

The Exhale: 6-month Schedule July-December 2021 – EMBODIED PIANO TECHNIQUE,

SEMINAR ONE:

Introduction to Piano Somatics: A 6-month Study Group (to be preceded by a [gala free introductory session](#) in June)

Free Introductory Session (pay what you want Community Class, Sunday, June 20)

This session is open to pianists & piano teachers of all levels, instrumentalists and vocalists. The principles of *Embodied Performance* apply to other instruments and the voice in ways similar to their application at the keyboard. If you are a musician who loves Feldenkrais and is interested in acquiring more strategies on applying it in practice, this session is for you.

Topics to be covered:

- Initiating movements of the periphery from the core
 - Voice: lumbar spine and abdomen to vocal cords
 - Winds: lumbar spine and abdomen to lips
 - Strings: pelvis to bowing and fingering arms
 - Keyboards: the pelvic moving arch structure to the hand's moving arch structure
- Mapping physical gestures onto musical phrase shapes
- Discovering how movement patterns that are healthier are also more musical
- Developing ways of tricking the brain into letting go of holding patterns: we need structural integrity but that structure must always be in movement
 - Exaggerated movements to reset the movement template
 - Surprise the brain by *not* extending a pattern – then extending it unexpectedly
 - “Standing without standing”
 - Lying down to stand better

The structure of the session will be as follows:

- Short introductory talk
- Alan leads the group in an *Awareness Through Musical Movement* (ATMM) lesson exploring skeletal-structural organizations special to musical performance.
- In a series of spot-check lessons, random participants will be asked to play a phrase or two, then try out a Feldenkrais-style strategy that gives new insights into the neuromotor underpinnings of the playing action presented.
- Individual group members will be invited to work with Alan on specific problematical aspects of their playing – have your question ready!
- Closing discussion, Q & A

Session I (July 18)

The Relationship of Gesture to Sound: Healing the Inner Pianist by Aligning Musical Body and Musical Soul

It's a truism of musical performance that everything you do, sounds. Every aspect of your movement at your instrument has a profound effect on the musical result. We mostly rely on our early training and intuition to arrive at convincing pianistic artistry, but what if we could return our physical self to the spotlight, examine it under the microscope and hone it to yield greater musical riches. It's a difficult but eminently rewarding path of growth.

This first seminar will examine some fundamental assumptions about the hand's interaction with the key in the light of an intriguing metaphor: the hand as a mini-body that has legs (the fingers), a pelvis (the hand) and a torso (the forearm). When a Feldenkrais view of skeletal mechanics is

brought to this mini-body, the hand acquires a new freedom and incisiveness in its relation to the key and ultimately to the music.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *Awareness Through Piano Movement (ATPM)* lesson (a Feldenkrais lesson done at the piano, not on the floor): ***Floating the Arm, Collapsing the Finger to Grow it Again, Connecting Whole Body to Key***
- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

Session II (September 19)

Returning to Pianistic Infancy: What Can the Hand Learn Lying on its Belly?

Each one of us spent a year rolling about on the floor and crawling before we stood up and walked. Hundreds of body movements were learned and integrated – without them, standing and walking would be impossible. The pianist's hand is expected to stand and walk the first day – no wonder there is so much stiffness, so many injuries. What if that hand could undergo a pre-standing apprenticeship, so that pianistic standing, walking, running and leaping became easy and pleasurable?

This seminar lies the hand down – on a table or on the keys – not to relax it into inert deadness but to offer it a secure foundation from which it can learn to move anew: organically, naturally, sequentially. We explore various manipulations of the key where the finger, freed from carrying the arm's weight, can refine and enhance its sensitivity. Eventually the hand stands and plays, without losing the inner freedom and balance it developed while prone.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *ATPM* lesson: ***Mashing & Rolling the Hand On Key, Playing with Bird Beaks & Cat Scratches***
- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

Session III (October 17)

The Thumb: Pianistic Ugly Duckling or Radiant Swan?

