BUILD THE ARCH RING

accompaniments to the 2026 Keystone Texts

Welcome back, lovely human!

The voussoirs are waiting...

Consider these expositions to enhance your understanding of the 2026 Keystone Texts.

Enjoy each thought and magic will happen.

Cheers for diving deeper with me!

Contents

"Who is listening and why?"

INTRODUCTION

Actions, Qualities, and the Art of Playing

Every **musical** sound begins with an action. Every action has a **quality**. The development of a musician is the gradual **refinement** of those qualities. This book is about that refinement. Piano playing is not primarily a matter of strength or relaxation. It is a matter of **organisation**: the organisation of the body in **gravity**, the organisation of **movement** through the limbs, and the organisation of **touch** at the key. In everyday language, we quietly organise the world into three kinds of things. There are things. There are actions. And there are qualities.

A **piano** is a thing.
To **play** is an action.
To play **beautifully** introduces a quality.

Long before modern linguistics, Aristotle observed that human understanding naturally recognises similar categories. We notice what **exists**, what **happens**, and **how** it happens.

Language reflects this structure:

Language	**What it refers to**
Noun	a thing
Verb	an action
Adjective	a quality of a thing
Adverb	a quality of an action

Music teaching often begins with nouns and verbs.
The notes are the nouns.
The playing is the verb.
But artistry lives largely in the adverbs.

A student may learn the correct notes and rhythms, yet the musical **experience** truly begins when those notes are played freely, calmly, lightly, patiently, boldly, tenderly, or with restraint. These are not decorative additions. They **describe the qualities** of action through which sound is produced.

For this reason, musical **development** is not merely the acquisition of repertoire or technical skill. It is the gradual **refinement** of the qualities of action through which the body meets the instrument.
The pianist is not only **learning** what to play, but **how** an action is carried out.

Technique becomes the study of *action*.
Musicality becomes the study of the *quality* of action.

This perspective changes practice. A scale is no longer just a sequence of notes. It becomes a place to **observe** whether **movement** is hurried or patient, scattered or organised, brittle or alive. Every repetition already trains **a way of being** at the instrument.

This book invites the reader to **explore piano playing** in that spirit: not only as a collection of notes, concepts, and exercises, but as a practice in refining movement, attention, and sound.

When the quality of action changes, the music changes.
And often, the musician changes as well.

"Nice… now we let energy flow through that space."

ORGANISATION OF TOUCH AT THE PIANO

The Fingertip as a Support Point

At the key, the fingertip acts as a small support structure. It should neither collapse into the surface nor strike it with unnecessary rigidity. It needs to be balanced: **firm enough** to transmit movement, **sensitive enough** to feel the key.

This balance depends on three elements working together:

- the **distal phalanx**, which provides structural continuity
- the **soft tissue pad**, which distributes pressure and receives tactile information
- the alignment of the **finger joints**, which allows force to pass through the finger without collapse

When these elements are **aligned**, the fingertip can support weight without gripping. It feels stable, yet responsive.

One important contributor to this connection is the **flexor digitorum profundus**, the **deep finger flexor**. In refined playing, it does not need to contract aggressively. It often works in a lengthened and controlled way, allowing the finger to remain connected without hardening.

Flexors and Extensors

Balanced finger action depends on **cooperation** between the flexors and extensors of the forearm.
The **flexors** help direct energy toward the key.
The **extensors** help preserve length, openness, and joint integrity.

Good technique depends on a dynamic equilibrium between the two.

right hand, back-view

A principal **extensor** in this relationship is **extensor digitorum**. Its role is not to stiffen the hand, but to help prevent collapse and preserve a **sense of buoyancy** in the fingers.

