

*Pathway to Mastery at the  
Piano*



*Journey of Piano Mastery for Adults &  
Children alike*

# ***5 Secrets to Pain-Free Artistic Piano Playing***

Karen Dandino

# *My Story*

For as long as I can remember, I dreamed of being a concert pianist. I imagined myself on stage, playing Rachmaninoff, feeling the warmth of the audience's love and admiration. I entered college full of hope, ready to take on the music world.

But then *That Day* came. The day I stood outside a practice room door, listening to another pianist, and felt my dreams crumble to dust around me. At that moment, I had to face the harsh reality—I hadn't been taught the technical and performance skills I needed to stand on that classical stage.

I didn't just walk away from the piano; I ran. I ran as far and as fast as I could, feeling betrayed by my music and the path I thought was mine.

Fast forward several years, and God started pulling me back to the piano—but this time, it was different. This time, it was about teaching. On the day I returned, I made a promise to myself and to every student I would ever teach: I would give them everything they needed to accomplish their musical dreams, everything I had missed out on.

And so, my journey began—a journey through years of learning, studying under incredible teachers, and dedicating my life to becoming the best piano and music teacher I could possibly be. I sought out the best, studied pedagogy and performance, and devoted myself to passing on what I had learned.

## **Introduction**

Karen Dandino, a piano instructor with more than 30 years experience, currently maintains a respected private studio. She is known for her diagnostic skills, natural approach to piano technique, and dynamic style. Certified by the Colorado State Music Teachers Association, she has completed course work in Piano Pedagogy from Trinity College. She completed intensive work with Dr. Yelena Balabanova. Past coaches include Dr. Susan Cable and Dr. Janice Saffir.

## Embrace Your Journey to Mastery

At Ascension Piano Studio, I understand that every pianist's journey is deeply personal—full of challenges, growth, and those moments of pure joy when everything comes together. I'm here to walk alongside you on this path, offering guidance and support as you navigate the ups and downs of learning to play.

I all know that technical issues can feel frustrating, like they're holding you back from where you want to be. But I believe those challenges are opportunities in disguise—moments that invite us to dig deep, learn something new, and build a stronger, more pain-free foundation. Together, we'll work through these obstacles with a focus on developing effective practice habits that lead to real, meaningful progress.

Practice isn't just about repetition; it's about intention, patience, and being kind to yourself in the process. I'll help you approach each practice session with purpose, so you can move forward with confidence, knowing that every note you play is bringing you closer to your goals.

And when it's time to step into the spotlight, whether it's for yourself or an audience, I'm here to help you bring out the best in your performance. With the right preparation, you'll have the skills, artistry, and courage to share your music with authenticity and grace.

Let's embrace this journey together—because becoming the pianist you're meant to be is about more than just playing the right notes; it's about discovering who you are through the music.



## Secret 1: Proper Posture

Correct body posture is an absolute necessity in order to cover the keyboard with freedom of movement.

The pianist should sit only halfway onto the bench with feet flat on the floor and the upper body leaning slightly forward. Distance from the keyboard should be enough space for elbows to be slightly in front of the body and forearms to maintain a straight line to the wrist.

The height of the bench should be high enough that the forearm stays straight from the elbow all the way to the keyboard allowing the pianist to rotate their wrists when needed.



This will allow movement over the entire keyboard with body weight on upper thighs and feet. The pianist will be able to lean from one side to the other without the feeling they are going to fall off the bench.

### COMMON MISTAKES

Common mistakes while sitting at the piano are

- \* Sitting too far back on the piano bench changing the center of balance to the tailbone.
- \* Sitting too close to the keyboard. This affects the healthy position of the forearm and wrist causing discomfort, tension in the hand, and limited move capability. This will also affect the ability to keep the heel on the floor to control pedaling. It can also cause tension and discomfort in the shin area.
- \* Keeping elbows too close to the body. They should be about the distance from the torso as if the pianist had to hold a balloon under each arm.
- \* Sitting too low and having to “reach up” to the keyboard causing tension in the wrists

## Secret 2: Hand positioning

Building a strong piano hand is like building a strong house. You must have a good foundation, solid strong walls, a strong roof and door that can open and close.

Healthy technique is not just about fast fingers. We need to engage our entire body to produce the sounds we wish to create. As stated in *What Every Pianist Needs to Know about The Body* (Mark, 2003), "Quality of movement and quality of playing are connected".

The following exercises are connected to building that strong piano hand and releasing the wrist allowing the arm and wrist to have free motion while maintaining a good piano hand.

What is a "good" piano hand?



A strong hand has joints that do not curve inward and Knuckles (bridge) well defined and not collapsed down.

The forearm is straight from the elbow with the bridge rising gently.

Keeping the elbow lined up with the pinky then the pinky functions as a strong independent finger.