The thumb constitutes a full 50% of the hand and maintains a unique relationship to the fingers: that of opposition. When pianists try to make the thumb similar to the fingers they disempower it, robbing it of its ability to empower the entire hand. The thumb needs to revel in its uniqueness, taking upon itself fully its position of functional ascendancy in the hand. Only then, when the thumb offers the fingers its full support, are they free to run like the wind and fly like a bird.

This first of two seminars on the thumb teaches it to stand alone. The series of exercises explores its unique structure and unique way of moving, focusing especially on the *thumb metacarpal bone*, which in many pianists remains relatively inert. It also relates the thumb back to the whole body, ensuring that the changes experienced during the lesson will be integrated and useable in the future.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *ATPM* lesson: ***Thumb Stands, Thumb Push-ups, Thumb Rotations, Thumb Slides – An Entire Regime of Thumb Calisthenics***
- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

Session IV (November 21)

Incorporating the Thumb into the Arches of the Hand: The Whole is Greater than the Thumb of the Parts

The thumb is an integral part of three of the four hand arches. Now that we've confirmed its structural integrity, we can begin to establish its relation to the whole: the fundamental role of thumb opposition in all of piano playing – continually growing and maintaining the structural arches of the hand and contributing to their overall moveability and potency.

This second of two seminars on the thumb relates it to the fingers, hand, wrist, arm & body. Exploring opposition, we discover how the thumb can actually carry the hand as if it were an elastic, cantilever structure, before exploring how a judicious dose of forearm rotation combined with thumb opposition serves to remove all awkwardness from scales & arpeggios.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *ATPM* lesson: ***Thumb Opposition: I Put and Do Not Put My Thumb Under (apologies to Heraclitus)***
- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

Session V (December 19)

From Standing to Walking: From “Stiff-Legged” to Supple Fingers

The finger is a complex set of levers. Pianists generally learn to curl the fingers well, that is, activating the finger's “ankle” and “knee,” but sometimes at the expense of the “hip joint.” When the metacarpal-phalangeal (MCP) joint, the top knuckle fails to activate fully, the hand is weakened and risks injury – the fallen keystone of the arch creates instant tension in the forearm tendons.

This seminar explores legato, the pianist's basic touch that establishes the fingers' secure, moving relationship to the key, allowing them stand up into their arch structure and to walk with potency and fluidity. We revert to a “one-boned finger,” a flattened digit that goes against much of piano orthodoxy, to establish the all-important “hip joint” as the hand's fundamental source of physical as well as sonic power. When the hand arches are healthy, the voice of the piano is rich and sultry, penetratingly expressive and touching.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *ATPM* lesson: ***Floating, Stilting, Teetering, Sinking & Clapping: Multiple Activities to Establish the Supremacy of the MCP Joint, the Hand's Hip Joint***

- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

Session VI (January 16)

From Walking to Running on Key – From a Solid to a Moving Arch: Scales & Arpeggios, a Few Practicalities

The hand's power is derived from its arch structures – but to play, these structures must be in constant movement. How to move from a static to a fluid state without losing structural integrity? It's tricky, but the design of the hand facilitates just that.

This seminar first has you walking “stiff-legged” on key but soon snapping thumb to finger vigorously and lightly to instill a sense of moving agility with no loss of stability. It's a tall order but when the structure and function of the entire hand structure is well-understood, it leads to greatly improved dexterity and expressivity in your playing.

Seminar Structure:

- 75-minute *ATPM* lesson: ***Relating to the Keys: Manipulating Them, Sauntering on Them, Running Through Them, Stretching Over Them***
- Two 40-minute individual lessons on repertoire, applying the seminar themes in performance.
- 25-minute discussion and close: question & answer round table

This concludes this first 6-month exploration of the hand as a mini-body, The Exhale's first seminar on *Embodied Piano Technique*. By now you should have established a sense of “skeletal security” in your hand, an awareness of the extent to which the bones transmit kinetic energy so much more effectively than the muscles. Yes, the muscles play their part, but elegantly, in a choreographed way, free from stress and strain. Every truly efficient movement is perceived as effortless.

We invite you to build on this solid technical foundation and hone your skills further by continuing this exploration of piano somatics in our next seminar, ***Embodied Piano Technique, Part II***, beginning in January 2022.