

Week #1: Let's Get Started

This week, I will be taking you through all of the exercises slowly so that I can teach them to you. This will be the most involved week of the entire year and you should allot around 45 minutes to an hour to working through this material.

The daily practice will also take longer this week, as it will take you time to learn (or review!) the technical details. Take your time to move through this material - there is no medal for finishing first!

Posture at the Piano

In order to play the piano correctly, it is important that you set up your posture correctly. In order to do this, you have to make certain that your bench is placed correctly and you are sitting in the most effective posture.

Bench Height

Set your bench/chair height so that you are sitting in a way that allows your forearm to be parallel to the floor. You don't want your bench so low that your elbow is below the keyboard or so high that your elbow is above the keyboard. Either adjust your bench or chair or use a cushion or book to sit at the right height.

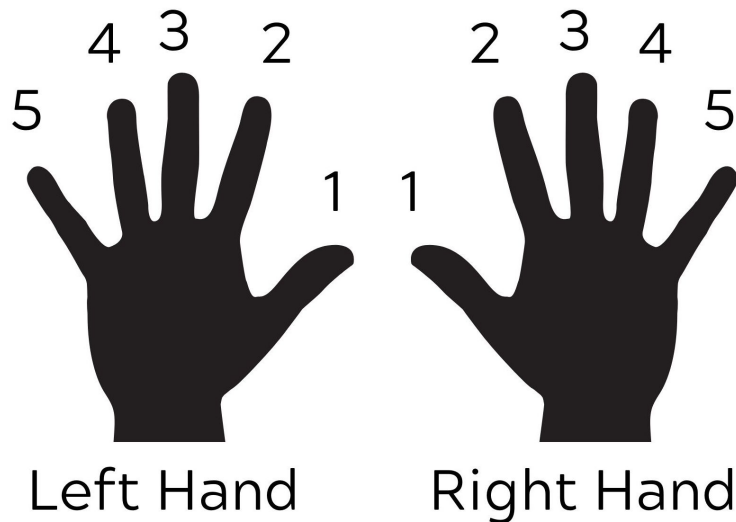
How close to the piano should I be sitting?

People tend to sit too close to the piano, which results in a slouched posture. Instead, bring the bench back a bit and sit forward so you are just sitting on your "sit bones."

Hand Position

Your thumb should be in "laying down position," resting on its side from the knuckle to the tip of your thumb. Your fingers should be comfortably curved, and there should be a circle shape between your thumb and index finger. Your wrist should not be lifted or dropped. Use your arm weight to drop into the keys, rather than pushing with your fingers or wrists.

Here is a diagram on how the fingers are numbered



Avoid Injury

Ease your way into practicing by starting out playing a few minutes a day and gradually increasing. It will take time for your muscles to get used to playing the piano, so avoid marathon practice sessions until you've built up some strength.

Take Your Time!

Don't speed through the exercises! Remember, this time is for you to develop excellent technique, touch and tone. If you blast through it with a "get 'er done" mentality, then you will miss the actual magic of this work.

Be patient with the process and find the enjoyment in improving your tone, touch and technique!

Exercises in the Key of C:

Exercise #1 - Two Octave Scales

Scales improve all aspects of our technique at the piano, from finger independence, to dexterity and help us develop evenness of touch, while we develop our sound at the piano.

Scales also help us to develop fluidity and mastery of each key centre, which helps us to feel confident playing in any key. (No more panic in the key of B major!)

Mastering scale fingerings helps us to be able to finger melodies with less error, since muscle memory kicks in.

Fingering Rules

When I was learning to play my scales as a child, I was presented with several pages of scale fingerings to read and memorize. I was always terrible with scales until I discovered that there are actually fingering *rules*. (Let me save you the trouble and share them with you now!)

1. **Thumbs and pinkie fingers do not play black notes.**

Ever wondered why? Those two fingers are substantially smaller than the other three and it is much harder to get an even tone and play virtuosic runs while trying to use the thumb and pinky on black notes. Bear in mind, that I am a jazz player and since I spend the majority of my time improvising, I take more of an anything-goes approach to my fingering, but since I was classically trained I know that some of these fingering strategies are naturally engrained in my work.

2. **Try to move with the largest finger groupings as possible.** This will prevent you from just going 1-2-1-2-1, etc.

3. **Fingering will stay the same in both directions.**

The fingering you use on the way up will repeat on the way down, just in reverse.

Scales

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a two-octave scale in C major. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both are in 4/4 time. The scale is written in eighth notes. Below the notes, the fingering is indicated by numbers 1-5. The fingering for the treble clef is: 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 1 | 2 3 1 2 3 4 5 4 | 3 2 1 3 2 1 4 3 | 2 1 3 2 1. The fingering for the bass clef is: 5 4 3 2 1 3 2 1 | 4 3 2 1 3 2 1 2 | 3 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 | 1 2 3 4 5.

