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**THE TAUBMAN APPROACH TO PIANO TECHNIQUE:  
WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T**

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*The principles underlying healthy playing not only facilitate speed, control, brilliance and power, but can also aid in preventing and/or overcoming technical limitations, pain and injury. A brief overview of what lies underneath a healthy virtuoso technique will be given.*

This paper addresses some common misrepresentations that have limited wider dissemination of the Taubman Approach. These include both those uncovered through a rigorous review of the literature during my doctoral candidature and queries that are often raised in my professional practice as Taubman Instructor and workshop presenter. Three main areas will be considered: the association of the Taubman Approach with injured pianists, common misconceptions around rotation as taught in the Taubman Approach, and finally, frequently recurring misunderstandings of the retraining process.

**Myth: The Taubman Approach is Only for Injured Pianists**

After discussing the misconception that only injured pianists can benefit from learning the Taubman Approach, this section briefly outlines the transfer of Taubman principles to other instruments including strings, and computer and mobile (cell) phone use, as principles of coordinate motion can be successfully transferred to myriad of occupations.

**Association with Injury**

The Taubman Approach has had remarkable success in assisting pianists find freedom and ease at the instrument through overcoming technical limitations, playing-related discomfort, pain and injury. However, studying the Taubman Approach can also be of enormous benefit to healthy pianists who are looking for greater facility, to overcome difficult passages, develop security in performance, more dependable memory, or a wider palette of tone colour. “Natural” players can learn to become more conscious of what they do, enabling them to develop skills with which to help their students attain a healthy, virtuosic technique; children can be taught to develop healthy piano technique and awareness of their bodies from their first lesson.

Regrettably however, the Taubman Approach has become negatively associated with injury, due to the large numbers of musicians who have been helped through studying this technique. The advantages of enhanced virtuosity are often overlooked in comparison to what one Taubman student described as the “obvious benefits to injured pianists” (cited in Milanovic, 2005b, p. 45).

There is also an unfortunate impression that only injured pianists study Taubman, or attend the annual Symposium. Taubman teacher Giselle Brodsky reveals that healthy pianists are concerned they might be considered injured by association (Golandsky et al, 1998, p. 14). As Oltuski notes (2009), others are repelled by the image of “tragic desperation” of the wounded pianists, despite Symposium participants comprising of a range of pianists, of all ages, levels, and nationalities. To compound the issue, Taubman shunned the association with injured pianists in her later years. She insisted her major contribution was her interpretative skills, which she believed to be as “penetrating as her approach to technique” (Taubman Seminar, 2009).

### **Benefits of Analysing Coordinate Motion**

Another prejudice is the fear that a diagnostic approach ruins what Schön calls the “indescribable” of artistic inspiration (1983, p. 276). However, my experience, and that of many others, is that overcoming technical limitations allows for great freedom and artistic choice (see Durso, 2011; Stewart, 2011). As one improves use of one’s body, performance also improves, with greater power, brilliance, ease, and speed (Conable & Conable, 2000, p. 66). “Symptoms of misuse”, such as technical limitations, pain and injury, disappear (Alexander, 1931/ 2001, pp. 66-67). Further, coordinate use assists learning: new concepts are absorbed faster, and responses become more precise (Gelb, 1994, p. 28). Pianists who have retrained their technique with the Taubman Approach share that they no longer require warm-ups (see McLelland Piano Studio, 2008).

Additionally, when one’s musical vision is complemented by a physical understanding of how it is to be achieved, the performance becomes more reliable. It is no longer dependent on mystical forces such as inspiration for success (see Conable & Conable, 2000, p. 48; de Alcantara, 1997, p. 212; Matthay, 1932, pp. 3-4). Taubman would agree wholeheartedly with Berman’s view that “lofty ideas...need to be supported by know-how” (2000, p. x). She believes that “The tools needed for music-making are physical tools”, interacting with each

instrument's "own mechanical principles" (1984, p. 144). Cultivating a three-way partnership of the instrument, the music, and its embodiment through the musician enhances consistency of performance.

Finally, a common myth that can deter non-injured pianists is that Taubman pianists sound the same because their techniques are built on the same principles of movement (as reported in Durso, 2011; Dybvig, 2011). It is true that despite individual variations, such as having longer or wider fingers, we are ruled by "the same physiological laws", including similar skeletal structure, muscular function, and nervous systems, which govern the laws of coordinate movement (Kochevitsky, 1967, p. 37). However, access to the same information does not mean homogenised expression. While Taubman pianists may share a similar physical approach, in my experience no Taubman pianist sounds alike. Technical freedom allows more choice, subtlety, and colour, which tension restricts (Dybvig, 2011). As Taubman summarised, "Your playing is only as beautiful as your tools allow it to be" (Taubman Institute, 1986). However, through overcoming technical limitations and developing an understanding of coordinate movement, technique becomes "a means to create, and realize vision" (Golandsky lesson, May 29, 2009).

