

Let's Get Physical: Technique

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Edna Golandsky on Taubman technique

It wasn't so long ago that people aged 50 were considered elderly, and those 65 or more downright old. In 1940, you probably wouldn't have reached the latter milestone anyway, since the average life expectancy for men was 60.8. You lived, you worked, you had as much fun as you could—and you died. There wasn't a lot you could do about it. I remember my grandfather telling me “I'm sure the doctor will tell me if there's a problem” as he lit another cigar over a glass of port, his nightly ritual. Information about a healthy lifestyle had not entered much into public consciousness and had no influence at all on his behavior. He expected life to be hard, and it had been.

Unbeknownst to my grandfather, there was a revolution afoot. Beginning in the early twentieth century, visionaries as diverse as Joseph Pilates, Ida Rolf, and Moshé Feldenkrais pioneered philosophies of kinetics that promised to increase function, improve quality of life, and even add years to a normal lifespan. They put an emphasis on making healthy choices and stressed the importance of alignment and ‘natural’ movements. As their thinking has entered the mainstream, many people have become aware that a more satisfying and pain-free life is indeed possible through a careful monitoring of action and making appropriate choices.

There is a comparable figure in the world of piano teaching to these pioneers of healthy function. She is Dorothy Taubman, the distinguished piano teacher from Brooklyn, NY, who was professor at the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College and also taught at Temple University. For many years she directed the Dorothy Taubman School of Piano in Amherst, MA, a summer program that drew top pianists from around the world.

Now retired from active teaching, Mrs. Taubman's work is being carried on, in part, by Edna Golandsky, the former Associate Artistic Director of the

Taubman Institute. In 2003, Golandsky and other senior Taubman teachers founded the *Golandsky Institute* to carry on the dissemination and advancement of the Taubman Approach. The *Golandsky Institute* holds an annual symposium and festival every July at Princeton University.

I had a chance to discuss these issues with Edna in a series of conversations, beginning in Oakland, CA.

How did Mrs. Taubman become involved in this work?

Dorothy Taubman is a friendly, warm person who wanted to make information about healthy piano technique available to everyone, not just to an elite few who already knew what to do intuitively or studied with one of a handful of famous teachers. I heard her say many times that anyone could learn to play at an expert level with the correct understanding of function and movement. She was egalitarian.

Mrs. Taubman was a gifted pianist herself. But when she was told that the only solution to technical problems or inconsistent performances was more work, she sensed that there must be something more—some deeper understanding better than “no pain, no gain.”

Taubman didn't intend to contradict traditional technique. She just wanted to know more, and to share the information with other pianists. Fifty years ago she said, in a speech to a group of piano teachers, that we should never blame the student. Instead, we need to point the finger at ourselves, the teachers, for not having enough knowledge. She aimed to correct this situation.

How did you become involved?

I was a student at Juilliard, not suffering as much as others, but wondering why my performances were so inconsistent. I had a persistent backache that I never dreamed was connected to my practice. My then-roommate told me about Mrs. Taubman,

so I cautiously decided to give it a try. I saw results right away—and my backache went away. There was order and logic, and solutions to problems.

What is your role now?

I'm here to offer help, based on my work with Mrs. Taubman and my study of other disciplines such as the Feldenkrais Method and Alexander Technique. It's interesting that each of these pioneers, including Dorothy Taubman, was told that there was no hope! Alexander, an actor, was told he would never speak on-stage again. But they chose to ignore conventional wisdom and develop a healthy approach, based on physiological research.

When I work with a student starting from the beginning, I first work with the whole body, getting it to move right. Then I explain how the piano works. Next we work to get a sense of the micro-timing of the piano key, the finger going down with the key. It's important to start with big motions, then learn how to minimize.

People have the impression that this process must always take months and years. Not necessarily! I help people who come getting ready for a performance. I don't necessarily go through everything. I do what I think will work to make an immediate difference. You can enter the Taubman Approach at any point unless there is a serious injury.

What are the basic principles of the Taubman Approach?

Mrs. Taubman worked from some basic values. Two important precepts were: don't isolate muscles, or choose movements that cause them to work in opposition; and don't curl your fingers, or stretch them.

