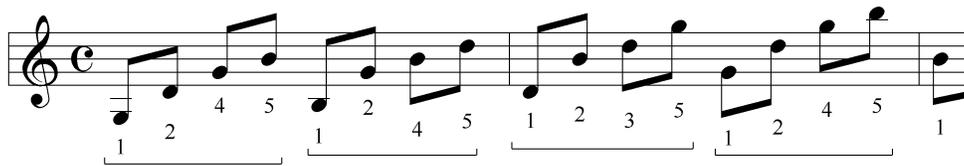


Avoiding Tension With Movement

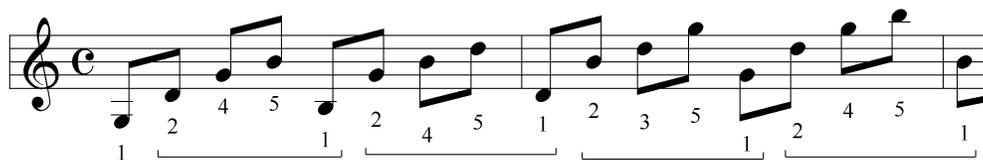
We often hear that staying relaxed is a high priority when playing the piano. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to understand exactly what that means, particularly when challenging pieces make that requirement seem difficult. While there are many ways that we can think about relaxation, one area where we can exercise choice for a tangible result is through the use of fingerings that avoid stretched fingers and tense wrists. Nevertheless, this sometimes requires more movement, and moving also presents its own particular set of challenges.

How a pattern is organized in one's thinking can make a difference regarding how easy the grouping feels to the player and how accurately it is played in performance. Note groupings that involve large leaps and extended hand positions can sometimes be made simpler by conceiving them in the setting of smaller intervals and hand positions. In the example below, a right hand arpeggio is thought of according to its metric organization: as a series of groupings, each of which spans a tenth or greater:



In this case, it is easy to be concerned about the wide interval that each arpeggio encompasses. Since each four note pattern is thought about in relation to the thumb, moreover, it is easy for the thumb to lag behind until the next arpeggio is played.

If, on the other hand, the arpeggio is organized differently—according to an octave grouping that also encompasses four notes, the same passage feels easier to play:

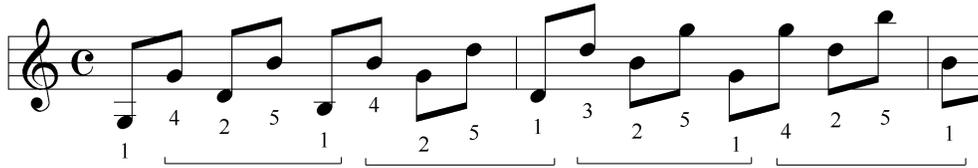


Since each grouping is conceived in relation to a position defined by the thumb on B (as opposed to G), the hand moves to set up a hand position that uses a movement of the hand that is guided by octaves. This organizes the movement of the thumb in a way that is guided by the octave descent from the note played by the pinky. Since the player is more aware of the octave connection between the B down to B (the 4th and 5th eighth notes) as the boundary of the pattern, the thumb moves into position more quickly. As a result, the hand concentrates on *movement* rather than stretching.

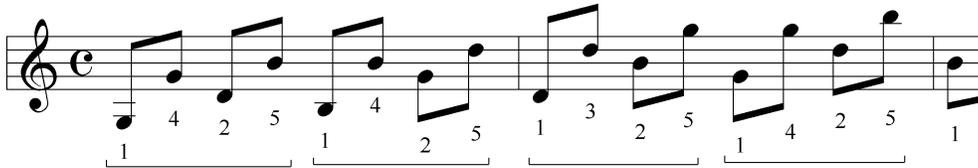
In the second example, moreover, the distance between the thumb and the pinky is not only smaller; it remains consistent. In the original grouping, the boundaries of the first two groupings are tenths, while the boundary of the third grouping is an eleventh. In the second example, the boundary remains unchanged as an octave.

