

## The Use of the Eyes At the Piano

Adam Cole

As pianists, we spend a great deal of time and energy thinking about our hands. They are the focus of our expressive power. Anything we do has to come through our hands to get to the piano. But because we spend so much time on our hands, we very often neglect the rest of ourselves. Any good pianist will tell you that this cannot be. In order for a pianist to use their hands effectively, even elegantly, he or she must have an understanding of what the whole body is doing.

The most neglected parts of the musician are the eyes. If we are using our eyes to read music while we play, then we are very aware, at least in one sense, of their connection to ourselves. But when we have no music in front of us, it is easy to discount the eyes and think of them as useless: If we have nothing to look at, we think the eyes have no part of our playing.

But if you imagine that you have no music in front of you, that you are playing a recital from memory, and someone has instructed you to play the entire concert with your eyes in a single spot, never allowing you to move them, then you can imagine what would happen. You would feel incredibly constricted. Your neck would freeze. Your shoulders would suffer from a loss of mobility. It would be very difficult for you to move your arms at all. The power in your hands would be limited to the strength of your wiggling fingers.

Very few people actually look at a single spot when they play. But it might be worthwhile to observe what you *are* doing with your eyes. Perhaps instead of a single spot, you have three or four places you look. This is better than one spot, but all it really does is allow you three or four positions for your body. Perhaps you look only at your fingers. If you are always looking down, how does that limit the possibilities in the rest of your body? Perhaps you never look at your fingers, but instead find a spot just beyond the piano. Perhaps you feel safe looking at this spot. Nevertheless, how many possibilities does it allow you in your movement?

The question really is not which spot is the best place to keep your eyes. The question is, when you do something with your eyes, what do you do with the rest of your body? At some point, it becomes obvious that how you use your eyes affects how you use your hands.

Great pianists are often seen looking all about them, sometimes at their hands, sometimes at the audience, and sometimes with eyes closed. Very often, what they do is seen as enhancing the feeling in the music. Usually their movements are seen as a kind of icing on the cake, an expressive power in their body to show what the music is doing. But is this really so? Are their movements truly so arbitrary? It is easy to tell when students are pretending to look expressive because their movements do not match the music they are playing. Liszt was the first pianist to turn the piano so that he presented his profile to the audience. He was also known for creating a certain effect by looking at the members of his audience. Is it merely a coincidence that one of the greatest pianists of all time should be remembered in part for what he looked at while he played?

The use of our eyes affects our movement, not only at the piano, but in every situation. As little children, we may desire to hold a certain thing because we see it. We want to get something, so we learn to reach. We want to see who is calling us, so we learn to turn our heads. From the very beginning, we form an integral connection between how we want to move and what we are doing with our eyes.

The connection is two-way. The eyes direct the movement, but they are also affected by it. We must constantly change our focus as we approach something. We need to know exactly how far to reach to get something, and this estimation changes as our eyes tell us we are getting nearer or farther away.

In playing the piano, we are stationary. We have no need or desire to move forwards, backwards, up or down. Everything we need is to our right and our left. This is why we often overlook our eyes when we play. As the need to move is not immediately apparent, so, too, the need for the use of our eyes is not apparent at first glance!

But if we recognize that how we move will affect the sound we can create, then we begin to understand how we might want to move further “into” the piano for some phrases, and “pull away” for others. If we recognize that our volume and control at the piano comes not so much from our fingers, but from the distribution of weight through our sitzbones, giving us the leverage to drop as much or as little of our weight on the keys as we require, then we begin to understand the need to go up a little, or to sink down into the bench.

So we can only play freely when we can move freely. Any part of us that is unable to move freely will act as a catching point, limiting our whole body from going

anywhere without it. And where do we freeze ourselves the most often? The eyes! Imagine how difficult it would be to express yourself if you had to play with your left pants-leg glued tightly to the bench! Many of us play with our eyes glued and never even realize.

The movement of the eyes is perhaps the most difficult for us to notice, partially because our use of the eyes is so primal, and partially because we have strong emotional attachment to our choices of eye-movement. In some cases, we constrict our eyes because of our fear. Very often you will find that pianists do not like to look to the right, where the audience invariably is. For those unfortunate to have had a scolding teacher who liked to sit on their left, you may find a person who prefers to simply look straight ahead. Often these people are able to compensate by looking farther away or nearer, or by closing their eyes. But any restriction will show up somewhere in the playing.

