

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Warming up your body
- » Relaxing and stretching
- » Checking your posture at the piano
- » Moving at the piano

Chapter 1

Getting Ready to Practice

Take a few minutes to warm up and relax your body before you start to practice. Many musicians find that stretches, yoga, the Alexander Technique, and exercise in general help the physical component of playing music by heightening awareness of their bodies and the way they move. After a few stretches and warm-ups, you can bring a relaxed awareness to the piano when you practice.

The warm-ups in this chapter are designed to loosen and relax the areas piano players use the most: the fingers, hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, neck, back, and hips.

Warming Up Away from the Instrument

Why warm up away from the piano? Here are two reasons:

- » To stretch and release muscles throughout your body from standing positions and floor positions
- » To develop a routine of feeling loose and comfortable when you go to the piano

Plus, because you can do these warm-ups anywhere and anytime, you can start before you get to your piano.

Releasing tension and releasing your muscles

The basic pattern of tension and release is fundamental to music making, both in the physical process of playing and in the music itself. Playing the piano involves a wide range of movement, from pressing down a key with your fingertip to using your entire upper body in playing scales, arpeggios, and chords. Add in pedaling and you're using your whole body. All this movement requires muscle flexion, extension, and rotation; movement is enhanced by a fluid, relaxed approach that's unhindered by excess tension in your body. And because piano playing requires so much mental participation along with this physical movement, it's easy to overlook the buildup of tension: gripping in the neck, forearms, and jaw; hunching in the shoulders; and locking the joints in the fingers.



REMEMBER

These common manifestations of physical tension can easily become incorporated into your playing through the necessary repetition of practicing. So developing a pattern of releasing your muscles as you play and building this pattern into your playing are very important. Doing this also becomes a way to unify the physical and mental components of music making, because staying comfortable while you play requires constant monitoring for areas of discomfort.

Breathing in an unending circle

Breathing is the model for fluid motion. Think of breathing in an unending circle — the end of an inhalation is the beginning of an exhalation. When you play the piano you want to think of the music, your body, and your mind as part of this constant, fluid motion.

To create the smoothest, most luxurious breathing cycle you can imagine, follow these steps:

1. **Stand with your shoulders and arms relaxed at your side as you develop this slow cycle of inhalation and exhalation.**
2. **Inhale through your nose slowly and evenly, deeply filling your lungs over a smooth arc of time.**
3. **Turn the inhalation into an exhalation without holding your breath, like a swimmer reverses direction in a pool, always in motion.**
4. **Exhale fully, without pushing, and let go of all the air until you're ready to begin another inhalation.**
5. **As you develop this slow cycle, let all your muscles relax and let go in the same rhythm.**

Allow the breath to widen your upper body, back, shoulders, and neck so that you feel as if you're loosening and lengthening throughout your body.

Massaging, stretching, and contracting your hands

Give all your joints, muscles, and bones in one hand a gentle massage with the other hand (see Figure 1-1). Squeeze, rub, stretch — do whatever feels soothing. Start with your wrist bones and work toward the fingertips, thoroughly massaging the top, sides, and bottom of your hand, and then switch to the other hand.

Follow these steps for an effective hand stretch:

1. **Spread your fingers into a comfortably wide span, palms down.**
2. **Contract your hand, bringing your thumb all the way under your pinky so you make an “X” with the thumb and pinky under the other fingers, as shown in Figure 1-2.**
3. **Spread your fingers into a wide span again.**
4. **Contract your hand, making the “X” with your pinky under your thumb, releasing all the way back along the finger joints to the wrist.**
5. **Repeat this exercise a few times, and then try it with your thumb crossing under and then over your fourth, third, and second fingers.**