My impression is that many of the movements you describe in your work—rotation, in and out, the walking hand, shaping—are designed to enable the hand to keep its natural position at all times. It's as if the movements deliver the hand to the appropriate position over the keys.

Yes. We try to keep the natural hand position as a constant; the arm movements and body alignment are designed to make this possible. The forearm takes the fingers to where they need to be. It should feel easy. This was a revolutionary part of Mrs. Taubman's thinking, in an era when people felt that you should work through pain. That's not right—pain is a sign that something is wrong.

The forearm is the key to everything. We need it to help the fingers and initiate movements. It's all very small movements, small muscles, small support. The question is: what do you need to put down a key to make the act of playing and the sound really secure? It doesn't take much weight. But if you do it right, the sound becomes fuller. Between the use of weight and the ability to time the key descent, you have the means to produce all kinds of colors and sounds.

Was this idea original to her?

There was much emphasis in the nineteenth century on relaxation, of course, and Tobias Matthay, the distinguished British pedagogue, did much work on rotation. People at that time noticed that using fingers alone caused a lot of tension. It seemed that there needed to be another part of the body involved. So they started talking about using the upper arm and shoulder, not necessarily because this was the right approach, in my opinion, but because these are movements that could be seen.

Taubman technique—Some terms and concepts from Edna Golandsky

The mechanism of the piano—Edna observes, among other things, that piano keys are weighted, and she encourages her students to feel the keys supporting the hand and fingers. Students should aim their energy to the point of sound, and follow-through to the keybed without forcing.

Movement is based on a system of leverage. Edna compares piano playing motions to a seesaw, noting that all move from a fixed point. The fingers move from the metacarpophalangeal joints (what piano teachers often call the bridge); the hands move from the wrist; and the forearm moves from the elbow. Taubman teachers describe a good piano technique as “coordinate movement.”

Hand position Fingers should retain their natural shape at all times, never stretching, cramping, or trying to line up in a straight line.

Muscles There are many muscles involved in the use of the arm and hand. Two key groups are the forearm *flexors*, on the inside of the arm, which help us make a fist. The *extensors* are on the outside of the arm and allow the fingers to open out. Pianists using the principles of Taubman Technique avoid engaging both groups simultaneously, believing that this is a major cause of strain.

Forearm use is a key component of Taubman Technique. According to Edna, movement at the piano should be initiated in the hand and forearm, because the muscles there are capable of quick and precise movements, unlike the upper arm, which

has mainly slow-moving muscles.

Relaxation is a loaded word for piano teachers. Edna feels that over-relaxing is almost as bad as being tense. She prefers the terms “resting down”—not stiff, but in a state of readiness.

Some important motions

Rotation is a motion of the forearm, which could be compared to turning a doorknob. This movement is the foundation of Mrs. Taubman's work. There are *single rotation* motions, to play notes going in opposite directions, and double rotation, for notes moving in the same direction. These motions enable the forearm to assist the fingers with arm weight and covering larger intervals.

In and Out are arm motions enabling the fingers to play black keys without twisting. It has been described as an “in, up, and forward” motion and requires some planning as to where to place the finger on the piano key.

Walking Arm and Hand carry the hand laterally across the keyboard. Edna compares the motion to walking: the arm swings up a bit, just as your leg does from step to step.

Shaping the hand moves up and down creating curvilinear shapes. These are undulating movements.

Complete descriptions, demonstrations, and excerpts from Mrs. Taubman's teaching are included in videos available on the website of the Golandsky Institute, <http://www.golandskyinstitute.org>. ▲

The problem is that the muscles in the upper arm are heavy and sluggish, not good for initiating movement. So as pianists worked, they found that tension does indeed create problems, but so does too much of the wrong sort of relaxation.

One of Taubman's biggest contributions was to make a distinction between relaxation and freedom. There is a way for things to hold without tensing. This is so important in movement—you can't move quickly, easily, and securely with tensing. But the same is true of relaxation. A state of full relaxation is a falling down. It pulls on other parts of the body and you can't easily move from it.

I prefer to talk about sense of freedom or ease. When we are not tense, the brain feels relaxed—but it is not muscle relaxation! It's understanding how to line up and how to move. "Coordinate" piano playing can be compared to walking. When you step, the body settles behind the foot and you move on. If you relax fully you can't take the next step.

