



# Keyboard Companion

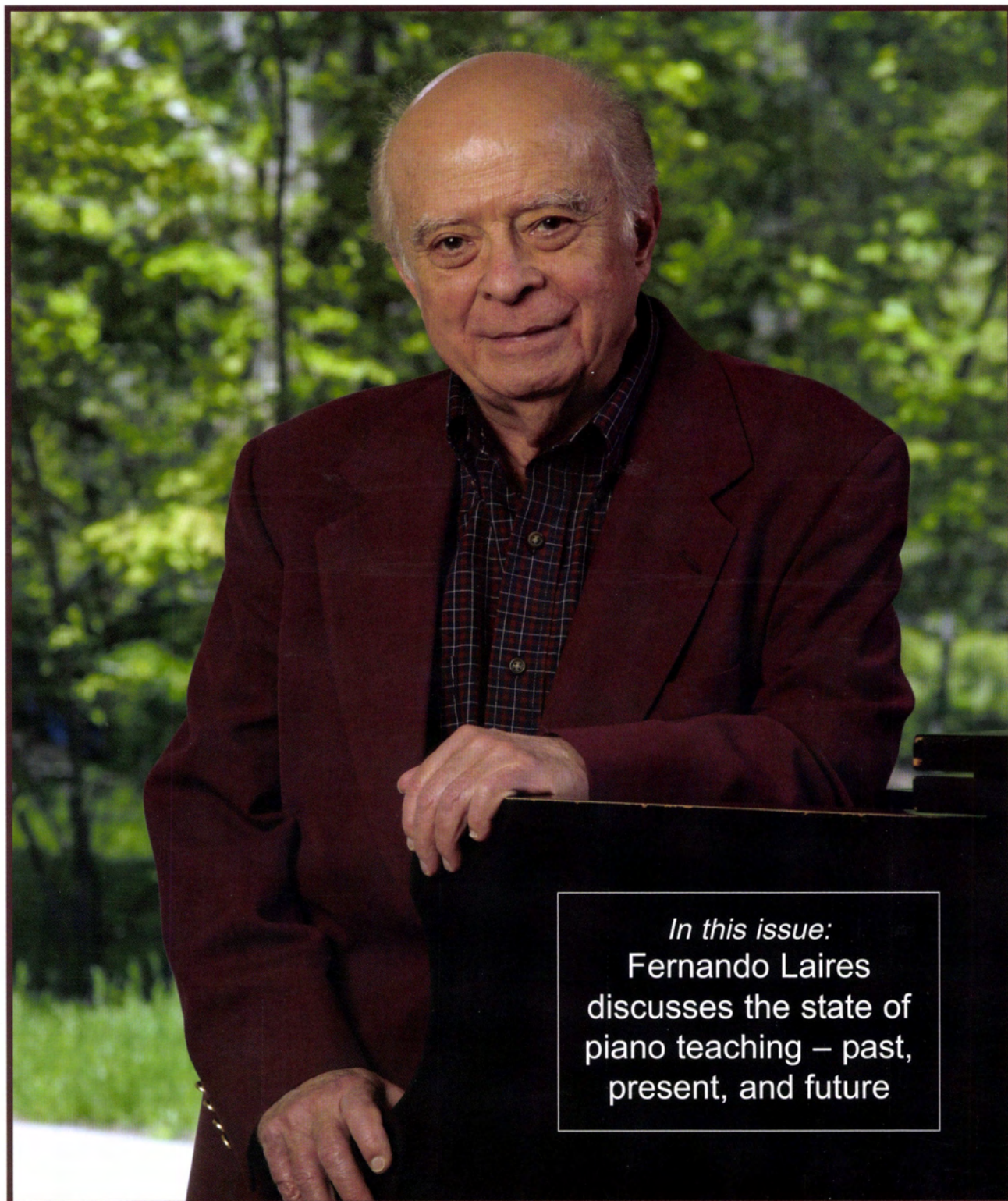
Autumn 2003

Volume 14, Number 3

Eight Dollars

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*A Practical Magazine on Piano Teaching*



*In this issue:*  
Fernando Laires  
discusses the state of  
piano teaching – past,  
present, and future



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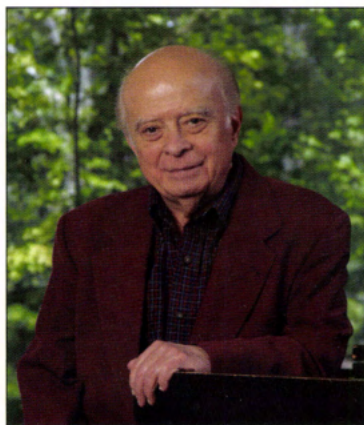
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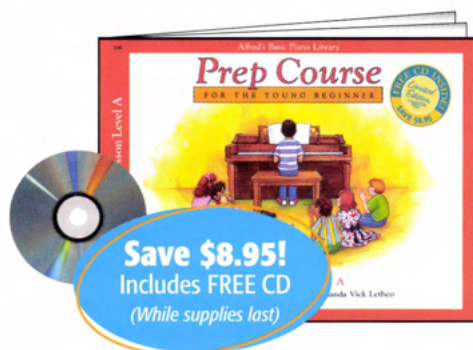
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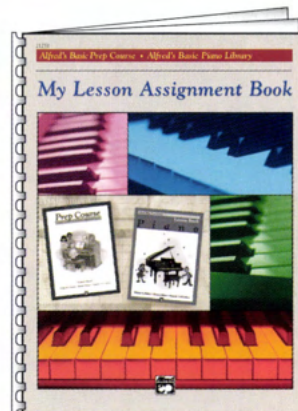
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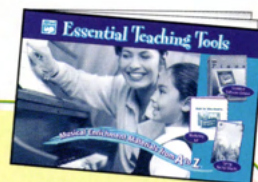
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# Editor's Page

Elvina Pearce, Editor-in-Chief

## Fall – “a new beginning”

In this issue's Repertoire column (see pp. 44-47), Marvin Blickenstaff describes the Fall opening of a new teaching season as “...a new beginning, a second chance, a fresh start...” I know that I certainly view this time of year in these terms, and I'm sure that many of you do as well. Fall teaching usually means *new repertoire* which hopefully produces renewed motivation! For many of us, it often means starting a new *beginner* — thus, another chance to “get it right this time!” And of course, a new teaching season also provides another opportunity to review our philosophy and policies about practice with both our students and their parents. In this issue's Home Practice column (see pp. 14-21), writers Lisa Caramia, Beth Jones, and Sue Steck-Turner share some of their excellent views about practice, and my remarks below also focus on this issue. They represent some of the points I always reiterate with parents and students at the start of a new teaching year.

### • The need for students to establish a regular time for daily practice

My experience continues to confirm that students who practice at the *same time* every day tend to make more consistent progress than do those who use the “catch-as-catch-can” method. I remind parents that it is perfectly normal for almost all students to be less than enthusiastic about practice at least some of the time, and therefore, they will need to assume the responsibility of seeing to it that their child does indeed get to the piano daily. I urge them to assist the child with selecting an everyday practice time (the *same time* each day) that will, for the most part, be compatible with both the student's and the family's schedule, and I assure them that there will be far less friction over the matter of practicing if a regular time is programmed into the student's daily schedule. Finally, I suggest that once a specific time has been selected, the parent needs to help the student stick to it!

### • The importance of the environment in which practicing takes place

When the student is practicing, he/she should be allowed access to the piano *without* undue distractions (sounds from the TV, radio, CD player, etc.). Nor should practicing be interrupted by telephone calls, visits from friends, or from intrusions by other family members. The point is that if practice is to become important to the student and a regular part of his/her daily routine, then a suitable environment for it must be created and maintained by the entire family to show that it respectfully supports its importance.

### • How long should the student practice?

This is a question that all parents and students ask, and one which I think we should answer with *specifics*. If we think that 30, 45, 60 (or more) minutes of practice a day is necessary in order for the student to accomplish the goals that we have established for his/her musical education, then I think that this is exactly what we should say. We need to impress upon both the parent and the student that regardless of ability, or even the *quality* of practice, progress and achievement are also greatly influenced simply by the *amount of time* one actually spends at the instrument. I also underline that I think it is far better to practice a shorter amount of time *every* day than to skip several days and then try to make up for it by cramming a week's worth of practice into 2-3 days. In addition, for students of all ages and levels, I strongly recommend dividing up the day's total practice time into 2-3 shorter segments rather than trying to do it all in *one* sitting.

### • Last, but by no means least

I stress the point that although consistent progress does depend on regular daily time spent at the piano, it also depends on *mind* spent, and therefore, this is always one of the main emphases of every lesson.

Actually, most of each week's lesson time is spent preparing the student for six days of productive practice in between lessons. In order to reinforce what is done at the lesson, the assignment is structured in considerable detail which suggests that practice is not just “doing time” at the piano — not just sitting there playing through pieces for a given length of time. Rather, it entails proceeding in a logical, step-by-step sequence, and applying whatever practice steps have been assigned to ensure maximum accuracy and success in a minimum amount of time. I make it clear that it is *my* job to program the student for successful practice. It is the *student's* job to utilize at home in everyday practice whatever suggestions are made at the lesson. In summary, every student's success probably depends more upon practice than on any other single factor, and certainly *how* the student practices will define the quality of both the student's accomplishments and his or her attitude about music, and continuing study.

## Results from the magazine's Spring Readership Survey

All of us associated with *Keyboard Companion* were extremely pleased with the large number of subscribers who took time to complete and return the Readership Survey that appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of the magazine. From this survey, we have learned much about you, your students, and your teaching. Believing that you might also be interested in learning some of the results, we are presenting the following information:

- **Age of teachers:** 72% of the responding subscribers are between the ages of 50 and 70.
- **Teacher classification:** 95% are independent teachers.
- **Number of students taught:** 41% teach between 30 and 40+ students per week, and 30%, between 20 and 30 students.



- **Ages of students:** Around 90% of the students taught fall into the age range of kindergarten through high school; 30% of the responders also teach pre-school, and 77% teach adults.
- **Types of lessons:** 51% teach individual lessons only; 48% teach individual lessons with an occasional group lesson.
- **Length of lessons:** 50+% of the respondents teach mostly 30' lessons, 37%, mostly 45' lessons, and 13%, mostly one-hour lessons.
- **Lesson fees:** Lessons fees ranged from \$20 per hour (16%) to \$50+ per hour (8%); 40% of the fees fall within the range of \$24-\$32 per hour.
- **Instruments:** Nearly 70% of the teachers use acoustic pianos in their lessons; 37% use both acoustic and digital instruments.
- **Technology:** Almost 40% do use computer technology as part of their piano instruction; 63% do not.
- **Summer teaching:** 85% do teach during the summer.
- **Professional association memberships:** Nearly 80% of the respondents are members of local, state, and national music associations. (69% are members of MTNA.)

We also appreciate so many of you taking time to send along your individual thoughts about the magazine. Included among the hundreds of comments were some very good suggestions that we shall certainly consider as we plan future issues. We are happy to report that the vast majority of your comments were very positive and provided confirmation that the content of the magazine is indeed accomplishing what we are dedicated to providing — namely, a *practical* approach to dealing with the many issues which confront today's piano teachers. Here are just a few quotes which support this conclusion:

"... The magazine is great because it is so helpful on a practical level."

"I love this magazine! Keep the *practical* ideas coming!"

"THANK YOU for your practical advice and wisdom."

"The best and most practical of all (magazines)!"

"A practical, 'down to earth' professional journal that addresses real questions ... with professional answers ..."

Even though the survey itself did not mention the magazine's "new look" (as of the Spring 2003 issue), nonetheless, many of you commented on this. Although there were a few who said that they preferred the "old" format (one person said that he/she did like the new format but tended to "resist change"), the majority who mentioned it said that they liked the change" i.e., "refreshing!...very clear and contemporary...(I) love the new look!...Thanks for the new format — it's much nicer to read", etc.

The last question on the survey asked "Which publication best serves your needs as a piano teacher?" Our subscribers' response to this question was music to our ears! The answer which 96% of you gave was *KEYBOARD COMPANION*! Be assured that we shall try to continue living up to your expectations, and please know that your ideas and suggestions are always welcome at *any* time. (P.S. If you've not yet returned your survey, we'll still be happy to receive it.)