The same arpeggio, played with a different note order, also benefits:

This:



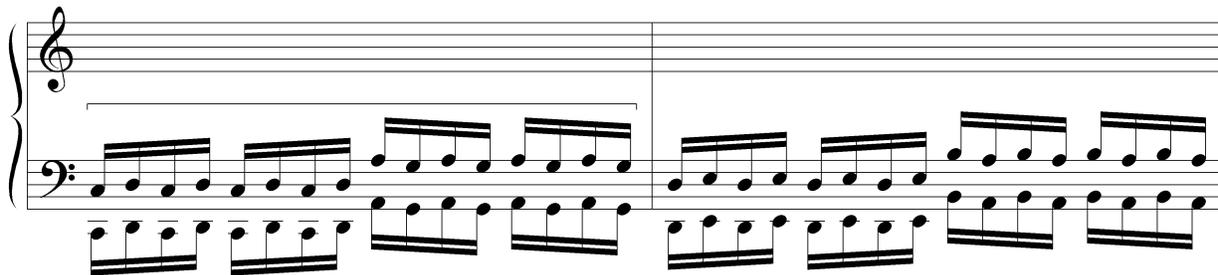
Not this:



Find a way, if possible, to take advantage of this technique in every instance wherein large intervals require that the hand stretch uncomfortably beyond the octave. Even if you find that the approach doesn't significantly approve your ability to play large interval figures, it is still a valuable practice technique to apply to these types of passages.

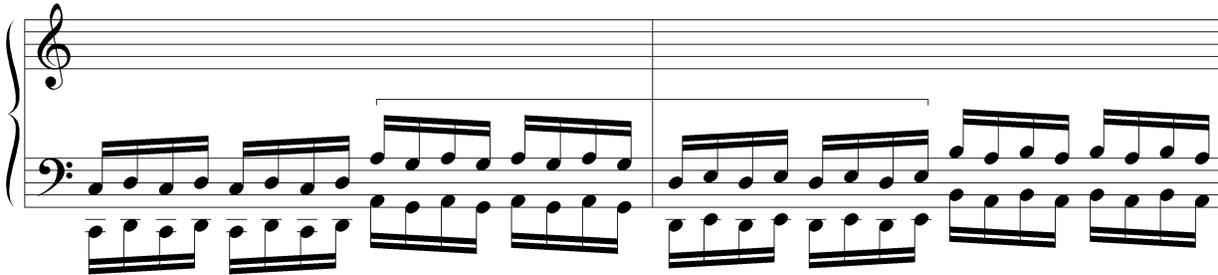
In general, don't let the metric organization of any figure automatically determine how you organize it at the keyboard with respect to hand position and movement. Experiment with different ways of thinking about a figure. This may lead to insights about other aspects of the passage such as fingering, phrasing, articulation, and other elements of musical expression.

Similarly, exercise 30 from Hanon reveals a similar application. In this case, the right hand position is easily associated with the measure and is spread out over a sixth:



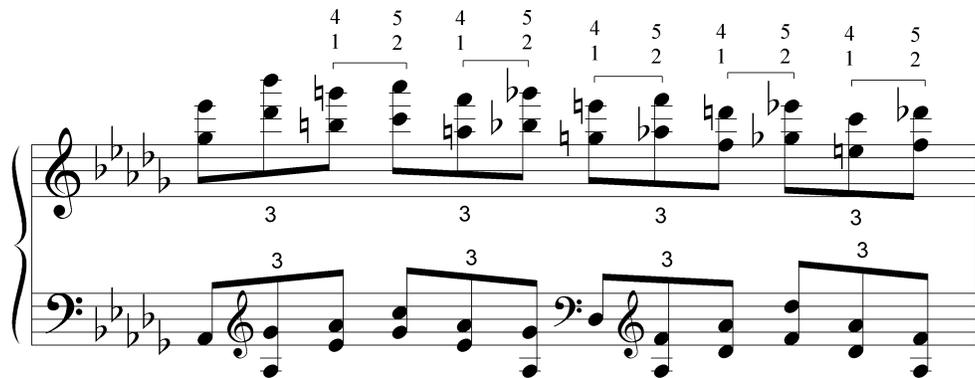
The hand moves up in the second measure when the thumb moves to D. The hand position is coupled with the measure with the upward movement of the thumb in the second measure.

Accordingly, there is the tendency to want to stretch up to the A. By conceiving of the passage slightly against the grain of the meter, the hand position encompasses a more easily negotiated fifth and there is no longer the sense of a stretch; the thumb moves easily with the pinky when the pinky moves up:



Grouping the note with a smaller hand position lessens the tension in the hand.

