The Chopin Etudes: Tips and Tricks for Smaller Hands

Jocelyn Swigger, DMA  Sunderman Conservatory, Gettysburg College
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General Principles:

1. Where you have to, make thoughtful changes with a clear conscience: fingerings, which hand, notes, note lengths, pedaling. Everybody does it—performers, editors, Chopin, everybody.

2. If you’re going to roll a chord, check its timing with the other hand, and then roll it like you mean it.

3. If you can’t hold on, let go. In most places, rotating works better than stretching.

4. Legato pedaling can help you create the illusion of a continuous line.

5. If it feels bad, it is bad. Find another way.

6. Experiment with fingering—does 2, 3 or 4 feel more comfortable for in-between notes? If you can reach an octave with 4, do try it—it often helps break the pattern and becomes easier than 5, though 5 might seem like the obvious first choice. Try sliding the same finger from black to adjacent white key. Try the thumb on a black key. Move hand positions around. Check different editions for fingering suggestions (some are included here).

7. For every situation at the piano, there exists some position for the arm and hand that will be more comfortable for you than any other. Find it and use it, even if it seems strange.

8. Practice moving from comfortable position to comfortable position; they may change every note. If a hand position is “wrong,” but feels and sounds good and lets you move freely to the next position, it’s right!

9. Return all hand positions to a neutral normal; don’t hold onto unnecessary tension.

10. If you can’t play the notes yet, learn the music. Simplify. Memorize the easy hand first. Analyze the harmonies. Play and sing the melody and bass without the hard stuff. Play arpeggios as chords. It’s always much easier to learn and play difficult technical passages when you have a clear musical intention behind them.

11. Don’t bite off more than you can chew. Play one measure well instead of the whole page badly; after you’ve learned the “game” of the piece, it will be easier to learn the rest.

12. Practice the rhythm of the gestures—notes are often grouped against the meter of the music.


14. Take breaks—every hour and every moment. Release tension whenever you stop to think.

15. If something is uncomfortable fast, play it slowly and comfortably, releasing your hand positions to a neutral normal; with time it may come to feel more comfortable.

16. Just because you couldn’t do it last week doesn’t mean you can’t do it today.
10/1 Experiment with 2, 3 and 4 for the in-between notes; practice slowly; rotate and let go of notes after you play them. Allow arms to open away from torso, and keep wrists and elbows free. This one is particularly challenging for small hands.

You can take the last note in LH in mm 8, 14, 16, 24, 34, 36, 45, 46, 56, 62, 66

You can change fingering in m22 to 4212

You can change fingering in m30 to 5213

You can change fingering in m31 to 2313

You can change fingering in m32 to 5213

You can change fingering in m64 to 5431 5431 4212 421.

Take last note in LH
**10/2** Practice 16ths without chords; take some chords in LH; experiment with fingerings.

![10/2 m2](image1)

Take final chord (or part of it) in LH in mm 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 17, 41

![10/2 m4](image2)

Take bottom RH notes in LH in m4 and similar

![10/2 m20](image3)

Leave out the bottom note in RH beat 3 in mm 18, 20 and 22

**10/3** If you can’t hold on, let go! Cheat with legato pedal, and try repeating a finger on successive notes. In the B section, rotate and pivot with the whole arm, and let go of notes after you play them.

![10/3 m3](image4)

Let go of notes you can’t reach, and connect them with legato pedaling

![10/3 m8](image5)

In m8 take the 1st A with the LH

![10/3 mm19-20](image6)

Use 5-5 to connect C# to B in RH in mm17-19. To make the grace notes in m. 20 easier, take the last B of the accompaniment pattern in m19 with the thumb.

In the sixths starting in m46, rotate and pivot, emphasizing the symmetrical motion in both arms. Find comfortable hand positions for each chord, and move from position to position.
10/4 Time rolls with the other hand; in big expanses, rotate with 8th note as pivot.

In m3 and similar, time LH rolls with RH; pivot RH on 8th notes and let thumb go

In m7 and similar, pivot LH on 8th notes and let pinky go

In mm 25-28 you can take quarter notes in LH

In mm 35-36, 39-40, and 41-44, rotate LH and let thumb go

If you can’t reach the chord in m45 and don’t want to roll it, you can take the top note in the RH (I prefer rolling, but this is a possibility)

If you can’t reach the chord in m48 and don’t want to roll it, take the top note in the RH

You can roll to the LH E in m75 or replace it with a C#; the C# is a more final resolution (because of the decisive landing on the tonic).

If you want to avoid the open arpeggios at the end of the piece, you can take the second C#s with the left hand (but be prepared to practice the coordination of the arms)
10/5 If you can’t hold on, let go. If you need to, use the pedal to sustain. Rotate for leaps rather than stretching. Experiment with fingering; use 5 as much as you want.

Instead of holding the LH Db in M4...

