

A photograph of an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue jacket, sitting at a piano and playing. The piano is dark wood with sheet music on the stand. A lamp with a yellow and white patterned shade is positioned above the piano. The background is a wood-paneled wall with a framed picture of a person.

SEYMOUR BERNSTEIN'S
**7-DAY WARMUP
CHALLENGE**

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INTRODUCTION

We get it – learning new exercises isn't always the easiest thing to do, especially when just playing scales and arpeggios for the thousandth time feels so good! However, **repeating the same physical gestures over and over for months on end can lead to technical plateaus where your routine has little more to offer physically or mentally.** At a certain point, is there really more to be gained?

That's why we put together this 7-Day Warmup Challenge based on Seymour Bernstein's exclusive tonebase course "Keyboard Choreography," introducing you to new, engaging – even bizarre – warmups to help boost your technical development up a level. From forearm rotation in scales to choreographing octaves, **Bernstein's exercises offer tons of opportunities for technical gains!**

Each day next week, we challenge you to try implementing one of these warmups into your technical routine. Or if you don't currently have a routine, start a new one with these exercises! **If you devote 5-10 minutes each day to these warmups, we guarantee your technique will reap the benefits.** Use the handy checklist below to ensure you're on track to complete the challenge. Happy practicing!



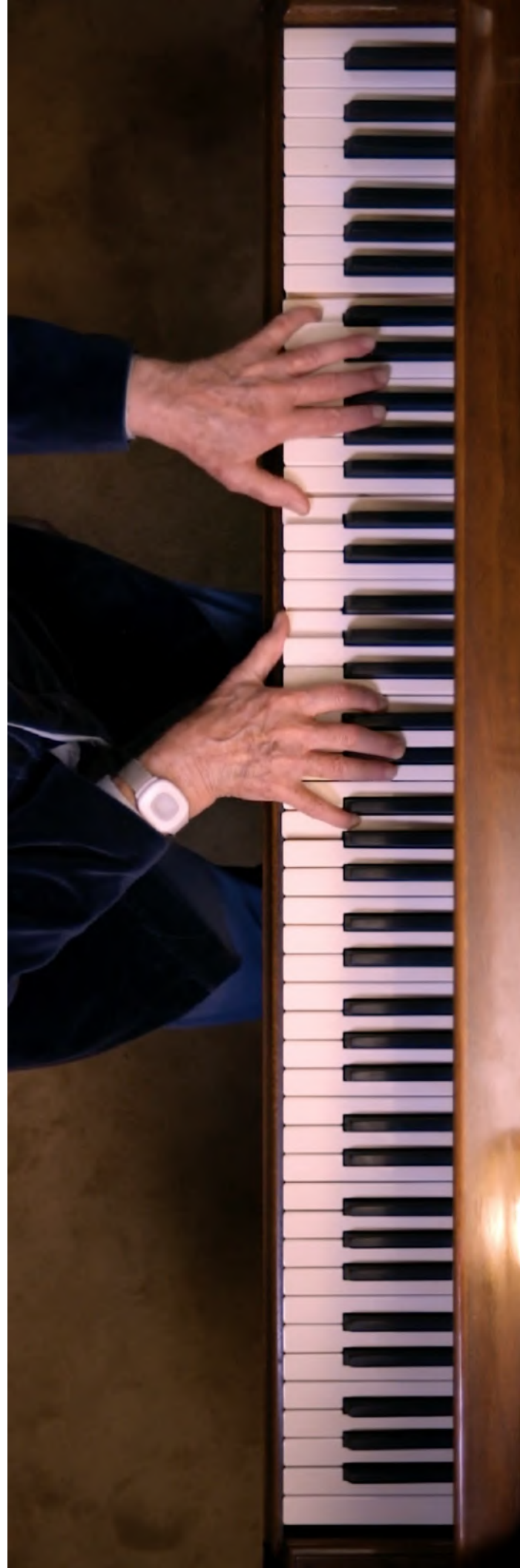
*Known around the world for his insights into life and music, celebrated pedagogue **Seymour Bernstein** was the subject of Ethan Hawke's 2015 documentary "Seymour: An Introduction."*