Bach's first biographer, Forkel, described how Bach asked his students to curl their five fingers so that the tips formed a straight line.

We move best at the keyboard when the fingers are not curled. This motion pulls on the long flexors, muscles that tighten us. If the fingers are too straight, the extensor muscles are put into play. This creates dual muscular pulls, one set of muscles pulling one way, the other in a different direction. This always creates problems! My advice is to go with the easiest way to move, which is the natural, slightly curved finger position, the fingers settling into their natural length.

Why are stretching exercises bad?

They are one of the great destroyers of technique. Individual fingers are very weak without the support of the forearm. When you isolate the finger muscles and ask them to stretch, it creates dual muscular pulls and stiffening, the fingers trying to accomplish everything through force. Over time, this will lead to all kinds of micro-trauma. Students ask me: if you are not stretching, how do you move from finger to finger? You don't stretch and you don't curl the fingers. You let them keep their natural shape and let the forearm move the hand to new positions. That was a key part of Mrs. Taubman's thinking, and led to everything else. In practice, of course, this is more complicated than this sounds, at least at first. There are a whole series of calibrated movements that each pianist needs to master and integrate into their own practice.

Are exercises in themselves always bad, or is it just the lack of knowledge of how to do it?

Isolation exercises are harmful. If you show people the proper way to move, they don't need these exercises. You don't need to build muscles in order to play. Prodigies tell you they don't have to practice a lot—when it's right, it's right. It's a natural phenomenon. If you don't speak for a while, you don't lose the ability to talk.



Dorothy Taubman (L) with Edna Golandsky.

Should the wrist move up and down while playing?

No. You want to create a bridge with the forearm and not let it bend. Too much relaxation promotes breaks, causing pain in the back, and eventually carpal tunnel syndrome. When I first played for Mrs. Taubman, she noticed that I was breaking my wrist and asked me if I had backaches. I had never mentioned this to anyone. I thought she was a witch! But they went away as soon as I supported my wrist and didn't break. I use analogies to daily life to explain this to students. Thinking of drinking a glass of water. If your wrist really bends down, you can't even hold the glass.

Does big tone always come from the forearm?

Everything in the body is connected—Feldenkrais, Pilates, they all talk about this. So in that sense all parts of the body are involved in playing the piano. When you are walking, your torso is involved but your torso isn't actually doing the stepping. In the same way, you don't literally play the keys with your back or stomach. Nor, on the other hand, should you cut your energy off at the elbow. The motion starts in the forearm and fingers and other muscle groups support.

The forearm is capable of great power and it can move quickly. The sound has to come from the fingers with the help of the arm. The very small muscles of the fingers need the weight of the arm for support. The forearm lets go in a free motion, like tossing a ball. To throw further, you go further back and release more—if you force, it won't go far. I call this "inner let-go." If the forearm breaks, the weight goes into the wrist and there is pain. If forearm falls into the fingertips freely, you will get a big sound and no negative consequences. The energy should be aimed to the point of sound, then the arm follows through. As in martial arts, you can get great strength from releasing power in a comparatively small movement.

What is the mission of the Golandsky Institute?

We want to provide musicians with a foundation that will promote full artistic expression with complete ease; to give them the skill to realize their highest potential; to overcome technical limitations with knowledge; and to recover fully from injuries caused by "incoordinate" playing.

There are solutions for every problem. The symptoms that people complain about are our greatest guides. Tension on the top part of the forearm generally comes from curling the fingers and lifting them all by themselves. Tension on the bottom part comes from digging hard into the keys. Holding the upper arm up is often a compensation for the wrist dropping down. Pain in the back comes usually from wrist drop, top knuckles drop, or any relaxation of those fulcrums that are needed for the limbs parts to move from. Wrist pain and carpal tunnel syndrome come from wrist "break." Pain on the side of the wrist comes from twisting. When the causes for those symptoms are corrected and tension and pain go away, that's the state we want to be in. Not tense and not relaxed, but free and ready to move. ▲

To learn more, visit the Golandsky Institute website at <http://www.golandskyinstitute.org/>.