## On the cover

Featured on this issue's cover is the renowned pianist and artist-teacher, Fernando Laires. The photo was taken in May of 2003 by Kurt Brownell who is the staff photographer at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. A comprehensive biography about Mr. Laires accompanies the article devoted to his views on the state of piano teaching which appears in this issue in the News and Views column on p. 52. ▲



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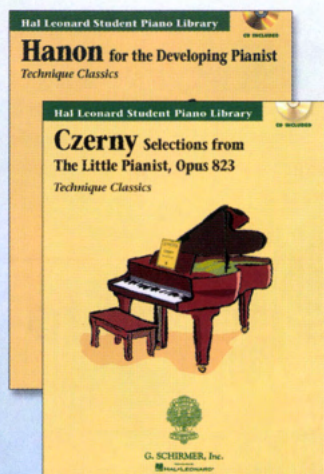
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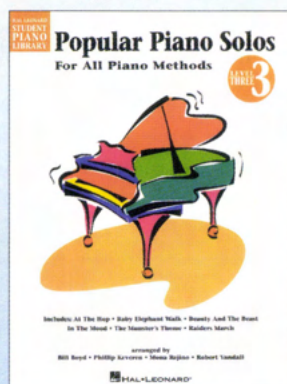


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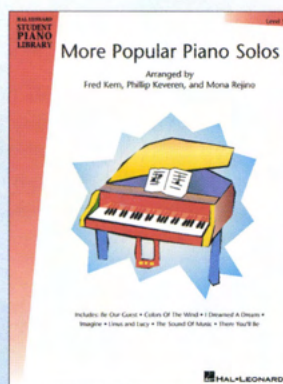
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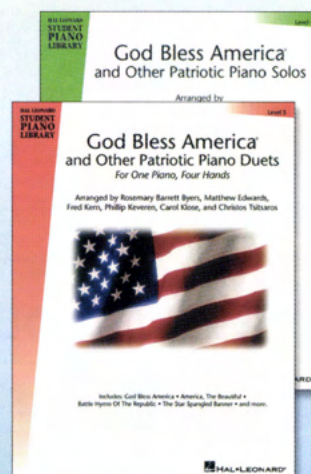
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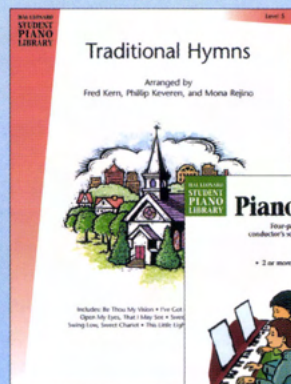
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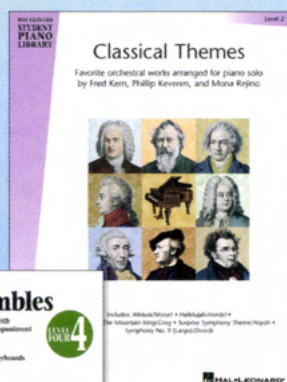
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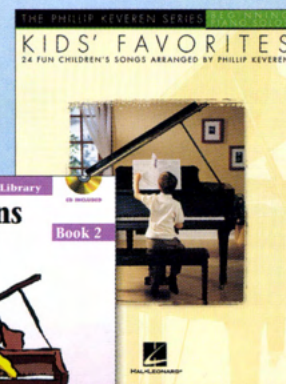
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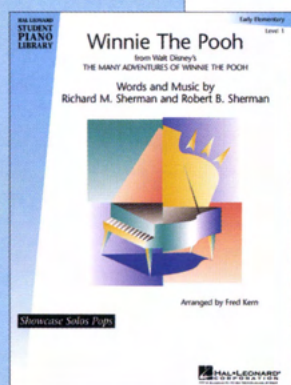
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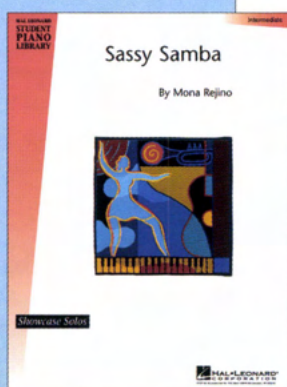
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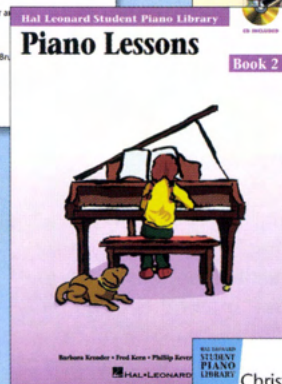
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# From the Files

## Articles from past issues of Keyboard Companion

### Editor's Note:

The question, "How do you make sure piano lessons get off to a good start in the fall?" was the subject for the Teacher/Student/Parent column which appeared in the very first Autumn issue of *Keyboard Companion* in the fall of 1990. Aside from the fact that all of the ideas presented in this article are equally useful in today's

world of piano teaching, we thought that as you are planning your 2003-04 season, you might enjoy the following brief visit back to the magazine's "past." Enjoy!

**Cathy Albergo** was the first editor of the Teacher/Student/Parent column, and here is what she wrote in 1990 as her introduction to the question below. ▲

## How do you make sure piano lessons get off to a good start in the fall?

*Cathy Albergo, Editor*

**H**APPY NEW YEAR! In August? Yes! For most piano teachers, students, and parents, August heralds the beginning of a whole new year of lessons and activities. For many, however, this new beginning is anything but happy. For parents and students, finding a new teacher and working out scheduling difficulties can be terribly confusing. Many teachers, likewise, find this time of year frustrating and stressful because of the difficulties of scheduling, class planning, and problem solving for parents and students.

One of the most successful methods I have found for getting fall lessons off to a good start is holding a special parent/teacher meeting. After students have been enrolled, schedules set, interviews or auditions have been held, and a general discussion of policies, the Harper Music Academy goes one step further and holds a special parents meeting. This meeting has been a real boost for our program, especially for parents of beginning students, both at the start of the Fall and Spring semesters.

Independent teachers might hold this meeting before regular lessons begin or during the first couple of weeks. Since we have several teachers in our Academy, we generally hold the meeting during the first class session of the semester. While the students attend their first class and get acquainted with their teacher, the Coordinator meets with the parents in another room. The discussion usually includes:

- A review of studio policies and procedures.
- An introduction to the methods and materials used in the student's piano class.
- A "mini-lesson" for parents covering concepts and materials for the first few

weeks. (This allows the parents to help students immediately and alerts them to what types of sounds and activities to expect.)

- Guidelines for student practice and how the parents can help.
- An exchange of names, addresses, and phone numbers of all class students so that parents can arrange car pools if needed.
- Pointers on how to handle the first "But I don't want to practice!"
- Guidelines for buying a piano, if needed.
- Introduction to local music stores and where to purchase music.
- Guidelines for piano tuning and a recommended list of tuners.
- A discussion of a keyboard versus an acoustic piano. (This has become a popular topic in recent years.)
- Suggestions for parental involvement, student motivation, and long term goals.

- Encouragement for close communication between parents and teachers. We assure parents that we are open to their suggestions and will be happy to offer advice if problems arise....

Our parent/teacher meetings have been a great asset to our program. Since we began these meetings, our communication and contact with parents has greatly improved. Parents feel free to call us to discuss problems or ask for help. I feel that the meetings help cut our drop-out rate, build a better relationship between parents, students, and teachers, and set the stage for a successful start to our fall program.... ▲

*Cathy Albergo is Professor of Music and Chair of the Music Department at William Rainey Harper College in suburban Chicago where she developed the Harper Music Academy. She holds a Doctorate from the University of Illinois and is co-author of the Handbook for Piano Teachers, Celebration Series, 2nd Edition, the fourth edition of Intermediate Piano Repertoire, and the new Celebrate Piano! series (Frederick Harris).*

## Music Hot Line

by Carmen Doubrava

**F**ive years ago, the Carrollton Music Teachers Association (Dallas, Texas) was formed. Of course, a music teacher association was a terrific idea. We could have our own festivals and competitions, meet the other local music teachers, and become known in the community (our BIG goal). We all basically had small studios in a rapidly growing area. To get our first Fall off to a roaring start, we needed to

be noticed! Noticed by parents to fill our studios, and noticed by other music teachers to expand our membership.

From an idea at a state convention, Chris Duncan, our first president, started the "Music Hot Line." Flyers were put up in schools, libraries, music stores, and the Chamber of Commerce. Ads were placed in local newspapers (see the following example):



For more information about the  
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Carrollton, Addison,  
Farmers Branch, N. Dallas,  
Coppell, Lewisville or Grapevine  
contact  
**HOT LINE TO MUSIC**

(The HOT LINE phone number was also included in the above ad.)

We are lucky in our community to have a "Welcome Wagon." All new families to the area receive a packet of information about the city including information about CMTA, our festivals, and the Music Hot Line number. The phone number rings at the home of (one of the members). She happily gives inquisitive callers information about CMTA and sends them a list of teachers' names, addresses and phone numbers. The list includes the instruments they teach, if they are in Guild, if they prefer only small children, or only adults, etc. She often gets asked but never recommends a certain teacher, nor does she discuss fees. Any prospective CMTA member is referred to the membership chairman.

Fall is the busiest time of the year for the Music Hot Line, but people call year round. Last year, (1989) (our "Hot Line telephone-teacher") received 78 calls and diligently kept a record of each inquiry. I can safely say that all of our 35 members have overflowing studios and waiting lists....

We've got our teachers off to a great start, but what about the students? Each of them has a teacher who meets the requirements of a music teacher's association and parents who have the opportunity — and are encouraged — to call and interview with several teachers to find the one they feel is best for them. ▲

**Carmen Doubrava** holds a BM and MM from the University of North Texas. (At the time of this article, she was) President of CMTA; she has a private studio in Carrollton, Texas, and teaches for Su Su's Yamaha Music School.

## The planning/introductory lesson

by Sara Bradley Mason

For the past few years I have begun the new fall term by meeting with each student for a planning/introductory lesson during the last two weeks of August. In Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the school year begins during the last week of August, so students and parents have the option of scheduling the planning lesson before or after school starts.

At the planning lesson, I usually discuss some of my tentative plans for the student and get feedback regarding possible technique, repertoire, or performance goals. Students have often come to this lesson with ideas, suggestions, or questions about the forthcoming year. For transfer students, it is a great time to get acquainted and evaluate the student's strengths and weaknesses.

Last year, I tried a more structured approach to gaining student input and told my students ahead of time that I wanted them to be thinking about possible goals for the new year. At their planning lesson, we discussed these goals, I made suggestions based on perceived needs and/or challenges I felt (were) appropriate, and together we came up with a written list of these goals. I made two copies — one for the student to keep in her/his binder, and one for me to keep in the student's folder. We checked these goals periodically during the year to see how we were doing.

The students' suggestions varied from the very specific (I want to play *Für Elise*), to the general (I want to play *hard* pieces). Several wanted to improve their sight-playing skills, others said they wanted to play a wide variety of music, and others wanted to work on composition skills. With some students, I talked about problems with rhythm or note recognition and with others about the importance of a daily structured approach to technique. I found that by discussing these goals with students and writing them down together, they were much more willing to give these problems the attention needed.

I found it interesting to discover the variety of approaches students had to learning new material. Many said they wanted to have a lot of new pieces and to go quickly through their method books. Others said

they preferred going slowly with lots of reinforcement. Of course, I still have to make the decisions about what to do when, but I continue to take their feelings into consideration. Most important is that I was sometimes surprised about how a particular student felt.

Encouraging student input in both short and long term planning is beneficial for both the student and the teacher. I feel that what made this year's planning better is that everything was written down and available for reference for both the student and me. For the coming year we will definitely do this again. I am planning to compile a check list from last year's goals. Of course, there will be a lot of space for other suggestions that they, or I, may have. And again we will *write it down*.

### What do the students say?

- My goals were to improve note-reading and recognizing intervals. Also, I wanted to compose new songs. This year I did all of these things. I worked real hard at it and I got better. Now I'm doing fine and I'm really good at the piano.

*Missay Ann Poklasny, 10 years old*

- It worked for me to be able to work on my own goals — not those of my piano teacher.

*Brad Packer, 14 years old*

- I really felt excellent when I looked at my goal sheet and accomplished two of the most important things to me in piano. One was that I wanted to play a piece that people know that sounds good for a recital. I did it. The well-known "Spinning Song" was the piece I accomplished. Another was to improve my memorization and I was able to play three pieces for auditions by the end of the year.

*Erika Graf, 13 years old ▲*

**Sara Bradley Mason** (at the time of this article) was President of the Wisconsin Music Teachers Association. She holds the Professional Certificate in Piano from MTNA, and is an independent piano teacher. She is a member of *Allegria*, a chamber music ensemble, and has been active as a performer, accompanist, adjudicator, and clinician.



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# A stable and comfortable schedule

by Sally Laird

One aspect of getting fall lessons off to a good start is to work out a schedule that will be comfortable and stable for all parties throughout the whole school year. This means first, that the teacher has to determine the limitations of hours for teaching and the number of students those will accommodate. Then, the students and their parents need to consider other anticipated activities and commitments within which the lesson times will fit without conflict.

It is important that the teacher be aware and considerate of the students' and parents' other interests and commitments while making clear to them the limitations of scheduling flexibility. From the teacher's viewpoint, there are several points to consider:

1. What days do you plan to schedule lessons?
2. What time can you begin each day and what time do you need to finish?
3. What is the desired length of each lesson slot?
4. If the stretch of time is lengthy, should you schedule 10- to 15-minute breaks so that you won't have to interrupt any lesson for a "potty call" or a fresh cup of coffee?
5. How many students will fit into your tentative schedule? If it is not enough, where can you add lesson slots? Early morning? Later into the evening on one or two days? During school hours for release time high school students or non-working adults? Remember, you can only do as much as time and energy allow. An overworked teacher burns out sooner or later, and is of little benefit to the students.
6. If your days and times are limited, consider including one or two "open" slots (perhaps at the tail-end of a day's teaching or on a Saturday morning) in which make-up lessons could be given.

Once you have determined what your teaching schedule will be, write it up clearly and send a copy to each adult student and each child's parent. Ask them to indicate the three preferred lesson slots and cross out any which would be impossible with the remainder indicating open possibilities. (You may also benefit from additional information such as what commitments to extra-curricular and other activities might conflict or affect the student's lesson attendance, practice time, and rate of progress.) Be precise about your need to have the sheet returned to you by a date which will give you time to work out the placement of students in your schedule.

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determine the  
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those will  
accommodate.

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The parents' and students' part in this scheduling process is very important. It includes giving careful thought to the activities and commitments that can be anticipated for the whole school year and consideration to the teacher's task of trying to accommodate everyone fairly within the limitations of time and energy. Some of the areas to be considered are:

1. School and/or community sports
2. School, church, and social group meetings and activities
3. Other lessons and classes
4. Student part-time jobs
5. Family vacations
6. Sibling activities
7. Transportation time and means
8. Parental activities such as work, classes, and social interests

9. How the active alertness of a student at certain times (supper time or later!) may be affected by the age and personality of the student.