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EXERCISE CHECKLIST

- ☐ **Day 1:** Warming Up the Fingers
- ☐ **Day 2:** Supporting the 4th Finger
- ☐ **Day 3:** Forearm Rotation in Scales
- ☐ **Day 4:** Thumb Agility Exercise
- ☐ **Day 5:** “Neutral” Chord Releases
- ☐ **Day 6:** Forearm Rotation in Arpeggios
- ☐ **Day 7:** Choreographing Octaves



EXERCISE #1:

WARMING UP THE FINGERS



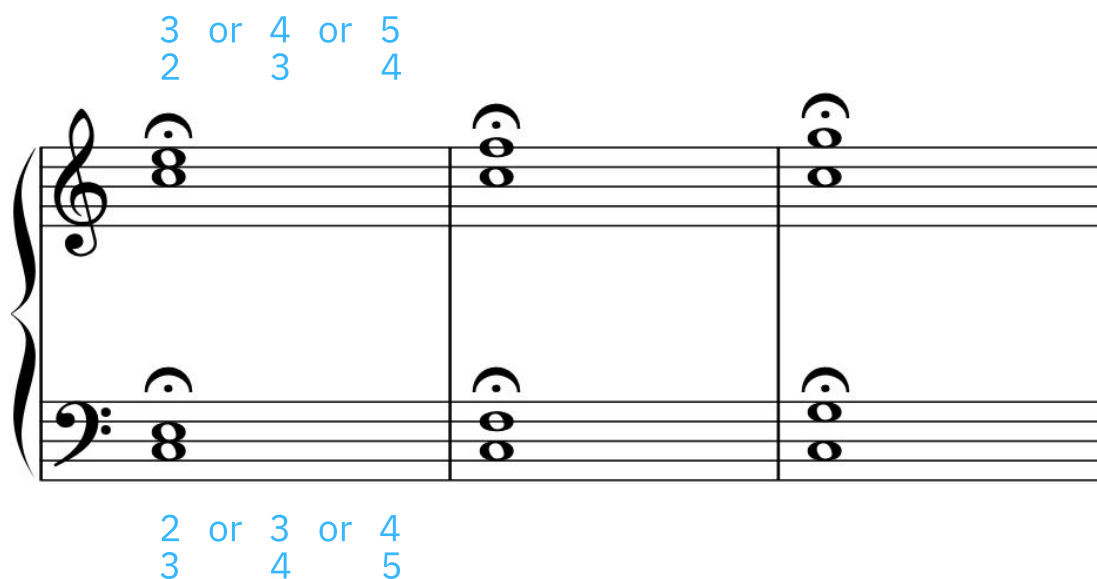
To start out, we're going to do a simple stretching exercise that Seymour Bernstein still uses to warm up, even at age 92. It's important to start with this exercise because warming up properly is a great way to avoid injury. Without warming up, you can accidentally overstrain your body, which in turn prevents you from expressing yourself musically.



DIRECTIONS

Start with your right hand, laying your second and third fingers flat on C and E while letting the other fingers hang down. Roll your hand and forearm clockwise and counterclockwise (your palm facing left and right, respectively).

Let the fingers stretch gently to avoid strain, and feel yourself “oiling the joint” of each finger at the bridge of the hand. Repeat this exercise in the left hand.



