

POSITION-CHANGE NOTES

It may take a few weeks to become comfortable recognizing position-change notes.

But with consistent practice, elbow motion will begin to feel intuitive. Over time, even during sight-reading, your elbow will naturally shift to new positions at the right moments—without conscious analysis. The movement will simply follow the music.

Recognizing Notes That Mark a Position Shift

Begin by circling the downbeats in your score. These will serve as your potential points for elbow-led position changes.

Use the time signature to guide your choices.

The bottom number tells you which note value receives one beat: 

Circle each beat accordingly:

- In 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/4, one beat = a quarter note → circle every quarter note.
- In 3/8, 6/8, 9/8, 12/8, one beat = an eighth note → circle each eighth note.

This downbeat-based pattern can be particularly helpful when working through long trills, broken octaves, tremolos, or repeated notes. It gives your elbow a clear rhythmic anchor, allowing for more grounded, tension-free movement.

Avoid circling upbeats – the 3rd note in a compound time, or even notes in a simple time – as moving the elbow on these lighter beats tends to feel unstable and rushed.



Adjust Your Markings as You Play

Once all potential beats are marked, play through the piece—one hand at a time—to refine your choices.

Much depends on your individual hand size and how your elbow naturally supports your wrist.

Pay close attention to the following:

- Where does it help the hand stay in a closed, natural position?
- Which markings feel awkward or unnecessary once played?

Let your physical experience guide any adjustments.

How to Practice These Motions Effectively

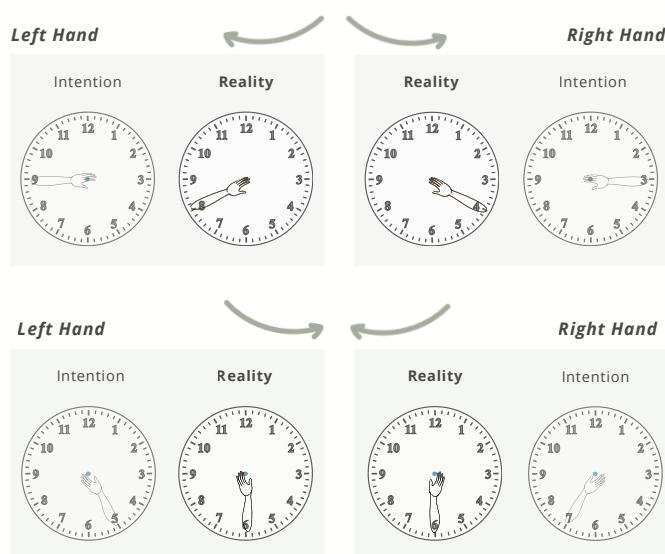
- At a slow tempo, release each circled note with a light, non-legato touch.
- This release is essential: it frees the elbow to move fully and naturally, without creating stretch or tension in the hand.
- Keep your fingertips in light contact with the key surface as the elbow moves. This keeps the motion connected, smooth, and grounded.

When you arrive at the circled notes, observe your forearm and hand alignment. They should form a straight line—like the hand of a clock. To create a feeling of broad, flowing motion, set a mental intention to reach farther than you actually do.

Here is your reminder:

- Moving outward: aim mentally for 3 o'clock (RH) or 9 o'clock (LH), while physically reaching closer to 4 and 8 o'clock.
- Moving inward: aim for 7 (RH) and 5 (LH), while physically landing around 6 o'clock with both hands.

This mental-physical balance prevents awkward angles, keeps the hand relaxed, and allows motion to stay open and natural.



As a reinforcement, try saying the directional numbers out loud while playing: for example, “3, 7, 7, 3” for the right hand. This simple habit can increase awareness, clarity, and intention in your movement. To help your hands remain relaxed, try speaking the numbers aloud in a soft, gentle, almost weightless voice. This outward softness will influence your internal state—and in turn, your hands will stay in that same relaxed condition.

WORKING WITH THE SCORE

When to Erase, Keep or Add Circles in the Score

Remove circles when you're playing within the same hand position and no shift is needed.

If elbow motion begins to feel forced or excessive, especially in faster passages or in compact hand positions, it may be a sign that a position change isn't necessary. In such cases, elbow movement can lead to awkward or inefficient motion.

Keep circles only when a true position change occurs. This typically happens in two key situations: when the hand stretches beyond its natural shape, and when the thumb passes under.

1. When the Hand Stretches Beyond Its Natural Shape

If your hand begins to open beyond its natural, relaxed form—the way it hangs when you're walking—that's a clear signal to shift to a new position.

Even though a sixth, seventh, or octave might not feel like a big stretch at first, holding it for too long without returning to a neutral shape can lead to subtle but accumulating tension.

