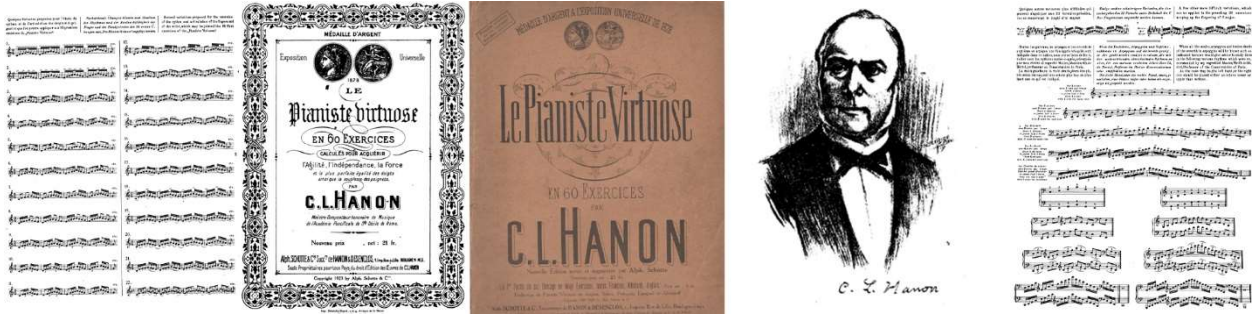


Why I Love Hanon



Talk to any pianist and they will have heard of Hanon and probably also have strong opinions either for or against the use of these 5 finger technical exercises. I'm a big fan of Hanon exercises. I use them myself and with my students, but I do use them in particular ways.

Who was Charles Hanon?

“Charles-Louis Hanon (2 July 1819 – 19 March 1900) was a French piano pedagogue and composer. He is best known for his work *The Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises*, which is still used today for modern piano teaching, but over the years the method has also faced criticisms.”

Excerpted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles-Louis_Hanon

Hanon Critiques

Some of the general criticisms of Hanon are that they are excessively boring for students and can actively harm a pianist if used without proper technique. Here's an example of the critique of Hanon exercises:

“I am not against piano exercises in general; I am only against the ways they are usually played. They are nearly always played totally unmusically and without the slightest sensitivity to sound. Piano students shut off their ears and drill their fingers, not realizing that they're doing almost irreparable damage to their techniques rather than acquiring technique. They may well acquire finger dexterity, but at the steep price of musicality. Such mechanical practicing defeats the very purpose of making music.”

“I have long hated Hanon exercises, as they are stripped of virtually all musical content. Save for scales and arpeggios in all keys, the exercises are all in C major. They are but empty finger patterns, virtually devoid of musical material.”

Excerpted from: <https://www.key-notes.com/blog/piano-exercises>

Hanon Enthusiasts

“His most famous work, *The Virtuoso Pianist* was first published in 1874 and is known



worldwide for its use amongst pianists of all levels, including virtuosos such as Sergei Rachmaninoff and Josef Lhévinne. Despite this, the work is clearly influenced by other composers, such as Aloys Schmitt who wrote an identical exercise to Hanon's first exercise more than fifty years prior. *The Virtuoso Pianist* contains five-finger exercises in various patterns, all the scales and arpeggios, as well as more challenging exercises in octaves and repeated notes. Hanon's work was so popular in the twentieth century that Dmitri Shostakovich even included varied excerpts of the patterns in his *Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Major*, Op. 102. Today, many pianists continue to study the work significantly, transposing the exercises into various keys."

Excerpted from: <https://pianoinspires.com/this-week-in-piano-history-march-19/>

How do I approach Hanon with my students?

Most of the people who critique Hanon as a mindless, potentially harmful, exercise will nevertheless talk about the importance of scales and arpeggios, whereas I tend to put Hanon in the same category as scales and arpeggios. If scales and arpeggios are practiced without thought to technique and meaning, then I believe they also can be boring and harmful. For me, the idea is to practice technical exercises while understanding the purpose of the exercise and consciously use it as a tool to practice effective technique.

I like to talk to my students about using of their technical exercises including scales, arpeggios, Hanon, and others as warmups at the piano. I compare these technical exercises to an athlete warming up at the track. Track athletes need to warm up their muscles before they start their regular practice through various stretches, slow jogs, etc. These warmups are not the bulk of the practice for the athlete, but they help the athlete to get ready in both body and mind for their practice. Also, the athlete doesn't substantially change their warmup before every practice, they have a routine which helps them prepare for their practice. I advise my students to think of their technical exercises as warmups to their piano practice that shouldn't take more than 5-15 minutes of their practice time.