right hand, palm-view

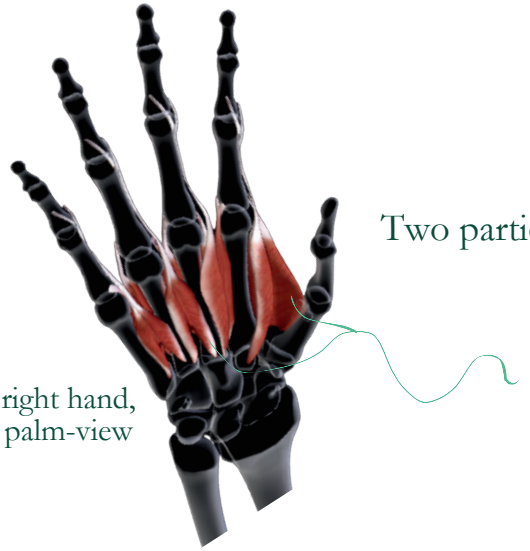
This can be understood as coordinated opposition:

- the flexors help **transmit**
- the extensors help **organise**

When the flexors dominate without enough support from the extensors, the finger grips. When the extensors dominate too strongly, the hand becomes rigid and disconnected.

Intrinsic Hand Support

The larger muscles of the forearm help drive and organise finger movement, but the **fine stability** of the fingertip **also depends** on the **intrinsic** muscles of the hand.



right hand,
palm-view

Two particularly important groups are:
the **lumbricals**
the **interossei**

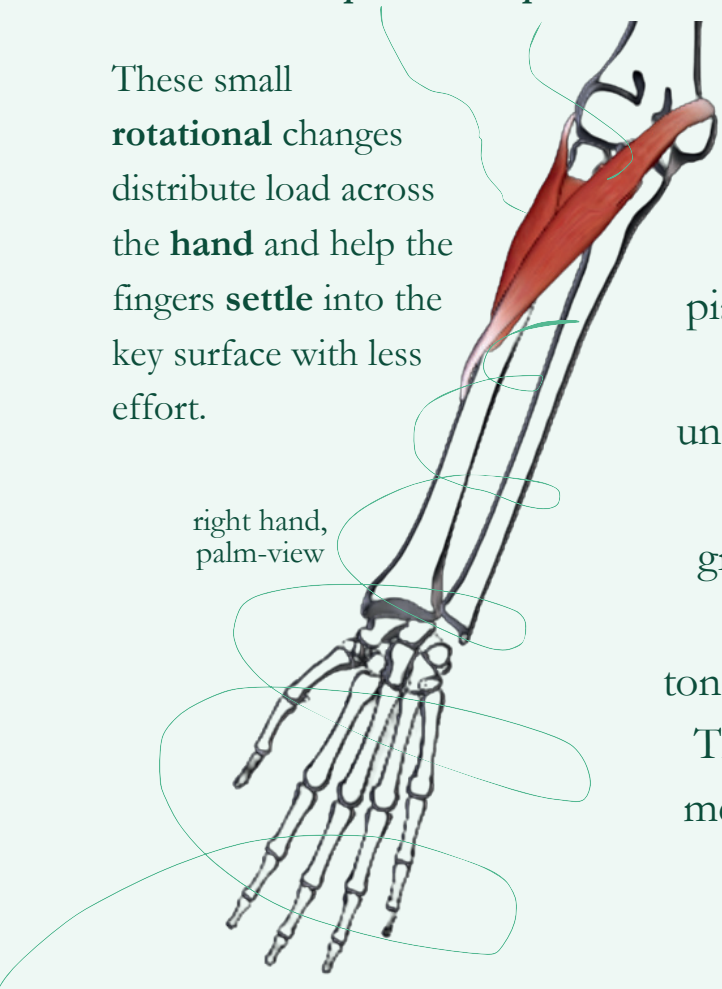
These **small** muscles help coordinate the finger joints in more **subtle** ways than the larger forearm muscles can achieve alone. They contribute to stability, direction, and refined adjustment. They **help** the middle joint remain buoyant rather than collapsed, while **allowing** the fingertip to stay **sensitive** and **alive**.

The result is not hardness, but poised support.

Rotation and Micro-adjustment

The fingertip rarely finds its best balance by travelling straight down. **In skilled playing**, the arm makes continual micro-adjustments that help each finger arrive at the key with greater ease and accuracy. Many of these **adjustments** arise through forearm rotation: *pronation* and *supination*. Muscles such as **supinator** and **pronator teres** contribute to these movements.

These small **rotational** changes distribute load across the **hand** and help the fingers **settle** into the key surface with less effort.