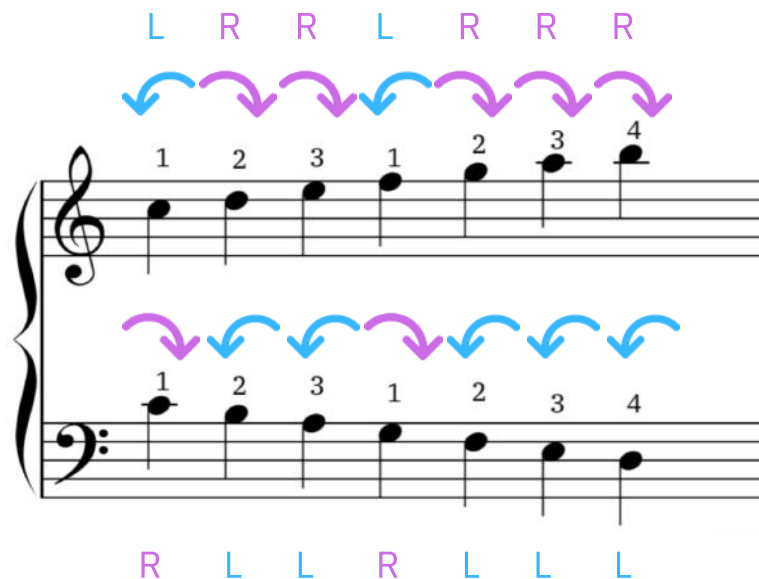
SEYMOUR'S TIPS

- Depending on the size of your hand, try stretching from C to F or G
- Try other combinations of neighboring fingers

EXERCISE #2: FOREARM ROTATION IN SCALES



What if playing scales were as easy as opening a door? Turns out, they have something in common: rotation. Bernstein says, “Pretend that you're putting a key in a door and turning the key – that's rotation.” Forearm rotation is the key to playing expressively and comfortably at the piano; use this exercise to help you add rotation to your technical toolkit!

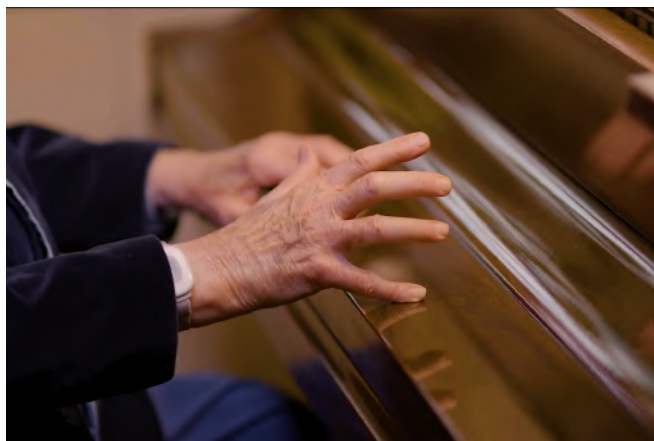


DIRECTIONS

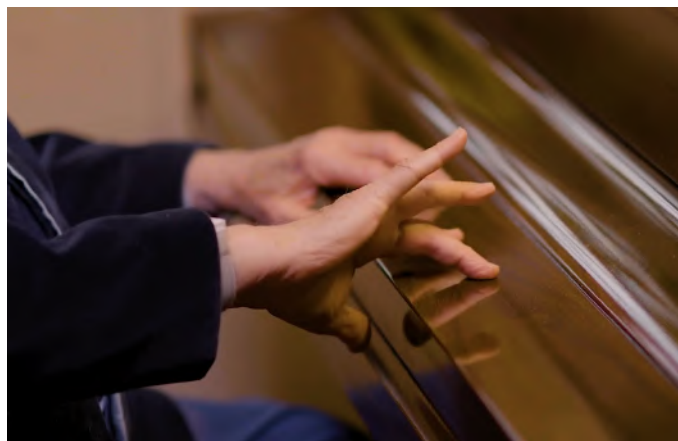
Let's see how it works: rotate your forearms between the two positions pictured on the previous page. It should feel like turning a key or doorknob.

How does this apply to piano playing? To play a note using rotation, you need two movements: **you first need a preparatory swing away from your destination, then a rotation to strike the desired note.** In the exercise on the previous page, curved arrows indicate the direction of this second rotation towards the key, showing you whether it's left or right (L or R).

Apply this movement to scale playing by remembering a simple rule: **make sure that every time you play your thumb, your forearm rotation arcs down toward the other hand.** The direction of the other rotations will depend on context – where you're coming from, where you're going to. Rotation directions for traditional scale fingering are on the previous page.



