

ABRSM

Grade 5 A1 Tarantelle - Burgmüller

The Tarentella (also known as the Pizzica – The Bite)

It seems true that this lively and slightly flirtatious dance derives its name from a town (Taranto), not the deadly Tarantula, but the energetic nature of the dance does have its roots in the need to dissipate the poison when bitten by a local spider (not deadly, but with a bite similar to a bee sting).



The spider's bite was believed to be potentially lethal. The first signs of the disease were fatigue, apathy and malaise. Once the victim began to slip away into a catatonic state, there was only one thing that could save them from succumbing to the poison: to dance it away.

Whilst the title describes this fabulous virtuosic piece well, Burgmüller knew that it was challenging technically; it is, after all, a study. It's not all about being able to play it confidently and securely with good control and coordination either, though this may prove the greater challenge. Your pupil also must be able to perform it with musical imagination and flair.

Background Listening

For younger pianists why not start with a bit of Peter Pan, the musical. Whilst not authentic dancing, discuss what makes the music a Tarantella.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scGeaEJ-uwo>

Here's a Liszt Tarantella from Venetia e Napoli. Listen to the first couple of minutes – lots of fireworks in the fingers here and definitely designed to remove that poison from the blood stream...

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5jFO6m25v99idoNY8WwVaM?si=6e7d507850ba4315>

And something a little different.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mdfE9zVWqM>

All of these give you a little window into the world of this fun, exciting and lively dance.

A musical Performance

The success of a performance will rely on:

- Vivid and exciting dynamic shape and contrast
- Defined phrasing
- A characterful and contrasting middle section
- Convincing balance between the hands and, perhaps above all...
- A reliable and fluent technique with excellent coordination, physical freedom and rhythmic control

Technical Challenges

Technical challenges abound in this short piece, and it is unfortunate that one of the hardest moments piece is the opening four bars so there's little time to settle. There are though some excellent strategies which can be used to learn it fluently and freely, and I've detailed some of these below and they are further explored in the video.

Chapter 1: Fingering and notes

Remember the Williams Three 'W's... WWW (not world wide web).

Which finger

Where

When

Pre-plan: Without pre-planning which finger you are going to use on the notes all the technical work training each finger to play its part will be wasted. The only wrong fingering is inconsistent fingering!

Take advice: The fingering in the copy has been done with huge insight by an excellent editor which considers not only 'can you play it' but also 'how does it need to be played'. It takes into account the phrasing and the dexterity needed. Change some of it for your pupil if you wish but remember that you might miss something that later on means the original fingering make sense.

Chapter 2: Technical work

Pre-plan: Encourage your pupil to work at the tricky bars first. These are undoubtedly bars 1-5, 19-24, 29-32, 60-64 (or the end).

Slow motion performance practice: The benefits of slow practice are self-evident, but ALWAYS include the essential musical detail at the same time. The crescendos,

diminuendos, articulation, dynamic too. It's not a bolt on extra, fingers need training from the start to produce the right SOUND on the notes, at the same time as the right note. 'Dial down' distance (number of bars practised) and speed, 'dial up' musicality.

Be in control of every note: Good rhythmic control and coordination will come from a variety of strategies which 'train the brain' to control every note independently. Here are some strategies further explored on the video.

Together and separately:

- Accenting different/alternate notes
- Rhythmic work in short sprints
- Gestural phrasing
- Highlighting each hand (hands together)
- Slow motion performance practice

Chapter 3: The performance

Speed is not the essence: Don't use a metronome to speed a pupil's fingers up, it can cause tension. Their fingers will mostly do this of their own accord as they get used to the patterns and control. This is especially true if the groundwork of WWW has been done well. Keep the tempo consistent between sections at all times.

Draw out the personality: As the fingers get used to the patterns and control then encourage a livelier performance by focussing on the imagery, excitement, shape and contrast, not the technique. If there are a few technically less assured moments don't worry too much, as long as there's no tension creeping in. Once the performance starts to take shape, then go back and focus again on some of the less fluent bars before trying again like fine-tuning a 2-stroke engine.

Fast is not better: The faster a performance goes often the less musical interest there is. Find that perfect balance where the speed is exciting but there is enough room for control and vivid tonal colours, dynamic shape and variety of articulation.