You can let it go

Be sure to accent the “held” note

Instead of stretching for the leaps in RH m16, m27, mm45-48 and LH 78-82, let go and rotate

In m28 use the thumb for the last note

The Henle edition says this in m66...

Play this instead
10/6 Find comfortable hand positions and practice changing from one to another; let go of notes you can’t hold; take some inner voices with RH.

Take inner notes in RH in mm 7, 15, 47, 48, 49

In mm18 and 20, hold the LH pinky if you can (you may have to go off the edge to do it), but make sure to let go of the thumb as soon as you play it.

In mm 23, 28, 38, 39 let go of the RH top note with a clear conscience.

In m26, take the last note with the LH.

Take Ebs in RH in mm50-52

10/7 Rotate LH. Practice sixteenths as eighth note chords, finding comfortable hand positions with 2 and 1 on the same note for each chord; remember that the best position is the one that feels good, sounds good and lets you move to the next one. Don’t take RH notes with the LH for this one.

In m24 and similar, having the RH take the LH top note is more trouble than it’s worth, because it breaks the flow of the RH movement.…

...It’s easier to roll the LH instead.

Some RH positions will be strange—try variations of the one-eared llama (stay flexible and release tension between every position when you do!)

Jocelyn Swigger    Sunderman Conservatory of Music, Gettysburg College   www.jocelynswigger.com   March 2014
10/8 Time rolls with other hand; support thumb; let go of thumb for big rotations; don’t worry about held notes.

In m26, roll the LH chord if you have to and sustain with the pedal, sacrificing the low C at the end of the measure. You can also roll the first chord in m49.

Let notes go with a clear conscience; if m48 in your edition has a whole note D...

...Play it Mikuli’s way, with a half note on the D

In m46 slide the RH thumb from the C# to the D

In mm54-60 let go and rotate both hands

In m84 LH treat the low F and A as half notes, and let them go to reach up to the A

10/9 Let 5 go (use the one-eared llama); experiment with 5, 4 and 3 for middle notes, but 4 almost always works best; don’t hold unnecessary tension in the hand between gestures; rotate the whole arm; take occasional notes in the RH. This is a good first etude to work on big expanses in the LH, because the RH is fairly easy.

Use the one-eared llama position in the LH from e.g. the F to the C, then let the pinky go and open the hand; 4 usually feels best for the middle note (although it might seem tempting to use 5 sometimes, mostly it’s not worth breaking the flow).

Try 5-5 fingering for LH in mm25-26.

Take notes in the RH in mm 8, 16, 52

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10/10 Let go of notes after you play them; rotate LH and allow it to fold; practice RH line alone.

In mm1-6, if you can reach a 1-4 octave, allow LH to fold into one-eared llama to hold the half note in the middle of the measure while playing 5 (if not, accent half note to give it heft).

You can leave out the low Ebs in mm46-48.

Don’t practice m61 and m68 till the rest of the piece feels comfortable. When you do, let go of the thumb, rotate, and don’t try to connect. Also, practice the gesture from the chord down to the next single note.

If your edition says this for the last chord...

Play it Mikuli’s way and leave out the RH thumb Ab

10/11 Don’t stretch—rotate. Let hands go after each roll. Experiment with fingering; do 2, 3, or 4 feel better on the middle notes? Try for 4 and 3 in some RH top notes, but if they don’t work, use 5 when you need to. Keep wrists, elbows and shoulders free.

Learn just the RH top melody first without the rolls, with whatever finger comes naturally, so that mm1-2 are:

Bb Eb Bb A Bb C Bb

F Bb A Bb C Bb

You can leave out the occasional note, as in m3. Paderewski and the German 1st edition give this:

But Henle takes out the low Bb in the RH second chord:
**10/12** Experiment with fingering (some suggestions follow).

- In mm15-16 use LH fingering 5153 1351
- In m.25 let LH go, and experiment with 3 or 4 on the low Bb
- At the beginning of m66 use LH 5153 21
- In mm27-28, use LH 5321 5312 1235 1231
- In mm32-33, use LH 21 3 over the barline.
- In m68, use LH 5153 1234 1231
- In m80 let middle C go if you need to

**25/1** Rotate and let go. Stay flexible, keeping wrists and elbows free. Experiment with 2, 3 and 4 (but not 5) for middle notes. Switch RH/LH where it helps.

- Let go of 5 and 1 after you play them. For particularly awkward places, rotate and allow hands to fold and unfold (one-eared llama)
- Switch LH/RH thumbs in mm 8, 28, 32, 33
- LH can be 1-5 on Ebs in mm32-34
25/2 Let LH go and rotate, allowing it to fold and unfold. Practice hands separately. Use legato pedaling (sparingly—his pedal marks are interesting).

Experiment with LH fingering: do 2, 3 or 4 feel better for the middle notes? Don’t use 5 for middle notes—it’s much easier to feel like the LH is one large, constantly folding and unfolding gesture per measure. Especially in mm 32–34, 3 and 4 on middle notes work well.

