

Trill Exercise

by

Gavin Black

This is a description of a trill exercise. At least, I usually call it a trill exercise, since it is designed to help players to develop trills that are both incisive and controlled. However it is also very good at training the fingers to do any playing that has to be very fast and light. It is almost not a playing-based exercise, but rather a kind of meditation, or relaxation or breathing exercise. It is very efficient in achieving practical results for trill playing and other playing. Here's how it goes:

1) Choose any two fingers on the same hand. (For your first time getting used to the exercise they should probably be 4/3 or 3/2, in either hand, but certainly not include the thumb. Later on it is especially valuable to do it with 5/4, and any two fingers can be OK).

2) Choose two notes - at first they should be adjacent naturals, but later on it is valuable to include sharps/flats as well. It is important that the two notes feel similar to each other in voicing and not be too stiff. It is also important that they lie in the part of the keyboard where your arm and hand are naturally more-or-less straight when you are playing (that is, your wrist not cocked or twisted). This is near the top of the treble clef in the right hand and near the bottom of the bass clef in the left hand for most people, but it does vary a bit, so you may have to experiment. It is a good idea to position the fingers near the ends of the keys, and to let the thumb float in the air in front of the keyboard. (But see below for the use of this exercise with the thumb).

3) Once you have chosen the two notes and the two fingers, rest the two fingers on the notes and relax your hand, arm, neck, shoulders, etc. Sit in as comfortable a position as you possibly can, and take a deep but natural-feeling breath or two. When you feel completely comfortable, play one of the notes (either one) and hold it. Again wait for your fingers, hand, etc. to relax completely. If it seems to help to take a deep breath or two, do so. When you feel completely relaxed - and only then- then:

4) Play the other note and the original note in succession, as quickly and as lightly as you can: a quick, light two-note gesture. While you are playing these two notes your hand and wrist should feel more as if they are floating upwards than as if they are bearing down. This two-note gesture will of course leave you holding the same note that you played first, and it will have created at least a little bit of tension in your hand. Once again you should wait for your hand, arms etc., to get completely relaxed, with the help of a breath or two. Then - and only then - repeat the two-note gesture, and do this a few times in a row. It is crucial to wait each time for your fingers, hand, arm, shoulders, neck,

back, etc., to get completely relaxed. Thus it is *not* appropriate to develop a steady rhythm or beat in doing this exercise. If you do so, you are probably not paying enough attention to the relaxation.

5) After you have done this a few times with a particular pair of fingers and notes in one order, do it with the same fingers and notes in the opposite order. It is important to stop before it begins to feel "routine" and thus impossible to achieve a combination of concentration and relaxation. Usually it makes sense to do it about 4 to 6 times each (up/down and down/up) and then leave it. This of course varies from one person to another. It is better to do a little bit of this, often, than to do a lot of it in one sitting.

6) It is not necessary, or even a particularly good idea, to segue from this exercise directly into playing a trill or other fast passage. Rather, the point is to remember the feeling of the exercise when you next play such a trill or passage. If you do a little bit of this exercise most days, spreading it around to several pairs of fingers (not neglecting 5/4), and working with both hands an approximately equal amount, the feeling of it will spill over quite naturally into your playing.

7) The following "special cases" of the exercise require a bit of extra thought : the thumb; sharps and flats; non-adjacent fingers. In these cases, care has to be taken about hand position. It is necessary to make sure that the alignment of the fingers to the notes permits the hand to remain in (or constantly regain) a tension-free state. For example: the use of 2/1 on adjacent naturals is usually too awkward to be good for this exercise; however, the use of 2/1 or 3/1 on a natural and a sharp/flat is often very comfortable, and indeed a good thing to practice. (Thumb on the natural, obviously). The use of 4/2 on f# and d (right hand) is usually fine, but the use of 4/2 on a and f# (rh) is usually not. 3/2 on a natural and a sharp/flat is usually OK if 2 is on the natural, but not if 3 is on the natural. The point is to make sure that the wrist is not cocked or twisted outwards more than just a little bit (ideally not at all), that the fingers are not so curved that they don't have good leverage in pushing down the keys, and that it is possible to remain near the ends of the keys. (These are all normal considerations in harpsichord fingering, but this exercise only retains its purpose if the hands are very comfortable, whereas in playing repertoire, the complexity of the music often makes some compromise in comfortable fingering unavoidable).

(This exercise is a version – altered and adapted to harpsichord and organ – of an exercise taught to me by the late David Margeson in New Haven in the early 1980's)

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