

## **How Not to Teach Perfect Posture**

*By Michèle Wheatley-Brown*

Have you ever said this? “Sit up straight! “Imagine a string attached to your head pulling you up to the ceiling.” “Engage your core.” “Really engage.” “Pull your shoulders back.” “Relax.” “Loosen up.” “Don’t slouch.” “Play with perfect posture!”

How to sit at the piano bench is fundamental to good technique and one of the first things we teach our students. Intuitively, we all know how we sit is key to playing with ease and fluidity, yet the language we use is often based on clichés and misconceptions.

As we begin a new year of piano teaching this September, I would like to offer some thoughts on ‘posture’ at the piano - what it is, the language we use when we talk about it and some ideas on how to teach it more effectively.

### **Balance, not Posture**

So how should we teach good “posture” at the piano? The answer is....we shouldn’t.

The word “posture” implies something that is static and rigid, and yet playing the piano is about movement and fluidity. When we say, “sit up straight”, what do we really mean? Can your back really be straight? Why would we want to sit up when we want the weight of the arm to go down? What the heck are we teaching our students really?

Over the past several years I have studied and become licensed as an Andover Educator. Andover Educators are an international group of music educators who emphasize the importance of understanding how the human body is designed to move to make music. By understanding the physiology of movement, musicians are able to find ease and freedom of movement that can be heard in their playing. As a teacher, I am enabled to use precise language to talk to my students about technique – not only the “how” of good technique, but also the “why”.

So, as an Andover Educator, I don’t talk to my students about posture. I talk to them about finding “a place of balance”. It is that sweet spot where they can move effortlessly in any direction - a place of equilibrium from which they have many choices of direction and quality of movement.

To teach sitting balance we need to understand how our body is designed to support itself when seated. As odd as it may sound, we need to understand the physiology of sitting. Understanding the physiology, the how and the why of sitting in balance will, in turn, facilitate freedom of movement, technique, and tone—the basis of wonderful music making.

## **Body Maps**

One of the key tools that Andover Educators use is the neurophysiology concept of a “body map”—our perception and experience of our body’s anatomy. A body map is not a metaphor, it is literally a map in our brains that tells us what our body looks like and how it all works. Body maps govern the quality of our movement. If our body maps are fuzzy, our movement will be fuzzy. If our body maps are accurate and adequate for the task at hand, our movement will be easier and more precise. Creating a clear picture in our minds of how our body looks and works when sitting will help us refine our movement and find a place of balance at the piano.

Don’t be intimidated by all this talk of physiology and anatomy. We don’t need to know all the names of the bones and muscles in the body—just a basic understanding can make a big difference in feeling how the body is designed to be in balance and move freely. Instead of thinking of this as an anatomy class, think of this as a simple operational manual for your body to help you move with the body’s design—rather than against it.

## **Mapping Sitting Balance**

So how do we sit in balance at the piano? We find those bony structures that deliver and support the body’s weight. Some of those bony structures are your spine, the relationship of your head and your spine, your hip joints, your pelvic rockers, and how your arms are suspended from your torso. When we learn to use these bony structures to deliver the support the body’s weight, muscles that have been working hard to keep you upright are now free to move to make music.

## **Mapping your Spine to Find Sitting Balance**

Our spine obviously plays the biggest role in weight delivery and support. Therefore, we need to have a clear map of our spine to find sitting balance. Our spine has four gentle curves - at the pelvis, lower spine, upper spine, and the neck. (Again, why do we say “Sit up straight”?) In anatomical terms, these curves are your sacrum, lumbar vertebrae, thoracic vertebrae, and cervical vertebrae. If we were to draw a line directly down through the center of our body, it would actually intersect with the forward facing spinal curves - at the neck and lower back. Have a look at the illustration of sitting balance below. The dotted line represents the path of weight delivery—notice the centrality of the curve at the neck (cervical vertebrae) and lower back (lumbar vertebrae).

We often map our spine as being at the very back of our body and sit as if all our weight is in front of the spine. If we start feeling weight delivery and support down the middle of our body we can begin to feel comfortably supported and move more freely. Also, we need to map the spine’s cushiony discs. Spongy discs at the front of the spine enable fluid movement while supporting and delivering our weight to the fixed surface of the piano bench. And finally, it is important to realize that when we are sitting on the bench the heaviest structure the spine supports is, of course, our head.

