

Consider the Other Hand When Working Out Fingerings

In piano music, there are many opportunities to simplify the fingering arrangement of a passage. One approach involves moving notes written for one hand to the other. Although an in depth discussion of this technique (and the many examples in the literature that could be cited) goes well beyond the scope of this chapter, there are a few principles that are useful when considering this approach.

When a composer writes a piece for piano, he or she is concerned with both the musical and technical elements. The composer wants the score to reveal important musical relationships and distinctions, such as melody and accompaniment, which parts of the texture require emphasis, and so forth. The score also, however, presents the music in a way that suggests how the pianist should realize the music at the keyboard to support the musical aspects. Nevertheless, once the musical stipulations are made clear to the pianist through the notated score, the pianist is often free to consider different approaches to the technique of the piece (how the piece is realized at the keyboard) while keeping the musical distinctions (how the piece sounds or should sound) in mind.

Although the pianist is very much aware of how the music is being organized at the keyboard (through fingering and choice of hand within a particular passage), the listener is mainly concerned with how the music sounds. The pianist's aural experience of the music, however, is often unfairly biased by what the hands are doing. Although the pianist may imagine that the music sounds different depending upon which hand plays a particular note or note group, the listener will often be unable to notice any difference. The example below may be useful in demonstrating this idea.

I struggled with fingering for the passage below from *Scarbo*, the third piece from Ravel's *Gaspard De La Nuit*. I went through many possibilities, and eventually ended up using the fingering given below, from a fairly well-known edition:

262

1 3 2 3 5 1 2 1 5 1

The image shows a musical score for measures 262 and 263 of Scarbo. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/8. The score is written for piano with a grand staff. The right hand has a melodic line starting with a quarter rest in measure 262, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The left hand has a bass line with a quarter rest in measure 262, followed by quarter notes G3, F3, and E3. The fingering 1 3 2 3 5 1 2 1 5 1 is written above the notes in the right hand.

The edition also provided an alternative that moves two notes in measure 163 to the left hand:

262

1 3 2 3 1 2 1 2

The image shows an alternative musical score for measures 262 and 263 of Scarbo. The key signature and time signature are the same as in the first score. The right hand has a melodic line starting with a quarter rest in measure 262, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The left hand has a bass line with a quarter rest in measure 262, followed by quarter notes G3, F3, and E3. The fingering 1 3 2 3 1 2 1 2 is written above the notes in the right hand.

This made the passage easier to play, and generally more consistent in rhythm, articulation, and overall accuracy. There was, on the other hand, a sense that by putting two melody notes in the left hand, the melody would not be clear or would not be articulated on an equal footing with the notes of the melody played by the right hand. With careful listening, it became apparent that there was little difference in balance, articulation, and tone color between the two fingering arrangements. Accordingly, I decided to use the fingering that made the passage easier and more consistent, but to also keep the last note in the measure (C#3) in the right hand, since putting it in the left hand provided no discernible benefit. I ended up with the fingering arrangement below:

This example reveals a number of principles. First, without an awareness of which fingering is being used to play a part in a passage, it is quite difficult to hear a difference between the choices. This is particularly the case when the pianist makes an effort to play the passage with the appropriate balance, articulation, phrasing, and so forth. The listener, moreover, is a step removed from an awareness of the fingering.

Second, it is almost always easier to play a fingering that works technically in a musical manner, than it is to play a musically appropriate fingering in a way that is technically consistent. In other words, a passage that feels technically sound often allows the player the freedom and control to play it in different ways, all of which feel comfortable and secure. In this particular case, the dynamic control, as well as the articulation of B# in the left hand, can be easily adjusted if necessary.

Finally, the texture of a particular passage may also impact on any changes choices that affect the movement of any notes to the opposite hand. In the example above, B# is the highest note in the left hand chord which makes it likely that it will receive emphasis in the texture without any added emphasis affecting its articulation.

Another example of considering the hands together when choosing fingerings can be seen in a passage from Bill Dobbin's *Yardbird Conversation*:

Although both 2 and 3 felt comfortable on the left hand Eb (beat 2, second measure), it felt somewhat awkward when played with the right hand. It became apparent that using 4 in the left hand mirrored the right hand fingering and moved the exact distance up from the 1 to 4 that the right hand moved down from 1 to 4. This felt more secure and made the passage easier to play. Keep in mind that there are always a variety of workable fingerings. Working out the fingering for one hand in combination with the opposite hand, however, will give insight to the comfort and reliability of the various possibilities. Feel free to change the fingering when it becomes more comfortable when both of the hands play together.