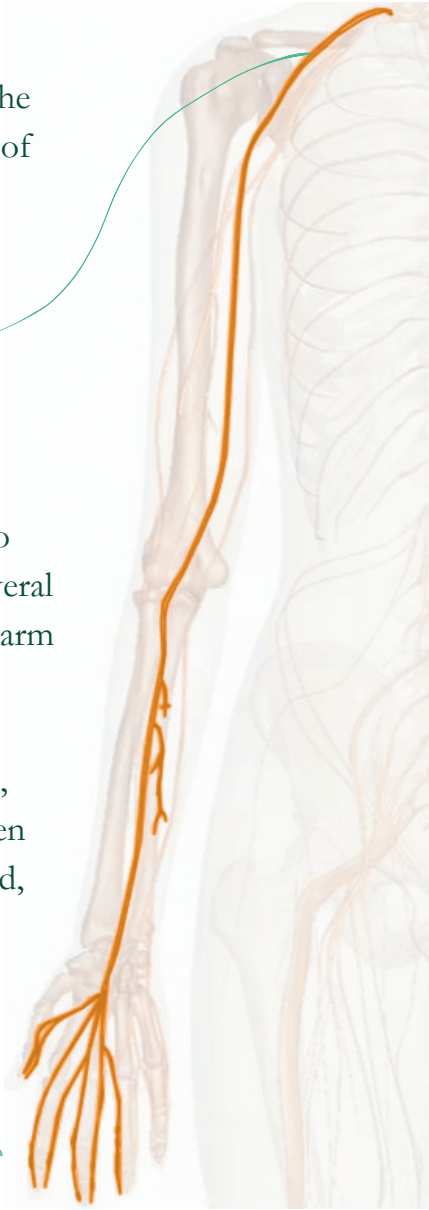


right hand, palm-view

In experienced pianists, this often happens almost unconsciously. Yet it **contributes** greatly to **control** of articulation, tone, and reliability. The arm does not merely descend. **It subtly orients.**

Sensation and Nerve Glide

Touch depends not only on movement, but on sensation. The pianist must be able to **feel** the key's resistance, travel, and point of release. This sensory awareness allows timing and tone to be regulated with much greater precision.



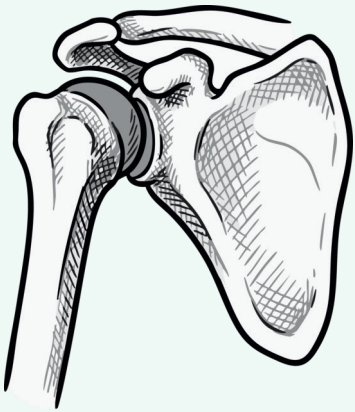
The **median nerve** supplies sensation to much of the thumb, index, and middle fingers and also contributes to the function of several important flexor muscles. As the arm moves, nerves glide through surrounding tissues. When movement is balanced and varied, this glide is better preserved. When movement is compressed, strained, or overly fixed, sensation may become duller or more irritated.

A well-balanced fingertip contact supports not only movement efficiency, but sensory clarity.

Moving Energy to the Fingertip

The instruction to "press the key" can be misleading if it encourages local effort in the finger. In refined technique, the aim is not to generate force at the tip, but to **organise energy throughout the body** and direct it toward the key.

The **torso** *stabilises*.
The **shoulder** girdle *transmits*.
The **arm** *carries*.
The **forearm** and **hand** *refine*.
The **fingertip** *receives* and *delivers*.