How do I use Hanon with my students?

I don't use all the Hanon exercises. I typically use exercises 1 (scalar) and 5 (non-adjacent fingers) with beginning students and the longer exercises 21-24 with my intermediate and advanced students. I also believe, along with the critics, that simply playing through all the Hanon exercises is incredibly boring. Consequently, I recommend memorizing just a few of the exercises to achieve the desired technical results. Fortunately, the exercises are pretty repetitive so that makes them easier for students to remember.

I typically have my beginning students learn the two easier Hanon exercises in the key of C, but for my intermediate and advanced students, I will have them learn the longer



Hanon exercises in the key of D flat to take advantage of the topography of the piano and encourage more movement in and out of the keyboard as well as movement of the wrist.

Once my students have their Hanon exercises memorized, then we can start to use these exercises to help them master other techniques at the piano.

- **Proper Hand position and beginning arm and wrist movement** – Hanon is a great way to check proper hand position at the piano for my beginning students. We can look at the fifth finger and check if it is flat or playing on its side. We can talk about how the thumb is a heavy and shorter finger, so it needs to play on its side and we need to move the hand “in” to play thumb notes more easily.
- **Finger strength and wrist movement at the piano** - My beginning adult students often come to me without a lot of finger strength at the piano, so I use Hanon along with other exercises to help my adult students to develop finger strength and get them using their 4th and 5th fingers more consistently. We talk a lot about “moving with every note” at the piano to encourage movement the wrist to ensure support of the arm behind every finger. As an advanced piano student, I also find myself benefitting from use of Hanon to make sure that all my fingers are “warmed up” and strong before starting my personal practice. In addition, I discuss thumb accents and ways to make sure that the thumb is not playing too heavily.
- **Different note rhythms** – Hanon can be used to practice various dotted note rhythms, triplets, etc. to familiarize the student with these rhythms
- **Dynamics Practice** – Students can practice Hanon using a different dynamic at the start of every measure of the exercise. I typically have my students practice 4 different dynamics changing with each measure. They play a dynamic of “p” for one measure, “mp” for the next measure, “mf” next, then “f” and repeat. I find this dynamic exercise is great for having my students understand the relation between the different dynamics and how they should sound relative to each other. It is also is a great way to practice going from loud to suddenly soft and vice versa.
- **Finger agility and speed** – I was not personally blessed by the piano gods with innate speed or finger agility at the piano. However, I have found that Hanon offers a great way to practice increasing my finger speed at the piano. One of my favorite ways to use Hanon is to set a metronome at a particular tempo and play one measure with the beat set to the quarter note and then double the speed to



have one beat equal to a eighth note. I also find that working with Hanon in this way can help with a student's sense of note values, rhythm and tempo.

- **Hand Balance** – I find Hanon is great for working on hand balance at the piano. Students can try to play the Left Hand at a “p” dynamic and the Right Hand at a “mf” dynamic and then reverse every measure. Another good way to practice hand balance is to have the Left Hand “ghost” the keys (depress without a sound) while the Right Hand plays a louder dynamic and then reverse.
- **Hand Independence** – Another way to practice Hanon is with independence of touches between the hands. You can play the Left Hand staccato and the Right Hand legato and then reverse every measure.
- **Practice of different articulations** – I find Hanon a great way to practice different articulations at the piano. If you are working on a Baroque piece and want to practice a specific articulation appropriate for the era of the piece, the student can practice that technique while doing their Hanon warmup.

Additional Resources

Graham Fitch Videos –

Graham Fitch has great ideas on how to practice your Hanon with his videos on “Jail Breaking Hanon”

Introduction to Hanon:

<https://www.informance.biz/wp-login/4-jailbreaking-hanon/4-introduction>

Great instruction on how to move at the piano using Hanon exercise 1:

<https://www.informance.biz/wp-login/4-jailbreaking-hanon/890-exercise-no-1>

An excellent Hanon biography -

<https://www.hanon-online.com/the-man-behind-the-virtuoso-pianist-charles-louis-hanon-s-life-and-works-p1/>

