

Mechanics of Advanced Technique

After Adele Marcus · A One-Page Technical Regimen · Page 1 of 2

CORE PRINCIPLES

Arm weight, not finger force. Energy originates in the back and shoulder, travels through a free arm, releases into the key. The finger is the delivery point, never the engine.

Floating elbow. The elbow leads laterally — it never locks, never collapses to the ribs. It floats at the height of the keyboard and tracks the hand across the registers.

Three motions per note. Approach from above, drop with weight, release instantly. Holding tension past the sound is the single biggest technical fault.

SCALES

Daily rotation: all 12 major and minor keys across the week. Two keys per day minimum, four octaves hands together.

- **Tempo ladder:** ♩ = 60 → 80 → 100 → 120 → 144.
Move up only when evenness holds.
- **Articulations:** legato, staccato, two-note slurs, dotted rhythms, triplet-into-sixteenth.
- **Patterns:** parallel, contrary motion, thirds apart, sixths apart, tenths apart.
- **Dynamics:** p ascending / f descending, then reverse.
Trains independent weight control.
- **Listen for:** thumb bumps on crossings, uneven fingers 4–5, rushed descent.

ARPEGGIOS

Daily rotation: major, minor, dominant 7, diminished 7. Four octaves hands together, all inversions.

- **Tempo ladder:** ♩ = 80 → 100 → 120 → 144. Hands separate first for a week on new keys.
- **Rotational motion:** small forearm rotation leads the hand through the shape. The wrist does not jerk — it floats on the rotation.
- **Thumb-under:** prepare early, pass silently, no accent on the crossing note.
- **Variations:** broken (one-two-three-four), block (as full chords), skipping intervals.
- **Listen for:** wrist locking at the top of the arc, uneven top note.

CHORDS (ARM WEIGHT)

The signature exercise. Full triads and seventh chords in all 12 keys, in all inversions, approaching each from several inches above the keys.

- **Motion:** raise the whole arm from the shoulder, drop as one unit, release the instant the sound happens.
- **Voicing:** project the top note by angling weight toward 5th finger. Then rotate and project the bass. Then the inner voice.
- **Progressions:** I–IV–V–I, ii–V–I, I–vi–IV–V, cadential 6/4, all 12 keys.
- **Dynamics:** ppp → fff pyramids on a single chord.
Trains the full dynamic spectrum through one gesture.
- **Listen for:** harsh attacks (sign of pressing), uneven voicing, held tension between chords.

OCTAVES

The Marcus–Biegel progression. Build from the arpeggio shape outward until the hand owns the octave.

- **Stage 1:** arpeggio one octave, hands separate, loose wrist.
- **Stage 2:** two octaves, same looseness.
- **Stage 3:** three octaves. Begin feeling the wrist as a shock-absorber.
- **Stage 4:** four-octave octaves themselves — the hand is now trained for the span.
- **Chromatic octaves:** short bursts at ♩ = 80, rest, repeat. Never grind through fatigue.
- **Broken octaves:** alternating 1 and 5, trains the rotation that makes continuous octaves possible.
- **Listen for:** clenched thumb, gripping between notes, forearm burn (stop immediately if it appears).

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SETTING-UP EXERCISES

Daily warm-up before scales. Short stretching and alignment work to free the hand.

- **Hand circles:** gentle wrist circles, both directions, 30 seconds each hand.
- **Finger extensions:** hold one finger down, lift the others individually. Trains independence without strain.
- **Trills on 3–4 and 4–5:** the weakest pairs. Slow, even, loose wrist. Thirty seconds per pair.
- **Five-finger patterns:** C–D–E–F–G up and down, all keys, varying articulation and dynamics.
- **Rotational drill:** C–G–C–G–C with 1–5–1–5–1, forearm rotates, no finger strain.

 • *Marcus's full stretching routine includes some aggressive extensions. Adapt to your hand — stop any exercise that produces sharp pain, tingling, or forearm burn. Modern pedagogy (Taubman, Golandsky) replaces some of her stretches.*

APPROACHING A NEW PIECE

Marcus's method, from the Juilliard studio. The piece is learned before the fingers touch it.

- **Score study first.** Read it like a conductor — form, key areas, harmonic plan, climaxes, texture changes. Away from the piano.
- **Sing the voices.** Especially the inner lines. If you can't sing it, you don't yet hear it.
- **Fingering decided early.** Write it in. Never improvise fingering under performance pressure.
- **Hands separate, slow.** Each hand mastered alone at ♩ = 40–50. Only then together.
- **Small units, varied repetition.** Four-bar chunks, five passes each: slow, dotted, reverse-dotted, staccato, legato.
- **Memorize in sections** from day one — harmonic memory, kinesthetic memory, aural memory, visual memory. All four.
- **Build tempo last.** Metronome up by 4 bpm at a time. If evenness breaks, back down two settings.

PRACTICE DISCIPLINE

Listen before you play. Hear the sound you intend before your finger moves. The brain leads, the hand follows.

Metronome for evenness, not speed. Marcus warned that chasing tempo destroys evenness. Build the floor first, the ceiling takes care of itself.

Record yourself weekly. Audio recording reveals what the hand hides from the ear in real time — rushed descents, uneven voicing, lost phrasing. One honest listen beats an hour of blind repetition.

The daily rotation: stretching (5 min) → scales (15) → arpeggios (10) → chord work (10) → octaves (10) → repertoire. Non-negotiable, even on performance days — half-doses on heavy days, never zero.

Rest is part of the work. Tension is the enemy. The moment you feel grip, strain, or forearm fatigue — stop. Shake out. Resume slower. The exercises build strength through release, not through pushing.

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