In some cases, we are constricted because of near-sightedness or far-sightedness. If you are an older player who has begun to require glasses to read music (or who has refused to wear them!) you may have noticed some unwanted difficulties in your playing that you were unable to account for. Glasses affect us in several ways. They change the physical relationship of the eye's focus to the thing focused upon; they interfere with peripheral vision; they cause a physical sensation along the ears and the bridge of the nose which can cause us to change our movement to avoid discomfort, or which can simply distract us from the rest of our body.

Even those of us who are not overly afraid or overly poor-sighted can still constrict our use of our eyes, solely because we have not thought about their use. In this

case, we simply do not take advantage of something which is as necessary and as helpful to our playing as our left hand.

None of these scenarios are reason to despair. Many pianists are able to achieve great things despite of these obstacles to their vision. Bruno Leonardo Gelber learned to play piano while lying in a bed, sick with polio! Surely a pair of glasses cannot permanently deter us from learning to use our eyes when we play.

The fact is that, unless they are damaged, the eyes can go anywhere. Most often, their restriction comes as a result of a choice that we have made without realizing it. The key to recovering our use of the eyes lies in becoming aware of the choice we have made, and deciding when and where to choose something else.

The following is a *Feldenkrais*® lesson designed to teach you something about how you use your eyes when you move. Read the lesson into a tape-recorder and follow the instructions. Do the movements slowly and gently. Never go as far as you can. Only do the movements within a range of ease and grace. Your attention is more important than your effort here. Please rest as often as you like.

Sit on the piano bench, facing a piano. Sit with your bottom on the front edge of the bench. Sit comfortably. Play a scale using both hands over three octaves. You may play the scale as slowly as you wish. If it is difficult using both hands, use the hand you play best with.

What are you doing with your eyes while you play the scale? Are you watching the keys? Are you keeping them fixed on any point while you play? Do you follow your hands left to right with your eyes? Do you lead your hands with your eyes? The question

is not what is the best thing to do. The question is, what do *you* do, right here, right now? That is the only question which you need to answer.

With the same sort of open curiosity, where you are more interested in what happens rather than if you did it right, notice where you play the scale most easily? Where is it most comfortable for you? Where can you play with the greatest grace or ease? Are you doing something different with your eyes in this place of ease than you are in the more difficult places?

Stop playing. Put your left hand on your left knee and your right hand on the bench somewhere behind you, where you can keep your hand comfortably. Bring the left knee forward a little bit, and then back. Make this little movement over such a small range that it is simple to do. You will notice that as your left knee comes forward, your left hip comes forward, too. Are you actually making this movement from the knee, or from the hip?

As you bring your hip and knee forward, what happens in your torso? Does it move at all? What happens when you bring your hip and knee back? What are you looking at right now? Are your eyes and head down, looking at the knees? Or are they looking straight ahead at the music stand?

Make this little movement with your hip and knee while looking forward. You may notice as your hip and knee come forward, your head and body turn a little to the right. Your eyes may follow the movement of your head and body and may move a little to the right as your hip and knee come forward. As the hip and knee go back, your body turns back to the front.

When your body turns to the right, what do your eyes look at? How far to the right of the music stand have they gone? Have they moved at all? Perhaps they are still looking straight ahead. Notice for yourself how far your eyes go to the right as your hip and knee make this little, gentle movement.

Notice that as you turn to the right, your body erects itself a little bit. Then as you return to the front, your body bends, and your head leans down a little. How can you tell that this is happening? Do you feel it, or do you see it as a change in what you are looking at? Make the movement several times, and try to answer this question.

The next time you turn, keep your eyes deliberately to the front. Your left knee and hip come forward, your body turns to the right, but your head and eyes remain facing front. You can describe this in another way: As your lower body moves to the right, your eyes and head must move a little to the left to keep looking front. Make this movement several times, quietly, slowly. Notice how it feels to move like this.

If you haven't rested yet, now is a good time. Sit back on the bench with your hands on your knees. While you rest, notice if there is a difference between your left side and your right side. Do the two sides feel the same? Are the hips the same height? Are the shoulders and hips parallel? What do you notice about what has changed since you began this lesson?

When you have had a few moments rest, come to the edge of the bench again and begin to make the movements you have already made, only this time do them on the other side. The right hand is on the right knee, the left hand on the bench somewhere behind you. The right knee moves forward, then back, over a small area. The hip is connected to the knee. The body and head turn a little to the left. Keep in mind the same

sorts of things as you make these movements. If you like, reread the lesson as you make the movements to remind yourself of what you might want to notice.