When this happens, a position change is needed—keep the circle.



2. When the Thumb Passes Under

Each time you pass the thumb under, you're entering a new alignment in the hand, which marks the beginning of a new position. Treat this as a position shift and keep the circle in place.



Adding Circles for Leaps and Large Stretches

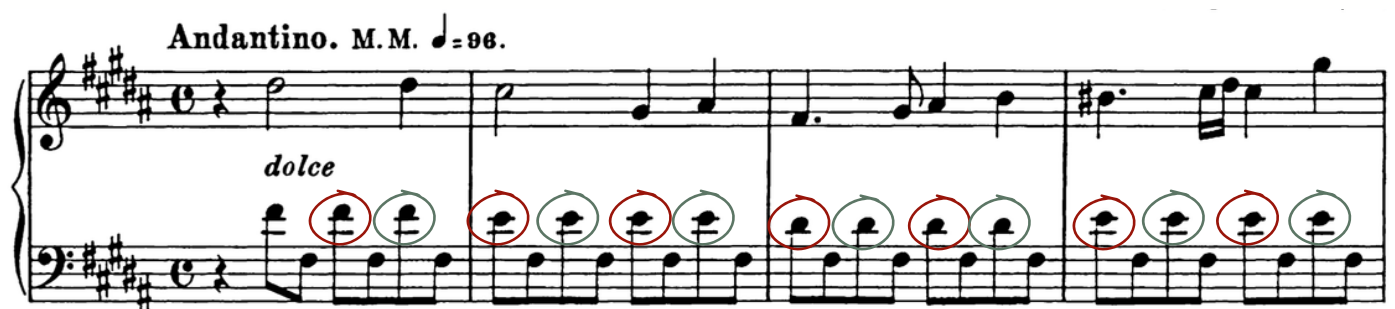
As you continue playing through the piece, you may find moments where adding an extra circle helps support smoother movement—especially just before large leaps or wide intervals (typically larger than an octave). Even if these notes fall on an upbeat, it's still valuable to add a circle there. The goal is to give your elbow a clear cue to prepare the transition early. This allows the shift to feel natural and grounded, rather than sudden or unstable.

Understanding Passive and Active Elbow Motion

In certain repetitive patterns, like the one shown below, passive elbow motion can be highly effective. While the time signature might suggest circling every quarter note, this example often calls for an additional motion on the return. In this case, that return should remain passive—allowing the elbow to follow the natural motion of the arm, rather than initiating movement on its own.

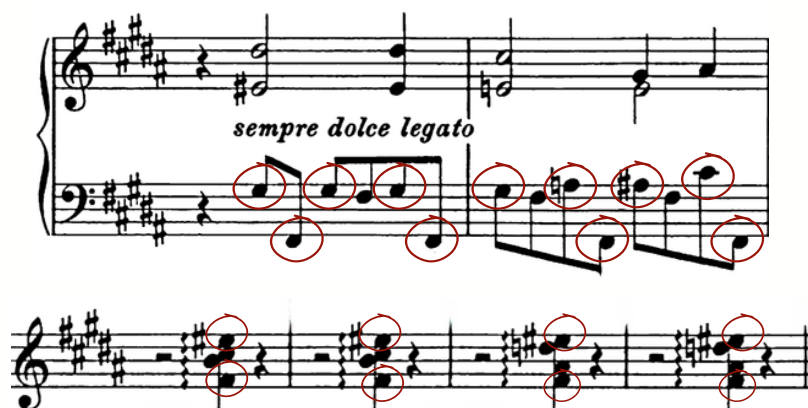
If you treat this return motion as active, even at a moderate tempo, the repetition can lead to unnecessary tension—especially in the forearm—due to the constant, effortful initiation.

Passive motion provides ease and flow in this context.



But it's important not to confuse this with situations that do require active elbow engagement—such as leaps, large position shifts, or jumps.

In those cases, passive movement isn't sufficient. You need a clear, intentional (active) elbow motion to generate momentum and support the transition smoothly—especially when circling an upbeat just before the shift.



Where to Release the Keys

It is not necessary to release the key on every circled note. In some cases, the circles serve only as a reminder to release wrist tension while continuing the elbow motion.

As a general guideline, keep the following in mind:

Slow tempo

Approximately two notes per second

Notes in conjunct motion — **release**



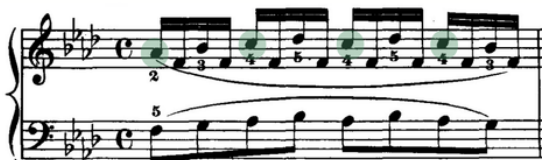
Notes in disjunct motion — **release**



Moderate and faster tempos

From approximately one note per second onwards

Notes in conjunct motion — **connect**



Notes in disjunct motion — **release**



Marking Elbow Direction in the Score

As you play, it can be helpful to add small arrows next to the circled notes in your score. These markings reduce mental effort during practice and bring greater clarity to your movement.

