

Lesson 19

Sounding Your Best

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David Dempster

Course	Read & Play Music
Book 1	Read and Play Simple Tunes
Part 3	Pitch + Time = Music
Lesson 19	Sounding Your Best

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LESSON 19:

SOUNDING YOUR BEST

Music is all about sound.

It's important to be making a good sound all the time as you're playing. In fact, that's one of the first things you notice when you hear a professional: the quality of his sound.

In this lesson, we'll cover three things that will help you make a good sound:

- sitting comfortably at the piano
- playing with curved fingers
- playing rather firmly

It's important to attend to all this at this point, because you will soon be done with **Book 1**. You will then be able to play tunes from the *Book 1 Tunes*, and I want you to sound really good so your friends and family are wowed!

MUSIC THEORY

BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Are you sitting comfortably?

In *Lesson 5*, we covered how to sit comfortably at the piano. I want to go over that again now that you're about to play lots of tunes.

It's important to be comfortable as you play the piano (or any instrument).

For one thing, you don't want to strain your body as you play. And for another, your playing will sound better if you are sitting comfortably.

Let's take a moment to make sure your seat is at the right height. If you are playing an electronic keyboard on a stand, you may also be able to adjust the height of your keyboard.

When you have your seat (and keyboard) at the correct height:

- your elbows should be a little higher than the keys of your keyboard
- your wrists should be straight, not bent up or down
- your hands should fall down on to the keyboard with your fingers curved



**Position seated at the piano:
elbows a little higher than the keyboard, wrists straight, fingers curved.**

Give that a try. Adjust the height of your seat (or keyboard) if you need to, so you have the result described above. Then play a tune, and see how it feels.

If you adjusted your seat (or keyboard) up or down, did it make any difference in the sound of your playing?

I find that students make a more positive, bright sound when they are playing with their seat at the correct height as described above.

Playing with curved fingers

If you watch a great pianist play, you will likely see that he has his fingers curved instead of straight.

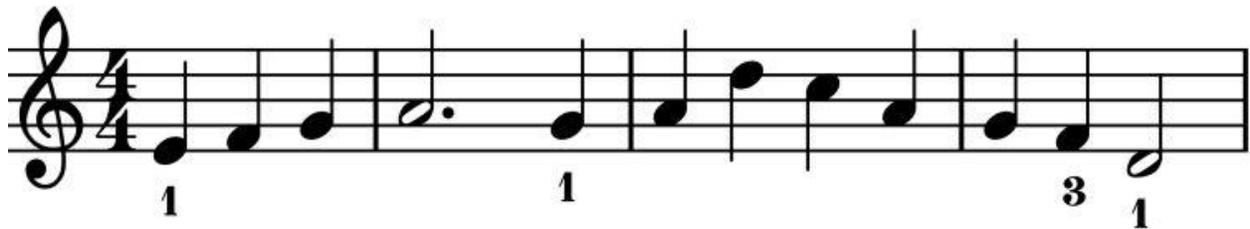
With your wrists straight and your fingers curved, there is a natural curve going all the way from the elbow to the tips of your fingers. You'll be able to play with more strength and better control, and your music will have a fuller sound.

Here's a picture of a famous pianist, showing how he's playing with curved fingers:



Now you try it. Do each step as you read it:

1. Get your seat (or keyboard) to the correct height, as described in the previous section.
2. Here's a tune you played in the last lesson. Play it now with your fingers *straight*, while counting aloud the beats. (I want you to feel what it's like playing the wrong way!)



3. Now play it with your fingers *curved*. (The right way to play.)

Do you feel the difference?

You may also hear a difference. I find my students' playing has more of a ringing, singing quality when they play with curved fingers.

If you like, you can go back and forth, playing the above tune first with straight fingers and then with curved fingers to compare them. I'm expecting you'll feel and hear the benefit of playing with curved fingers.