The thumb curves toward the hand forming a C with the index finger.

Fingers 2,3, and 4 are placed up slightly inside the black keys so that the thumb and pinky will have their place on the keyboard without turning the wrist

But....How do you teach your hand to know this position?????

### Exercise #1



Lightly wrap fingers around a stress ball - about the size of a tennis ball.



Roll Hand over holding on to the ball as if it was a frozen bubble

Repeat on each hand



### Secret 3: Soft Wrists

One of the most important physical requirements to a pain free technique is to keep a soft spongy wrist. Pain, tightness, and poor hand position can all result from tight locked up wrists. The soft wrist gives the pianist a way to release built up tension in the hand leading to freer more agile fingers.

#### Exercise #2



Gently roll up wrist letting the hand fall loosely



Drop hand back down to the keyboard

When the ball connects with the keys roll the ball while dropping the wrist to form a small valley.

Repeat on each hand

### Exercise #3

Remove the ball keeping the hand position

Roll wrist up

Drop down onto keyboard playing finger #3 Continue to roll down so that the wrist is slightly bent.

Repeat on each hand

### **Secret 4: Regular Breaks**

Every pianist has gotten so focused on what they are practicing that they lose track of the time, especially if practice is going well. If, however, the pianist reaches the point of fatigue to take a break they have waited too long. Muscles are already stressed. The brain is tired. Tension has built up and returning to the piano after the break usually will not go well.

If on the other hand the pianist schedules their breaks before they reach that point they will be able to return to the keyboard and continue making good progress.

If the pianist jumps up whenever they remember something they have to do they will never get into the practicing rhythm. Keep a notepad next to the piano. When those thoughts happen, write down the “to do” and take care of it at the scheduled break.

### **Secret 5: Focused Practice**

Anything worth doing well is worth spending time practicing. How well you are able to do it depends on the quality and focus of that practice. “During practice time, pianists study their bodies and apply technical principles to the repertoire in order to determine how to play comfortably and with beauty” Menahem Pressler *Artistry in Piano Teaching* (Brown 2009)

Unfocused practice will produce unfocused and poor piano playing. How many times after a recital a student has come to lessons complaining that they “messed up”. I take their lesson notebook and show them. I had repeatedly corrected that “mess up” but they refused to focus and practice it correctly so they performed exactly how they practiced and the “mess up” was actually how they played it over and over and over leading up to the recital.

Focused practice produces playing that is free of tension and alive in artistry.



Learning what to focus on at the piano and doing it consistently is the key to unlocking confident and beautiful playing

Perfect Practice gives the pianist the opportunity to perform to the very best of their ability.

But what in the world is “Perfect Practice”? No one is perfect you might say. But it is possible to play small sections, hands alone, slowly without making a mistake. It is truly possible.

#### Perfect Practice

1. Divide your piece into practice sections.
2. Start with a small section - no more than 4 measures.  
Practice each hand separately slowly paying close attention to fingering, rhythms, Articulation, dynamic expression and good technique. Watch for tension and pain.

If there were any “mistakes” stop and start again.

YOU ARE AIMING FOR 4 TIMES WITH NO “MISTAKES”

3. When you have learned the 1st practice section, hands separately, start putting hands together in 2-4 measure sections with the same goals as before.

As you work on the hands together, also add the next section hands separately. When you have section 1 hands together you will be ready to start putting hands together in section 2 .

WHEN PUTTING HANDS TOGETHER ALWAYS REVIEW ANY PART OF THE SECTION THAT IS NOT YET HANDS TOGETHER.

The very last part of your plan is to increase tempo. Using a metronome will help you increase gradually.

There are many variations of this practice plan, some of which are determined by the time period, composer, and piece being practiced. However, having a structured plan of how you are going to practice each day will keep you focused and excited about learning.

Most common stressors in practicing.....

1. Putting hands together too soon
2. Putting hands together in too large of a section
3. Practicing too fast.
4. Not paying attention to fingering when learning

## CONCLUSION

Learning piano is a lifelong journey. Rachmaninoff once said “Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music”.

Playing the piano should never cause pain or discomfort. When the body is tension free and able to move and support the hands and fingers, playing becomes artistic, beautiful, and most of all fun.

I have made it a lifelong journey to be able to play and pass on this kind of playing. It took many years before I found the answers, but when I did I began performing the way I had only dreamed of when I was 18 and I want you to experience the same freedom and love of playing that I now do. If you would like more information on being free at the piano and having good productive practice habits contact Ascension Piano Studio.

Mark, Thomas (2003) *What Every Pianist Needs to Know about the Body* Gia Publications Inc 2003

Brown, William (2009) Menahem Pressler *Artistry in Piano Teaching*, Indiana University Press (2009)

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<https://calendly.com/karendandino2> schedule a conversation.

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