The fingering for C major is the same fingering for five major and five minor keys.

Step #1: Read through this one hand at a time

Notice where you are meant to pass the thumb. Practice it one hand at a time, until your fingers start to feel comfortable and the fingering makes sense.

Step #2: Block the scale

Practice it one hand at a time, until your fingers start to feel comfortable and the fingering makes sense. This is a great way to get your hand used to the positions. It also helps you to get a picture of what the scale “looks like” on the keys, which will help you to better play in different keys.

RH play 1-2-3, then 1-2-3-4-5, then 1-2-3-4-5 and then 1-2-3.

LH play 5-4-3-2-1, then 3-2-1, then 4-3-2-1 then 3-2-1.

Step #3: Play the scale hands separately

If this is new to you, I suggest you play the scale hands separately until you can play it flawlessly and effortlessly. Add the metronome as you are able - S-L-O-W-L-Y.

Step #4: Play the scale hands together

To put the hands together, I recommend you block the fingering first just to get yourself used to the idea of your hands playing two totally different fingerings at once.

Triads

Triads and chords are crucial knowledge, since they form the basis of all harmony. We learn chords in inversions to help us make better voice leading choices and to provide options for piano arrangements. We practice triad inversions for hand strength, agility, dexterity and mastery of the ever-important “passing of the thumb.” We will use triad inversions in every style of music and a vast array of accompaniment strategies.

Understanding Inversions

When we rearrange the notes in a chord, we call these inversions. To invert the chord means to flip it around so that there is a different note on the bottom. I like to think of inverting chords a bit like the game Jenga - “take a block from the bottom and put it on top...”.

Since a triad has three notes, there are three different possibilities:

The image displays musical notation for triad inversions on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation is organized into two measures. The first measure shows the Root Position, 1st Inversion, and 2nd Inversion of a triad. The second measure shows the Root Position, 2nd Inversion, 1st Inversion, and Root Position of a triad. Below the staff, the following labels are provided: Root Position, 1st Inv., 2nd Inv., Root Position, Root Position, 2nd Inv., 1st Inv., Root Position.

Root Position

- Chord is in its “natural” state.
- Root on the bottom, 3rd in the middle, 5th on top.
- The lower interval is a major third (4 half steps), and the top interval is a minor 3rd (3 half steps).

1st Inversion

- The root of the chord has been moved to the top of the chord.
- 3rd on the bottom, 5th in the middle, root on top.
- The lower interval is a minor 3rd (3 half steps), the top interval is a perfect fourth (5 half steps).

2nd Inversion

- The 3rd of the chord has been moved to the top of the chord.
- 5th on the bottom, root in the middle, 3rd on top.
- The lower interval is a perfect fourth (5 half steps), the top interval is a major third (4 half steps)

Triad Fingerings

The fingerings for triads will be the same when you play it solid (all notes sounding at once) or broken (each note sounding independently). The fingerings will all be the same in every key, which means only one set of fingerings to master in each hand. (Hooray!!)

The image shows a musical staff with two systems of triads. The first system shows Root Position, 1st Inversion, and 2nd Inversion. The second system shows Root Position, 2nd Inversion, 1st Inversion, and Root Position. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5.

Hand	Position	Fingering (Notes)
Right Hand (RH)	Root Position	5, 3, 1
	1st Inv.	5, 2, 1
	2nd Inv.	5, 3, 1
	Root Position	5, 3, 1
	2nd Inv.	5, 3, 1
	1st Inv.	5, 2, 1
Left Hand (LH)	Root Position	1, 3, 5
	1st Inv.	1, 3, 5
	2nd Inv.	1, 2, 5
	Root Position	1, 3, 5
	2nd Inv.	1, 2, 5
	1st Inv.	1, 3, 5

Notice that we use the 1-3-5 fingering in the RH and 5-3-1 fingering for in the LH for 75% of the inversions. The only exception? The 1st inversion in the right hand and the 2nd inversion in the left hand.

Why? Because in each of these examples, there is an interval of a fourth. By using the second finger, we can play with more accuracy and less strain to the hand.

Exercise #2 - Solid Triads

Practice hands separately. Once mastered, you can play hands together. Try adding the metronome to help you with your time.

The exercise consists of eight measures of solid triads. The right hand (RH) fingerings are: 135, 125, 135, 135, 135, 135, 125, 135. The left hand (LH) fingerings are: 531, 531, 521, 531, 531, 521, 531, 531.

Exercise #3 - Broken Triads

I have grouped these into triplets, which will help you to internalize them both rhythmically and technically.

Practice hands separately. Once mastered, you can play hands together. Try adding the metronome to help you with your time.

