

# Free to Play

5 Keys to Pain-Free, Expressive  
Piano Technique

*Build a technique that supports artistry—for life.*

by Karen Dandino

# 5 Secrets to Pain-Free Artistic Piano Playing

by Karen Dandino

---

## My Story

For as long as I can remember, I dreamed of being a concert pianist. I pictured myself on stage playing Rachmaninoff, soaking in the warmth and admiration of the audience. When I entered college, I was full of hope—ready to take on the world.

But then came **That Day**. I stood outside a practice room, listening to another pianist, and felt my dreams crumble. In that moment, I realized the painful truth: I hadn't been taught the technical and performance skills I needed to succeed on a classical stage.

I didn't just walk away from the piano—I ran. I felt betrayed by the very thing I had loved most.

Years later, God gently pulled me back. But this time, it wasn't about performance—it was about teaching. When I returned, I made a promise: I would give every student everything I had missed.

So began my new journey—one filled with study, mentorship, and dedication to becoming the best teacher I could be. I studied pedagogy, technique, and performance with incredible mentors and immersed myself in the craft of teaching music.

---

## About the Author

**Karen Dandino** is a piano instructor with over 30 years of teaching experience. She runs a respected private studio and is known for her diagnostic skill, natural approach to technique, and dynamic teaching style. Certified by the Colorado State Music Teachers Association, she studied piano pedagogy through Trinity College and completed intensive training with Dr. Yelena Balabanova. Her past coaches include Dr. Susan Cable and Dr. Janice Saffir.

---

# Embrace Your Journey to Mastery

At Ascension Piano Studio, I believe every pianist's path is unique—filled with growth, discovery, and joyful breakthroughs. I'm here to guide you through the challenges and help you turn technical obstacles into stepping stones.

Frustration with pain or tension at the piano is often a sign that something can—and should—be changed. With mindful practice and healthy technique, you can make real, lasting progress.

Practice isn't just repetition. It's about showing up with intention, patience, and kindness to yourself. When it's time to perform, whether for others or just for your own joy, you'll have the freedom and confidence to share your music fully.

Let's walk this journey together—because learning to play beautifully and pain-free is about more than technique. It's about discovering your voice through music.

---

## Secret 1: Proper Posture

Freedom at the piano starts with posture. You need to move freely across the keyboard without tension or imbalance.

### Here's how:

- Sit on the front half of the bench.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor with body weight evenly distributed between thighs and feet.
- Lean slightly forward from the hips—not the shoulders.
- Position yourself far enough from the keys so your elbows are slightly in front of your body.
- The forearm should form a straight line to the wrist.
- Bench height should allow the forearm to stay level, enabling smooth wrist rotation.

### Common Posture Mistakes:

- ✗ Sitting too far back—throws off balance.
- ✗ Sitting too close—limits arm movement, effects pedal control, and creates shin tension.

- ✗ Elbows too close—pretend you're holding a balloon under each arm.
  - ✗ Sitting too low—forces you to “reach up,” causing wrist strain.
- 

## Secret 2: Healthy Hand Position

A strong, pain-free hand begins with good structure—just like a sturdy house.

### What a Good Piano Hand Looks Like:

- ✓ Knuckles are lifted (not collapsed).
- ✓ The forearm is straight, with a gentle rise to the bridge.
- ✓ The elbow aligns with the pinky for balance and control.
- ✓ Thumb and index finger form a gentle “C” shape.
- ✓ Fingers 2–4 rest slightly inside the black keys for easy access.

### Training Exercise #1: The Bubble Hand

- Lightly wrap fingers around a stress ball (tennis-ball size).
  - Roll the hand forward, maintaining a gentle curve.
  - Repeat with both hands to build shape and flexibility.
- 

## Secret 3: Soft, Flexible Wrists

Tight wrists are one of the biggest causes of piano-related tension and pain. A soft wrist releases tension and allows the fingers to move freely and expressively.

### Exercise #2: Rolling Release

- Place your hand on a small ball on the keys.
- Gently roll the wrist up, letting the hand hang loosely.
- Roll back down into the keys, creating a “valley” with the wrist.

### Exercise #3: Follow-Through Drop

- Without the ball, keep the same hand shape.
  - Roll the wrist up.
  - Drop gently onto the keyboard with finger 3, letting the wrist follow through.
- 

## Secret 4: Take Regular Breaks

It's easy to get lost in the music, but pushing through fatigue can lead to injury.

### Smart Practice Strategy:

- 🕒 Schedule breaks before you feel tired.
  - 🧠 A clear mind and relaxed muscles help you return refreshed and focused.
  - 📝 Keep a notepad by the piano to jot down distractions and stay in the zone.
- 

## Secret 5: Focused, Intentional Practice

Quality matters far more than quantity. Mindless repetition leads to ingrained mistakes. Focused practice leads to artistry.

### What Is Perfect Practice?

- 🎯 Small, slow, intentional sections.
- 🎧 Focus on fingering, rhythm, dynamics, and technique.
- 🔄 Repeat until you can play it correctly four times in a row—**no mistakes**.

### Practice Plan:

1. Choose a short section (2–4 measures).
2. Practice each hand separately, slowly.
3. Once confident, combine hands in small chunks.
4. Gradually increase tempo using a metronome.

5. Avoid putting hands together too soon or in large sections.
  6. Watch for tension and adjust immediately.
- 

## Most Common Practice Mistakes:

- Hands together too soon
  - Practicing too fast
  - Ignoring fingering
  - No clear plan
- 

## Conclusion

Rachmaninoff said, *“Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music.”*

Playing piano should be a source of joy—not pain. When your body moves freely and your technique supports your artistry, the music flows naturally.

It took me years to find the answers, but now I play—and teach—with the freedom I once dreamed of. I want that for you, too.

If you're ready to learn more about pain-free piano and powerful practice habits, I'd love to talk with you.

---

## Let's Connect



**Ascension Piano Studio**



[Schedule a Conversation](#)



[ascensionpianostudio.com](https://ascensionpianostudio.com)

---

**Recommended Resources:**

- Mark, Thomas. *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body*. GIA Publications, 2003.
- Brown, William. *Menahem Pressler: Artistry in Piano Teaching*. Indiana University Press, 2009.