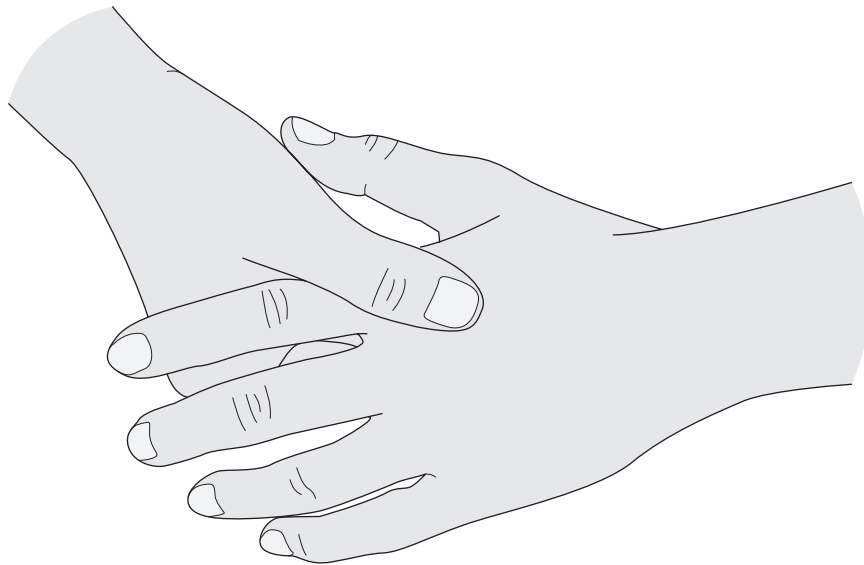


FIGURE 1-1:
Use one hand
to massage the
other.

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Continue your warm-up by contracting your hand:

1. **Make a tight fist and wrap your thumb across the outside of fingers two through five (see Figure 1-3).**
2. **Expand all your fingers, with space between each finger in a comfortable stretch.**
3. **Close your fist again, this time with the thumb tucked inside fingers two through five.**
4. **Repeat with both hands, alternating the thumb position.**

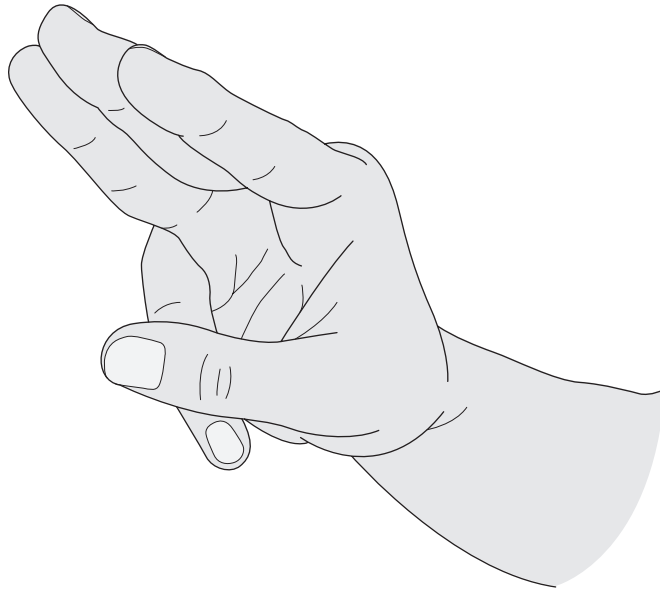


FIGURE 1-2:
Cross your thumb and pinky to make an “X” shape.

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FIGURE 1-3:
Contract your hand by making a fist.

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Warming up your wrists

Give your wrists a warm-up by following these steps:

- 1. Hold your hands in front of you, palms facing away, as if to signal “stop” with both hands (see Figure 1-4).**
- 2. With a loose wrist, slowly circle your hands both clockwise and counterclockwise.**

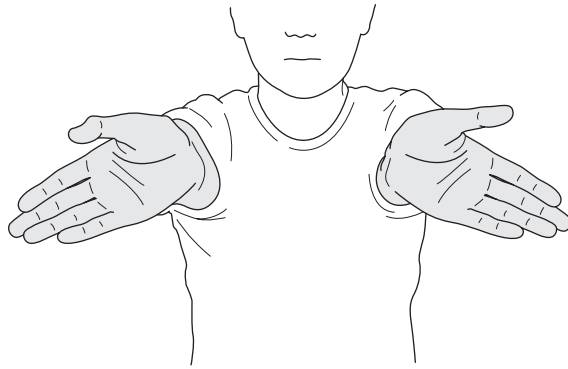


FIGURE 1-4:
Hold your hands out and slowly move them in circles.