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

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

Exercise #4 - Arpeggios

Arpeggio is the name for chords that are played broken. The arpeggios that we are going to use for this exercise will span three octaves and will require you to pivot on the thumb.

We practice these arpeggios to develop hand strength, agility and mastery in the passing of the thumb. These ones are a bit tricky to get used to, as they can feel awkward in the arms and shoulders.

Arpeggios

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

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

Practice hands separately. Once mastered, you can play hands together. Try adding the metronome to help you with your time.

Technical considerations:

As I show in the video, you need to make sure that you are sitting back from the piano in such a way that your elbows are able to pass in front of your body. If your elbows get stuck at the side of your body, it will be very difficult for you to play these without having a lot of strain in your wrists. This is yet another reason to consider your posture and sitting position at all times!

Make sure to plan your feet hip-width apart and allow your body to lean slightly as needed.

Chord Progressions Explanation

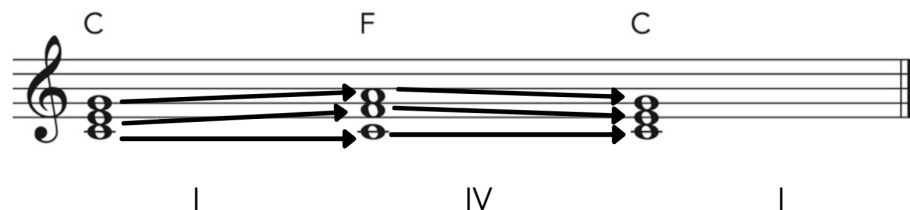
Cadences or chord progressions are important to master. Practicing them with intention will help train your ears to recognize them when you listen to music. Having these cadences under your fingers will also make it easy for you to throw down simple harmonies for melodies. This will help you to accompany voice exercises, songs and will build a foundation for songwriting too!

Working on cadences will also develop your ear and you will start to recognize these simple chord progressions, since you have been hearing them as you practice.

The Plagal Cadence (I-IV-I)

The Plagal Cadence is the fancy way to describe movement from the I (one) chord to the IV (four) chord. The Plagal Cadence is sometimes referred to as the “church cadence” as the “Amen” chord at the end of a piece.

To use smooth voice leading, we are moving from the root position of the I chord and the second inversion of the IV chord. To simplify playing this in every key, it is helpful to consider how each note moves as the chords change. Follow the arrows below to visualize the movement. The movement will be identical in every key.



I to IV

- The **root** of the chord stays the **SAME**
- The **middle** note moves **UP** by a **HALF** step
- The **top** note moves **UP** by a **WHOLE** step

IV to I

- The **root** of the chord stays the **SAME**
- The **middle** note moves **DOWN** by a **HALF** step
- The **top** note moves **DOWN** by a **WHOLE** step

Play this cadence a few times in the right hand, just to get it in your fingers.

The Perfect Cadence - Dominant (I-V7-I)

This tutorial is about the Perfect Cadence: an iconic progression that shows up in pretty much every piece of Western music, from Beethoven to Radiohead.

Remember that a cadence is the close of a musical phrase, where a moving chord resolves in some way to a resting chord. The perfect cadence is a dominant cadence where the V chord resolves to I. In this case we are going to play V7, which is a stronger dominant resolution.

To keep things simple and easy-to-play, we are going to play an abbreviated version of G7, where we omit the D (the 5th of the chord). This is a common way to play this progression on the piano, as it still provides the pertinent pitch material and keeps the harmonic density the same for all chords. (And it's easier on your hand!).



I to V7

- The **top** note stays the **SAME**
- The **middle** note moves **UP** by a **HALF** step
- The **bottom note** of the chord moves **DOWN** by a **HALF** step

V7 to I

- The **top** note stays the **SAME**
- The **middle** note moves **DOWN** by a **WHOLE** step
- The **bottom note** of the chord moves **UP** by a **HALF** step

Play this cadence a few times in the right hand, just to get it in your fingers.

Exercise #5 - Chord progression

In this exercise, we are going to combine the cadences together. Practice the hands separately, then try them together.

Cadences

C F C G7 C

135 135 135 145 135

C F C G7 C

531 521 531 521 531

Ear Training

This week's ear training exercise is very simple: sing a note and find it on the piano. Just sing any random pitch and try to locate that note on the piano. This might be very simple for you, or nearly impossible. Try to do it 10 times in a row singing in different parts of your voice. Try some low, some high. The goal is just to get used to finding pitches on the piano.

Conclusion

This concludes the five main exercises and the ear training that we are going to be using for this entire challenge. Take your time to learn them carefully with perfect accuracy. This might take you several days to get each exercise under your fingers, which is **absolutely fine**.

Work at your own pace and don't move on until you feel secure in each exercise. Try to find the music and enjoyment in doing this work. Like a yoga pose or a meditation, this is time well spent for your musicality and piano skills.