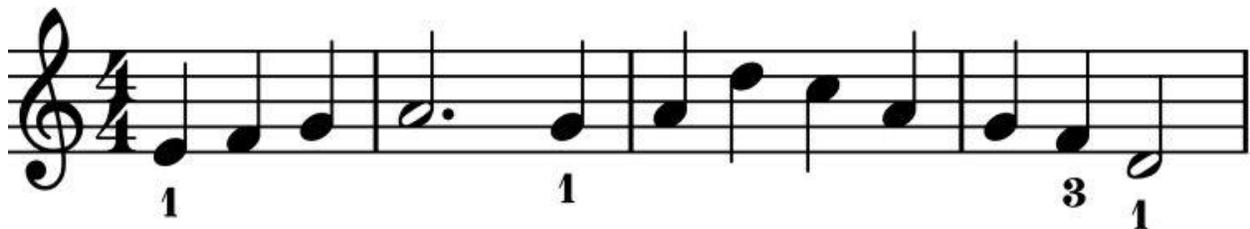
Playing rather firmly

When a professional pianist plays, he varies the way he pushes down the keys to create a variety of musical effects. He might play a dramatic piece of music with strong key strokes, and then he does a love song and presses the keys down more gently.

For now, as you are getting started, I want you to work at playing each note rather *firmly*. That means pushing the keys down with a definite, rather strong motion. You can experiment with other styles of playing later on as you gain experience.

Do this now:

1. Play this tune again, working at playing each note rather firmly. Keep your fingers curved, as you did in the previous section. Notice how the music sounds.



2. Now play the same tune, but this time play the notes with weak, feeble motions. How does that sound?
3. Finish by playing rather firmly again. Work at creating a ringing, singing quality.

PRACTICAL

BUILD YOUR SKILL

Exercise 1:

Get yourself sitting comfortably

1 Adjust the height of your seat

1. If you haven't already done so, **ADJUST** the height of your seat as described earlier in this lesson. When you have the height just right, your elbows should be a little higher than the keys of your keyboard. If you are playing an electronic keyboard, you may also be able to adjust the stand to move the keyboard higher or lower.

2 Make your wrists straight

1. **ADJUST** your wrists until they are straight, not bent up or down. This is very important. You'll be able to play better with your wrists straight. And this is also to avoid injuring your wrists by doing a repetitive activity (such as playing the piano or typing at a computer) with your wrists bent.

3 Curve your fingers

1. **CURVE** your fingers. Because your elbows are a little higher than the keyboard, your fingers should fall down to touch the keys. Here's that picture of the famous pianist again. See how his fingers are curved and fall down on to the keyboard:



4 Walk away

1. **WALK AWAY** from the keyboard, **COME BACK** and **SIT DOWN**, and **FORM YOUR HAND** into the shape described above: wrists straight, fingers curved and falling down on to the keyboard.
2. **RELAX** your arms, wrists, hands and fingers.
1. **REPEAT** until you are doing it consistently, and the position begins to feel natural.

Exercise 2: Play with curved fingers

1 Position your hand

1. **POSITION** your hand as in the previous exercise: wrist straight, fingers curved and falling down on to the keys.
2. **RELAX** your arms, wrists, hands and fingers.

2 Play

1. **PLAY** the music below, keeping your hand in that position and making sure you stay relaxed:



2. **REPEAT** as needed until you're doing it well and it begins to seem natural.

Exercise 3: Play rather firmly

1 Play

1. **PLAY** that music again, pressing down each key rather firmly to create a strong, positive sound. Here it is:



2. **REPEAT** until you are very satisfied with the firmness of your action on the keys and the quality of the sound you're making.

Tune 1: A Christmas carol, revisited

You played this tune in the last lesson.

Play it again now, focusing on the three points you learned in this lesson and practised in the three exercises above.

Jingle Bells

The musical score for 'Jingle Bells' is presented in four staves, all using a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), a quarter note (A4), a quarter note (G4), a quarter note (F4), a quarter note (E4), a quarter note (D4), and a half note (C4). The second staff consists of a continuous sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3. The third staff begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), a quarter note (A4), a quarter note (G4), a quarter note (F4), a quarter note (E4), a quarter note (D4), and a half note (C4). The fourth staff consists of a continuous sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, ending with a double bar line.

By the way ...

The tune ‘Jingle Bells’ has a unique claim. It was the first tune broadcast from outer space.

In 1965, astronauts aboard the American spacecraft Gemini 6 called Mission Control and pretended they had caught sight of Santa Claus flying down from the North Pole. Then they produced a tiny harmonica they had smuggled aboard, and played ‘Jingle Bells’.

What’s next?

Now that we’re combining pitch and time, reading and playing music becomes a bit of a challenge. In the next lesson, I’m going to give you an approach that will help you in learning to read and play new pieces of music.

Go on to your next lesson



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