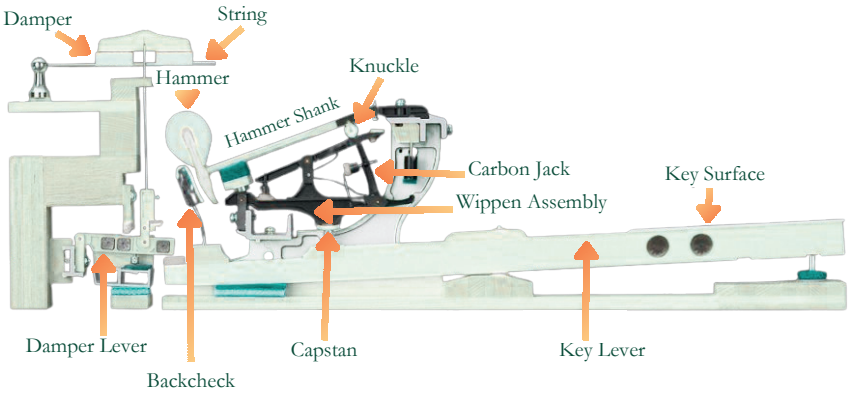


When this chain is working well:

- the fingertip balances naturally
- the key descends smoothly
- tone becomes easier to shape

The pianist is **not forcing** the mechanism. The pianist is **organising** the **conditions** through which the mechanism can **respond**.

The Fingertip as Interface



At the **piano**, sound arises when a **hammer** strikes a **string**. Yet the **pianist** experiences this entire event through one small point of contact: the **fingertip** on the **key**.

When the fingertip is well organised: supported structurally, balanced between flexion and extension, refined through intrinsic control, and assisted by rotation—it becomes a **highly sensitive interface** between body and instrument.

Through this point of contact, the pianist **shapes** dynamics, articulation, and tone colour. The fingertip may be small, but it is the final **expression** of a much larger coordination.

In practice

At the keyboard, **notice** whether the **finger** feels as though it is pressing by itself, or receiving **support** from the arm and torso behind it.

The aim is not a hard finger, but an organised one. Let the fingertip feel like the **end of a chain**, not an isolated worker.

“I'm the one at the sail,
I'm the master of my sea...”

WHAT IS PAIN?

Pain is one of the body's **protective** arts.

It is not merely punishment. It is not always damage. It is the nervous system's **way of calling attention** to something it believes requires care.

For musicians, this matters profoundly. We work through repetition. We refine through return. We ask small structures to perform subtle tasks again and again, often for years. Under such conditions, pain is not an interruption from outside the art. It can become part of the body's response **to how the art is being pursued**.

Pain is not always a sign of failure. Sometimes it is the first sign that the body is asking for a better way.

Pain is often imagined as a direct **report** from injured tissue. But this is too simple. Tissue may send **signals**, yet pain itself is produced by the nervous system when protection seems necessary. The body offers information. The brain **evaluates** it. Pain is one possible **conclusion**.

This means that pain is **shaped** not only by physical strain, but **by context**: fatigue, overload, fear, memory, stress, anticipation, and habit. The nervous system does not ask only, *What is happening?* It also asks, *How safe is this? How prepared am I? How much protection is needed?*

When **protection** rises, the body changes its **behaviour**. Muscles tighten. Movement narrows. Breathing may become less free. Sensitivity increases. The whole person begins to organise around **defence**.

For a musician, this can become a quiet trap. A small irritation invites guarding. **Guarding** alters coordination. Altered coordination creates fresh strain. The player feels this and tries to relax, but relaxation is not something that can simply be commanded. The body does not surrender its protection because the mind has issued an instruction.

The body does not yield to orders.

It yields to trust.

It changes when it receives better experience.

This is one reason pandiculation is so valuable.

Pandiculation...

...is the body's natural process of awakening a pattern of contraction, feeling it from within, and then releasing it slowly and consciously. It is seen in the long stretch after sleep, in the yawn that gathers the whole organism into a single arc of renewal. It is not merely a stretch imposed upon tissue. It is a reset of organisation. That distinction matters. Stretching may pull. Pandiculation senses. Stretching may lengthen a part. Pandiculation restores choice within the whole. For the musician in pain, this is not a small difference. Much chronic tension is not simply a short muscle waiting to be lengthened. It is often a learned holding pattern: a way the nervous system has organised protection over time. The arm braces. The shoulder fixes. The jaw hardens. The hand grips. The person may not even notice these things until they are named by discomfort. Pandiculation offers a return to the body's own noticing. By gently engaging a contraction and releasing it with attention, the player begins to reclaim voluntary control. The nervous system is shown that it does not need to hold in quite the same way. Effort can be reorganised. Tone can redistribute. Support can return without hardness.