To choose the direction of elbow motion, simply look ahead:

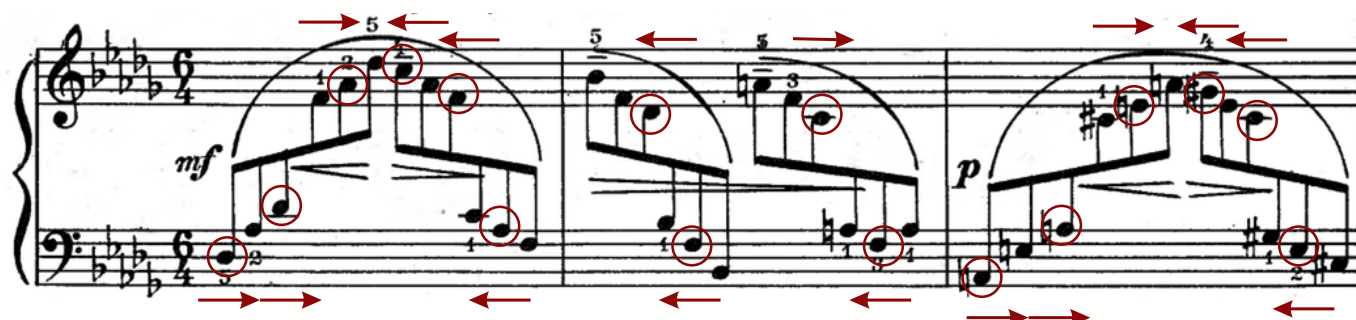
- If the next two notes move upward, gently shift your elbow to the right.
- If they move downward, shift to the left.

For example, in this excerpt from Glière's Prelude, the texture is repetitive and arpeggiated. In a 6/4 meter, it's often effective to begin by circling each beat—six per bar—to map out possible motion points.

As you work through the passage, allow your hand to intuitively sense which direction your elbow wants to move on each circled note to keep the motion fluid and natural.

Then, add arrows to reinforce that choice visually in the score.

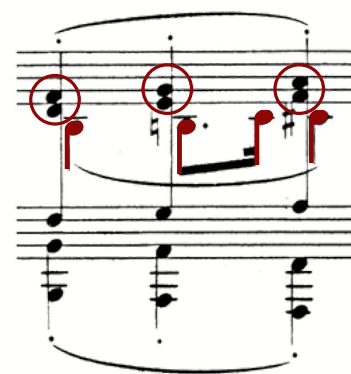
In sections with jumps or large shifts, it may be helpful to add a second layer of circles to mark additional motion points. Trust your physical experience and feel free to adjust the markings wherever they support ease and clarity in movement.



Releasing Wrist Tension in Block Intervals and Chords

When playing block intervals or chords, stay connected to the melody note, and gently release the supporting notes to allow the wrist and elbow to move freely. This helps the hand return to its natural, relaxed shape immediately after playing, giving the wrist enough space to shift right or left without tension.

Use the pedal to sustain the full harmony, creating the illusion of a continuous sound while the hand resets in preparation for the next motion.



1. Mark the circle notes according to the beats indicated by the time signature.

50. TEMPO DI VALSE.
Con grazia.

The musical score is for a waltz in 3/4 time, marked 'TEMPO DI VALSE. Con grazia.' It consists of five systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 3/4. The score is annotated with red circles around specific notes, indicating position-change notes. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes. The first system starts with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

2. Play hands separately with the sustain pedal, adjusting fingering and circles as needed. Confirm the final circles by marking them with an arrow.

TEMPO DI VALSE. **For pleasure.**
Con grazia.

Optional circle: Since this is only a five-note position, adding a circle is not strictly necessary. However, if while playing at the original moderate tempo you find that using this extra circle helps your wrist stay lighter and softer, feel free to keep it. If instead it causes awkward tension or jerky motion— especially at faster tempos — simply erase it.

This elbow motion frees the wrist allowing the hand to return to a closed position by releasing the thumb early.

OPEN LESSONS



OPEN LESSONS



A video thumbnail showing a woman wearing headphones and a grey blazer, sitting at a piano. A laptop is open on the piano. The text "RETRAINING-PIANIST.COM" is at the top, and "that's for sure" is at the bottom. A pencil icon is in the bottom right corner.

Positions

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