

Ergonomics and Physical Wherewithal  
in Piano Tuning, by Nathan Jensen

Technical for March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
for Seattle PTG

As we all have different bodies, different approaches to piano tuning, different physical comfort levels and very different experiences, it should be pointed out that there can be no one-best-way to tune a piano ergonomically. There are, however, certain habits, certain ways of thinking, and a handful of tips and approaches that can be adopted to reduce the physical wear and tear on the body in the course of piano tuning.

First and foremost is change. They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result. Doing the same thing at the piano over and over again while expecting an ache or pain to go away on its own is itself a bit insane. Only some sort of change will alleviate and possibly rid one of the problem. And usually there is no one-thing to change, but rather a combination of things. As such, a holistic understanding of what has worked for others is in order.

I've arranged these 'changes' into three broad groups. Firstly, things we can do before beginning piano tuning. Secondly, things we can do at the piano while tuning. And thirdly, things we can do after piano tuning while feeling certain aches or pains. It could well be that some combination of things among these groups might improve one's well-being and thereby enhance their ability to tune. And it could be you have more to add. If so, add your ideas to the section or sections you best think they belong!

### **I. Preventative**

*These are things that can be done away from the piano, things that may well assist your ability to tune well before you even open up a piano.*

- Exercise
- Nutrition (tendonitisexpert.com)
- Good posture and wrist position at other keyboards (such as computers!)
- Change up one's schedule – Insert a repair between two tunings instead of doing the two tunings in a row, for instance.
- Alexander Technique

### **II. While Tuning**

*These are tips and suggestions that can be adopted while in the midst of tuning a piano.*

- Mindfulness
- Change tuning hammers, change approach to using tuning hammers.
- Posture – Back, wrists, etc.
- Key thumper
- Take a break, stretch
- Ambidextrous tuning as needed
- Rubber fingertips with cotton

### III. Reparative

*These are things that can be done after tuning, especially if you are experiencing aches and pains from the process.*

- Massage (including a massage gun)
- Rest, such as one day off or even a vacation or sabbatical
- Warm shower or bath
- Glucosamine, chondroitin
- Chiropractor
- Ibuprofen

### IV. References

- "The Trigger Point Therapy Workbook" by Clair Davies
- "The Frozen Shoulder Workbook" by Clair Davies
- "Pain Erasure" by Bonnie Pruden
- And also, the PTG Piano Technician's Blog from which this exchange was lifted:

This from Susan Kline:

As for tuning, I have a lot of muscle and tendon problems (fibromyalgia), but I can tune without injury through a variety of habits I've built up over the years. I use a long extension hammer with a tip which can fit the tuning pins well enough that the hammer can stay on one without falling, and for an upright I use a lot of slapping (to go sharp) or nudging and jerking (to go flat) all done out at the tip. Slow pull is very tiring and usually not the best for stability. Any motion I make to move the hammer I do quickly, and then completely relax my hand and arm. A lot of the tapping or slapping is done with a quick motion of the wrist. I attempt to have a large variety of positions instead of doing the same thing over and over again.

Susan:

I agree. Nudging, slapping, impacting, jerking techniques combined with the occasional light steady pull/push as needed are less body harming techniques, but they still give you good tactile assessments of pin flex, pin stability, pin resistance in the block, string position, and sting segment balance/equilibrium.

Richard West

Thanks, Richard. A tuning seminar put on by Jim Coleman, Sr. back when I first arrived in Oregon got me thinking about the tapping, later slapping and nudging idea. Not just easier on the body, but it also helps stability, since the pin has far less tendency to twist or flagpole. I'm really glad he made the trip up here. It was probably 1994 or so.