Scheduling time is also a good time to let the students and parents know of the major activities in which you, the teacher, plan and expect participation for yourself and your students. Inform them, in writing, of the dates and times if possible, of any group classes, performances, auditions, adjudications, or festivals that will come up during the year. Ask them to reserve those dates on their calendars. Of course, you should remind them of those activities as the times approach, but if they know about those activities early, perhaps they will give priority to them over conflicting activities which may arise later.

By demonstrating good planning techniques, the teacher shows that there is a commitment to directing the students through a successful year. By cooperating in the scheduling process, the parents and students also realize a commitment to the year of lessons. By opening the doors for communication early, getting around the rough paths of conflicts and slumps can be made a little easier. ▲

*After living and teaching in Eagle River, Alaska for 15 years, Sally Laird relocated to Bay Village, Ohio in 1989. She holds a BM degree from Sam Houston State University and is professionally certified through MTNA. Sally served the Eagle River Music Teachers Association as president and vice president, and held offices in the Anchorage Keyboard Teachers Association, and the Alaska Music Teachers Association. She (has) served on an ad hoc committee on local associations for MTNA and was a presenter at the 1990 MTNA national convention.*



# Start the fall term organized

by Tim Shook

Beginning the Fall term is exciting for keyboard students, parents, and teachers. Students anticipate working on new goals in technique, repertoire, and lesson books. Does this excitement just happen? No! The teacher must enter the Fall term organized.

Organization must begin early. Just as a bloom on a flower results from an earlier planted seed, the successful fall term results from seeds planted in the minds of the students and parents. Here are some ideas to help build excitement for the Fall term:

1. Allow the fall term seeds to germinate through an active Summer program. Plan the Summer session for variety, allowing students to explore new technology, popular styles, improvisation (jazz or traditional), ensemble playing, lead sheet realizing, composing, or accompanying. Offer a recital as the culmination of the summer session where students can share their best work from the summer. Participation in an active summer program creates a continuity in piano study resulting in the students anticipation of the Fall term.
2. The seed must germinate within the parents as well as the students. Schedule parent-teacher conferences during the summer and discuss strong and weak aspects of the student's piano study. Examine the parent's musical goals for

the student and suggest ways both parents and teacher may help the student successfully reach these goals. An important part of the conference is discussing the benefits of music study, reminding parents that the student gains much more than the ability to play and listen to music.

3. Create new interest for the Fall term by making one significant change in the studio. Giving rewards for practice time, rearranging the studio, adding a lab component to the studio, redecorating the walls or remodeling a room are all types of positive changes.
4. Offer a "Keyboard Carnival" the week before the Fall term starts. The Keyboard Carnival gives information about the Fall term and creates a festive atmosphere. Hold the event like an open house in the studio with teachers sitting at a booth ready to talk to parents and students. The three integral parts of the "Magic Triangle" (student-parent-teacher) are present and can list the goals discussed in the summer parent/teacher conference in priority order for the next year. Upon completion of this list, the teacher may discuss accomplishing the goals, participating in events, new policy items, changes in the studio, tuition payments, and calendar dates.

Activities centers provide fun, thought-provoking sessions during the Keyboard

Carnival. The "Schedule Center" allows parents and students to write a weekly schedule of daily practice times for the student. Younger students enjoy an "Events Center" where they can discover events in which they may participate, such as festivals, contests, and auditions. Have the students write their names on displayed posters representing the events in which they would like to participate. The posters will serve as a convenient guide in choosing the students' repertoire. Have mature students monitoring activity centers. Serve refreshments and allow time for parents and students to converse with other studio families, new and returning.

A sequence of activities such as these help build excitement toward the beginning of the Fall term. The parents are involved in the music education process, the students have had opportunities for decision making, and music education has become a family project with direction. As a result, the students, parents, and teachers enter the fall term in full bloom and the organized teacher can focus on helping the student reach the goals set by the Magic Triangle. ▲

*Tim Shook, a 1987 D.H. Baldwin Fellowship recipient, is director of the Creative Keyboard Studios in Wichita, Kansas. He teaches piano and piano pedagogy and directs the Fine Arts Preparatory Program at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas.*

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*The Magic Triangle:*

## Teacher/Student/Parent

*Barbara Kreader, Editor*

*Barbara Kreader has continued to teach in her independent studio in Evanston, Illinois since 1974. She is also Senior Editor for Educational Keyboard Publications for Hal Leonard. Her previous responsibilities have included faculty member of Northwestern University's Division of Preparatory and Community Music, editor of Clavier magazine, and editor of Baldwin's Soundboard newsletter.*

*This issue's contributor:*

*Karen Harrington, NCTM, maintains a studio with over thirty-five students in Tulsa, OK. A graduate of the University of Oklahoma, she is also active as a clinician and adjudicator. She is currently president of the South Central Division of MTNA for which she previously served as secretary. Karen is a past president of Tulsa Accredited Music Teachers Association, and has served the Oklahoma Music Teachers Association as member-at-large to the board, as a member of its certification committee, and as President of the Northeast District. Karen is also currently president of the Tulsa Piano Study Club (an organization dating back to 1915). She also produces music theory games through her own company, Music Games 'N Things, and in addition, she is a co-author of the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library Theory Workbooks and author of the Hal Leonard Notespellers.*

## What do you say to a student who wants to quit piano lessons?

Last spring I received "The Call" from one of my parents. Nine-year old Blake "needed to quit lessons" because he had been chosen to join a traveling Little League team. In my community this honor is comparable to becoming a rock star among peers and to becoming a lawyer and a doctor among parents.

Sometimes I am relieved to hear that a student has decided to stop lessons, especially if the student and I, together with the parents, have tried everything to keep interest going. Blake presented a different story. Eager, intelligent, musical, and coordinated, he had been practicing and playing like the little powerhouse he is. I loved working with him.

In this month's article, Tulsa teacher Karen Harrington talks about her feelings when her daughter decided to quit piano lessons. Sometimes we simply have to give in. Did I try to talk the family out of their decision to end Blake's lessons? No. Despite the fact that Blake "didn't want to quit," I know the pull of Little League and I also knew that Blake was overscheduled with swimming and the tutoring for possible entrance, as a fourth grader, into a high school math program.

From the experience of teaching Blake's two older siblings, one who became a serious ballerina and the other a math whiz, I also understood that the family saw piano

lessons as a finishing touch, a way to increase brain cognition and develop body coordination. These goals, while certainly not my only ones, are worthwhile, and Blake had already achieved them. In addition, he wouldn't have even a minute to practice, which would frustrate both Blake and me.

I shed a few tears, let go, and made "The Call" back. "Congratulations to Blake for making the team. I feel sad that his involvement with baseball means he has to give up piano lessons, but I respect you for helping him choose among activities so he doesn't become overscheduled and miserable." He came for two more lessons. He played all of his favorite pieces for me and we celebrated all he had accomplished.

I then sat down with myself and reflected once again on my role as a teacher. I can command, cajole, cheerlead, encourage, plead, advocate, and even demand, but in the end, the parents and the child are the ones who have to choose to study and to make piano lessons a priority. I am merely the medium between the music and the child.

Eight months later I received another call. Blake wanted to "take a few lessons" between swimming and baseball season. Unfortunately, my schedule was full. I have rarely felt sorrier that this was the case. ▲

## Who should drop out and who should continue?

by Karen Harrington

When a student says he or she wants to quit piano lessons, I am not usually surprised. How I respond depends on the student, the family, and my assessment of the student's progress. Often I am the one to suggest that a student not continue. In many cases par-

ents want their children to continue simply because "it's a part of their education." However, when the student is unhappy and does not respond to my suggestions, and when we have wrestled with the situation for months, I tell the student and parents that we should stop. I will not keep a student



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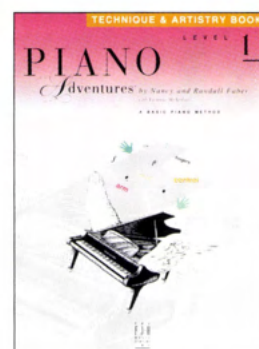
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who is unresponsive and sincerely no longer wants to come to lessons. I ask students to quit only after I have talked honestly with them about their capabilities and about any literature that might keep them interested.

There was a time in my career when I decided that I wouldn't keep students who didn't show some talent and have a flair for piano, but in the long run I am glad that I didn't stay with that policy. We have all dealt with students who "didn't have a musical bone in their bodies." After working with these students, though, I have found that with perseverance on my part and theirs, they can keep a steady beat, read fairly well and play musically. I often reflect on their beginnings. Although the progress is slow, they enjoy their lessons and ultimately develop skills and great attitudes! What better way is there for them to develop self esteem, enhance their lives, and learn to focus? Besides learning to play the piano, they develop coordination and perseverance that benefit their performance in school and in life. When students are consistent in their practice and are proud of their accomplishments, I know I have succeeded. Often students with less natural talent are ultimately more content with piano than the talented ones who perform well in competitive auditions.

Throughout the year I often talk to many of my students about why they are taking piano lessons. We have heart to heart talks about their future in piano, about their interest in the arts and about their attendance at concerts (which I urge them to attend). I ask about their practice habits, and specifically whether they go to the piano on their own or if a parent has to insist that they practice. Because routine plays an important role, I ask about the time of day when they practice and how long they spend at the piano. I write goals in their assignment books, making certain they are reading their assignments and following my directions. Their answers are not always what I would wish; but they are generally honest, and the conversations allow us to set realistic goals and shape useful habits. When sports and other activities interfere with practice, I work with the student and parents to set a time each day or at least planned times during the week for practice. Without practice, students just will not advance.

## What motivates student interest in continuing on with lessons?

To keep students motivated and interested, literature plays a key factor. Students at the lower levels are in methods, but all students receive solos and supplemental literature. Hoping to involve them and to build their excitement, I present them with several pieces appropriate to their level and allow them to choose what most piques their interest. We also discuss the historical periods and listen to recordings so that they can develop a feel for the times and context from which the music came. For many students, the imagery from pieces by educational composers such as Dennis Alexander, Melody Bober, the late William Gillock, Jennifer Linn, Robert Vandall, and others, seems to spark an interest and excitement that motivates them. When students arrive for their lessons, it is interesting to see which piece appears first in their stack.

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To keep students motivated and interested, literature plays a key factor.

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Almost always it is the piece they have practiced the most. I gladly go along with that ploy. After we play their assigned technique, we begin with the piece on top.

In preparation for this article, I talked with Gloria Johnson, one of my colleagues here in Tulsa. She told me that she has three girls from one family who occasionally talk to their mother about quitting. The mother tells them that if they can find three adults who say that they are glad they quit piano lessons, the girls can also quit. How many adults have we talked with who say, "I wish I had continued?"

Once students reach that certain age, the only thing we can do is encourage, praise and present music they can play and enjoy. Once that has been accomplished, the ball is in their court. We can't do it for them; we can only enhance the process.

## A good musical foundation will last a lifetime

When students and parents come for their initial interview, I tell parents that my main goals for students are: 1) that they learn to read music easily, for this skill will

allow them to enjoy playing the piano throughout their lives, and 2) that they learn to play musically. They must learn to shape phrases, find climaxes, and play a piece according to the composer's intentions. If we can also learn the theory and history behind the music, then they have learned the joy of making music.

A couple of months ago I received a telephone call from my twenty-seven year old daughter. She had just enjoyed an impressive recital by a French pianist. She began the conversation by saying, "Would you tell me again why you let me quit piano when I was in the eighth grade?" If there had been one child I would have most wanted to continue in piano, it was Emily. She was studying with a wonderful teacher whom she adored, and she had the talent, coordination, and musicality needed for success. Her father and I encouraged her in every way and even resorted to punishment by not allowing her to do things she wanted to do until she had practiced; but she absolutely *refused* to practice. Finally, we were no longer able to deal with her rebellion and let her quit. Nevertheless, during and after college she has continued to attend many concerts, operas, plays, dance performances, and recitals. She owns more CDs of classical music than I do, and she visits museums at every opportunity. Next spring she will receive a Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan. I have to believe that her love of the arts reflects the environment we provided when she was growing up, including her years of piano lessons.

When parents are faced with similar situations and lessons cease, I tell them that what their children have already learned will be with them forever and that maybe someday they will look back with appreciation of what they have learned and will be lovers of music. Chances are they will phone home one day to find out why their parents let them quit piano lessons. ▲

*In the next issue:*

What did you learn from competing in the MTNA competitions?



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**Elvina Pearce**, Editor of Keyboard Companion, studied piano with Isabelle Vengerova and pedagogy with Frances Clark. She is a founding member of the Board of Trustees of the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy for which she serves as Vice President. She has presented recitals and workshops in over forty states plus Canada, the Republic of China, and Australia, and is also a nationally recognized composer.

This issue's contributors:

**Lisa Strouse Caramia** works with school-aged and adult students in her independent studio near Rochester, New York.

**Beth Jones** teaches at the North Central College Piano Academy in Naperville, Illinois, where for eleven years she served as the Academy's director. She holds degrees in piano performance from DePauw University and the University of Alabama. In addition to her teaching, she is also very active as a performer and adjudicator in the Chicagoland area.

**Sue Ann Steck-Turner** is an independent teacher in Lafayette, Louisiana. She is certified as a Master Teacher by MTNA and is currently president-elect of the Louisiana Music Teachers Association. She is active as a collaborative pianist, clinician, and adjudicator.

