

Dive or Swim: A Teaching Approach for Piano Tone

by Gloria Chu

In my exploration of how to teach tone production at the piano, I encountered the work of Otto Rudolph Ortmann (1889-1979). His research as a pianist and scientist were of particular help to me in explaining differences in tone quality to my students. Ortmann defined two basic tones, “percussive” and “non-percussive” depending on how a key is depressed. I call them “diving” and “swimming.”

The “diving” tone results when we place a vertical distance between the fingers and key prior to playing, followed by a rebound of the fingers off the keys.

What I refer to as the “swim” tone begins with the fingers resting on the keys, providing a gradual increase in key speed from top to bottom.

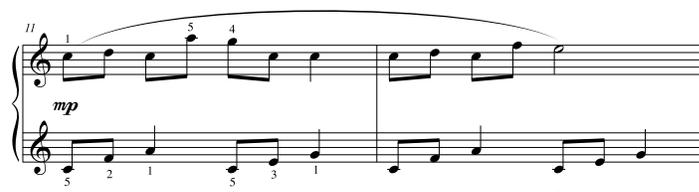
These two approaches added depth to my discussion with students. When working on *Funny Puppy* by Anne Crosby Gaudet there is much room to explore the “diving” tone:



This short staccato touch is the perfect opportunity to try different distances between the finger and piano key. I explore with students various heights of “diving” into the piano tone, discovering the ideal height of the diving board to create the desired tone. We can also experiment with the speed at which we “attack” the key, creating a louder percussive tone and an even more “biting” staccato touch.

This passage also demands control of balance between the hands, projecting the top melody over l.h. chords. Experimentation for students may include: can the right hand begin with a diving tone while the left hand starts with a swimming tone? The initial difference of height in each hand produces a faster key action in the right hand melody and a slower key action to the left hand accompaniment. This idea encourages different joint movements in the hand, introducing students to begin exploring large versus smaller muscle movement and its impact on piano tone. That leads towards exploration of colours in the “diving” and “swimming” tones, sowing the seed for control and coordination of future Chopin Nocturnes.

Part B of *Funny Puppy* sets the stage for legato “swimming” non-percussive tones. This passage invites students to explore how to produce a singing tone with the fingers initially resting on the keys.



Pedagogically, I notice how the left hand is grouped in chord patterns over a ‘C’ tonic pedal, leading into a discussion of harmonic colours of the F major and C major harmonies. One of my students associated the IV chord as the puppy yawning, then closing its mouth on the I chord. She discovered that variations in the weight of “swimming” tones will further enhance her musical communication. While still using non-

percussive technique this student showed off the “yawning” chord with more intensity.

Combined with imagination, experimenting with the height of “diving” and “swimming” tones can provide tools to help students achieve a vibrant and lively performance.

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Gloria Chu is a pedagogue, examiner, adjudicator, composer and performer. She has a Master of Arts in Piano Pedagogy, and teaches piano, violin and voice. Gloria has attended The Juilliard School, the Boston Conservatory Berklee, Shenandoah University, and the University of Ottawa. She is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Violin Pedagogy at the University of Chichester.

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