25/3 Rotate, let go and allow hands to close slightly in between gestures.

LH experiment with 3 and 4 for pivot notes (4 usually feels better). 5 doesn’t work.

At the end, you can take the low Cs with the LH.

25/4 Let short chords go under legato line. Use 4 for RH top note where you can, but use 5 if you need to.

Learn RH mm35–38 first: they’re the easiest to practice holding down the long notes while letting go of the short notes quickly.

If you can reach a 4-1 octave, changing from 4 to 5 on a single melody note works nicely

Use 4 for legato top notes where you can; if not, use 5.

Use legato pedal sparingly (e.g. catch the high C but not the low B in m.17)

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25/5 Find comfortable fingering for rolls; let go; rotate.

In m14, use 5212 for LH rolls

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Slide the RH thumb from D# to E in m11} \\
\end{align*} \]

In m14,

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{use 5212 for LH rolls} \\
\end{align*} \]

25/6 Rotate LH and find comfortable positions; experiment with RH fingering and sliding black keys to white keys.

In mm122-124, roll the LH as soon as you need to; leaving out the top E doesn’t work...

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{...because it resolves to a D# in m129} \\
\end{align*} \]

Find comfortable RH hand positions in mm98-124

25/7 This one has few issues for small hands; you can take some notes in the other hand, and let go of some held notes if necessary.

M24 LH can take G#, then RH can let go of high A#

Let go of the RH F# in the first beat of m30, and catch the high G# in the pedal to restrike the next chord (also in m44)

Jocelyn Swigger
Sunderman Conservatory of Music, Gettysburg College
25/8 Don’t stretch; practice moving between comfortable hand positions; play one line legato and let the other be disconnected; experiment with fingering in both hands

In the RH, slide from a black key to a white one with the same finger where you can (here, 4-4 on Eb to E). Let go of the low notes in the RH (e.g. in m1 let go of LH C in first chord). In the LH, experiment with fingerings for the low notes in the chords; only use 5 for the second chord of a group as a last resort.

25/9 Let long notes go if you need to. Let the RH eighth note go as you play the chord. Use 4 for LH chords when you can, but 5 if you need to. In the RH, use 4 for the high notes where you can: it changes the motion and makes the repetition easier. Keep wrists free!

25/10 Experiment with fingering; use 5 where you need to in both hands, but use 4 where you can to break up the pattern; fake legato in the B section with the pedal and arm; practice slowly till motions start feeling normal; practice thumbs alone, or just thumbs and inner voices.

In the B section, roll LH when you need to, and connect RH with legato pedaling, especially if you play the top line 5-5; let thumbs go

You can roll and take low C# in LH to facilitate trill in m51; if you can’t hold the LH A in m52 and 72, can let it go (but emphasize A to G# in RH)

Jocelyn Swigger Sunderman Conservatory of Music, Gettysburg College
25/11 Let go of notes; roll chords where you need to; take some notes with other hand; don’t be afraid to repeat a finger on the next note; practice gestures of 4 (not just 6) 16ths.

Let go of LH low chord and use 1-1 in m11

Use 5-5 in e.g. RH m50

Use 5-5 and roll chord in LH mm35, 36

If you have to, let go of low E in mm59-60; depending on the piano and the room, you may be able to hold it with the pedal for a climactic blur. It’s also worth trying to see if you can (gently!) stretch the LH from the E to the G, with almost the entire hand off the edge of the keyboard (don’t practice that stretch a lot—just try it a couple of times a day, releasing in between).

You can move the RH D in m88 up an 8ve:

Take G# in m62 with RH so LH ends with 31; in last chord of m64, take B in RH and G# in LH

Rotate LH in mm 89-91
25/12 Rotate; let go of notes after you play them; don’t hold quarters you can’t reach.
Keep elbows and wrists free.

Practice arpeggios as chords
to memorize harmonies/
melodies before playing as is

Nouvelle etude 1 Let hands soften and close; experiment with fingerings (below are some suggestions); allow the thumb on black keys.

Nouvelle etude 2 Connect the top line while letting lower RH voices go; experiment with using 3, 4 and 5 in RH; let go LH and move whole arm.
**Nouvelle etude 3** Experiment with 4 and 5 to connect melody notes; let lower RH voices go; change notes where you need to; time rolls with the other hand.

In m42, roll the 9th, then to avoid the tenth, change RH thumb in beat 2 from Eb to Gb and LH 2 from Gb to Eb

MM 49-52 and 58-59 have (at least) a couple of different solutions; one is to take low RH notes in the LH with a roll, so the high F can stay; that accents the inner voice in an interesting way...

...Or you can accent the high F (rolling if you need to) and let it go, playing the RH as written.

If you roll RH 9ths in m51 and mm59-62, time them with LH

If you like, you can use one solution for mm49-52 and another for 58-59.

You can e-mail me at jswigger@gettysburg.edu with questions.
make thoughtful changes

Germaine

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