



# First lessons on balance between hands

by Jenny Macmillan

**M**usic comes alive through its variety – fast notes and slow notes, short sounds and long sounds, strong tones and soft tones, combining well shaped phrases (thinking horizontally) and well balanced sounds between the hands (listening vertically). Melodies need to be beautifully shaped and accompaniments carefully moulded (see my article in the January 2021 issue of PP on Alberti basses) but, also, importantly, the hands must be well balanced. Let the melody sing out, and let the accompaniment do just that – accompany, but not dominate, the melody.

In the early stages, it is enough for students to work on shaping each hand separately. But when they start to play with hands together, they embark on a journey of discovering two separate qualities of sound, one in each hand, and learn how to differentiate between melody and accompaniment.

I teach pupils to make small sounds by keeping the fingers close to the keys and to make strong sounds by stretching the finger and pinning the note down with a relaxed, rounded hand and finger. This idea can be demonstrated with a football metaphor: if one plans to kick a ball a long way, one takes the foot back further than if one wants simply to dribble it.

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“ Encourage students to listen from the bottom up rather than the top down.

Work on just the first note of a piece, playing the starting note in the RH strongly (if the melody is in the RH) and holding it down while playing the first note in the LH softly; then vice versa – play the first note in the LH softly followed by the RH strongly. Listen to the sounds. Repeat several times. Then play the first bar of the melody strongly, followed by the first bar of the accompaniment softly, and then the first bar HT. See example 1: *Lightly Row Folk Song*.



Focus on the RH. Set up a big singing RH. Play the first phrase, listening to the RH, watching the RH. Then play the first phrase again, this time HT, but still watching and listening to the RH. And vice versa – set up a soft LH, then add the RH. Repeat several times daily.

Exaggerate – play the LH too softly and the RH very strongly. Take that to extremes and mime the LH, first on its own, and then while playing a strong RH. Then play the LH allowing a few notes to sound very quietly, and again while playing the RH. Then aim for all the LH to sound very quietly while playing the RH strongly.

Practise each hand separately with eyes closed. Then play HT looking only at the RH (particularly important to focus on the hand that needs to sing out), but then also looking only at the LH. Play HT looking at the LH but listening to the RH, and vice versa. Play HT with eyes closed, listening only to the accompaniment or only to the melody. Continuing with hands separate practice is essential for learning to listen to the two different qualities of sound required from the two hands. All these suggestions should be played repeatedly.

One trick I find sometimes works miracles is to give the pupil a large heavy book to hold in one hand and a small light book in the other hand in order to feel the difference required in the sound. Or to ask them to imagine the accompanying arm is filled with helium.

Of course, sometimes the melody is in the LH, and so that will need careful practice as we are more used to projecting and listening to the RH. It's useful to review an old, easier piece with a LH melody to develop this skill, rather than working at it in a new piece. Direct the pupil to listen carefully to the melody, watching that hand rather than the accompaniment hand, practising in all the ways already suggested for a singing melody. See example 2: *Happy Farmer* by Schumann.

There may be two-part writing in one hand. For clarity, accuracy and shaping of each voice (melody), I would recommend practising the two voices in two separate

hands. Also try singing one melody and playing the other melody. For balance, I suggest practising in one hand very slowly, listening to the balance between the voices. See example 3: bars 8–9 of *Melody* by Schumann.



If there are more voices, practise each voice on its own, shaping each musically. Then play any two out of three (or four) voices, or any three out of four voices. Play one voice strongly and mime the others. Practise bringing out each voice in turn as a solo. See example 4: *Gavotte in G minor* by Bach.



Sometimes a melody needs to be brought out of a single line of music. In this case, first pick out just the melody, listen to it carefully, decide how to shape it. Then play just the non-melody notes very softly, or even miming them. And then put it all together, singing out the melody and miming or very softly playing the accompanying notes. See example 5: *Minuet 1* from *Partita No. 1 in B flat* by Bach.



Learning to balance the hands well can take many months. It's an ongoing project, not something that is mastered in a few days. Keep suggesting different ways for students to work on balance, and encourage them to repeat each way several times at every practice session. The bass is often the most important line after the melody. Encourage students to listen from the bottom up rather than the top down. In order to change the colour of a phrase, it is sometimes necessary to bring out the bottom or inner parts rather than the top line. Well balanced melodies, or melody and accompaniment, can transform the music and help bring out its character.

In my next article, I'll discuss first lessons on down-up technique.



Jenny Macmillan is a Suzuki piano teacher and teacher trainer. She teaches children in her studio in Cambridge and directs an online Suzuki piano teacher training course. Her short YouTube tutorials on studying 60 standard elementary piano pieces have been viewed thousands of times. You can read more of Jenny's ideas for practising in her book, *Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers*, which has become a valuable resource for many students and teachers. For more details, please visit [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk).

You can watch a 7-minute video of Jenny demonstrating what she explains in this article on <https://youtu.be/hoX1fTws7is>.