### **The Taubman/Golandsky Approach to Strings**

As noted earlier, Taubman principles can also assist instrumentalists aside from pianists. A notable development in recent years has been the application of the Taubman Approach to string playing, a collaboration between Golandsky and violinist Sophie Till. While Taubman and Golandsky had successfully assisted professionals from flautists to cake decorators to overcome occupational discomfort (Taubman Institute, 1986), Till was the first to initiate a deep investigation in applying the Taubman Approach to strings, in which common principles could be transferred, and technical issues particular to strings could be developed.

In 2009, violinists and violists attended the Golandsky Institute for the first time as participants; in 2010 and 2011 a parallel string program of lectures, individual lessons, and workshops was offered. Till's Marywood University String Project received the American String Teachers Association's "String Project of the Year Award", in recognition of her contribution in developing the Taubman-Golandsky Approach for violin (Marywood University, 2010).

## **Healthy Typing**

Principles of coordinate movement can also be successfully transferred to computer and mobile (cell) use. To this end, Golandsky launched Healthy Typing in 2009, an independent business venture offering a website, DVD, and workplace training, the culmination of fifteen years of development through professional practice (Hudson, 1994). The objective was to make information widely available in response to the “health crisis of global proportions” related to computer keyboard, mouse and cell phone use. In the US alone, workplace injuries related to computer keyboard, mouse and cell phone use. In the US alone, workplace injuries cost the economy US\$100 billion each year in rehabilitation, and US\$13-20 billion in compensation claims (Healthy Typing, 2009a). As at the piano, Golandsky advocates prevention of workplace injuries by eliminating the incoordinate movements that create tension. Although some claim that “once significant RSI symptoms have appeared they never completely go away” (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 151), Golandsky believes that substituting healthy movements can alleviate even problematic symptoms, with results as successful as her work at the piano (Healthy Typing, 2009a, Typing, 2009b).

## **Rotation is Nothing New**

This second section discusses rotation, a central technical constituent of the Taubman Approach. While Taubman’s explicit analysis and communication of healthy virtuosity are groundbreaking, the underlying principles of coordinate motion, including rotation, are not new. It can be assumed that many fine performers have intuitively embodied principles of coordinate movement to varying degrees for centuries. Thus, a brief historical overview follows, with particular focus on the work of Matthay and Ortmann, in order for Taubman’s investigations to be contextualised in the evolving lineage of piano technique. This is followed by common misconceptions around rotation.

## **Historical Context**

By 1899, the “finger school” was “beginning to be held in disrepute” (Gerig, 1974, p. 70). Simultaneously, rotation was increasingly documented, including Breithaupt’s reports of Liszt’s forearm rotation in tremolos and trills with absolute relaxation (Gerig, 1974, p. 333). Thus, in 1903, Breithaupt represented the “cult” of “super-relaxation”, and defined rotation as rolling the completely passive fingers, hand and arm (Gerig, 1974, pp. 329, 334). The ensuing lack of control instigated dissatisfaction amongst pianists and return to practising with high

fingers and coins on hands (Gerig, 1974, p. 329). However, the same year, Matthay argued for an integration of finger and hand liveliness in rotation (Ortmann, 1929/1962, pp. xx, 297).

Ortmann (1889-1979) was among those who were concerned that in reacting against the classical finger school, relaxation diminished the finger's active role in playing, diminishing virtuosity and brilliance. Ortmann's released two major publications: *The Physical Basis of Piano Touch and Tone* (1925), which explored the construction and mechanics of the piano, and *The Physiological Mechanics of Piano Technique* (1929), which studied the interaction of the performer, high-level piano playing, and the piano's capabilities. These works prompted what Gerig describes as a "counterrevolution" against the relaxation's school unchallenged three-decade reign (1974, p. xxi). Ortmann's work profoundly influenced Taubman's growing understanding of piano technique. Nevertheless, she did not agree with all of Ortmann's principles, believing that he did not fully understand the hidden movements underneath a virtuoso technique (Taubman Institute, 1995, see DVD 3).

Concurrently to Ortmann, Matthay (1858-1945) continued his work on rotation, identifying two forms that he believed were indispensable to successful pianism: "rotary movements" in tremolos, and invisible "rotary actions" which are present underneath every note (1932, pp. 30, 50). Ortmann also confirmed that "in some modified form it [rotation] is in almost constant use in any advanced piano technique" (1929/1962, p. 194), but due to the tiny adjustments, probably defied analysis.

