



Jenny Macmillan

**First Lessons:** A new series of articles from Jenny Macmillan

# Part One: Alberti Bass

An Alberti bass – such a simple concept – is a chord broken into its individual notes to add a smoothly flowing movement and/or rhythmic drive to a melody. Used extensively by the Venetian Domenico Alberti (1710–1740/46), this type of accompaniment was a hallmark of many classical composers including Haydn, Mozart, Clementi and Beethoven.

Just as a superb soloist requires an excellent accompanist who will practise their music thoroughly, a pianist needs to work carefully at their Alberti bass (usually in the left hand) to offer a musically-satisfying accompaniment to their melodies (usually in the right hand). Alberti basses occur in simple time such as in duple and quadruple and in triple time. They also appear in compound time, such as 6/8, when the Alberti is shaped as in triple time.

What sort of sounds do we expect from the four notes of an Alberti bass in quadruple time? The first answer is sounds that are varied – certainly not all four notes sounding the same. That would be monotonous and wouldn't enhance the melody. The Alberti accompaniment needs to give the pulse – it needs to sing out the first beat of each bar. That means the melody doesn't necessarily have to be strong on each first beat – it can have its own natural shape while the pulse is provided by the accompaniment.

Not surprisingly, the shaping of an Alberti bass reflects the pulse of a typical bar of quadruple time – strong-soft-medium-soft.



Different teachers will teach different ways of producing stronger and softer sounds. The way I like to play is by straightening the finger more, stretching it forwards (so it is pointing at its own reflection in the fallboard) for a strong sound (like taking a tennis racquet back further for a longer, stronger hit, or the leg back to kick a football further), and



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by keeping the finger much closer to the key (hardly raising it above the surface of the key) for a soft sound. The tricky finger is always the thumb (short and dumpy!) which usually, in an Alberti bass, is required to play softly. I find it helps to keep the thumb quite standing up – not lying flat – to play on the pad at the corner of the nail – in order to control the soft sound. And certainly I find it invaluable to stretch forwards with the middle finger (usually finger 2 or 3) for the third beat – this means the sound can be slightly stronger than the thumb (on weak beats 2 and 4) but also, more importantly, it means the hand is continually moving, which produces a smooth sound. Bring the finger down for the singing first beat (often finger 5), then point the thumb for a soft second beat, stretch in smoothly for the medium third beat, and point the thumb for a soft fourth beat (I like the second thumb to be played further in than the first thumb). And then we come back down for the strong first beat with finger 5.

Continually moving in and out while maintaining a supple wrist is a way to avoid any tension creeping in. Also a fluid movement will produce a fluid sound. Think of the four notes of an Alberti bass as being one unit – four syllables of one word such as *caterpillar* rather than four separate words such as *cat sat on mat*. Listen carefully for smoothly flowing musical sounds.

There are various ways of practising an Alberti bass. One is to play the first bass note with a deep sound, wait, then play the remainder of the broken chord softly and lightly, keeping the fingers close to the keys:



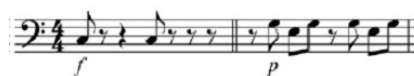
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Less intuitively, you could also practise waiting on any one of each of the four notes (the C, or the first G, the E, or the second G).

Another way is to play only the lowest (bass) notes of each broken chord with a deep sound; then play only the remainder of each chord very softly, listening carefully to the sounds you produce:

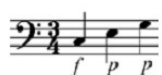


You can emphasise any one note of each of the four-note pattern:



These different ways of practising are helping to develop technical control of the notes, and also offer an opportunity to listen carefully to the variety of sounds.

Alberti basses also come in triple time. To give the pulse here, we need to think strong-soft-soft or strong-soft-ly.



As with the quadruple-time Alberti, the first note is the important one for the pulse, so stretch the finger and play strongly, then stay close to the keys to play a soft middle finger and reach in further with a soft pointed thumb. I find myself making small circles with my wrist, thus keeping it very supple.

Practise three-time Alberti in the same way as four-time Alberti – waiting on any one of the three notes, playing just the bass note or just the second and third notes, or accenting any one of the three notes.

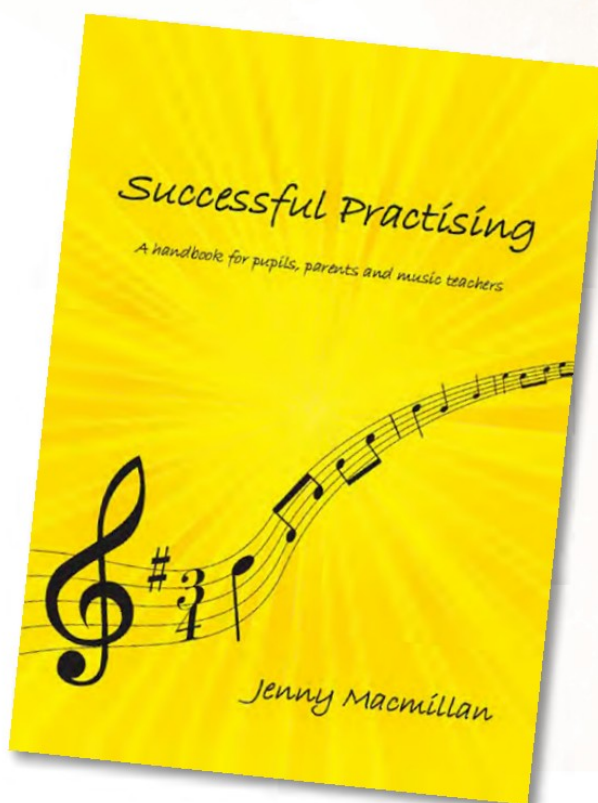
There are benefits to practising broken chords as solid chords. This can help when learning the notes, for forming the correct hand shapes and movements, and for memorising chord sequences. It's useful to seesaw back and forth between pairs of chords, for example the first chord to the second chord, and then the second chord to the third chord.

Practise Alberti basses at different speeds – but still listening carefully for the strong-soft-medium-soft or strong-soft-soft sounds. Practise them with eyes closed so you can feel and hear more clearly, and for security.

Always remember that a beautiful melody deserves a beautiful accompaniment. Give as much attention to your accompaniments as to your melodies. Then your melodies will sing through even more beautifully.

The next article will discuss balance between hands.

**You can watch an eight-minute video of Jenny demonstrating what she explains in this article on <https://youtu.be/PygYuVUuVz4>.**



You can read more of Jenny's ideas for practising in her book, *Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers*, available from [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk).

Jenny runs a Suzuki piano teacher training course, currently online, from her studio in Cambridge.

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