

Practice Transposition to Develop Your Ear and Technique

As we gain more experienced playing piano, we begin to understand why pieces sound best in the key that they are written in. One way to appreciate this facet of piano music is to try playing a few measures of a piece that you know well in another key. You may notice that the piece doesn't quite sound the same. The quality and character of the piece changes and it seems as though something is missing.

Compositions for the piano are, of course, meant to be performed in the key they are written in. Nevertheless, there is a great benefit to be derived from learning a piece in a new key, or, *transposing* it. First there is the technical gain. Since composers consider the way that the piece is arranged on the keyboard, it is likely to be more difficult to play in another key.

For example, throughout Alfred Cortot's edition of the Chopin Studies, he recommends transposing many of the studies into one or more other keys. In fact, he suggests playing the first study, in C major, in every key while keeping the same fingerings. The adjustments needed and the difficulties encountered create an artificial challenge which, when overcome, promotes an ease of execution when the original key is revisited. (This results, in part, from the added burden that the fingers encounter in the sequences of black and white keys in the transposed keys.)

Then there is the matter of training one's ear and developing a sense of keyboard harmony and theory. In order to transpose a piano piece, the player applies a variety of skills. Depending on the nature of the music (its texture, harmony, and other factors), the player is forced to rely on a combination of his ear, his knowledge of intervals and chords, and broader melodic and harmonic principles. Scales and arpeggios, for example, become relevant, being general expressions of important musical relationships.

To transpose a melody, for example, the player must be aware of the sound of the tune, the intervals that the melody embodies, and how these intervals appear in various positions on the keyboard. Given the skills that are needed, areas of weakness show up and are addressed through practice. As a result, the player's knowledge of the melody increases and his memory of it is strengthened.

There is no area of piano playing for which playing pieces in different keys provides greater benefit than for jazz pianists and pianists who wish to develop improvisational skills. The practice of playing tunes in all keys forces a player to develop the skills necessary for improvisation. These are the ability to hear the melody through its various manifestations on the keyboard, and the continual effort needed to come up with fingerings "on the fly," much as one does when improvising.

Even though theoretical principles are applied when one transposes, there are aspects of transposition that force a player to rely solely on his ear. The ear must directly guide the fingers, as many of the intricate twists and turns of a melody do not lend themselves to musical vocabulary or theoretical relationships that are readily apparent.

Certainly it is one thing to work out a transposition of a melody—to try various fingerings, and to choose what works best. If the player, however, forces himself to play through the melody in all keys without pause, a different kind of thinking and practicing occurs. This skill is the type that is most directly related to playing one's musical ideas when improvising. It is, perhaps, the most valuable approach to keyboard related ear-training.

Transposition is one of the most useful and musically valuable skills a pianist can practice. The practice develops one's ear, and contributes to the understanding and managing of fingering problems that occur with unfamiliar patterns. Beside furthering the ability of pianists who apply the skill directly in their work (e.g., accompanists), the practice of transposition benefits pianists who improvise jazz. It is the essential technique for connecting the ear, mind, and hand, and the best kept secret for teaching instrumental jazz improvisation. Transposition combines using the ear,

knowledge of theory, technique, and fingering, and keyboard pitch relationships in a way that no other practice approach can offer. A few exercises are offered below.

Exercise #1

1. Play a chord, scale, or short phrase.
2. Play it a half-step higher or a half-step lower, or:
3. Sing it a half-step higher or a half-step lower, then play it.
4. Play the figure in other keys.

Exercise #2

1. Choose a piece that you know well.
2. Learn the left hand and right hand in all keys. You may do hands separately at first, but eventually play them together. You can use different voicings in the left hand (in other words, transpose the left hand harmonically, but don't worry about transposing the chord voicings in the original key exactly as you played them). Try to play the melody, however, exactly as you play it in the original key.

Consider the following:

1. Although recognizing intervals in the melody is important, try to *hear* the piece as you play it in the new key. This is your primary guide for the melody. Make sure you know the melody and chords well before attempting to transpose it.
2. Notice interval relationships (of one note to another or one group of notes to another group within the melody. You may not use all of the interval relationships that you notice, but there may be one or two crucial intervals that enable you to play the melody fluently in the new key.
3. Notice interval relationships between the melody and the chord that sounds. Again, you may not use all of the interval relationships that you notice, but there may be one or two crucial relationships that enable you to play the melody fluently in the new key.
4. Notice the relationship between successive chords. This would normally be the interval that the root moves. For example a C major seventh moving to an E minor seventh would produce a root movement *up a major third*.
5. Notice the relationship between each chord and the key of the piece. For example, you should be able to quickly grasp that an Eb major seventh is a chord on the bIII of C major, or III of C minor. Also notice temporary (tonicized) key centers within the piece. For example, if the bridge is in a different key, you should be aware of the new key and its relationship with the principal key of the piece.
6. Always keep your attention (even if it is only an background awareness) on the key that you are playing the piece in. For example, if the original key is G major, and you are transposing it to Bb major, you want to remind yourself, as you play, that you are in Bb. Additionally, if there are other important key areas that exist in the piece (such as a "B" section in Eb minor), you should also keep these in mind.