## The Other Teacher: Home Practice

*Elvina Pearce, Editor*

### What do you tell parents/ students about practice in the pre-enrollment interview?

Over the years, I've discovered that many (if not most) of the problems which I have experienced with students have to do with their practice, and quite often, these have occurred because of a lack of effective communication between me, the parent and the student. Since practice is one of the most critical issues related to student progress, I have learned that it is essential to be sure that both parents and students understand my philosophy on this subject, as well as my studio policies relating to it. Of course, this information must

be clearly presented at the pre-enrollment interview, and it also needs to be periodically reiterated. I always begin each new teaching year with a reminder to all returning students and their parents of my expectations for their ongoing responsibilities related to practice.

Read on to find out how our three writers for this issue, Lisa Caramia, Beth Jones, and Sue Steck-Turner, deal with the subject of practice at their pre-enrollment interviews with prospective students as well as with their continuing students. ▲

### One of the purposes of the interview is to educate both the parent and the student about the discipline of home practice

by Lisa Caramia

In one of my early years of teaching, a mother dropped off her daughter for a lesson and reported to me, "She loves coming to lessons, but she doesn't practice. Make her practice!" I imagined myself jokingly asking the mother if she thought I should move in with them.... Even back then, I had a policy statement and interviewed potential students, but I don't recall the details of the interview with this particular family. Of course, no one can actually make someone else practice, but perhaps my policies and interviewing process have improved enough over the years not only to weed out a few potential problem families, but above all, to educate both the parent and prospective student about the discipline of consistent home practice.

#### What do I do at the interview?

During the first portion of an interview, the parent, child, and I sit at a table to dis-

cuss practicing, which also includes my showing them some materials and handouts to aid and encourage practicing. I then engage the child in a few activities that model practice steps.

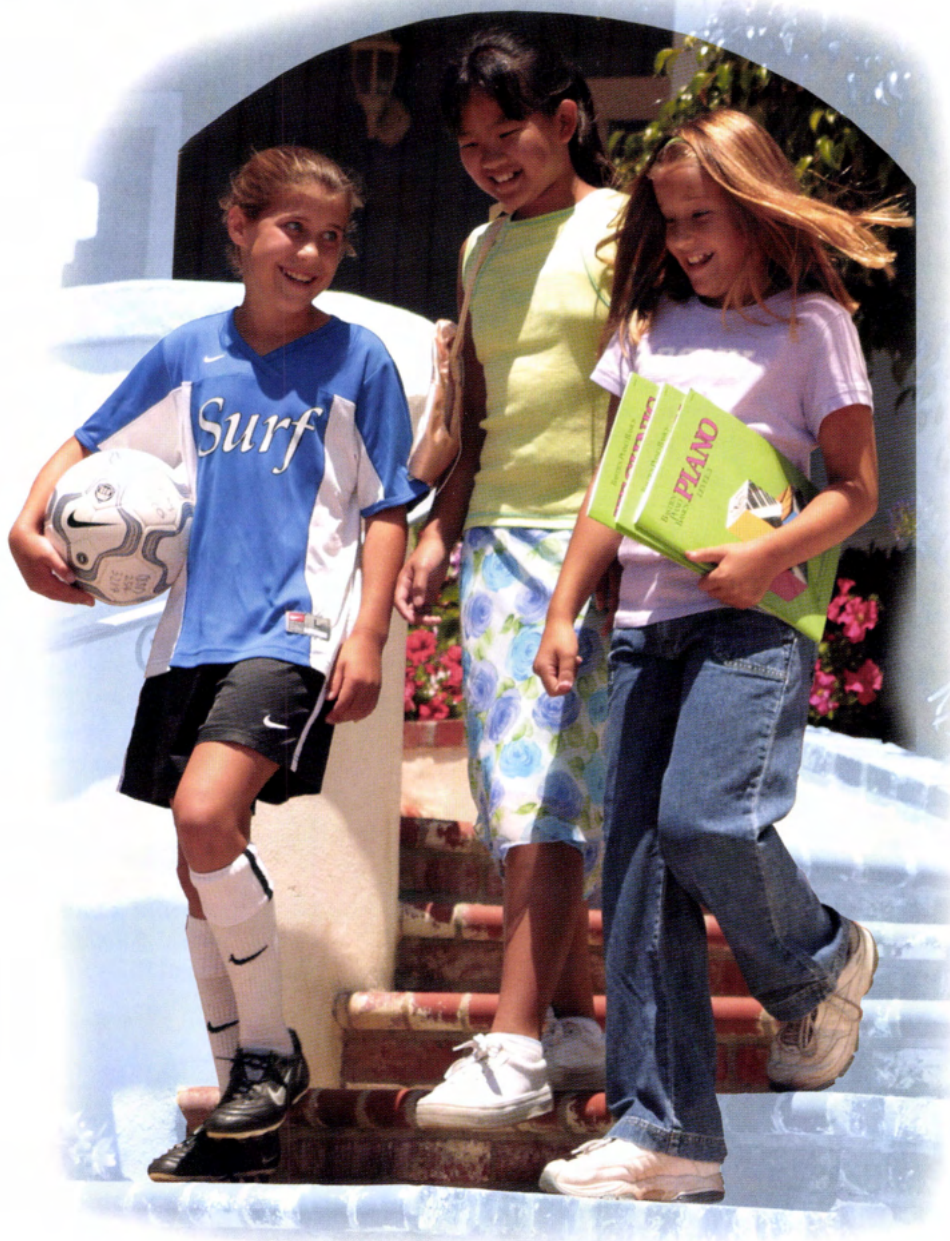
#### • The "Discussion" portion of the interview

I ask the child how many days she thinks she should practice. The most eager child will respond, "Every day!" I expect quality practice to occur daily or at least five different days each week, without making up missed practice sessions. A day of practice is accomplished only by completing the entire assignment. I show the family the practice record sheet on which students fill in their start and finish times for each day of practice for a given week. The sheet allows room to record two sessions per day in case a student feels more comfortable splitting his or her practice time into two daily segments rather than practicing in



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one longer session. The length of time spent practicing may help me to know if I'm giving the student an appropriate amount of work. I indicate that perhaps when parents sign the record at the end of the week, they can discuss how lessons and practicing are going. I tell the child if she fabricates practice time, she's mainly cheating herself and that I can probably tell when she hasn't practiced, anyway.

I allude to my practice chart dotted with stickers, each different colored sticker corresponding to a different number of practice days per week. I tell the student that negative consequences (listed in the policy statement) can result from inconsistent or incomplete practice, but not to worry about those things if he or she merely practices the entire assignment well at least five days every week. The greatest reward students receive for careful, focused practice is their own progress, which, in turn, thrills Mom and Dad *and* the teacher. I have no minimum practice requirements for adult students; however, I still encourage them to divide their practicing among as many days as possible rather than perform marathon practice sessions once or twice a week.

One of the most important duties I have during a lesson is to show students *how* to practice. As I display a sheet of practice steps, I articulate that if they decide to enroll in lessons with me, I will be giving them this sheet of practice steps, teaching them how to use the steps during the lessons, and writing on the assignment sheet which practice steps to use for a given piece or section of a piece. I state that I might periodically observe a home practice session in place of a lesson to see how a student is practicing.

The assignment sheet, practice record, and practice step handout all list my phone number. As I present what a sample assignment sheet looks like, I also tell parents and potential students that most school teachers have the luxury of being in touch with their students five days a week. What I say next usually makes many of my private music teacher friends gasp: I ask students to call me if they ever have questions about an assignment. For example, perhaps I didn't explain a theory assignment well enough, and even though at the lesson, the student said that he understood the assignment perfectly well, he somehow felt confused

about how to complete it at home; or perhaps he had trouble focusing at the lesson because his dog had died the day before. A student's saying "I didn't understand this" at the next lesson can become a chronic statement with one who procrastinates or just doesn't want to complete a certain part of an assignment. However, when students initiate a *phone call*, they further develop a sense of responsibility toward an assignment, as well as efficiency of time management, and ultimately take charge of their own progress. Reviewing a task on the phone with a responsible student certainly takes more of my time, yet I believe it is time well spent for both of us.

#### • The "Activities" portion of the interview

The activities I choose during an interview introduce a few practice steps. Here is one example: With a beginner, I might initiate clap backs while counting out loud and write rhythms on the board for her to tap and count out loud. After praising the child for counting out loud, I tell her that tapping and counting out loud is one of the practice steps she will be using when learning a new piece, and I ask her if she thinks she can count out loud at home. Sometimes I even say that if she doesn't think she can, I might not be the right teacher for her. Yet, if she can count out loud at home, she will already be on her way to becoming her *own* teacher.

Above all, no matter what policies teachers inform students and parents about at the interview regarding home practice, they must diligently reinforce those policies during the lessons and follow up with parents as necessary. Writing this article has compelled me to reexamine my own reinforcing skills which I believe I need to strengthen — *with practice, of course!* ▲



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- 1 Judge's Guideline Sheet
- 1 Judge's Comment Sheet (copies to be duplicated by the teacher as needed)
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# What happens at the interview?

by Beth Jones

Whenever I conduct a pre-enrollment interview, I provide the following material for the parent to study during the time that I am auditioning his or her child:

- Our *Piano Academy's* "Calendar and Studio Policies" (which includes the department's practice requirements);
- A printed information sheet which summarizes my own personal philosophy and requirements related to practice;
- My professional "bio," and a music scrapbook;
- An application form.

## What do I do at the interview with a prospective transfer student?

During a transfer student's interview session, I like to learn something about his or her home practice. Does the student tend to practice all in one sitting, or is the practice often divided into several shorter segments? In asking when practice usually takes place, I've learned: "right after school," "before bed," "sometimes a few minutes before school," "after supper and a shower," "before leaving for karate," "after one hour of homework," "all in one sitting," "I tend to do it in one chunk, but sometimes I divide my practicing — it depends on the day," "either before or after my homework." Often I discover in the pre-enrollment interview that the student is already accustomed to practicing what I would consider to be an adequate length of time.

## A discussion of curriculum and materials

After the student and I have finished working together in the audition, I then meet with the parent, first giving a summary of the interview. Curriculum and materials are discussed, and the parent is asked to send along a three-ring binder to the first lesson. At this point, I think it's a good idea to show the parent a copy of the assignment sheet that will be placed each week into the binder. (See example 1 at right and also on p. 19.)

As you can see, my assignment sheet includes boxes to be checked off on a daily basis after each category (technique, theory, repertoire) of the assignment is completed. I'll know that my expectations for completing the assignment sheet probably weren't

presented clearly at the interview if, during the course of study, the child is inconsistent about filling out the sheet. By looking over the completed assignment sheet at each lesson, I am provided with a glimpse into the daily practice. Seeing how much of the assignment is covered in each home practice session helps me evaluate the assignment's length. Parents should know that careful consideration is given to the number of pieces that would typically be assigned each week. For example, with an early intermediate student, I mention that there

could be five to eight pieces (a combination of new and review pieces) included in the assignment.

## What should the student bring to the first lesson?

At the interview, I also tell the parent that in addition to the binder for the assignment sheet, the child will also need to bring a new audio cassette tape so that various portions of the lesson can be recorded. I explain that I frequently tape

Example 1 (below and on p. 19)

### ASSIGNMENT SHEET by Beth Jones

QUARTER: \_\_\_\_\_ LESSON #: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**REMINDERS:** 1) Group Lesson Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
Performance pieces: Memory: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
2) Next week's "Begin-the-Lesson" piece: \_\_\_\_\_  
3) "On-Own" piece: \_\_\_\_\_ Due date: \_\_\_\_\_  
4) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

For each category, put a ✓ in the box every day after you've done the assignment.

At the end of the assignment, be sure to total each day's practice time and have your parent sign it before you come to your next lesson.

#### TECHNIQUE WARM-UPS:

1) \_\_\_\_\_ Create your own warm-up this week.  
MM = \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

2) **SYLLABUS**, pp. \_\_\_\_\_, EX. # \_\_\_\_\_  
KEYS: \_\_\_\_\_  
MM = \_\_\_\_\_ HS \_\_\_\_\_ and HT \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

3) **SCALES**: Keys: \_\_\_\_\_  
MM = \_\_\_\_\_ HS \_\_\_\_\_ and HT \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

Practice Suggestions: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4) **ARPEGGIOS**: Keys: \_\_\_\_\_  
MM = \_\_\_\_\_ HS \_\_\_\_\_ and HT \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

Practice Suggestions: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5) **OTHER**: \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S



the student actually doing some of the practice steps being assigned and that I'm pleased if he/she works with the tape as needed during home practice — especially at the start of each new week's practice right after a lesson. I request that the student listen to the tape at home, hear a demonstrated practice step, and then turn off the tape and *do* the illustrated step, continuing this same procedure with each subsequent step. (I have also found that some students enjoy being asked to listen at home to their taped lesson performance of a "recital-ready" piece, listening for things they're pleased with, as well as any aspects of the performance that could be improved upon in practice.)

While meeting with the parent, I note that the student is asked to fill in each day's

practice time on a chart that appears at the bottom of p. 2 of the assignment sheet — and that a parent's signature is requested on this weekly practice record before the student returns to the next lesson. We next review the Academy's practice requirements which the parent will have previously read as I worked with his/her child in the audition. The practice policy states:

Students are enrolled with the understanding that they will practice a minimum of five days a week. Suggested daily practice requirements are as follows: for students in elementary school up through grade 5, at least 30 minutes a day; for students in grades 6-8, 45 minutes a day; for students in grades 9-12, one hour per day.