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3. **Bring your hands together in front of you like you're praying, palm-to-palm, finger-to-finger, and extend your elbows out to the side.**
4. **Slowly rotate your wrists so that your fingers point toward you, and then away from you, and finally down to the ground, as shown in Figure 1-5.**
5. **Repeat a few times as you loosen your wrists.**

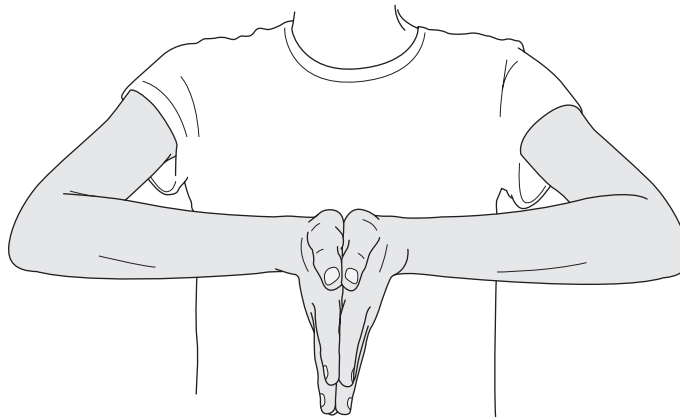


FIGURE 1-5:
Continue rotating your wrists as a warm-up.

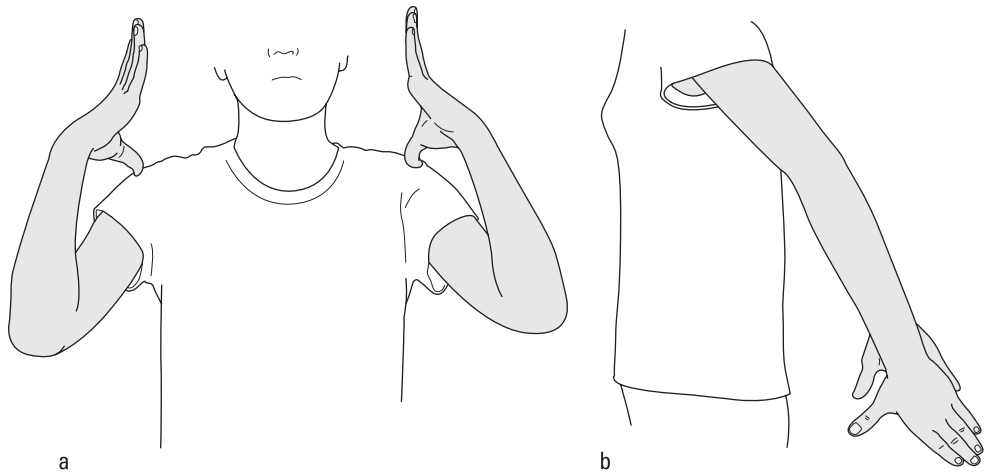
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Swinging and twisting your arms

Try this exercise and then enjoy the looseness you feel throughout your arms:

1. **Swing your forearms up from your elbows to the side to touch your thumb to your shoulder (see Figure 1-6a).**
2. **Let your forearms swing down gently, the momentum extending your arms out behind you but without reaching back (see Figure 1-6b).**

FIGURE 1-6:
Use control
during this
forearm swing.

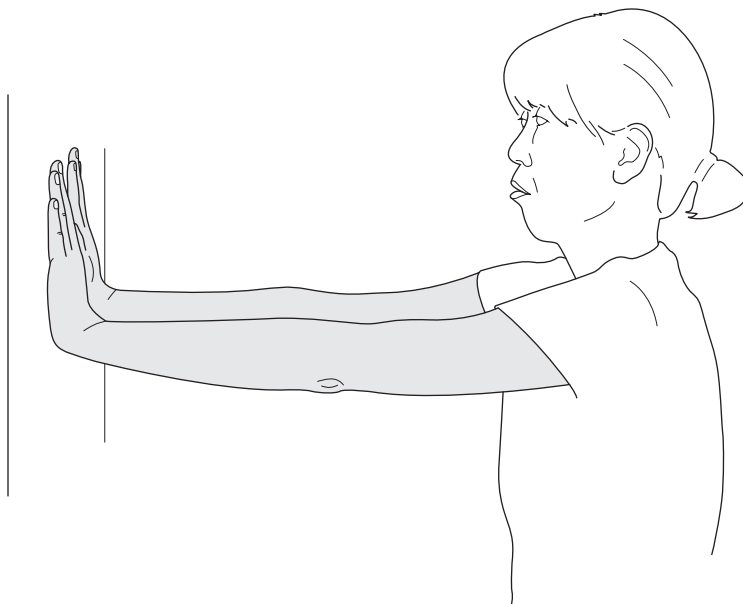


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To continue stretching your arms, follow these steps:

- 1. Stand facing a wall, at an arm's length away.**
- 2. Reach both arms straight to the wall, at eye level, and put your hands on the wall, fingers pointing up, feeling your entire palm and all fingers firmly against the wall (see Figure 1-7).**
- 3. Extend your arms to their fullest extension by taking tiny steps backward.**
- 4. Relax and let your arms rest at your side.**
- 5. Repeat this stretch, but with the fingers of both hands pointing in toward each other, and then pointing out to the side, and then pointing down to the floor.**

FIGURE 1-7:
Place your
outstretched
hands on the
wall in front
of you.