Pain is sometimes the body's beautiful refusal to keep cooperating with confusion.

This is why pain should not always be read as an enemy. Often it is the body asking for reorganisation.

Not always rest alone.
Not always force.
Not always endurance.
Sometimes a different organisation.

For teachers, this has practical importance. Students are often told to "relax," but such advice is incomplete. A person cannot meaningfully relax what they cannot yet sense. Nor can they release a pattern that has become their normal. **Awareness must come first.** The student must begin to feel where effort collects, where support disappears, where movement becomes fixed.

Only then can technique become truly educational. In this way, **awareness** is not an ornament to playing. It is one of the conditions of healthy playing. It helps the musician detect the difference between support and bracing, between tone and hardness, between contact and collapse. Pandiculation belongs within this field of awareness because it teaches that release is not passivity. Release is informed change.
A well-organised body is not limp. It is **available**.
It has tone where tone is needed.
It yields where yielding is wise.
It transmits force without confusion.
It does not waste itself in unnecessary **holding**.

You cannot release what you do not yet know you are holding.

Freedom in playing is not the absence of effort. It is effort that no longer fights itself.

This is one of the deeper hopes in understanding pain well: the nervous system is adaptable. It can become more sensitive under repeated threat, but it can also become less protective when it meets clarity, variation, safety, and better coordination. It can learn again.
So pain may become, however unwillingly, a teacher.

It shows where options have been lost.
It reveals where effort has become habitual.
It asks whether the body is being organised in a way that it can trust.

This does not romanticise pain. Pain can be complex, limiting, and deeply distressing. Persistent pain deserves careful professional attention. But even so, it helps to know that pain is not always a fixed sentence pronounced by damaged tissue. Often it is the voice of protection speaking too loudly, or for too long, because the system has not yet been shown another path.

For the musician, this is hopeful.
It means that better sensing can matter.
Better organisation can matter.
Better teaching can matter.

The body is not betraying the musician when it hurts. It is trying, in its own stern way, to preserve the possibility of music.

And it means that freedom at the instrument is not found by overpowering the body, but by learning to work with its intelligence.

The aim is not to
defeat the body.

The aim is to
become refined
enough to listen.

"We're all here to play!"

DISCIPLINE: A STRANGE KIND OF FREEDOM

Discipline is often mistaken for hardness. For force. For the grim art of making oneself obey. It is spoken of as though its value were self-evident, as though any life with enough order in it must therefore be admirable. But discipline is not good in itself. A tyrant may be disciplined. A life organised around fear may be disciplined. Vanity may be disciplined. So may love. The question is not whether there is discipline, but what it serves.

Every discipline bows somewhere: to beauty, to ambition, to approval, to control, to money, to safety, to truth, to belonging, to survival. The outer form can look identical while the inner allegiance is entirely different. Two pianists may sit at the same instrument for the same number of hours and be serving entirely different gods. One may be trying to deepen contact with sound. Another may be fleeing shame. One may be refining a life. Another may be narrowing it. Discipline cannot be judged by intensity alone. It must be judged by its end, and by what it makes of the person who submits to it.

This matters because life is brief. Practice is not made of abstract units. It is made of hours that do not return. A day can be scattered almost without notice. A year can disappear by leakage. A life can become the servant of habits never consciously chosen. So discipline, at its best, is not brutality. It is a way of protecting one's finite life from being spent too cheaply. It helps a person remain near what they have recognised as worth serving, even after mood, fatigue, appetite, boredom, or distraction begin their negotiations.

Most people know something of what they want: to hear more finely, to play more truthfully, to understand more deeply, to become less clumsy in body, less divided in mind, less absent in the act. Yet wanting alone does not organise a life. Between desire and action, something always intervenes. Weariness. Fear. Restlessness. Convenience. The seduction of what is easier. The pull of what is immediate over what endures. This is why discipline matters. Not because every feeling must be conquered, but because a life cannot be built on feeling alone. Without some form, one is left at the mercy of whatever presses nearest.