I often share with parents my own experiences with the piano practice of our 7th-grade daughter, Hillary. For example, after her weekly lesson, I usually look over her new assignment sheet in order to be aware of what has been assigned. To encourage thoughtful practice, I often ask that we look over the assignment together *before* a practice session — something which I wish we would do before *every* practice. Though it's wise to allow Hillary to work on her own without interruption, I am sometimes torn (as many parents may be) between staying *out* of the music room and wanting to pop into it in order to "redirect" the focus of the practice. On occasion, I'll ask Hillary to let me know when she'd like me to hear a performance piece. Those times when she is the happiest to demonstrate practice steps often immediately follow one of these performances.

Parents are asked to look at their child's assignments periodically so that they can assess whether or not he or she is actually *doing* what has been assigned. At the interview, I also discuss the importance of parents giving positive reinforcement when hearing the student's home practice. For instance, a parent might say to the child: "I notice that you're becoming more accurate as a result of slow practice." Or, "That last piece I heard sounds much better than it did a few days ago. Those practice steps you've been doing must really be paying off!"

For those families who are no longer new to my studio, I communicate frequently with them throughout the year about both the quality and quantity of their child's practice. End-of-term progress reports provide an excellent opportunity for conveying such information. And at the start of each *new* school year, I once again remind both parents and students about my policy on practice. To that end, in the early fall, I send home with each of my returning students, another copy of my information sheet about practice as a reminder of what was discussed at their pre-enrollment interview. In addition, I also provide them with a description of the practice schedule that has worked well for my own child. ▲

## ASSIGNMENT SHEET page 2 (Beth Jones)

### THEORY:

SYLLABUS, pp. \_\_\_\_\_ EX. # \_\_\_\_\_

Keys: \_\_\_\_\_

Practice Suggestions: \_\_\_\_\_

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S'

### REPERTOIRE: Review Pieces:

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S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

### New Pieces:

---

---

---

---

S	M	T	W	TH	F	S

Sightplaying: pp. \_\_\_\_\_

### TOTAL PRACTICE TIME

This week's average: \_\_\_\_\_

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat

Signature of Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

### OTHER COMMENTS:



# What are my expectations for student practice?

by Sue Steck-Turner

Practice can be the bane — and the beauty — of our existence. Compliance or non-compliance to practice instructions creates the pain or pleasure experienced during lessons.

At our initial meeting, I give parents and students my studio policy and practice procedures sheet for them to read and discuss with me. (See example 2.) Everyone leaves appearing to understand and to be reasonably assured that they can follow through with my expectations. However, through the years I have learned that most parents are basically ignorant when it comes to music lessons and initially are thinking primarily of that wonderful final product, rather than the long journey required to reach that reward, and that most students are just along for the ride. After the initial “honeymoon” is over, many students and parents become disillusioned about their commitment to what is emerging as a rigorous discipline.

## Two practice plan methods

The most common question concerning practice is “How long should my child practice?” I never answer this question — at least not with the anticipated answer. *Practice is **method**, not minutes.* (See example 2.) Since I teach an abundance of pre-schoolers, I use two practice procedures. Pre-schoolers and early elementary students use the *Magic Number Method* — they must practice five days a week and play every item three times each day, totaling the number 15. The amount of time spent depends on how quickly the child works, generally anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. If the child is a slow worker or is distracted easily, practice sessions should be divided into smaller segments and scheduled at various times during the day, focusing on fewer items at a time.

Older or more advanced students use the *Practice Plan Method* — a plan consisting of where, on what, and how they will focus their attention. (See p. 21.) For each selection they must plan where they will start in the music, what they hope to accomplish, how they will accomplish it, and the projected number of minutes to accomplish the task. Certain items such as scales, chords and arpeggios, and other technical exercises may continue with the *Magic Number Method*. With careful planning, students can estimate the required practice minutes, generally 45 to 90 minutes.

I am convinced that most practice problems arise from false assumptions. Teachers assume that students will honor the required practice outlined on that initial handout and that parents will serve as watchdogs. Parents assume that since their children are visiting the piano, they are practicing. While many students will try to follow instructions to the best of their ability, others assume that no one will really be able to tell the difference, and that they can wiggle their way out of a tight spot if necessary.

Example 2 (below and also on p. 21)

From the Studio of Sue A. Steck-Turner, NCTM

## PRACTICE

Practice is method, not minutes.

## ESSENTIALS FOR PRACTICE

- \* Music practice must have the same priority as school homework.
- \* Practice should have a regularly scheduled time during each day.
- \* The practice location must be conducive to concentrated study habits.
- \* Students must practice a minimum of five days a week.
- \* Suggested minutes for practice time will vary from ten to ninety minutes, depending on the level of the student.
- \* The most important time to practice is immediately following the lesson.

## PRACTICE METHODS

### Young or Beginning Students: Magic Number Method: $5 \times 3 = 15$

- \* Students must play each piece a minimum of three times each day for five days.
- \* Parents must monitor the practice of very young students every day. As the student gets older or more advanced, parents should wean their presence to the first day and fourth day, and eventually to “lending an ear”.
- \* All assignments will be numbered in the order the pieces will be heard at the next lesson. Concentrate on the first four or five items to make them as perfect as possible. When these are well-played, proceed to any additional items on the assignment.
- \* Rotate the list each day so each piece will receive maximum concentration at some time.
- \* If your child has difficulty concentrating for all of the required items, practice only one or two items at each sitting and schedule practice at additional times during the day.
- \* Depending on your child’s learning style and work habits, practice minutes will range from ten to thirty minutes each day.

p. 1

## Never assume!

One of the most important things I have learned through the years is to never assume! Be specific in demands and expectations.

• *Never assume students will bring their assignment notebook to the lesson, or even read it during the week.* I have developed assignment sheets to accommodate my teaching style, and I keep a carbon copy of each assignment for every student. I number each item on the assignment in the recitation



order for the next lesson and notate the areas of focus. Although many of my computer-generation students don't totally grasp the concept of carbon paper, they soon understand that there will be no confusion, or disagreement, with what was assigned — the written word is final.

• *Never assume that students will regulate their own practice.* When students' lessons are ill-prepared with no valid excuse, I send the *Magic Number* students home with a check-off sheet for the week. *Practice Plan* students formulate their practice plans in the lesson, writing them down (with carbons, of course!) so there will be no questions or excuses the following week. It takes time, but eventually it saves time. Students learn how to practice efficiently and lessons improve, often dramatically.

• *Never assume that parents know what is going on.* I have learned to always be in contact with parents, either verbally or in writing, and to keep an open time in my schedule for them to contact me. Occasionally I have to invite "non-existent" parents to the lesson to observe their child's performance and progress. It is wise to always keep the communication lines open to protect our professional reputation and to preserve our sanity.

• *Never assume the student is a "normal" learner.* Many difficulties in lessons are not caused by lack of practice but by learning problems in the students' personal lives. I have experienced an alarming increase of learning disabilities in the past ten years, especially ADD, ADHD, and dyslexia, and many of my students are classified as

"gifted" learners. An increasing number of students are from broken homes, and many more are being cared for by nannies. Many of these students do not learn in traditional ways and require constant adjustments and adaptations in methods, expectations, and attitudes — especially patience.

To be effective teachers we must clearly outline our procedures and expectations and be diligent in implementing and continuing them at all times. We must constantly be aware of our students' learning potentials and problems, whether they be personal or life-style. Good practice makes good lessons. Practice depends on that eternal triangle — student, parent, teacher. We perform the balancing act for the practice triangle by being precise, perceptive and persistent. ▲

**Older Students:** Practice is not playing from beginning to end.

### **Practice is having a PLAN.**

Your practice plan is where, what, and how.

- \* Plan **where** you will start and end your practice in each selection each day.
  1. Always start at a different location, either new material or problem areas.
  2. Choose a reasonable amount of material to perfect in each piece, and determine the number of minutes you will devote to accomplishing this task. When finished, play the entire piece as far as it is learned at least one time, and evaluate your progress for each selection. If you have not used all of the devoted time, proceed to the next area needing attention.
  3. Always begin each practice session with a different selection. Rotate your assignment list so that each item receives maximum concentration at least one day of the week.
- \* Plan **what** your focus will be in each piece and **what** you hope to accomplish. Do you need technical work, expressive work, or just nitty-gritty learn-the-notes work? Determine what you hope to achieve in your allotted time. Evaluate your progress for each focused area.
- \* Plan **how** you will accomplish your task.
  - Practice in small segments, either phrases or four measures at a time or isolated areas. Do hands separately to check for accuracy in notes, fingering, or voicing.
  - Use various learning techniques such as blocking, rhythmic patterns, etc.
  - ✓ Always check for consistency of fingering.
  - ✓ Always check for consistency of tempo. Use the metronome.
  - ✓ Analyze the music for chords, sequences, repetitions, etc.
  - ✓ Do slow practice--2 fast, 1 slow.
  - ✓ If memorizing, do 2 without music, 1 with.
- \* Always **review** previously learned material at least one time during your practice sessions.
- \* Practice does not need to be accomplished in one time segment. If your day is very busy, practice one item during any idle time--a study break or while waiting for dinner, for the shower, for the phone, etc.

**Always make something perfect each practice.**

From the Studio of Sue A. Steck-Turner, NCTM

*In the next issue:*  
What practice steps do you assign for early level repertoire?



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## Independence Day: Music Reading

Craig Sale, Editor

**Craig Sale** is Director of the Preparatory and Community Piano Program at Concordia University in River Forest, Illinois where he also teaches courses in piano pedagogy. He holds degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as well as a Professional Teaching Certificate from The New School for Music Study where he received his pedagogical training from Frances Clark.

### This issue's contributor:

**Rebecca Lewis, NCTM**, holds a B. Mus. degree from Wittenberg University and a M. Mus. degree in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from Northwestern University. She is the Pennsylvania Music Teacher Association Chair for Arts Awareness and Advocacy and lectures and writes on the benefits of music study. She frequently judges local piano festivals and competitions and maintains an independent piano studio in Pittsburgh, PA.

## What is new in your teaching of reading this year?

The new teaching year always brings a time of reflection and action — time to evaluate student progress and then implement a plan for the coming year. This year I am re-tooling some of my early-level reading activities. I have collected several ideas from previous articles in this Reading column and hope to incorporate them into my lessons. I am eager to see how these changes will help my students become even better music-readers.

### Including kinesthetic experience

In the Spring 2003 issue, Dr. Alice Hammel wrote, “We all learn through various modalities (visual, aural, and kinesthetic) ... A kinesthetic approach combined with visual and aural elements helps students learn.”

This year I am including kinesthetic elements in the introduction of “lines and spaces” with my young beginners and students with learning differences. In the past I have presented line-notes and space-notes by having the student see what I *draw* on the whiteboard. The only modality used in this case was *visual*. With the addition of “hands-on” kinesthetic experiences, I hope to avoid the confusion and apparent lack of focus I sometimes observe in young students working with the basic notational concept of lines and spaces.

To implement this goal, I have cut five 3-foot segments of heavy rope which I lay out on a table (using any number of the ropes). Each rope represents a “line” and the area between the ropes is a “space.” I have students place their hand on the rope to *feel the line* and then place a hand in the area between to *feel the space*. We do a brief activity where the students place their hands on lines or spaces as I direct. In past years I have used lines and spaces made out of tape on the floor, and students would stand on the lines or spaces. Although this whole-body experience has been effective, I believe my new activity in which the students *manually feel* lines and spaces will be even more meaningful.

Our three-dimensional experience of notation will continue with students placing large noteheads (cut out of construction paper) on or between the ropes, seeing how notes “sit” on a line or a space. Sometimes the students will place the notes as I direct them; other times *I* will place the noteheads and the student will tell me if it is a line-note or a space-note.

When we begin exploring intervals, the students will play them on the keyboard (*aural*), create them using our ropes and noteheads (*kinesthetic*), and read them in pieces and at the board (*visual*). By expanding the number of learning modalities used, I will have increased the students’ sensorial experiences and I suspect that because of this, their understanding will be more complete.

### Learning those ABC’s

In the Spring 2002 issue, Kim Nagy wrote, “Our students must understand the simple beauty of the repeated *A-B-C-D-E-F-G* line to space relationship. Using rote memorization and mnemonic devices leads to extreme confusion...” This year I am taking a more active approach to help students see the connection between the musical alphabet and the staff. The *Time to Begin: Activities* book by Steve Betts (Summy-Birchard/Warner Bros.) has been a great help and inspiration in this task. Since I began using this book a few years ago, my students have moved from off-staff to grand staff reading with greater ease. However, this year I am not letting the book do all the work!

I plan on taking alphabet activities such as the ones shown in examples 1 and 2 “off the page” through the physical manipulation of “alphabet cards” — large cards, each with a letter (*A, B, C, D, E, F, G*) on them. (See examples 1 and 2 on page 23.) Group lessons will provide opportunities to play games, inspired by Dr. Sally Sloane’s article in the Summer 2003 issue, where we “build” the musical alphabet forwards and backwards from any given note. Once



secure with the alphabet in steps/seconds, we will move on to new games where we skip/remove every other letter. This manual and visual manipulation of the alphabet will not only help prepare students for thirds but will also help them develop mental fluency with the idea of “skipping” letters in the alphabet.

## Improved note recognition

A major area of focus with my first-year students this year will be development of speedier note recognition. I remain a strong proponent of an interval-reading approach. However, one of the potential problems with this approach can sometimes be a slow development of note recognition. I want my students to reach the point more quickly where they can see a “B” on the treble staff and recognize it as such, rather than always using intervals (i.e., “*Treble G up a 3rd, B*”).