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Finish your arm stretches with this exercise:

1. **Stand perpendicular to a wall with your right side closest to the wall, at arm's length.**
2. **Reach your right arm straight out to the wall and put your hand flat against the wall, fingers pointing up.**
3. **Slowly and gently look left as you extend your right arm into the wall (see Figure 1-8).**
4. **Use your left hand to massage the tight areas around your right shoulder and clavicle.**
5. **Repeat on the other side.**



FIGURE 1-8:
Massage the
tight areas in
your shoulder.

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Stretching your shoulders and neck

To stretch your shoulders and neck, follow these steps:

1. **Stand with your head in a neutral position and your hands at your sides.**
2. **Hunch your shoulders (see Figure 1-9) straight up to chin level, and then release down.**
3. **Circle your shoulders front to back, and back to front as you hunch and release.**

Work on this shoulder and neck warm-up next:

1. **Reach your right hand up and behind your right shoulder to touch the shoulder blade on your right side.**

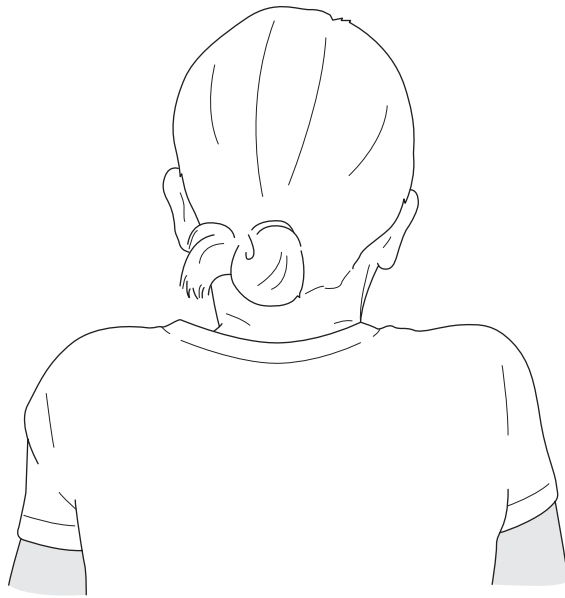


FIGURE 1-9:
Hunch and
release your
shoulders.

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- 2. Bring your left hand behind your back at the waistline, and reach up to touch your right hand.**

If you can't reach, try dangling a strap, belt, or some other suitable extension so your left hand can grab on (see Figure 1-10).

- 3. Repeat these steps with your hands reversed.**

To continue your shoulder and neck stretches, follow these steps:

- 1. Grab the top of your head with your right hand and touch the top of your left shoulder with your left hand.**
- 2. As shown in Figure 1-11, use your right hand to gently guide your head down to the right, toward your right shoulder.**
- 3. At the same time, gently pull down on your left shoulder with your left hand, giving your neck muscles a nice stretch.**
- 4. Repeat the stretch on the opposite side.**



REMEMBER

Keep your stretches in sync with your breathing; your movement should be relaxed and flowing, not stiff and rigid.



FIGURE 1-10:
Use a strap to help you with this stretch.

