

First lessons on down-up technique

by Jenny Macmillan

Down-up technique is the term I use when the music calls for a strong sound followed immediately by a soft sound, as in slurs, broken octaves, um-cha-cha basses, repeated notes and syncopated rhythms. These are occasions when the weight of the arm can be used to help produce a good, strong, deep tone for one note or chord, followed by a light, floating arm for a soft sound.

Its simplest form is exemplified by playing **repeated notes** as in bars 1 and 3 in example 1.



Example 1: Allegro RH bars 1-4

Here we have 4 beats in a bar, with the RH crotchets to be played strong-soft-medium-soft. For the first strong sound I lift the arm high above the keyboard and allow it to drop, keeping the wrist level (not allowing the wrist to drop), 'taking' the note with the finger, keeping the wrist supple so as not to produce a harsh sound, and relaxing the arm immediately after playing the note. The next note is to sound soft, so I start to raise the wrist, keeping the fingertip near the key, and just as the finger is about to be lifted away from the key, it plays its note, so the finger is very light. There is no weight behind it – it's like a butterfly wing.

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The third beat is another down movement, though not lifting the arm as high as for the first beat, and therefore producing a medium sound rather than a strong one. The fourth beat is another up movement for a soft sound. The movements and sounds are the same for the four crotchets in bar 3.

Slurs are another obvious musical device where I teach this down-up movement. See the RH in bar 2 in example 2.



Example 2: Beethoven Sonata in G 1st mov RH bars 1–2

Two-note slurs need to sound strong-soft, so I drop the arm and then lift it from the wrist. Starting with finger 5 to play the top G in bar 2, drop the arm (keeping the wrist level and supple) and listen for a deep singing sound on the high G; hold the note whilst rolling the wrist forwards and upwards. Play the second note lightly just as the finger is about to come away from the keyboard, listening to the way you float off the end of the note – a rounded end, rather than cut off straight. Imagine pushing a ball under water for the first note, then the ball pushing the hand and wrist gently upwards before and as you play the second note. Hear the emphasis as in the word *Sunday*.

Broken octaves have the same down-up movement to produce the strong-soft sounds, as in the LH in example 3.



Example 3: Bach Minuet bars 1–2

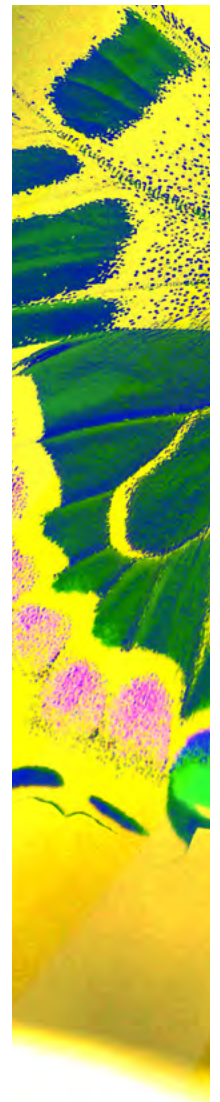
Circular movements are usually more successful at the piano than straight lines – natural rainbow shapes rather than taking the shortest distance between the keys. The arm comes down and relaxes onto the low first beat of the bar, keeping the wrist level – strong but supple. Keep the hand relaxed, rather than stretching it out, while the arm floats sideways, catches the high D softly with the thumb and continues floating up and round and down to the next low D. Listen carefully that this low D, on the second beat, is less strong than the D on the first beat, giving strong-soft-medium-soft for the 4 quavers in the bar. Practise circular leaps of two octaves, three octaves, even four octaves – then one octave seems easy!

Extending the broken octave technique takes us to **um-cha-cha basses**, as in the LH in example 4.



Example 4: Chopin Waltz in A min bars 1–4

It's important to keep the hand balanced while playing the low first beat bass note rather than tilting it into a karate chop, which may produce a harsh tone. I recommend practising just the bass notes – the first beat of each bar – listening to how one bass note relates to the next, keeping the hand level. Then practise just the chords on the second and third beats, keeping the fingers close to the keys and listening that all three notes of the chord sound significantly softer than the single bass note on the first beat of each bar. I find myself walking inwards for



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the repeated chord on the third beat. Then, when the low bass note is added, that walking in aids the circular movement of the arm – down-up-in.

Practise just a single soft chord followed by a deep low bass note: up-down. Again, keep the hand in a soft relaxed shape, rather than stretching it out, so there is more control to play a beautiful sound on the low note with finger 5. Or play a repeated pair of chords followed by the bass note. It's easier to play strongly after softly; more difficult is to play softly enough after a strong note. So also practise a bass note followed by a single very soft chord. Use the energy from the key rebounding to carry the arm up the octave as quickly as possible, forming the hand into the correct shape for the chord as it moves. You could also practise it split between the hands, with the RH playing the chords as softly as possible while the LH plays the strong bass notes – listen to the difference in the sounds.

I suggest that **syncopated rhythms** also can benefit from down-up technique or, rather, from up-down technique. See bars 2 and 4 in example 5.



Example 5: Beethoven Ecosse RH bars 1-4

In bar 2, the F#, although on the first beat of the bar, is less strong than the high E on the second quaver. An advantage of using the up-down technique here is that although the E does need to be emphasised, it's as much from a slight delay as from a stronger sound. So the circular movement of the arm from F# to E will naturally delay the playing of the E. A similar delayed emphasis is required on the A# in bar 4.

Music becomes more engaging when sounds are varied. Repeated notes, slurs, broken octaves, um-cha-cha basses and syncopated rhythms will all benefit from this down-up technique. The more we can produce a variety of sounds through natural movements, the more comfortable and convincing will be our interpretation of the music.



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.

You can watch a 10-minute video of Jenny demonstrating what she explains in this article on <https://youtu.be/WJvxM8SyQZ8>.