bass. Measure 9 is boxed. The right hand has a melodic line with fingerings 5, 4, 5, 3, 2, 4. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings 5, 4, 1, 2, 3, 5. The key signature is D-flat major and the time signature is common time. There are "Leg." and "\*" markings below the left hand.

And finally in the "G Minor Ballade Opus 23," the right hand ascending "leggiermente" scale passage at mm. 158-161 is prudently quickened by taking all the E-flats into the left hand. (Excerpt 20)

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## Excerpt 20 - Chopin Ballade in G Minor, Opus 23, mm. 158-161

158

1 2 3 4    1 3 1 2 1    5 3 1 2 3 4    1 3 1 2 1

*fz* *p* *l.h. 1* *l.h. 1*

4    1 2 3 4    1 1 2    1 1

4    4 5    4 5    4 5

5 3 1 2 3 4    1 3 1 2 1    3

*l.h. 1*

2 4 5    1 2 4    1 3 5    2 4 5

If that passage is lightly “bubbling up” to the contrasting downward sweeping scale to follow, this fingering really helps!

**6. Strive for consistency - Similar passages fingered similarly.** Helpful consistency can be achieved in the right hand passages of (again) Chopin’s “G Minor Ballade” at measures 146-149, which can be fingered as in Excerpt 21. Recapitulations of “sonata-allegro” 1st movements also often benefit from this precept.



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Chopin's "B-Flat Minor Scherzo, Opus 31" at measures 5 etc. where the left hand thumb is both accurate and strong. (Excerpt 23)

Excerpt 23 - Chopin Scherzo in B-Flat Minor, Opus 31, mm. 117-121 etc.

Musical score for Excerpt 23, Chopin Scherzo in B-Flat Minor, Opus 31, measures 117-121. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat minor. It shows the left hand playing a repeating eighth-note pattern with a thumb (finger 1) and the right hand playing a melody with various fingerings (5, 4, 1, 5, 4, 2). The dynamic is marked *ff*.

**9. Test all fingerings in full tempo.** The repeating thumb in the left hand used by most students in the third movement of the "Moonlight" from measure 121-122 seems fine - until the full tempo of 1/4 note = c160 is performed with both hands! Using the fingering in Excerpt 24 works better in tempo.

Excerpt 24 - Beethoven Sonata in C-Sharp Minor,  
Opus 27 #2 (the "Moonlight"), mm. 131-133.

Musical score for Excerpt 24, Beethoven Sonata in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 27 #2 (the "Moonlight"), measures 131-133. The score is in 3/4 time and C-sharp minor. It shows the left hand playing a repeating eighth-note pattern with various fingerings (5 1 3 1, 5 1 4 1, 2 3 5) and the right hand playing a melody with various fingerings (2, (e-d#) 1-3, (23) 1, 24 3, 2 3 4). The dynamic is marked *p* and *ff*.

**10. Stay with the same fingering - especially before a performance!** Changing well-practiced fingerings shortly before a performance is dangerous! In fact, at the Young Artist Piano Camp UMD in Minnesota, we now have a policy of not changing them in the short week we have with our 60 campers. As a general rule, fingering changes should not be made later than a week before a performance!

Finally, fingering is no doubt a controversial subject as noted at the start. Yet it is so intrinsic to artistry that to ignore sharing it in our professional interactions is a worse fate than suffering the expected criticism from those with other

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viewpoints. Our goal is to leave no stone unturned in our pursuit of great playing - and who knows - we might all learn a thing ... or ten!

\*With heartfelt thanks to my colleague Gregory Theisen who helped prepare the musical examples in this article!

### **Paul Wirth bio**

Paul Wirth received his B.M. in Piano Performance from Temple University, and his Master and Doctorate degrees in Piano Performance from Indiana University where he was teaching assistant to Sidney Foster. Dr. Wirth co-founded and is now Artistic Director of the Central Minnesota Music School in St. Cloud, MN, now with over 250 students taught by a faculty of over 18. Chosen as the 2004-05 Distinguished Teacher of the Year by Thursday Musical, twenty one of his pre-college students have given over fifty solo performances with orchestra.