However, despite these findings, Taubman (1918-) developed her approach independently of Matthay. When she "discovered the concept of rotation", her students flourished; she "couldn't get them to leave the house" (cited in Berkowitz, 1998, p. 9). Rotation became central to her technique. Later, in studying Matthay, Taubman realised that rotation had been discovered long before. She attributed to Matthay the first scientific approach to investigating pianism, although believed he did not explain the "double rotation" sufficiently clearly (Berkowitz, 1998, p. 10). This description was one of Taubman's significant contributions to pianistic understanding. Possibly this led to the misinformed view that the Taubman Approach only concerns rotation. However, rotation operates alongside other elements that interact together in a well-functioning technique, including "in and out movements" toward and away from the fallboard, the lateral "walking hand and arm" and shaping (Taubman Institute, 1995, Taubman Institute, 2003).

## **Misconceptions around Rotation**

There has been widespread misunderstanding about rotation, beginning from the time of Matthay, who was misunderstood on many levels. Matthay struggled with being “persistently and stupidly misrepresented as dealing solely with rotary movements” (1932, p. 50), or what Taubman called “single rotations”, instead of his discovery of the tiny rotary action, or “double rotation”. His frustration is evident in his chapter “Misunderstandings, misrepresentations and worse”, in which he declared:

Possibly one might expect to find it difficult to “explain” such elementary matters even to so intelligent an animal as a clever horse, dog or cat, but surely one has a right to expect something better from a human intelligence? (1932, p. 125)

Although Matthay was initially known as a most “ardent exponent” of relaxation, he later clarified that “relaxation does not lead to flabbiness...it does not imply the omission of exertion needed in all playing”, of which he believed proponents of the relaxation school were guilty (cited in Kochevitsky, 1967, p. 9).

Similarly, is a misconception that Taubman recommends creating a singing tone with floppy fingers, and the arm a “dead weight”, as Fraser and Haji-Djurich claim (2009).

Others accuse that Taubman teachers advocate an extreme relaxation “undermine(s) the hand’s natural structure”, causing “collapses into flaccidity” and deprives the fingers of their ability to move (Fraser & Haji-Djurich, 2009; Yankovitch, 2011). While relaxation is commonly advocated in traditional pedagogy for beautiful tone, there is no difference in tone quality between a relaxed touch and dropping a lead weight if the key descent is identical (Ortmann, 1925, pp. 116-117). Therefore, Ortmann believed that if beautiful tone was produced solely by relaxation that would then become the prerequisite of piano technique making it “impossible to play, musically effectively, a very great portion of the piano literature” (1925, p. 72). Accordingly, in the Taubman Approach, the fingers, hand, and forearm need to be connected and lively for tone production.

## Retraining

There are many misconceptions regarding retraining in the Taubman Approach. This final section counters common myths regarding the large rotation often present in early Taubman retraining, and the length of time needed to retrain.

### Misunderstandings around Retraining

Many common myths are based on the assumption that this temporary, beginning stage of learning the Taubman Approach is the summation of the technique (see Durso, 2011). Some have expressed incredulity that this “exercise” is practical for playing (Yankovitch, 2011; discussed in Durso, 2011). This criticism often arises from misunderstanding the early stages of retraining, whereby rotation may be large to counteract the symptoms of a tight forearm. It is understandable that large beginner rotation may seem peculiar to those unfamiliar with the process. I can relate to one symposium attendee’s account of “dozens of bemused, concerned, or recently enlightened pianists” at Taubman symposia “rotating in cafeterias and along streets” (Doherty, 1999, pp. 265-266). Many do not understand that playing with large movements in retraining is a short, *temporary* stage in learning the Taubman Approach.

As with learning any new skill, with time, movements gradually become automatic, requiring less conscious attention (Feldenkrais, 1980, p. 58). Minimising the technique then begins, as rotation works best when small in combination with other movements. Also, as underlined in studies on analytical piano technique, rotation has to be integrated with lively fingers and hand to facilitate speed (Ortmann, 1929/1962, pp. xx, 297, 376; Dybvig, 2011; Mark, 2003, p. 80). As minimising cannot fully happen without lively fingers, an essential step is (re)integrating the fingers’ lively movement with the support of the hand and forearm (Matthay, 1932, p. 59). Thus, when integrated, rotation does not “seek to replace all finger activity” as some claim (for example, Berman, 2000, p. 25). Nor is the technique all forearm (cited in Dybvig, 2011), Taubman teachers do not encourage students to develop fingers like “noodles on a fork” (Berman, 2000, p. 25). In Golandsky’s experience, this can take mere minutes with a cue as simple as “let the fingers move a bit more” (Lesson, May 11, 2009).