An illustration of this principle from the piano literature can be seen in Chopin's Sixths etude, Opus 25. No. 8. In measure eight, the right hand plays pairs of chromatic sixths that resolve upward. Normally, this half step relationship would likely determine how the hand negotiates the keyboard. If you pair the sixths according to this musical relationship, the keyboard relationship is easy to discern, organize, and remember, but the sixths seem difficult to play, particularly for a small hand. This is because the thumb and index finger, and the fourth and fifth fingers are both a half step apart, and this places a lot of tension in the hand:



If, however, you conceive of the sixths in as the example below, the thumb and index finger, and the fourth and fifth finger are a whole step or a step and a half apart:

the hand moves to play the high B, there is a certain amount of throw generated. This may be appropriate given the B is the highest note of the phrase. Consider also that the slight movement of the hand from the third finger on D# to the fifth finger on B is small compared with the movement of the hand up *one octave* from beat one to beat two.

One of the best examples of moving to avoid tension can be found in the left hand in two different Chopin Etudes. In Op. 10 No. 10, below, the left hand fingering is most often found in the first fingering (#1) In this case, the thumb must reach up for the highest Eb:

The image shows a musical score for Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 10. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 12/8. The piece is marked *p* (piano). The score shows a sequence of notes in the right hand and a sequence of notes in the left hand. Below the staves, two fingering suggestions are provided: #1 and #2. #1 is 5 1 2 4 1 2 and #2 is 5 2 3 5 1 3. There are also some additional fingering numbers 5 1 3 5 1 3 placed further to the right.

#1: 5 1 2 4 1 2
 #2: 5 2 3 5 1 3

5 1 3 5 1 3

This is the fingering that I have always used for this piece. In learning the piece again recently, however, I've practiced with the second fingering (#2). Although the hand must travel farther with this fingering, once it is in position, it is comfortable. Moreover, when the hand moves up, 1 and 5 set up an octave which helps to ground the hand into a manageable grouping of notes or *block*. (See, for example, measures 37-42 and 62-64). Additionally, the use of 5 on Eb3 (on beat 2) allows one to apply rotation easily for emphasis on this note if desired. There are many instances throughout this piece where this technique can be applied contrary to the fingerings often given.

A similar instance is found in the left hand of Op. 25 No. 3:

The image shows a musical score for Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 3. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The piece is marked *p* (piano). The score shows a sequence of notes in the right hand and a sequence of notes in the left hand. Below the staves, two fingering suggestions are provided: #1 and #2. #1 is 1 2 / 3 5 and #2 is 1 2 / 4 5. There are also some additional fingering numbers 1 2 / 3 5 and 1 2 / 4 5 3 5 placed further to the right.

#1: 1 2 / 3 5 1 2 / 3 5 1 2 / 3 5

#2: 1 2 / 4 5 1 2 / 4 5 1 2 / 4 5 1 2 / 3 5

Here again, the fingering most often given is the first (#1), where the hand is stretched and tense. This is the fingering that I used when I first learned the piece. When I revisited the piece recently, I wanted to apply the principle of movement over stretching, so I worked with the second fingering.. At first, it felt insecure, since I was giving up a feeling of stability or "holding on" to a position. Now it seems as though there is no other way to play it. For my hand, which is not too small, the first fingering now feels tense, awkward, and rigid. For a smaller hand, I imagine this fingering would be even more uncomfortable.

Speaking of etudes, another example of a fingering change that provides less tension with slightly more movement is the right hand of the Etude in F minor Op. 25 No. 3:

#1:	2	2	3	1	2	4	3	2	3	1	2	4	5	2	3	1	2	4	3	2	3	1	2	5	4		
#2:	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	4	5	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	4	5

for it to be) as fast and easy as motions with the fingers close together. It generates tension and courts injury. An efficient, safe technique will not attempt to move the fingers rapidly up and down while holding them spread apart, nor will it use spreading or stretching the fingers as a means of covering distances in single-note playing. Instead it will train the arm to move sideways to cover distances while keeping the fingers in the neutral position from which they can move freely.¹

¹ Thomas Mark, *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2003), 98-99.