Again I am taking my lead from an activity in *Time to Begin: Activities* (see example 3). I plan to include similar activities at the whiteboard and on our rope lines and spaces. Once the students have moved from off-staff reading onto the grand staff, we can draw the alphabet on the lines and spaces, starting on our 3 landmark notes — *Treble G*, *Middle C* and *Bass F*, or use our alphabet cards and place them on our rope staff.

One of the benefits of a landmark approach is the security of location on the keyboard, i.e., *Middle C* is one specific *C* on the piano, *Treble G* is one specific *G*, etc. A continued focus on these fixed notes combined with fluency in intervals AND a more thorough grounding in the musical alphabet will make for easier note recognition.

In the past I would ask a student to identify this note as follows:



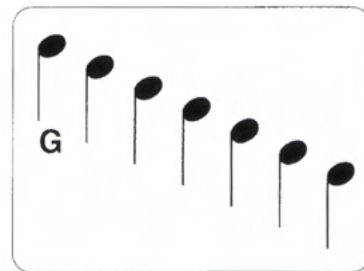
1. Look at the note.
2. Name the nearest landmark (*Treble G*).
3. Identify the direction and interval from the landmark to the note (up a 2nd).
4. Look on the keyboard to locate “*Treble G, up a 2nd.*”
5. Name the note (*A*) and then play it.

I think much of the past delay in my students’ note recognition has been due to step 4. This year instead of encouraging them to look at the keyboard I will have them mentally compute that “*G, up a second*” is “*A*.” And then they can look at the keyboard to determine the note’s exact location before playing it.

I can facilitate this through preparatory mental drills, e.g., “Think about a *D*. Now think up a third. What note is that?” Keep in mind that this will be possible because of the extensive alphabet work done before the student went onto the grand staff. If the student can easily complete these mental drills, it is then a small step to

### Example 1

Write the name under each note.

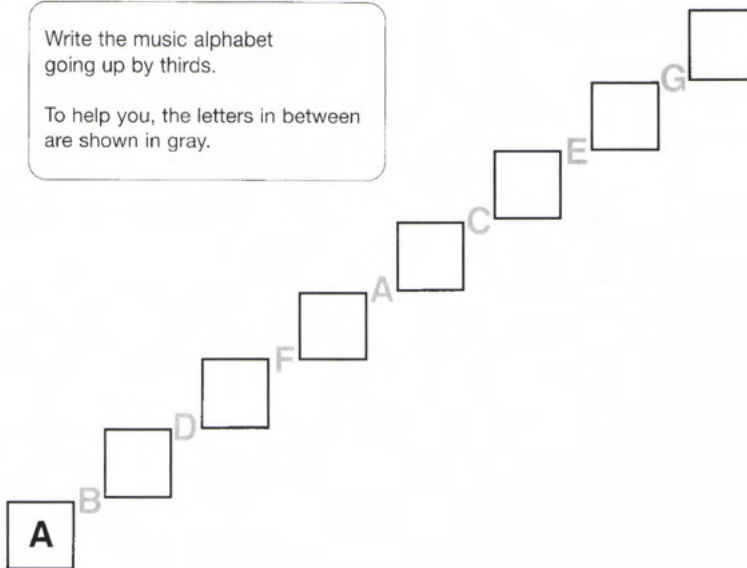


Examples 1, 2 and 3 from *Time to Begin: Activities* ©2000 Summy-Birchard Music, a division of Summy-Birchard Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

### Example 2

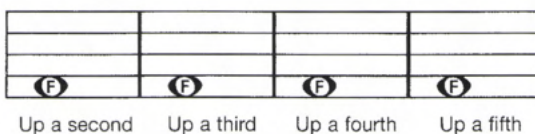
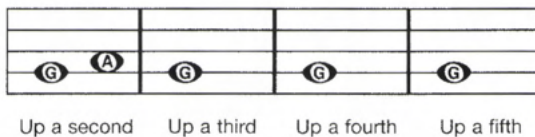
Write the music alphabet going up by thirds.

To help you, the letters in between are shown in gray.



### Example 3

In each measure, draw the second note and write its letter name. The first one is done to show you how.





flashcard drills where a note can be identified with the following slightly different process:

1. Look at the note.
2. Name the nearest landmark (*Treble G*).
3. Identify the direction and interval from the landmark to the note (up a 2nd).
4. Name the note (*A*) — using *mental computation* of “*Treble G, up a 2nd.*”
5. Look on the keyboard and play the note.

This new procedure includes internalized processing of the interval as it relates to the alphabet. Because it is an internal process, it will lead more quickly to memorization of the note name. In this case, memorization of note names is not a bad thing *because it is rooted in concrete experiences and conceptual understanding.*

### Regular sight-reading

In the Winter 2002 issue, Beverly Lapp wrote, “Those students who sight-read *often* will become better readers...” Reading something new every day is easier when students have sight-reading included in their elementary method materials. I need to make a concerted effort to continue this when students are in the *intermediate* level. To begin to meet my students needs I am going to utilize old materials I no longer use as well as numerous complimentary publications I have collected.

After completing each sight-reading book, I plan to ask students to play their favorite piece in the book. This will not only give me an idea of how they are doing with the material but can help me discover which new books or pieces I might want to include in students’ repertoire. Getting input from students will help acquaint me with the music that otherwise piles up on my desk!

### Teachers are learners

Teachers are really learners. We are always re-evaluating our work and making changes. Whatever change we make, we can be guaranteed to see a new result. We then evaluate these results and make new decisions. I believe that exploring the ways students learn best is the thing that keeps teachers fresh and motivated. When we stop learning from our students, our teaching becomes stagnant, routine and less effective. I hope *your* teaching year will be one brightened by continued evaluation and change! ▲

## Change sparks both creativity and enthusiasm

by Rebecca Lewis

I confess! I love summer and it’s hard to see it go. Family vacations, gardening, picnics — summer provides a restful margin in an often hectic teaching year. It also provides treasured time to study, practice and create new goals for September, the starting point of a new teaching year. Recently I’ve been making a real effort to use summers to reflect upon the successes and failures of the previous teaching year and commit to making at least one significant change to my studio, whether it be the addition of a piece of equipment, updating the curriculum, providing more performance opportunities or creating a new student incentive program. In this way, I regularly evaluate what my studio offers and look for ways to improve the curriculum.

Change is good not only for our students, but for *us*. Borrowing a phrase from today’s business world, it is good for us to “think outside the box.” All of us have comfort zones. Many of us feel comfortable with our familiar, “tried and true” teaching methods or styles. However, our comfort zones may fail students, who become bored with predictability. Change sparks creativity and enthusiasm. Change energizes teaching and learning. For this reason, as much as I love summer, I look forward to September, knowing that the changes I make will spark excitement among students and their parents.

### Creating a music lending library

Following the lead of a colleague, I recently strengthened my studio’s reading program by creating a music lending library. This was a simple change and done at very little cost to me, but it added great value for students, who now have access to an abundance of music for home sight-reading assignments at no cost to them. I color-coded piles of accumulated, but unused, music by level and genre and stored them in a file with matching color-coded dividers. Students sign out music appropriate to their level, by recording titles and dates in a 3-ringed binder. Big hits have been contemporary religious music, movie and show tunes, folk tunes and popular music. I’ll add about 10-20 books each year including complimentary music acquired at teacher workshops and conventions. I’ll promote use of the library by running an incentive contest, awarding certificates to students who regularly borrow music.

### Creating a computer learning lab

Another change was more extensive. I plunged (maybe “tip-toed” is a better word) into the age of technology and opened a computer learning lab. I was cautious about making a financial investment in technology until I was sure of the benefits to my students. Because I already owned a computer for studio business purposes, the initial financial outlay was merely the purchase of high quality headphones and a variety of instructional music software, researched and purchased online. The original intent of the lab was to supplement the studio’s theory program, having become frustrated with how little time I had during lessons for correcting and assigning written theory work. However, after exploring a variety of software, I quickly realized that using the lab was a perfect way to develop a more comprehensive curriculum and to provide additional reinforcement of concepts.

The lab is a hit! The blending of computer-learning, written theory, and small group and private lessons creates an environment where reading skills are reinforced four-fold, retention is high, and interactive activities are increased. Students are scheduled immediately before or after their private lesson to work independently on theory, ear training, music history, composers, and creativity software.

### Reinforcement of reading with a software curriculum and group lessons

During the summer, I developed a 5-year software curriculum that allows students to work on concepts appropriate to their level of study. Concepts are introduced at the private lesson and further reinforced with written theory work, computer software assignments and group lesson activities. Many reading concepts are included in the multi-level curriculum that covers everything from “The Musical Alphabet” to “Transposition.” Currently the lab program has 5 levels — primer, early elementary, later elementary, early intermediate and intermediate. Each level contains 7-13 concepts that students complete during the year. Study of each concept includes assignments (1-7 weeks long) from a variety of software programs. Students are grouped into levels at the beginning of the year and



take quick review tests that cover prior year concepts before beginning new material. The following illustrates concepts for the primer and early elementary level curricula:

### Primer Level

1. High and Low
2. Finger Numbers
3. Beat, Tempo and Rhythm
4. Musical Alphabet, Naming White Notes on the Keyboard
5. Introduction to the Staff
6. Treble and Bass Clef and Staff
7. Note Values – Quarter, Half, Whole Note, Dotted Half
8. Middle C Position Note Names
9. Rests – Quarter, Half, Whole
10. Barlines, Measures, Time Signature
11. Dynamics
12. 4/4 Time Signature
13. 2/4 and 3/4 Time Signature

### Early Elementary Level

1. Review of Treble and Bass Clef Note Names
2. Repeat Signs
3. DC, DS, CODA, FINE
4. Tempo Markings
5. Articulation
6. Ties and Slurs
7. Half and Whole Steps
8. 5 Finger Patterns
9. Sharps, Flats, Naturals
10. Grand Staff Note Names

The lab offers great reinforcement of reading skills. For example, a mid-elementary level student studying ledger lines works at the private lesson, identifying notes using landmarks as references. Sight-reading with ledger lines is done and several pieces are assigned for home practice. Students follow-up with correlated written theory work done during lab time. Further reinforcement is gained with instructional software. During the next several weeks, students complete 8 software lessons and 4 computer games from *Music Ace* (Harmonic Vision), *Essentials of Music Theory* (Alfred Publications.) and *Music Theory Fundamentals* (PianoMouse), covering bass and treble ledger lines above and below the staff. The software assignment for ledger lines takes up to 7 weeks to complete but is well tolerated because students love working on the computer. Many software programs incorporate ear-training drills so students are strengthening their listening as well as notation skills.

Group lessons offer final reinforcement. Using the lab curriculum as a reference, group lesson activities are structured around concepts currently being studied. Timed relay races, games, ensemble activities, sight-reading duets, all based on ledger notes can be

successfully used in a group setting. Learning takes on a new element of excitement when presented with variety and in the form of an interactive activity with the result that *students have fun!* Retention is high because concepts are thoroughly reinforced with private and group lessons, and with written and computer work. I'm sold on the educational value of my new lab curriculum, having already seen improved results in my students' National Federation of Music Clubs Junior Festival theory tests.

### **"Quality" time for written work**

Another change is providing "quality" time for written theory work, an important way to reinforce notation skills. How many of us are not surprised that students often complete theory assignments in the car while on their way to lessons? That is, if they remember to do them at all! The solution is easy! In my studio, students complete written theory during lab time, leaving their books in the studio when finished. This allows them time to fully concentrate at the lab desk on their written work and allows me time during the week to carefully correct their work. Once a week I take a stack of theory books to Starbuck's to correct while sipping a café mocha. Heaven!

### **Confronting reading problems**

Finally, I'm working on better ways to diagnose and correct reading problems. The studio provides plenty of sight-reading opportunities but my teaching has primarily focused on mental preparation skills, i.e., scanning the score, looking ahead — and encouraging students to regularly sight-read. I realize that students can't become fluent readers if underlying problems are not addressed, so I'll be incorporating short exercises into the lessons to assess and strengthen visual, motor and memory issues that often hinder reading. Exercises to develop quick horizontal and vertical eye movements; technique to develop quick hand shape responses for chords, scale passages and jumps; topographical awareness of the keyboard; and drills for short-term memory will be regularly completed at lessons.

How can I squeeze one more thing into my lessons? Multi-task! Rather than fragmenting lessons to cover one skill at a time, I'll incorporate sight-reading skills into other parts of the lesson, allowing me to cover several concepts at the same time. I had already done this with technique, theory and musical issues, but not with reading. Previously, my students sight-read new pieces at home to identify form, mark practice sections and identify potential problem areas. Beginning this year, students will complete the initial sight-reading and discovery at the lesson. When pieces are assigned, I'll slip in a few sight-reading drills at the same time I'm teaching practice and learning strategies.

Before playing, students can do visual exercises by quickly moving their eyes to and from focal points on the score, such as beginning and ends of lines, every other measure, or from the score to the keyboard, all done in time to the metronome. Scanning the score now turns into an eye exercise. This strategy works particularly well when weekly assignments include lots of shorter pieces learned quickly and not intended for performance. In this way, students are reading lots of music and I am constantly assessing their progress.

My curriculum is changing constantly and I'll be curious to see what works this year. No doubt there will be more changes in the future. ▲

*In the next issue:*

How do you teach "hard-to-read" pieces?