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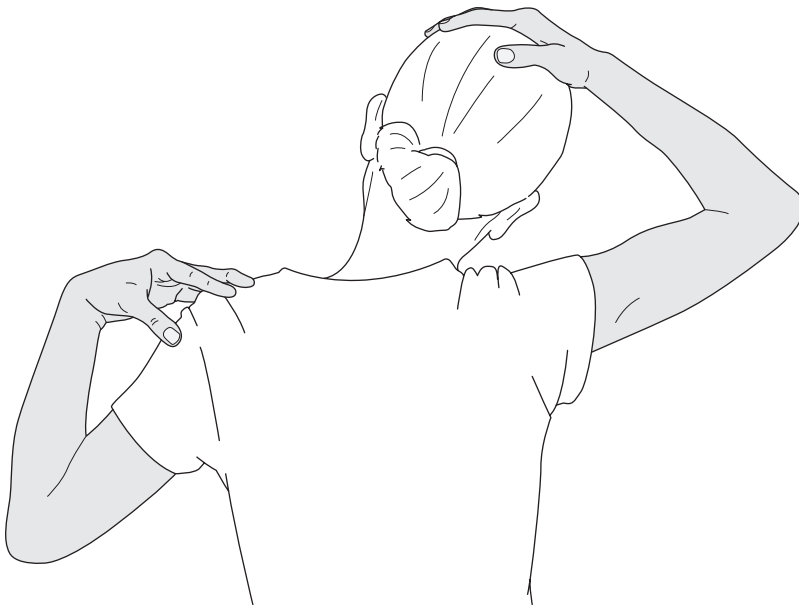


FIGURE 1-11:
Gently stretch your neck.

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Working on your back

The following exercise will stretch your back:

1. **Stand with your feet just a few inches apart, fold your arms in front of you, and cup each elbow with the opposite hand.**
2. **Looking down to the floor, bend your knees and squat down, and let your elbows reach toward the floor in front of your feet.**
3. **Lower your head forward so you're looking at your knees and your back is nicely rounded (see Figure 1-12).**
4. **Slowly rise up, still holding your elbows and bringing your arms up above your head to reach, lengthen, stretch, and widen your back.**

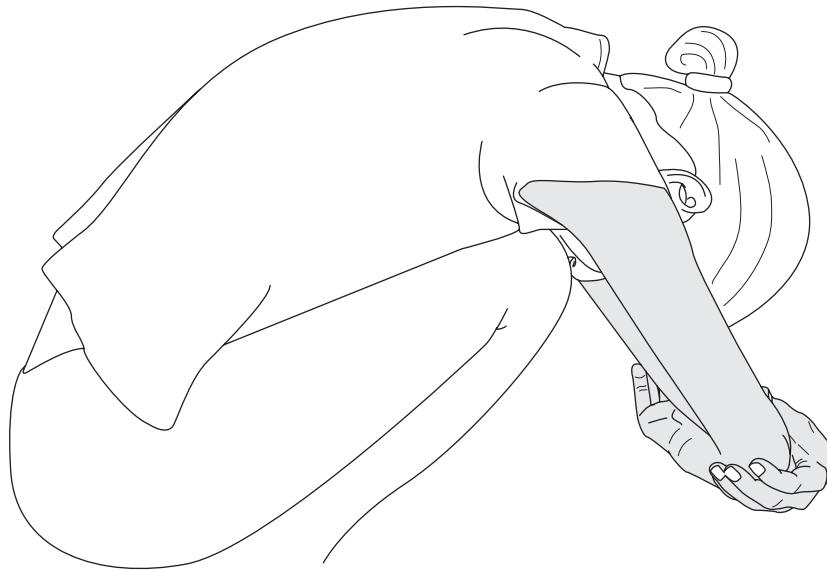


FIGURE 1-12: Round your back before reaching up to stretch.

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TIP

If you want to do more back stretches, I recommend two yoga poses that are excellent for your back: Cat Pose and Child's Pose. For more on these and other poses, check out *Yoga For Dummies*, by Georg Feuerstein, Larry Payne, and Liliás Folan (Wiley).

Stretching your hamstrings

Sitting can be a lot of work! Tight hamstrings can make it difficult for you to sit at the piano because the tight muscles pull down on the back of the pelvis, which means you have to do a lot of work to get your upper body balanced on your sitting bones. (You read more about this in the next section.) So stretch those hamstrings, too, by following these steps:

1. **Keep your legs and back straight as you stand and bend at the waist.**
2. **Reach with your arms to the floor to stretch your hamstrings.**

If you can't reach the floor, reach down to a piano bench or low table placed in front of you (see Figure 1-13).

