



Teaching Piano with clusters

A New Approach

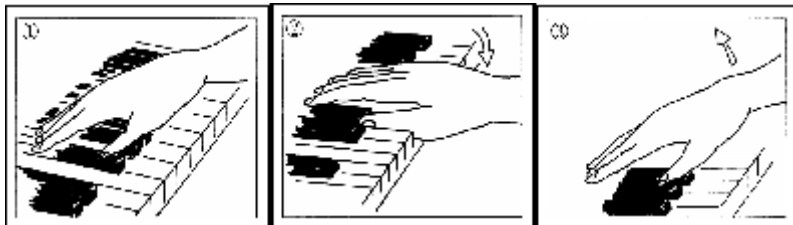
by Sonoko Kase

In this accelerating age of ours, it is a compelling necessity that we try to keep ourselves up to date. Teaching piano is by no means any exception. It would be most appropriate, that an up to date approach to piano teaching make use of the achievements of contemporary piano music itself.

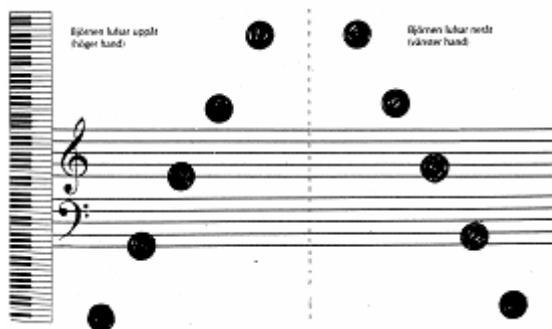
The most distinguishing innovation on the field of playing the piano is certainly the invention of clusters by Henry Cowell at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, as one of the most outstanding examples of playing with clusters I would name György Kurtàg's Plays and Games for Piano.

The use of clusters reveals new opportunities even for piano teaching. Instead of beginning with fingers alone, we can involve the whole playing mechanism from the start.

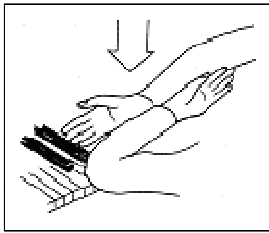
For example, we can play with palms, like this:



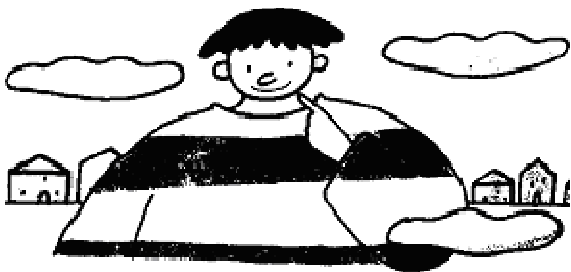
and call it "bear steps",



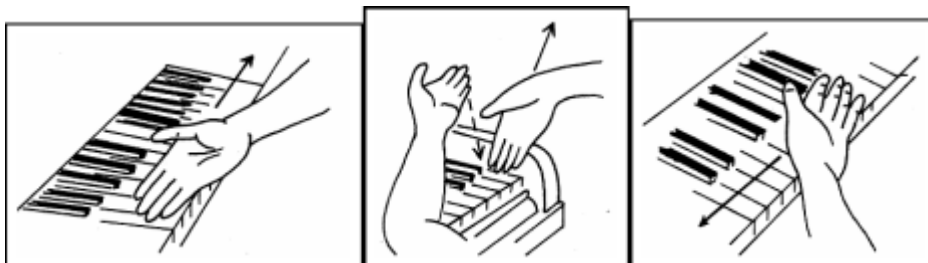
with elbows



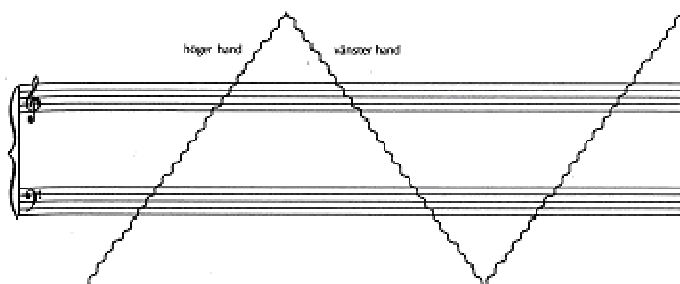
and call it "giant",



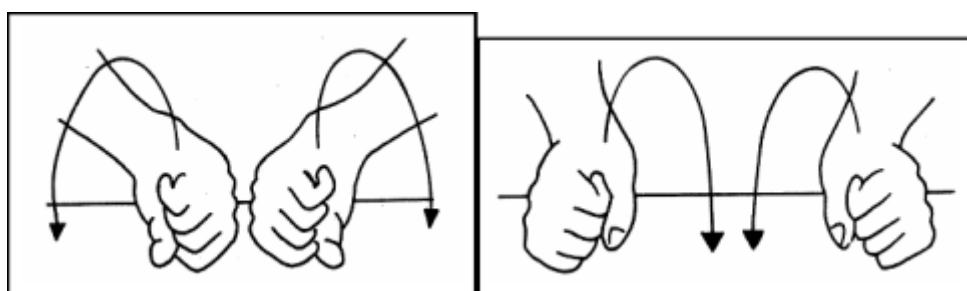
with fingernails, as glissando



And call it "waves",



or with rotating fists, like this:



Playful finger exercises shall also be included, to teach the basics of finger technique.

Such a way of using clusters provides us a pleasant way to combine teaching the basic technique and developing musical expression. The right way of playing with palms, fists, elbows, fingernails etc. requires exactly the same movements as we use when playing the classic repertoire. It represents various movements of arms, necessary relaxation, balance, all of which will help the fingers to a good touch. Especially for beginners of younger age, it is a great advantage to begin with the larger movements, and proceeding to the smaller ones. Another very stimulating effect is that you can use the whole keyboard from the very beginning. Playing with clusters is also an easy and funny way to get acquainted with how to read notes.

Based on this approach, I have written some piano books with the title The Children's Piano Treasure Chest, which are published in Japan (Piano wa utau, Ongaku-no Tomo-sha edition) and in Sweden (Klang i Klaveret, Eriks Förlag edition).

A more detailed explanation of this method you can also find in the Piano Journal, issue 64, Spring 2001, under the title "Clusters...The Essence of Musicality and Technique", by Sonoko Kase.

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