### **Head/spine relationship**

An average human head weighs between 7 and 12 pounds. The body's skeletal structure has a wonderful design to support and deliver this weight onto the spine. The place where the head meets the spine is smack dab at the mid-point of our skulls— front to back, side to side— almost right between our ears. We call that joint between the base of our skull and our top vertebra of our spine the atlanto-occipital joint. Otherwise known as the A-O joint. Most people have a map of their heads meeting their spines somewhere in the back of their necks level with the chin. This mapping creates scrunching and a 'turtle look'. By properly mapping how our head is balanced on our spine we can release a lot of tension, which in turn is transmitted into our shoulder complex and, again, will impact movement at the piano. Once you are aware of this mapping error, you begin to notice how many turtles play the piano!

### **Hip Joints**

In the illustration below notice how the hip joints are directly above the lowest part of the pelvis. If we have a correct map of our hips we realize that we can actually move quite a bit from the hip joints while seated. Knowing that we don't 'sit' on our hip joints can help us find a lot of freedom of movement—to move forward and backward and to help shift our weight to different angles when playing in extreme registers. I find that students often try to move from a fictional "waist" that they map somewhere far higher up in the body. A waist is not an anatomical joint - it is a fashion design term. That being said, today's low-slung pants are almost perfectly aligned with the hip joints!

### **Finding your Rockers**

The weight of the body's upper torso is delivered through the cushiony discs of the spine then out through the sacrum (wedge shaped bone of the spine) and pelvic bones to the "rockers", or "sitting bones." These are the boney blades that swoop down at the lowest point of the pelvic bones. The rockers form a tripod shape, thus giving you great stability as well as mobility because of their curved 'rocker' shape. To find your rockers, scoot your hands underneath your bum and rock back and forth. Be aware where you are feeling the greatest weight delivered to the bench. Now have a good look at the illustrations below and notice how the rockers (a.k.a. sitting bones) direct the weight of the body into the bench.

### **Arms**

A major section of the Andover curriculum is an exploration of the whole arm structure. It is always the most fascinating section for pianists and really is a topic unto itself. For now, just note how the word 'posture' can trigger a 'down and back' position of the shoulders and create a lot of muscular holding in the upper arms. Yet, when we speak in

terms of ‘balance’, we can begin to sense how the spine can provide a lively support for the arms— a wonderful condition for playing with ease and freedom at the piano.

### **Teaching Tools for Balance**

Telling our students to “Sit up straight!” or “Don’t slouch!” or “Play with perfect posture!”, may seem much simpler than exploring the places of balance. However, in my experience, exploring balance is worth all the time it takes. Rather than falling back into the “do this” way of teaching so many of us grew up with, teaching sitting balance at the bench opens many exciting doors. It can be an opportunity to set a new tone for teaching—one of guided awareness, inquiry, exploration and experimentation. With these tools, students begin to be more attuned to their bodies when they play the piano. They learn to listen to those signals their body is sending so that they can make choices about the quality of movement they need to play the piano with freedom, ease...and joy.

#### ***Awareness***

- One of the most important things we can do to teach sitting balance is to draw our students’ awareness to how their bodies feel when they are playing the piano. We can do this by asking questions: Where do they feel they are ‘holding’ on to muscles? Where is most of the weight being directed to the bench? Are they gripping with their legs?
- Ask questions about their body maps. Remember, this is not a test—it is just to find out their current ideas about their body and compare that with reality. A sense of humour goes a long way to getting the ideas flowing.
- Show students illustrations of the spine and sitting balance to help build a clearer body map of what we look like when we are sitting in balance. I keep my illustration and anatomical models (my skeleton Mr. Slim) close to my piano as a reminder to my students and myself.