## Let's Get Physical: Technique

Scott McBride Smith, Editor

**Scott McBride Smith** is Executive Director of the International Institute for Young Musicians in which capacity he directs summer programs involving some of the nation's top artist-teachers and students. He has been a contributing editor of *Piano & Keyboard* magazine and has recovered from his early bad practice habits to become a well-known clinician and private teacher in Southern California.

### This issue's contributors:

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**Ronald Shinn** currently holds the chair Dowling Professor of Music at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, where he has been a member of the music faculty for twenty-five years. His Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance is from The University of New Mexico, his Master of Music in Piano Performance is from The University of Wisconsin (Madison), and his Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A.) in Piano Performance is from The University of Alabama. Dr. Shinn's students are consistently winners in solo and concerto competitions. He has judged many piano competitions throughout the South. In addition to the college load, Shinn has a number of talented pre-college and adult students, and was honored as the recipient of the 1999 AMTA Teacher of the Year Award.

**Lois Finlay** received her BS and MS from the Juilliard School of Music in Piano Performance. She has 10 years experience as a college level teacher and 35 years serving as a private piano teacher of all pre-college levels. Her students have included numerous state and regional winners. She has many years experience as judge for competitive and non-competitive auditions. She is a member of MTNA, GMTA, National Piano Guild, MENC, and GMEA.

## How do you help students control physical tension?

A wise man once said that the child is the father of the man. My grandmother had an earthier way of putting it. "You better watch out, Scotty," she said, following some childish misdeed of mine involving teasing of sisters which started as a joke and ended in tears. "What goes around always comes around."

Both statements apply to piano technique. What we teach in the beginning has a big effect on the result we get at the end. This isn't quite as easy as it sounds when dealing with younger students. There are so many challenges in achieving a recogniza-

ble rendition of a piece that sometimes, the underlying principles of good technique are overlooked.

You will make a good start to rectifying this situation by reading our three articles and applying the writers' ideas in your own studio. Hand, wrist and arm position, pronation and lordosis, imagery and problem-solving — they're all here, and more. "If one is good, two is even better," my grandmother used to say. "If you have three, you're rich". A good description of this issue's Technique column. ▲

## Awareness of natural functions of hand, wrist, arm, shoulders, neck, and back prevents undue tension

by Ronald Morgan

### The hand

Hang your arm and hand at your side. Now place your hand on a surface while maintaining the initial position. The hand is relaxed, has a natural curve, the final joint of the thumb is in a natural position (which differs slightly depending on the student), and the teacher can see the fingernails when looking down from above. I call this *playing on the pads*. There are many times when we must leave this position, but I suggest returning to it as often as possible to minimize muscle contraction. This is also one of my guiding principles in determining fingering.

Often students are encouraged to hold a ball to find the basic hand position. I am not in favor of this approach because I believe that it creates excessive muscle contraction in the hand and fingers. Students who are taught this position will often experience a collapse in the final joint of the fingers when playing on the pads. To

correct this, I try to create an awareness of firm finger joints away from the keyboard. An example would be to practice picking up and holding small objects with the thumb and one other finger with firm finger joints.

If the thumb is played exactly parallel to the keyboard, the student must lift it in order to move the thumb to another key. Effort is minimized if the thumb is played at a slight angle (a descending slope towards the keyboard). It is also much easier to pass the thumb under the other fingers when necessary.

Students with a tense thumb ("hitch-hiking" position) and the curled or raised 5th finger are attempting to stabilize their hand; it is a sensation similar to grasping a railing to avoid falling. The result is unevenness in articulation because the student inhibits the coordination of the fingers with the extremes of opposing motions (e.g., pulling up the 5th finger while pushing down the 4th). This is usually a sign of



a bigger problem — the student does not make a connection between the hand and the rest of the playing mechanism. Everything stops at the wrist, which is usually tight and immobile.

## The wrist

Our bodies and muscles like to move and it is healthy to move our wrists. Keeping the wrist in unnatural positions (static postures) for long periods of time is what gets us in trouble. Without fail, all students who have had problems with tension in the hands have improved when I free their wrists. I teach a basic exercise<sup>1</sup> using an easy pattern such as Hanon's first study from the *School of Velocity*. This exercise is to be played very slowly and only for short periods of time. The basic rules are:

- Play the notes *from the keys* (no lifting of the fingers above the keys). The thumb can fall away from the keyboard when not in use.
- Play each note with a smooth down stroke and a flexible wrist, followed by an immediate upstroke. Never exceed a comfortable range of motion for the wrist.
- Add lateral (sideways) motion when moving in a pattern from the thumb to the 5th finger. Imagine a straight line from the playing finger down into the arm. The elbow will also move away from the body as the pattern moves towards the 5th finger. Lateral motion releases the thumb and 5th finger from their previous roles as stabilizers.
- The faster one plays, the smaller the motions of the wrist. Students should have a free sensation in the wrist when playing fast passages. The wrist will move laterally to facilitate evenness, and will rise and fall with the contour of the phrase.

## The arm

I learned about the concept of physical gestures in piano playing at Eastman<sup>2</sup>. For example, if one plays consecutive octaves as *one movement*, the passage becomes easier. The mental image is horizontal, traveling along the length of the keyboard. Muscle contraction is also minimized if students follow-through with a flexible wrist and arm gesture when playing loud, chordal passages (like the follow-through when hitting a baseball — the physical gesture does not stop at the moment of impact). I encourage students to consider the choreography of their gestures through slow practice.

## Shoulders, neck, and back<sup>3</sup>

Students tense their shoulders and neck as a natural reaction to experiencing emotions while playing. It can cause sore trapezius muscles, and referred problems in the arm and hand due to insufficient blood circulation. To increase awareness of the problem in students, I assign easy pieces where they are only allowed to focus on relaxing their shoulders while playing. I also teach students to bend towards the piano from the hip to maintain a curve (lordosis) in the back, to keep the arm-bone in the shoulder socket as much as is possible when reaching forward, and to minimize a forward posture of the neck.

## General

I encourage students to increase blood circulation through exercise, and to counter the hours of muscle contraction from daily practice sessions with stretching. ▲

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some readers may recognize a similarity to the Vengerova technique, which I learned from Patricia Parr at the University of Toronto. She studied with Vengerova at Curtis.
- <sup>2</sup> I studied with Douglas Humpherys at the Eastman School of Music. He in turn studied with, among others, Nelita True, whose videos were also very influential.
- <sup>3</sup> Sue Callan-Harris, currently a physical therapist at the Eastman School of Music, was very influential in teaching me about the general physiology of the shoulder, neck, and back.

---

# Monitoring posture and hand position is important in controlling tension

by Ronald Shinn

No violinist can produce a good tone without addressing relaxation of the bow arm. Unfortunately, pianists sometimes study for years with hidden tension and poor tone but the issue is not addressed because the relationship between tone and tension is not as immediately apparent in pianists. Pianists sometimes suffer from physical injuries that may be tension-related, so there are many reasons for us to deal with excessive tension.

Monitoring posture and hand position is an important step in eliminating tension. Frequently observed errors in students include: sitting too far back on the bench; having the bench too far forward which limits lateral torso and arm movement; elbows positioned too close to the body; back either overly rigid and straight or slouched; wrist level too high or too low which can cause tendonitis, and head and neck bent too far forward, which can cause excess tension in the back as well as future problems with vertebrae misalignment.

## The elbows and arms

Particular attention should be paid to the elbow position. If the elbow is drawn too far toward the body, the hand will be sloped downward (supinated) and the weakest fingers of the hand (4th and 5th) will be forced

into positions that severely limit mobility. Students should relax and float arms out and up slightly. The arms should move into a position which draws the back of the hands parallel to the key tops and the ensuing pronation allows great freedom of movement in the weak 4th and 5th fingers. This also allows the elbow and forearm to track along with the movement of the hand during scales and arpeggios. Students often hold their elbow in one position while executing scale and arpeggio patterns, not realizing the strain that causes to their mechanism. Students should be encouraged to keep their forearm, hand and arm in approximately the same angle as they move higher or lower in pitch, and this requires freedom of movement in the shoulder and arm.

## The fingers

Students often force their fingers into unnatural positions. If a student holds the hand out in front, palm facing away, and then drops the hand onto the keys, the natural position of the hand would be to have fingers interlaced with the black keys and the thumb closer to the body on the surface of the white keys. And yet how often do we see students force their fingers in front of the black keys, avoiding interaction with black keys?



When executing leaps — for example when the left-hand plays a waltz bass involving lateral movement over an octave or two — students often avoid moving over the black keys. It seems much simpler and more natural to move in a low arc over the black keys, allowing the forearm and elbow to travel with and even lead the fingers in the movement to the new position (analogous to bowing a stringed instrument), keeping the 4th and 5th fingers approximately parallel to the piano keys through the movement.

### Choreography at the keyboard

Variety of sound demands variety of movement. The “choreography” of movement is an extremely important part of learning a piece. Too often, students are only concerned with getting the notes down. To push the key down and then to stop all motion is a tension-producing act; learning to come up and out of the key with a follow-through motion allows a more relaxed approach and promotes an awareness of how one sound connects with the next. While excess motion is not desirable, a series of short choppy motions is not desirable either. In general, when the movement stops, so does a student’s listening.

There are many other tension-producing acts: poor fingering which can cause undue strain in webbing between fingers and excessive lateral wrist movement; loud sounds produced by small muscle groups (back and upper arms can assist in producing large, effortless sound); failure to breathe during performance; excessive fast practice which promotes thoughtless, unnatural movements; excessive slow practice which may promote overly detailed movements; unnatural straight movements (our joints demand slightly circular movements); and excessively loud practice which fails to encourage use of refined, smaller muscle groups. After playing a note or chord, pianists can often be observed holding a fixed position. It is advisable to practice with deliberate “spring” in the wrist, which in turn moves the elbow and shoulder joints. It is very difficult for a joint to have excessive tension while limbs connected to that joint move.

Perhaps these brief reminders may help us more carefully choreograph movement and help students produce a more beautiful tone, fewer injuries, and greater joy in music making! ▲

## Is there “good” tension as well as “bad” tension?

by Lois Finlay

Physical tension can be a problem from the very beginning of the study of piano performance to the advanced stages of learning. Emotional tension is also a vital part of the expression of an idea or an emotion through sound. The ability to tell the difference is a subject which is very important for any piano teacher and student. If beginning students develop the *not-good* part of tension in their muscles, joints, ligaments, and if they are allowed to continue uninterrupted for a significant length of time, their bad habits may seem almost impossible to break. I believe that one of the teacher’s most important attributes is to *empathize* or *feel* what is going on in his or her student’s body while that student is performing.

### The importance of being aware of the proper physical approach to the piano

Often bringing the poor physical approach to the attention of students allows them to refocus their thoughts and include a more pleasant physical approach to the solution of the problem. For students who have been allowed to pursue some tense physical motions to the point that “they” are seemingly the “way to play,” it can be quite difficult to help them change their ideas about how to play or how to make the appropriate sound. It may require that the teacher and student work on some less complicated repertoire for a brief period so the primary focus can be on the correct physical approach rather than on reading the minute details of the score or discussing various interpretive ideas. Conversely, it may also be that in discussing those details, a re-thinking of the physical approach will be a natural part of the learning process. I suggest that it is absolutely

essential to deal with the physical approach that a student makes, even when it is *obvious* that the student does not want to, does not seem to care, or cannot do it “your way” at the moment. In other words, we should NEVER GIVE UP trying to influence the quality of tone that students make, even if they cannot seem to hear or feel the difference themselves.

Often a student will respond to a direction with, “But, I am already doing it!” when we can hear otherwise. Have patience! Eventually the light bulb goes on and the student says, “Oh, I didn’t think you meant THAT!”

Eventually the light bulb goes on and the student says, “Oh, I didn’t think you meant THAT!”

### Sally and John: two real life examples

Sally is 8 years old. She has just come for her second lesson with her new teacher, so she is trying very hard to please. Her little fingers march up and down like gung-ho foot soldiers of generations ago, *attacking* the keys lined up

in front of her. The sounds of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” are excruciating to hear. She grins and looks up at the teacher with wide eyes to get approval for her intense work. What does the teacher say?

John is 15 and planning a career in music. His previous teacher recommended to his family that it was time for someone else to help him prepare an audition program for college. His new teacher is excited by the challenge and assigns him a suitable program. The next few months cause the teacher to pull out her hair and treat him to a constant barrage of negative comments. Why? What is the problem?

To be sure, these are but two fictitious examples of piano students who are very well-intentioned but who abuse their bodies in a manner that obscures completely their expression of an emotional response to our wonderful world of piano sounds and



“classical” music. What got in their way? *TENSION* in capital letters! But, you say, tension is at the core of all musical statements. Herein lies the problem. It is what happens *after* the tension that sets up the release of the tension itself. Beginning in the first year of lessons, the student learns that the V7 chord creates the “tension” and that it “resolves” to the I chord. This is where the body should first learn the proper physical reaction. If the student grasps this one concept, he or she can then progress to experiencing far more physically complex things like releasing tension in the arm, hand, finger, elbow, shoulder, stomach, head, and foot. (Yes, I am sure you have seen and heard students whose foot and leg are cast in steel when they pedal.) Students must learn to play all types of articulation without getting bound up in physical abuse of their own bodies.

### Using imagery to development physical awareness of tension

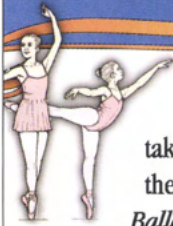
I mentioned earlier the necessity for the teacher to notice and feel the physical response within the student. In my studio I have a wonderful “helper.” One of my pianos reflects with complete honesty the physical approach of each person who caresses (or does *not* caress) its 88 keys. Listening with honesty is a great part of determining unwanted tension in the student’s playing. There are millions of images that help both teacher and student enhance this discussion. Often students help create these images. One of my 7-year-old students taught me a new image just the other day. Creating images that the student understands and feels in his/her own body is at the core of the solution to the problem of unwanted tension. Here are just a few. Allow your imagination to flow from there.