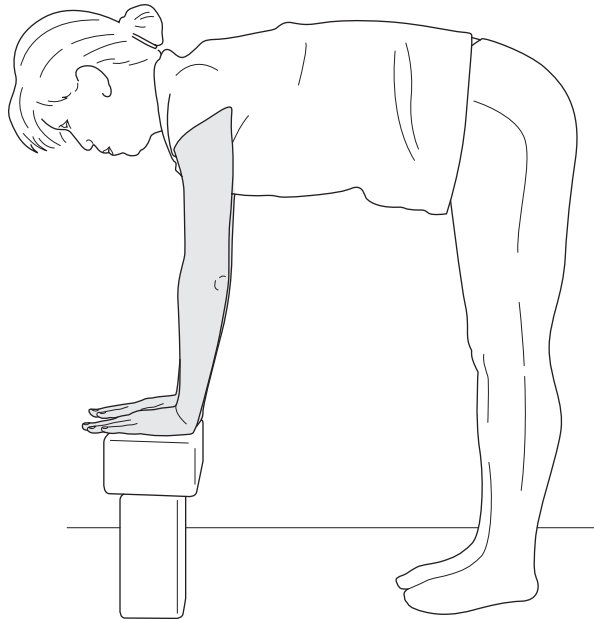


FIGURE 1-13:
Bend toward
the floor.

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Perfecting Practice with Proper Posture

Start with a common-sense approach to your posture: Aim to situate yourself comfortably in a stable, balanced position so you can play and read music, with room to move freely. The trouble is, piano players can get so caught up in the complication of notes, clefs, fingering, rhythms, and dynamics that they often forget about their bodies. So a reminder to monitor your comfort level and make appropriate adjustments is always a good thing.

Sitting at the piano: Height and angle

If you're too close to the piano, you cramp up your arms and scrunch your shoulders. If you're too far away, you overreach, putting stress on those parts (the neck, upper arm, and pelvic support) that have to work to support your overextended parts. You want to feel comfortably loose, with enough room to move freely and enough support to feel light and long in the upper body and head. You should be able to move easily in either direction of the keyboard, just enough to follow and support your arms when they venture away from the middle to the high or low registers.

Check that your bench or chair is the right height. A common way to measure this is by seeing that your elbows are even with the height of the keyboard when you're sitting at the piano with your hands in playing position. You should see a slight arc from the elbow to the top of your wrist and back down your hand to the keyboard. You have a big advantage if you use an adjustable bench or chair (available on the web at places like www.cpsimports.com and www.grandpianobench.com). The benches that come with most pianos aren't a comfortable height for many people. If you don't want to buy an adjustable chair or bench, a typical kitchen chair is a good alternative.

Good posture is all about support. Think about building support from the ground up:

- 1. With the floor and the bench or chair providing your support base, align your body so your torso, shoulders, neck, and head are fully supported from underneath.**
- 2. With both feet on the floor, and with your knees directly above your feet, sit evenly on your sitting bones so you feel a strong, stable support for your upper body.**
- 3. Don't let your weight fall back; bring the back of your pelvis (your hip bones on the sides and sacrum in the back) up above the sitting bones, and continue this line of support up through your spine to the top of your head.**

Your spine has four curves; it takes careful awareness and support in both the front and back to balance and feel centered throughout your upper body.

- 4. Keep your head supported above your spine; don't let it drop or lean in any direction.**

If you're hunching, slouching, or leaning, you're going to have to use your muscles and energy to compensate for the imbalance.

- 5. Release your shoulders if they're holding any tension, and let your arms hang to the side.**
- 6. As you breathe in, feel the full length of your upper body from the sitting bones to the top of your head.**
- 7. Breathe out and feel a relaxed, stable balance throughout your body.**

Getting a handle on proper hand position

Your hands should feel supported by your shoulders and arms, balanced and relaxed so they can move as easily as possible. Your wrist should be high enough that your fingers make a slightly curved shape with the fingertips on the keys, but not so high that you restrict movement. You should see a rounded shape created by the soft, relaxed undersides of your fingers and palm, similar to the shape of your hand draped around the fist of the other hand, as shown in Figure 1-14.

As you move up and down the keyboard, try to keep this shape and feeling, with a minimum of twisting at the wrist.