Preparatory swing for a **left rotation**



Preparatory swing for a **right rotation**



EXERCISE #3: SUPPORTING THE 4TH FINGER



Everyone loves an underdog! Although we often think of the fourth finger as weak, it has a lot of potential. Building on Exercise #2 “Forearm Rotation in Scales,” rotation is crucial for supplying your fourth finger with more strength and support than it has on its own. Use this highly targeted exercise to help reinforce your fourth finger and smooth out your scales.

RH

hold 3 while rotating into 4

hold 1 while rotating into 4

LH

hold 3 while rotating into 4

hold 1 while rotating into 4

DIRECTIONS

Play a one-octave C major scale with your right hand, ascending and descending, but hold the note right before the fourth finger plays. Using this preceding note as an anchor, repeatedly play the fourth finger using forearm rotation.

To do this effectively and comfortably, raise both the fourth finger and the neighboring fingers. This reduces strain while increasing power and coordination. See photo below, which shows the third finger used as an anchor in preparation to play the fourth finger (a preparatory swing for a **right rotation**). Repeat with your left hand.



SEYMOUR'S TIPS

- Be sure to vary the dynamic level: piano, mezzo piano, mezzo forte, forte
- Use crescendos and decrescendos to make your scale practice expressive



EXERCISE #4: THUMB AGILITY EXERCISE



Although the thumb isn't a weak finger, it can cause problems when tension builds up in its powerful palm muscle. To counteract this, develop your thumb agility through technical exercises that help balance the hand and refine your touch. Seymour Bernstein developed an exercise to do exactly that: by freeing up the joint of the thumb closest to the hand, you'll play with greater ease.



1 1 1 1 etc.

DIRECTIONS

Start with fingers 2, 3, and 4 on the three adjacent black keys and the pinky on the next nearest black key. With these fingers firmly grounded in the keybed (the key fully pressed down), play the intervening white keys with the thumb in various patterns.

For another variation, try repeating the exercise but using finger 2, and then eventually finger 3, to play short chromatic scales with the thumb.



SEYMOUR'S TIPS

- Rest the **pads** of the fingers on the black keys, not the **tips**
- Be sure to play all exercises with musical expression!
- Experiment with different dynamics and articulation

EXERCISE #5:

“NEUTRAL” CHORD RELEASES



Time to get the whole body involved! Chords are one of the glories of the piano, yet they can also be a source of frustration and restricted mobility. Try Seymour Bernstein’s chord release exercise to “put it in neutral” after playing a chord.

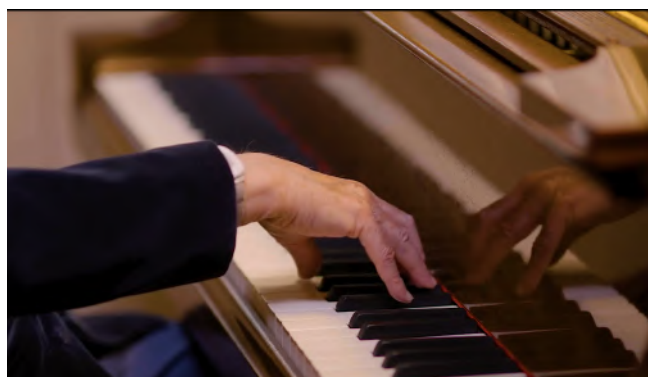
DIRECTIONS

It's a myth that you need to be completely relaxed while playing piano; even the act of breathing involves contracting muscles. Instead, consider which muscles should contract when you play, and when to release them. Besides the fingers, chords also require you to use your entire arm, back, and other muscles. The buttock area contains the center of strength in the body, and it contracts while you play, along with core muscles in your chest and abdomen. So how can we take advantage of this knowledge to play successions of rich, full chords?

DIRECTIONS

The exercise itself is deceptively simple. Play a chord (any chord) by starting with a relatively high wrist and dropping your weight into the keys, supported by a little bit of contraction in the fingers.