Still, discipline becomes dangerous the moment it is admired too naively. It has been damaged by severity. Many have known it as pressure, shame, overcorrection, or the demand to continue long after the soul has gone absent. There is nothing inherently noble in that. A person can become highly consistent in their own deadening. A student can appear exemplary while inwardly disappearing. A routine can remain perfectly intact while the life inside it thins out. That is why discipline must never be confused with mere obedience. It is not the worship of routine. It is not the moral glamour of endurance for its own sake.

Some repetition deepens a person. Some repetition numbs them. Some habits refine perception. Others gradually replace presence with automaticity. This is as true in piano practice as anywhere. One may repeat a passage and come more deeply into contact with sound, timing, weight, breath, and relation. Or one may repeat it until the act becomes vacant and the ear goes dull. Not all repetition is practice. Some repetition is only delay. Some is self-soothing dressed as work. Some is fear wearing the face of diligence.

So the question cannot simply be whether one persisted. Persistence alone is too blunt a virtue. A heroic burst may alter a life. So may a quiet return. Steadiness is not automatically wise. Intensity is not automatically foolish. Either may deepen a person. Either may distort one. The better question is whether the work leaves the person more awake. More able to perceive. More able to feel relation. More alive in the act itself.

For this reason, fruitful discipline is often gentler than people imagine. It does not always arrive as strain. Sometimes it is simply the shaping of conditions that make the next good action more possible: a time, a place, a ritual of beginning, a small aim, a clear stopping point. Not a cage. A threshold. Good discipline reduces needless struggle. It does not ask the self to fight a civil war every day. It makes room for the work to begin before resistance has made its full argument. In this sense, discipline can be a form of mercy. Not softness. Not vagueness. Mercy through clarity.

It is also a form of restraint. Discipline is not only the power to continue. It is the power to refrain: to stop before attention collapses, to not overplay, to not confuse agitation with effort, to not keep hammering after listening has gone dead, to not surrender the hour to every interruption that flashes across the mind. This restraint is not a refusal of life. It is the protection of finer life. There are times when discipline says continue. There are times when it says enough. There are times when the most disciplined act is to leave the piano, walk outside, and remember that music belongs to life, not life to music.

That matters especially for teachers. A teacher can accidentally train compliance and call it character. One can train dullness and call it consistency. One can praise the student who produces visible effort while ignoring whether that effort is joined to perception, delight, curiosity, and inward participation. Pedagogy becomes dangerous when it rewards deadness simply because deadness is orderly. The aim is not to turn students into machines of admirable routine. The aim is to help them discover forms of work in which attention grows more vivid, the body more organised, the ear more honest, and the person more present.

Discipline that loses contact with enjoyment eventually curdles. Enjoyment here does not mean constant pleasure, nor easy entertainment, nor the refusal of difficulty. It means something deeper: contact with what is alive in the work. With sound. With motion. With discovery. With the surprise of finding one note more true than the last. With the strange privilege of spending one's brief life making something sing. Without some thread of this, discipline becomes thin and punitive. With it, discipline becomes protection. It becomes a way of keeping close to what one loves without dissolving into whim.

So perhaps discipline is a strange kind of freedom. Not the freedom of having no form, but the freedom of not being ruled entirely by accident. Not being thrown wherever mood happens to throw you. Not losing years to leakage. Not spending one's life in service of impulses one never truly chose. Form, rightly held, can free attention for finer things. It can make it more possible to hear, to shape, to respond, to imagine. But form must serve life. The moment life is sacrificed to form, discipline has betrayed its own purpose.

In the end, discipline is not the art of becoming harder. It is the art of returning to a chosen thing without going numb in the return. It is the shaping of conditions under which a finite life may gather rather than scatter. It helps us continue what is worth continuing. It helps us stop what empties the work. It asks not merely whether we kept going, but whether we stayed alive in it. That may be the truer measure. Not obedience. Not severity. Not perfect consistency. But whether, in the midst of repetition, one's life remained in one's own hands.

"What looks like going backwards is often just the universe taking a run-up."

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SPINE

At birth, the human spine is shaped like a gentle C.