As you do the movement to the left side, notice again that your body erects itself as it turns to the left, and then bends a little as it turns back forward. Ask yourself the following question: “When do I breathe?” Is it when you straighten, or when you crouch? Neither is necessarily better than the other. What is important is that you become aware of which one you are doing.

Now do the variation of turning to the left with the head and eyes facing front, just as you did before. After a few of these movements, stop and rest. Now put both hands on both knees. Keep your head and eyes in the center and turn your body left and right. With your head and eyes constrained, how far do you turn easily? Once again, do not strain. Simply stop turning when you begin to want to push your limit, and notice the place this occurs.

Finally, take the body and the head together to the right a little, and to the left a little. Please do not go farther than is comfortable. Obviously if you needed to, you could turn all the way around. When you are turning to the left and to the right, what can you look at on your left and your right with no trouble? The corners of the music stand? The poster of Beethoven on the wall? Any answer is satisfactory.

Take the right knee and hip forward so that the body and head turn to the left. Only this time, do not come back to center. Remain facing a little to the left, some place where it is easy for you to remain there for a little while. You may place your left hand on the bench behind you to help. Facing a little to the left, bring your eyes in a smooth,

horizontal movement towards the right, so that they are looking at the center of the music stand. Then return them to the left. Make this movement several times.

The idea is to bring your eyes from left to right in a smooth arc. Avoid straining to do this. If the movement of the eyes isn't easy, then make a smaller or a slower movement. It's all right if you can't bring your eyes all the way back to the music stand. Just notice how far they go. However far you bring your eyes, notice if they are smooth at every point along the arc. Do they jump at any point? Do they skip spots? Can you see along the whole arc, or do your eyes grab at certain sights along the way?

Now take your head along with your eyes to face the music stand, then back to the left. The body remains still and facing a little to the left. Once again, notice if this movement is easy. Where is it easiest? Could you bring this ease to the entire arc? What are you doing with your breathing as you move your eyes? Does your breath stop when your eyes stop? Finally, bring your body along with the head and eyes to the front, and then back to the left. Do this a couple of times.

Bring your body back to center, and rest. As you did before, sit back a little on the piano bench and notice the difference between the way your left side feels from your right side. When you are satisfied, come back to the front of the bench. Place your left hand on your left knee and turn slowly to the right. Leave your body facing a little right, your right hand on the bench behind you. Move your eyes in an arc towards the music stand, then back. After a few movements, your head will go along with your eyes. All the while, you are paying attention to yourself and answering questions about what you do when you make the movement. Finally, the whole body turns with the head and eyes.

Now face front, with your hands on your knees and turn left and right. Check to see what you are doing with your breathing now. Is it different from before? Keep the eyes and the head facing front, now, and turn the body left and right. How far do you turn easily? Do you turn farther to one side than the other? Have you increased the area in which you are moving with ease?

Take your right hand behind you on the bench. Take the body to the right, but turn the head and eyes to the left as far as you like. Then bring both back to the center. Do this a few times. Now bring the right hand to the right knee, take the left hand back, and turn the body left while the head and eyes turn to the right, and then back to center. Do this several times.

At last, face front, and bring the hands to the knees, and turn the body, head and eyes to the right. How far do you turn now? Take your head, eyes and body to face front, then to the left. Has anything changed since the last time you did this movement? Are you turning farther with greater ease? What do you see to your right or to your left that you could not see before?

Sit facing front once more. Play the scale you played at the beginning of the lesson. Has anything changed in the way you touch the keys? Is the sound coming out of the piano now different from the sound you produced at the beginning? What have you chosen to do with your eyes to make this movement easier?

This lesson suggests a lot of powerful relationships between the eyes and the rest of the body. I hope that it has opened your eyes as well!

Adam Cole publishes a free monthly newsletter about *Feldenkrais* on [www.feldenkraisinfo.com](http://www.feldenkraisinfo.com). During his training, Adam wrote a novel entitled *The Myth of*

*Magic*, about a school of magicians who are fighting for their survival in a world that does not understand them. Visit [www.mythofmagic.com](http://www.mythofmagic.com) to read an excerpt from this Feldenkrais-influenced book. To learn more about Adam, hear his CD, read his poetry, and much more, visit [www.acole.net](http://www.acole.net).