Now the most important part: as soon as you feel your fingers reach the keybed (the very bottom of the key), immediately release the tension. Your fingers are still resting at the bottom of the key, so you haven't totally let go of the chord, but by releasing your muscles you've "thrown it in neutral." This means the sound will resonate more freely, and you'll be physically prepared to move to the next chord swiftly and easily.



SEYMOUR'S TIPS

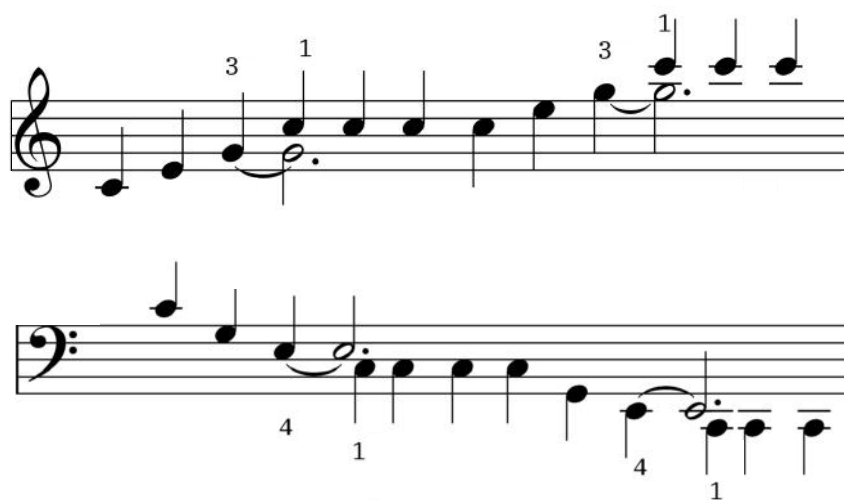
- Play hands separately and hands together, with chords of your choosing in the lower, middle, and upper registers of the piano.



EXERCISE #6: FOREARM ROTATION IN ARPEGGIOS



Forearm rotation is useful for more than just scales – they also give your arpeggios a lift! For this exercise, Seymour takes a simple C major arpeggio and demonstrates how you can use rotations to practice the tricky crossovers.



DIRECTIONS

As you play an ascending right hand C major arpeggio, hold the third finger on G and use it as the axis around which your thumb rotates. Bring the thumb under the third finger, and rotate the forearm back towards your body (a **left rotation**, preceded by a preparatory swing) as your thumb plays the C a fourth above G. Play the thumb like this repeatedly to internalize the feeling of rotation. This is an extension of the ideas in Exercise #2, “Forearm Rotation in Scales.”

If you have a small hand and cannot smoothly connect the fourth (G to C), simply move the hand laterally and gently to the C and don't worry about playing seamlessly legato. Once you pick up speed, the listener will not notice the small gap – as long as you avoid accents on either note.



SEYMOUR'S TIPS

- Avoid jutting the elbow out to the side



EXERCISE #7:

CHOREOGRAPHING OCTAVES



Congratulations – you made it to the last exercise! Octaves are a cornerstone of piano technique, but it’s easy to go astray: the octave stretch can cause pain, and repeated octaves cause tension to build up in the forearm. Seymour Bernstein devised a trick to solve both problems – using the fingers that aren’t playing!

DIRECTIONS

Since excess tension often arises from accidental contraction of neighboring muscles, it’s important to pay close attention all five fingers when playing octaves, not just the ones in use. When playing octaves with 1 and 5, there are three ways that pianists hold fingers 2, 3, and 4:

- All three fingers lightly pressed together
- Fingers 3 and 4 held together, with finger 2 separated
- Finger 2 curved downward

DIRECTIONS

Find the position of 2, 3, and 4 that best suits your own hand. Whatever you do, don't change the position of these fingers as you play, or your octaves will be sloppy.



SEYMOUR'S TIPS

- If your hands are small, holding the fingers together isn't the best option. Instead, spread out your fingers to maximize your handspan.
- For legato octaves, consider using finger 4 (or even 3), especially on black keys.