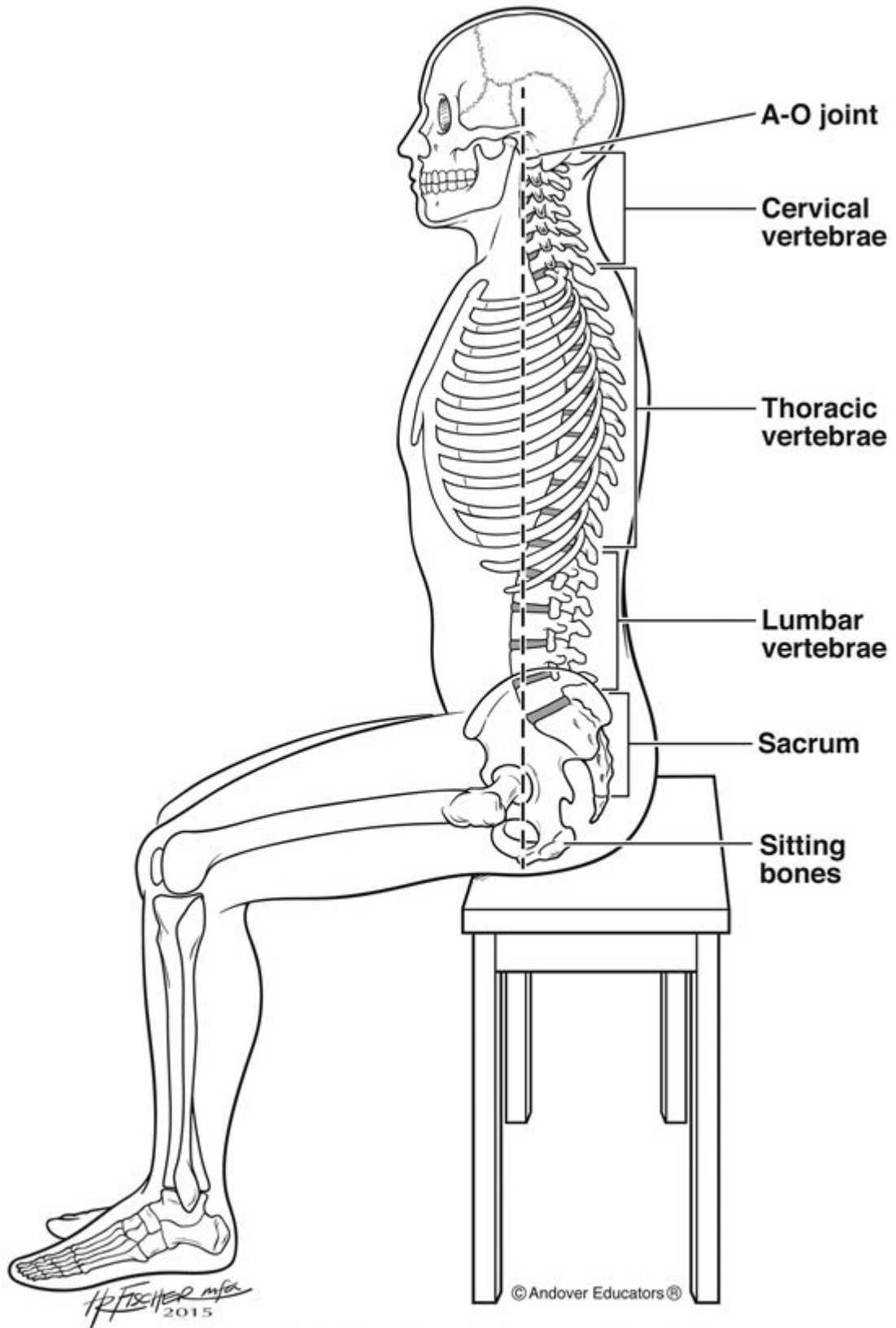
#### ***Exploration and Experimentation***

- Explore the extremes of perfect posture and relaxation. Then ask students to find that middle ground of balance. Experiment with how these places affect playing.
- Have students explore various spatial relationships to the piano. Close, far away, high, low. Ideally, that relationship will be one that allows for the best mechanical advantage with the tip of the elbow aligning with the third knuckle when the fingers are resting on the keys. The upper arm and forearm should form a 90-degree angle with the forearm parallel to the floor. Experiment to find that place where the energy of the arm drops easily into the keys with the help of gravity.
- Bring a sense of curiosity to the exploration of sitting balance. The more we can pique our students’ interest, the more we can truly direct their experiences. A

sense of curiosity can spark a love of learning that transforms practice and growth as musicians.

One final thought: As with all things in life, we seek balance. Balance in our life-work relationships, balance in our bank accounts, balance in our diets. Balance gives us a sense of well-being. It gives us a healthy outlook on life. Here's to finding balance on the bench.

*If you would like to learn more about this topic there are many wonderful resources including Thomas Mark's book 'What Every Pianist Needs to Know about the Body', [www.bodymap.org](http://www.bodymap.org) and [mindbodymusic.ca](http://mindbodymusic.ca)*



**Sitting in Balance Upright**

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