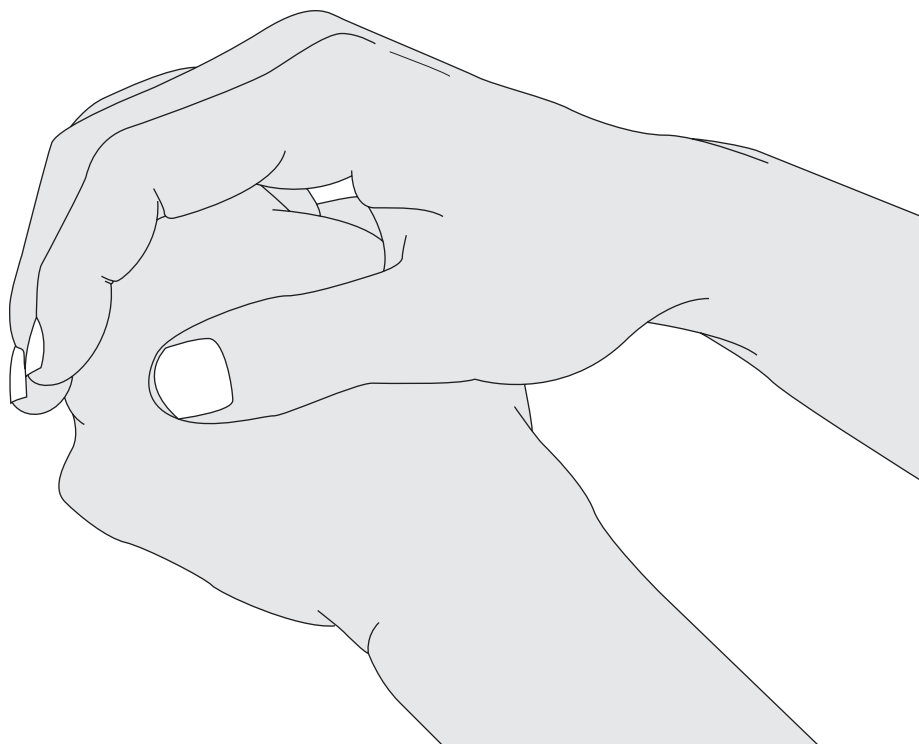


FIGURE 1-14:
Drape one hand around the fist of your other hand.

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Hands on the fallboard: Counting out loud and bouncing

Close the fallboard over the piano keys, and place your hands in playing position, as I describe in the previous section. With your fingertips touching the top of the fallboard, count out a steady, moderate, four-beat pattern of eighth notes, “one, and, two, and, three, and, four, and . . .” (see Figure 1-15). With a smooth motion, lightly bounce your wrists down on the beats and back up on the “ands” between the beats.

Count: 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and
Wrist: down up down up down up down up down up down up down up

FIGURE 1-15: Count these eighth-notes.

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You’re creating a model for playing the piano in tempo; remember this model when you play the exercises in this book and any other music. You’re counting and moving with the beat, your wrists are free and loose, and your fingers are in a nice, rounded shape. Incorporate this model into your fluid motion cycle, reading music and playing the piano in the motion of tempo and the musical phrase. The combination of reading music, counting, and playing on the keyboard

in a steady, continuous tempo may sound complex, but it's easier and more musical when you incorporate all the elements into one activity.

Hands on the fallboard: Hand arches and finger drops

The next exercise gives you practice switching comfortably from a contracted, arched hand position to an open hand position with your fingers loosely extended. To do the exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Let your hands rest, palms down, on top of the fallboard.**
2. **Raise your wrists as you touch your fingertips together in a point, fingers extended and still touching the wood (see Figure 1-16).**
3. **Spread your fingers and let your wrists drop easily until your palms are on the fallboard again.**
4. **Repeat several times.**

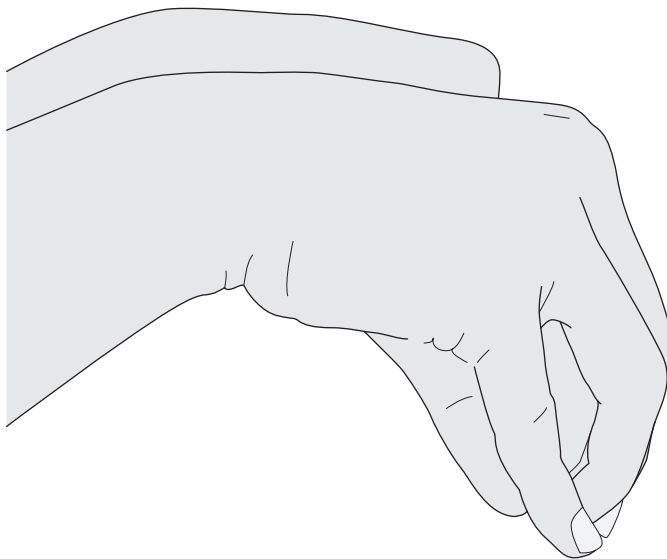


FIGURE 1-16:
Raise your wrists with your fingertips on the fallboard.