The process of minimising is customized to the student (Golandsky, in lecture, July 10, 2011). If minimising does not happen instinctively, the student may be asked to make the preparatory movements in between each note smaller, although comfort cannot be

compromised. The focus may turn to finishing each movement, with every finger feeling even and supported. Attention is also turned to incorporating elements of musical expression, if not already present, including adding shaping, tone production, and rhythmic expression, thus beginning the transformation of craft into artistic playing.

### **Length of Retraining**

An unfounded myth exists that Taubman retraining is long and arduous (cited in Durso, 2011). Some claim that Taubman training dictates pianists spending two years playing only C major scales (cited in Dybvig, 2011). In conversations with many Taubman students, I have only met one pianist who spent two years on basic movements; however, she had had only three to four lessons per year. If Golandsky hears of these cases, she questions the situation, and the rationale behind the teacher's approach (Lesson, June 4, 2009).

The official line is that the length of Taubman retraining "varies" (Dybvig, 2011). This approach concurs with recent performing arts medicine research advising against promising explicit time frames, while simultaneously offering "realistic hope" (Guptill & Golem, 2008, p. 309). As one Taubman student identified, "Everyone wants a quick fix" (cited in Milanovic, 2005a, p. 72). Yet, as Grindea notes, re-educating the body and (un)learning a technique cannot be immediate (1998, p. 17). In fact, Zull warns of acceleration being a "trap". He believes it best to assume comprehension cannot be hurried, advocating taking time to construct a solid foundation of understanding (2011, pp. 101, 150, 240).

Taubman believes that although retraining may take longer with some injuries, the only failures are those who "do not have the patience" to persevere (cited in Berkowitz, 1998, p. 10). As Gelb notes, some make enormous changes in a short time frame, for others the process is longer (1994, p. 134). Many injured musicians also fail to consider that the difficulty in overcoming a habit is related to the length of time it has been established (see Alexander, 1931/2001, pp. 82-83).

Conversely, retraining can be fast. In my experience, retraining does not require "inordinate amounts of my time" as some propose (Fraser & Haji-Djurich, 2009; Yankovitch, 2011). Taubman also reassures that the body can adjust quickly if given the experience of movement aligning with the body's physiological principles rather than against them (see Schneider, 1983, p. 20; Rezits, 1998a, pp. 21-22).



The learning goals also determine the length of retraining. As Alexander Technique teachers recognise, overcoming pain may require only a few lessons. To learn enough to never incur problems again, or to integrate new skills into one's technique requires more training (Gelb, 1994, p. 143). If one wishes to develop virtuosic pianism, benefit may be found in continued Taubman study over decades of lessons. As one Taubman student volunteered, improvement is "unlimited in this work...The sky's the limit" (cited in Milanovic, 2005a, p. 35).

### **Conclusion**

In my professional practice, I have often observed a tendency for a largely mystical approach to playing the piano, veiled in devotion to one's own teacher, and pride in one's musical heritage. Thus, piano technique is often removed from objective analysis, despite the worrying numbers of injured pianists. Rather than examining a scientific approach to piano playing with proven success, an unfortunate tendency is to spread untruths without open-minded exploration, several of which have been dispelled in this paper. In some ways, the defensiveness and reluctance within the musical community to investigate an alternative way of moving at the piano and investigating the causes of PRMDs are not unlike those Taubman faced fifty years ago. The issues of PRMDs and unchallenged pedagogical instruction are still prevalent.

It is a shame that the wealth of knowledge that the Taubman Approach can offer is often negated by the perception of the unknown as a threat. Thus, many decide in advance to condemn, not to learn (Berkowitz, 1998, p. 12). Nevertheless, there is plentiful research confirming the relationship between healthy use and improved skill, and suboptimal use with PRMDs. In consideration of the large number of pianists affected by PRMDs and other unnecessary limitations, the contribution Dorothy Taubman has made to our understanding of healthy pianism deserves open-minded consideration.

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Previous performance highlights with Collusion ensemble include ABC broadcasts, Musica Viva Country Wide and In Schools touring. Of late she has performed frequently with Topology, including collaborations with the Brodsky String Quartet, Grant Collins, national touring, Brisbane Festival, and festival concerts in Indonesia. Other performance projects focus on her ensemble Ikon Music, with soprano Emma-Baker Spink. Therese is currently completing her doctoral studies, on Learning and Teaching the Taubman Approach, at QCGU, and continues her training with Edna Golandsky via Skype.