This single curve belongs to the world from which the infant has just emerged. In the womb, the body is folded forward, held, contained. The spine reflects that condition: rounded, continuous, supple. There are not yet distinct regions in any pronounced sense —no clear cervical curve, no lumbar arch. The infant's body is organised first for being carried, not for carrying itself.

Yet the spine is not a fixed structure. It is a living architecture, one that develops through its meeting with gravity, movement, and curiosity.

Around three to four months of age, the first new curve begins to appear.

As the infant starts to lift and turn the head while lying prone, the muscles of the neck begin working repeatedly against gravity. Each small effort—lifting, wavering, lowering, and trying again—contributes to the gradual formation of the cervical curve.

This curve bends gently backward. It allows the head to balance more effectively above the shoulders and frees the eyes to meet the world.

Something important is happening here. The child is no longer only receiving sensation. Vision begins to draw movement forward. The spine responds by reorganising itself in support of a new relationship with space.

The neck curve does not arise because anyone instructs the infant to "hold the head up". It arises because the wish to see calls the body into a new pattern of organisation.

Months later, another transformation begins.

As the child crawls, pulls to stand, cruises, and eventually takes those first uncertain steps, the lower back develops its lumbar curve—another gentle backward arc. This curve emerges as the pelvis begins to balance beneath the spine and the legs learn to bear weight more fully.

Standing introduces a different challenge altogether. The body must now organise itself vertically within gravity.

The lumbar curve helps the trunk stack above the hips with greater efficiency, keeping the centre of mass better balanced. Without it, upright movement would demand far more muscular effort.

Again, this curve is not imposed from the outside. It arises through experience: rocking, falling, pushing up, swaying, trying again. Each movement teaches the nervous system something about how weight may travel through bone, joint, and muscle.

By early childhood, the spine has developed its familiar S-shaped profile: a cervical curve in the neck, a thoracic curve through the rib cage, a lumbar curve in the lower back, and a small sacral curve at the base.

These alternating curves are not decorative. They are functional. Together they behave something like a spring system, helping the body absorb force, maintain balance, and move with greater economy.

They allow the head to hover above the horizon. They allow the ribs to move with breath. They allow weight to pass through the pelvis into the legs. They allow the body to remain mobile while standing, sitting, reaching, and turning.

The spine is not a rigid column. It is a dynamic structure shaped for responsiveness.

And although these curves emerge in childhood, they are not simply fixed there once and for all.

They continue to respond to how we sit, breathe, move, and organise ourselves throughout life. When movement becomes constrained, or when habit overtakes responsiveness, the curves may exaggerate, flatten, or lose some of their elastic quality.

Yet the spine retains a capacity for reorganisation.

Each time we allow the head to balance more freely, the ribs to widen with breath, or the body to lengthen without hardening, we participate again in the same broad process that shaped the spine in infancy: an ongoing conversation between gravity and movement.

The curves are not forms we impose upon the body by force. They are patterns the body can remember when the conditions are favourable.

From the curled infant to the upright adult, the spine traces one of the body's deepest acts of organisation. Each curve marks a new way of meeting the world: first seeing, then reaching, then standing, then walking. The spine is not merely a structure of support. It is a living architecture of orientation. Through it, the body learns how to bear weight, how to balance, and how to rise into relationship with the world. Before the mind learns to name order, the body begins to live it.

Every day, my body is different.
Each moment, the universe flows through it, changing it.
Sometimes gently and smoothly, and at other times, violently and abruptly.
I love all these changes and they teach me.
To hold on and to let go, to half heartedly and whole heartedly act and not act.
When I will it to move, it obeys if it can.
If it cannot, it will reorganise over time so that it can.
I am grateful that it is always morphing to make me proud to be its owner.
Have some coffee and enjoy this fruit.
The ecstasy of a series of small deaths leading to the ultimate one.
Let me feel the light course through, up and down the central channel.
Delicious. Thanks for the meal.
I humbly return the plate to the kitchen.
No seconds, please.

About these accompaniments

Designed to enhance comprehension of the 2026 Keystone Texts. Expose yourself to greater detail with these complementary texts. Strengthen connections with further knowledge. Appreciate the fundamentals with different light.

Hanford, 2026
BMus(Hons) MTeach LMusA MVMTA