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Hands on the fallboard: Rotation in and out, movement up and down the keyboard

The next exercise gives you an example of how small forearm rotation should feel. You use this motion when playing broken-chord figures like the Alberti bass pattern in Chapter 11. To do a rotation exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Start with your hands in playing position, fingertips on the wood, wrists fairly high (see Figure 1-17).**
2. **Rotate your wrist slowly to the left, and then to the right, feeling the weight transfer across your entire hand, through your wrist, knuckles, and fingertips.**

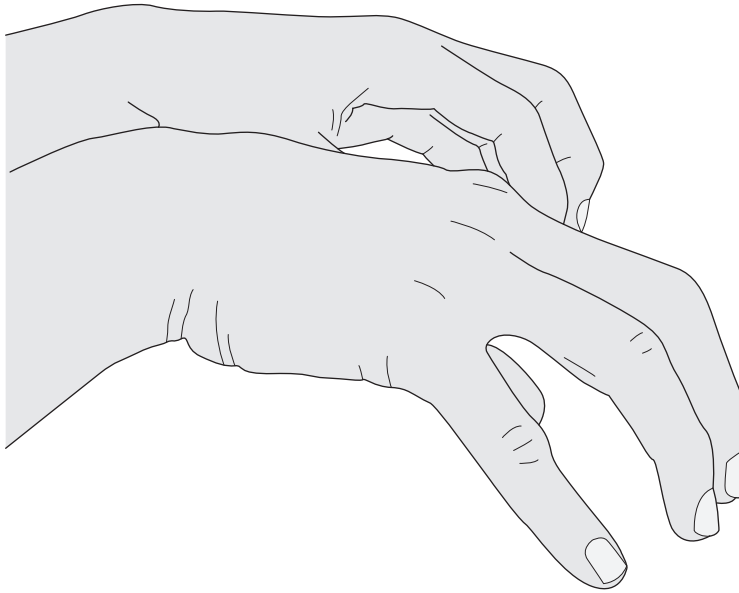


FIGURE 1-17: Put your hands in playing position on top of the fallboard.

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To get a feel for the motion up and down the keyboard — which is what you want when you play the scales in Chapter 7 — try this exercise:

1. **Start with your hands in playing position, fingertips on the wood.**
2. **Move your hands, forearms, and elbows evenly out to the sides and back in, keeping them all on the same plane, as if they were riding on a lateral-moving elevator (see Figure 1-18).**

Hands on the keyboard: Sound and movement on the keys

After completing the exercises in the previous sections, lift the fallboard to see those 88 keys eagerly awaiting your tingling fingers. You have to be willing to make some unusual music for this exercise, but give it a try: Playing and missing any notes that happen along the way, do the wrist bounces, hand arches and finger drops, wrist rotations, and lateral-movement exercises on the keys. Just try to maintain the position, support, ease of movement, and relaxed feeling you develop throughout this chapter.



FIGURE 1-18:
Move your hands along the fallboard as if you're playing the keys.

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Overcoming other posture pitfalls

Be on the lookout for signs of tension: hunching or muscle grabbing in the shoulders and arms; facial tics (biting or grimacing, clenching in the jaw); and stiffness in the neck or fingers. These points of tension may be indirectly caused by inadequate support, but you can ease them by including them in the larger cycle of tension and release — your fluid motion cycle.

When you release tension, you clear a path for your mind to guide the search for solutions to your technical problems. Technical problems don't get solved by playing a passage over and over, hoping to get it right one time, but by engaging your mind to consider changes and adjustments, examine the results, and lead your body toward new solutions.



WARNING

Be careful when the instrument may be part of the problem. For example, you may be sitting too low or high on a bench or chair that you can't adjust; a piano action may require extra work; a piano may produce inadequate tone; or you may have an electronic piano without weighted action. You may want to limit practice time and take more frequent breaks if you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation!



WARNING

If you use an electronic keyboard and/or a digital piano, be especially careful not to injure yourself while playing. Turning down the volume to a very low level to avoid disturbing family, friends, and neighbors can lead you to compensate by over-pounding so you can hear yourself play. Instead, use headphones or earbuds with the volume adjusted to a level similar to what you experience in normal piano playing.