

Piano Technique

Fundamentals & Chord Studies

in the Liszt tradition

Andrew Trotter · 2026

I. Foundations at the Bench

Bench Height

Sit so that your forearms, when relaxed at the keyboard, run parallel to the floor. The elbow should rest slightly above the level of the white keys not reaching up, not pressing down. If the bench is too low, the wrist drops and the shoulder tenses; if too high, the fingers flatten and lose their arch. Trust the forearm as your level.

Posture

Sit on the forward third of the bench. Both feet flat on the floor (or on the pedal). Spine long but not rigid imagine a string pulling gently up from the crown of the head. The ribcage is open, the sternum lifted. All motion begins from a stable, centered base; without it, the arms cannot move freely.

Distance from the Keyboard

Sit far enough back that your elbows can swing freely forward and outward without striking the ribs. A common fault is sitting too close this forces the arm into a cramped position and chokes the wrist. When in doubt, move back an inch.

Breath

Breathe before every phrase. A pianist who holds the breath holds the tone with it, and the sound locks. The body must stay as alive as the music.

II. The Mechanics of a Free Arm

The Floating Elbow

The elbow is never locked, never clamped to the side. It floats, following the hand across the keyboard as the hand moves between registers. Think of the elbow as a hinge that rides a cushion of air it rises slightly for octaves and wide chords, settles for scalar passages, swings outward on crossings. A locked elbow produces tension that travels straight into the forearm and wrist. If your elbow is still, your sound will be stiff.

Wrist Alignment

The wrist is level with the forearm not collapsed below the knuckle line, not arched above it. It is also flexible. For every attack, the wrist can rise slightly to release the note (as in staccato), or descend into the key (as in a legato cantabile). A rigid wrist transmits shock to the fingers; a floppy wrist loses control. Find the middle: firm, aligned, breathing.

Finger Curvature

Fingers curve naturally the shape of a hand holding a tennis ball. The tip of the finger (not the pad) contacts the key, with the second joint well above the key surface. The thumb is slightly curved, with its tip (not the side) striking the key. Flat fingers lose speed and clarity; over-curved fingers lose weight and tone. The natural arch is the target.

Shoulder Release

The shoulders stay low, broad, and relaxed. If you catch them creeping up toward your ears, stop and let them drop. Shoulder tension is the enemy of a singing tone it kills the connection from the back to the fingertip. Breathe. Imagine warm water running down the back of the arms. The arm must hang from the shoulder, not be held up by it.

III. Chord Studies

These studies build the hand on the two foundations Liszt insisted upon: evenness of touch and freedom of the wrist. Practice hands separately before combining. Begin at quarter = 60 and only raise the tempo when every note sounds without strain. Transpose each pattern through all twelve keys.

1. Major triads, root position

Play the chord firmly, then release the wrist upward between attacks. The sound rings, not thuds.



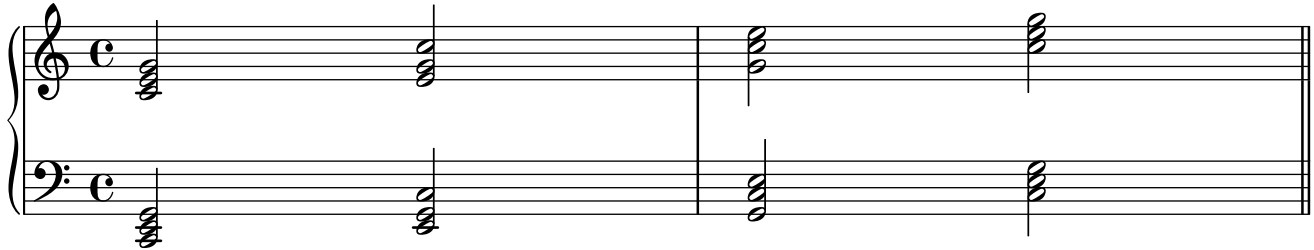
2. Minor triads, root position

Same gesture, darker color. Listen for the lowered third against the open fifth.



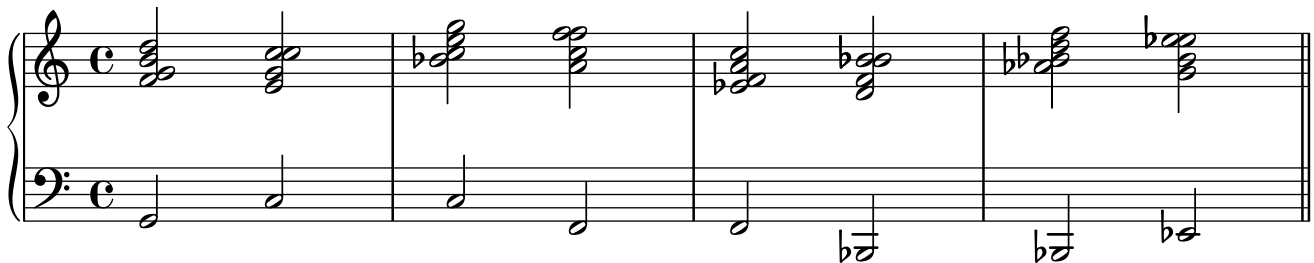
3. Inversions in C major

Smooth voice-leading. The thumb moves least; the outer fingers travel furthest. Keep the wrist loose through e



4. Dominant-seventh resolutions

Each V7 pulls to its tonic. Listen for the leading-tone rising and the seventh falling by step the two voices that



5. Broken-chord pattern (right hand)

Even finger weight, no accents. Keep the thumb light.



IV. How to Practice These Studies

Begin Slowly

Start at a tempo where every note sounds clean and even usually quarter = 60. Speed is a byproduct of accuracy, not a goal in itself. Liszt himself practiced slowly for hours; Cortot called slow practice the only practice that teaches. Only increase tempo when the current one feels effortless.

Listen for Tension

Every few minutes, stop and check: are your shoulders lifted? Is your jaw clenched? Is the thumb gripping the key? Tension is the single greatest obstacle to velocity and tone. If you find it, stop playing, let the arm hang at your side, and begin again from the breath.

Hands Separately, Then Together

Each hand has its own weight, its own motion. Learn each one alone until the pattern is second nature, then combine. Once combined, listen for which hand leads and which supports the balance shifts depending on the passage.

Three Passes per Day

The chord studies are most useful at the start of a practice session, when the hands are freshest. One pass slow, one at tempo, one with eyes closed to feel the geometry of the shapes. Fifteen to twenty minutes, every day, is more valuable than an hour once a week.

Transpose Everything

A pattern that lives only in C major is a half-learned pattern. Walk each study through all twelve keys by half-step or by circle of fifths. Where it feels awkward is where it most needs the work.

The hands build the technique. The ear decides whether it is music.