- The BOWLING BALL effect: no bumping, just rolling the heavy ball across the keys. This allows the fingers to relax and the weight of the arm to flow smoothly from one note to the next.
- The POGO STICK or DIVING BOARD effect: totally free up and down bounces for staccato notes. This keeps the arms and hands free from stiffness.
- PEDAL SOFTLY — so you won’t disturb anyone. This helps the leg and foot to relax so that the student does not noisily slam the foot down on the pedal.
- DON’T POKE MY EYE OUT — nudge me gently, please. This gesture allows the sound to be increased or decreased gradually, and avoids unruly dynamic changes. ▲

*In the next issue:*

What role does the wrist play in early-level technique?

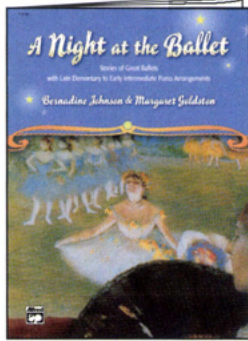
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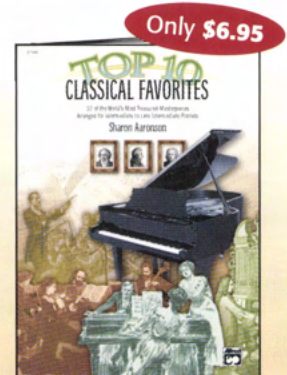
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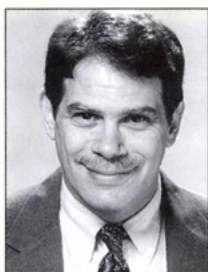
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## The Heart of the Matter: Rhythm

Bruce Berr, Editor

**Bruce Berr** has been an independent and college teacher of piano and pedagogy for a long time.

He frequently presents workshops on various topics important to piano teachers, including programs that use pedagogical videotapes from the library he has been creating since 1996. He is also an educational composer whose most recent compositions and arrangements are published by Hal Leonard Corporation.

### This issue's contributors:

**Maggie Charnon** is a retired professor of music from the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. She has a large private studio, freelances as lecturer at St. Norbert College in DePere, WI, and gives seminars and lectures to professional teachers' groups. She studied piano with Ellsworth Snyder at Milton College and piano pedagogy with Frances Larimer at Northwestern University where she did her graduate work. She is currently President of the Northeastern Wisconsin Piano Teachers' Forum, and chairs their competitions and festivals for Baroque and Classical literature.

**Audrey F. Evans** has spent much of her fifty-year teaching career in Chicago. She was on the faculty of the American Conservatory of Music for many years, teaching studio piano and piano pedagogy at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as supervising the classes in accompanying, ensembles, and keyboard skills. She also taught at the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University, and served as a consultant for the blind at the University of Illinois Disability Services. Ms. Evans has performed extensively as a soloist, duo-pianist, chamber player, and lecturer, and has frequently presented lecture recitals on the music and theories of Oliver Messiaen. She recently moved to California, where she is teaching in her home studio and at the Grace Christian Academy in Pasadena.

## How do you teach the rhythmic vitality and accuracy in Kabalevsky's "Sonatina in A Minor, Op. 27, #18"?

by Maggie Charnon

When learning this little gem (see excerpt at top of p. 31), students often fall into three rhythm traps:

1. Executing the dotted-8th-16th note pattern in a jazz "swing" style;
2. Playing straight 8th note patterns inaccurately after having played many dotted patterns;
3. Not sustaining the rhythmic drive.

### How to avoid these three "traps"

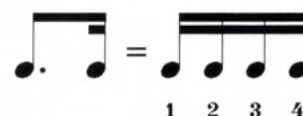
These traps are easily avoided with a few preparatory exercises and troubleshooting techniques I will discuss below. The purpose of the exercises is to have the student execute the new concept in a context he or she is already familiar with. This can be a scale that can be done without having to think about it, or chords that are second nature to find. The less the student has to think about, the quicker the newer concept can take hold.

When working with these exercises and techniques, it is essential that students use some type of verbalization such as counting ("1-e-and-a" or "1-ta-te-ta") or rhythmic execution of words that follow the natural accent of the patterns, such as "pret-ty pol-ly", or even nonsense syllables (my students like to use "doo-bee-doo-bee"). It is also necessary that they are instructed on effective use of a metronome, and that they feel comfortable using one while playing, counting out loud, or along with tapping.

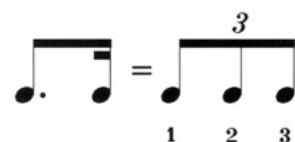
### Trap 1

The problem of "swinging" the dotted-8th-16th pattern is as old as jazz itself. For about a hundred years now, musicians have been swapping the interpretation of this pattern between the literal and the swing. I have seen some teachers try to remedy this by having the student place the 16th note as close as possible to the next beat. Unfortunately, this results in the 16th note frequently being too short, sounding like a grace note, and being disconnected from the 8th. It is important to notice that a solution is not found per se in the placement of the fourth 16th note — rather, it is in the feeling of where the *second* (unplayed) 16th note subdivision belongs. Not feeling this results in the beat usually being subdivided into threes, rather than fours. Students who are swinging this pattern are feeling the second and third 16th notes too late, and thus are not accurately subdividing the beat. (See examples 1 and 2.)

Example 1: Correct subdivision into 4's



Example 2: Incorrect subdivision into 3's, i.e., "swing"



The purpose of the exercise shown in example 3 (see p. 31) is to get students to feel the four 16th note subdivisions. I set the metronome to equal one tick per 16th note at a speed that they can count or use their syllables, and they tap the exercise.



# Sonatina in A Minor by Kabalevsky

With motion (Allegretto)

From "Children's Pieces," Op. 27

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by permission. (This excerpt from the Kabalevsky "Sonatina" is from Contemporary Piano Literature Book 4 of the Frances Clark Library for Piano Students [Summy-Birchard, Inc./Warner Bros. Publications].)

Example 3

This may seem remedial for some students, but it is important to do this to ensure success in the next exercise (see example 4) which eliminates *one* of the 16th notes, then *two* of them, until finally it ends up with the dotted 8th-16th pattern of the piece.

Example 4

Once the student is successful tapping this pattern, then we go to the piano, but always continuing to count and always using a metronome. The metronome can be adjusted during this part of the preparation to tick on 8th note subdivisions, rather than 16ths, so that the tempo can be increased. I start by using the broken chord patterns shown in examples 5a and 5b:

Example 5a

C: I

Example 5b

C: IV6/4

Example 5c

By beginning on the top of the triad outline instead of the bottom, students are being prepared for the technical "feel" of the RH in the piece. I gradually work in several chords until they are using the ones actually notated in the piece, i.e., as in mm. 1 and 2. (See example 5c.) We can get double duty out of an exercise such as this by using chords that reinforce the ones that are being studied and played in the theory portion of the lesson. For example, I may use a IV chord in first inversion (as in example 5b), or a diminished triad in root position, or whatever the students are doing in theory at the time. They can also experience the compositional device of *sequences* by making up their own "rhyming" chord patterns.



Next, I try the same exercise using scales (see examples 6a and 6b). This will directly prepare the student for the rhythm of the RH scales that occur in the piece.

Example 6a



Example 6b



It's useful to try several different scales, starting positions, and starting fingers; this not only reinforces the scales a student is learning in theory, but can also be a wonderful start to exploring modes. I work on different scales until the exact patterns of the piece are actually addressed, always using the metronome and always having the student count out loud.

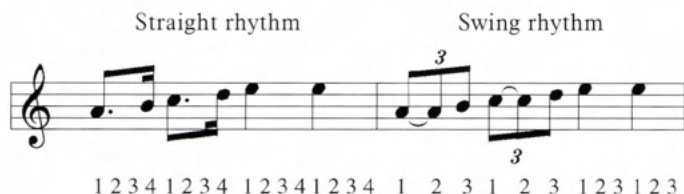
If preparatory exercises like the above are still not producing positive results, then troubleshooting is in order. One strategy is to have the student *play* the subdivisions of the dotted notes, rather than just *counting* or *feeling* them. For instance, m. 3 of the “Sonatina” can be practiced as shown in example 7 until the repeated notes can be eliminated.

Example 7



Another strategy is to have the student alternate between a measure of swing and a measure of *straight* rhythm so that the difference between the two can be distinctly felt. Students continue to count during this, and the metronome setting will now represent the *quarter* note. (See example 8.)

Example 8



## Trap 2

This trap is less common but does occur. Some students who develop a sense of the dotted rhythm get it so ingrained that they want to continue the pattern even though the rhythm switches to straight 8th notes as it does in m. 7. Since students have already internalized the subdivisions of the beat, it is not necessary to go through as extensive a preparation as with the first trap. Instead, I have them do scales *up as dotted rhythms*, and *down as straight 8ths*; then vice versa. (See example 9.)

Example 9



Then, I move to patterns which alternate more frequently between the two rhythms as they do in the “Sonatina”. (See example 10.)

Example 10



## Trap 3

The rhythmic drive of this piece has great appeal to both the player and listener. Students sometimes get bogged down with the process of subdividing, or they slow down in the softer passages. (It is interesting that the loudest dynamic indicated in this piece is *mf*.) Again, the metronome can help the student keep a steady beat, but it is important that as tempo is increased, the metronome tick represents the *quarter note* beat — no longer the *subdivisions* of the beat.

I also sometimes have students place a slight accent on the 16th note of the dotted pattern. This not only helps emphasize the correct rhythm but will propel the piece forward, just as slightly shortening the third beat of a waltz helps the drive of that dance.

Another thing I watch for is where students take breaths in the music. It is important that they use a breath to complete the end of each slurred group so that they do not delay the beginning of the next group. However, caution must be taken that they are not cutting off the tone abruptly, making it sound staccato.

Executing the notes that *are* staccato can also help the forward drive. Notice the staccato quarter note chords followed by a quarter rest in the left hand at the opening of the piece. These need to be the same length as the quarter notes that have no rests between them, such as those in m. 4. The tendency is to play the quarter notes with rests too short, and the ones without rests too long.

Another spot that tends to inhibit the forward drive is the rolled chord in the left hand that occurs at m. 31. (See Excerpt 11 on p. 33.) This can be executed with or without a crossover; whichever way is chosen, the preparatory exercise should reflect that approach. I have had more success using a crossover of 5-1-2. I have students begin by playing the chord unrolled, using the bottom two notes only with the fingering they will use when playing the whole chord. (See example 11a.) Then, they roll it as a fifth. Next, they play it as a blocked fifth grace note to the top note of the chord. (See example 11b.) Finally they play it rolled (see example 11c). This last approach is equivalent to the rolled chord, and helps the student achieve continuity in the flow of the tempo.





Example 11a



Example 11b



Example 11c



One final word of caution: Because this piece has a lively rhythmic motif and an appealing lilt, there is a temptation to perform it too fast rather than *Allegretto* (as marked in most editions). An effective rhythmic performance will result from a steady pulse with consistent execution, and not from raw speed. ▲

## If ... rhythm is accurate, musicality can rise to the surface.

by Audrey Evans

As I contemplated this article on teaching the tricky rhythms found in the one-movement Kabalevsky “Sonatina in A minor,” the importance of accuracy stood out. I have heard this tune-ful and charming piece performed many times with rhythms that were not exactly precise, not only by students of others but my own as well.

Whenever I am faced with a problematic rhythm I am reminded of a quotation from Plato found in *The Republic, Bk.1*: “Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.” Rhythm is the soul and spirit of music; it is the heart-beat and pulse that binds it together. Surely it is as important as all other elements combined. Without a correct rhythm, music falls apart, and the composer’s intention is lost. If the rhythm is accurate, musicality can rise to the surface.

Rhythm is the soul  
and spirit of music; it  
is the heartbeat and  
pulse that binds it  
together.

### Sorting out the rhythms

Teaching the various rhythms in the Kabalevsky “Sonatina” is not an easy task. Consider mm. 1-8. Students are faced with double-dotted quarter notes, dotted eighth notes, 16ths, etc. How do we help them sort all of this out?

Before even attempting to play the notes, I have the student count out loud using the syllables of “tah fah tay fee” to represent each 16th note subdivision. The student claps only on the first sixteenth note and I clap with him or her, filling in the remaining three 16ths, but always emphasizing the *first*. Then we reverse the procedure. When this is secure, I have the student clap on “tah” and “tay” as I continue clapping on *all* of the subdivisions. When this feels secure, then the student claps on “tah” and “fee”. After that drill, I combine all the rhythms, with the student and I continuing to alternate parts.

### Using “playing” exercises as rhythmic preparation

After the student experiences the rhythms *without* playing, I then create exercises using the different rhythms. For example, using the scale of C major (with the correct fingering, of course!), I have the student play the rhythm shown in example #10 on page 32. (**Editor’s note:** Both authors independently created this same exercise.)

Because it is necessary to develop the left hand as well as the right, I have the student also play the same pattern with the left hand. After mastery, I have the student play the scale in the key of A minor, hands alone or together, depending on whatever he or she can handle.

When this is secure, I isolate separate measures from the piece and have the student clap them, i.e., the RH in mm. 1-2. I also may play these measures while the student is

clapping four beats per measure, then I reverse the procedure. And I would do this for all similar measures. We might also do the same process for mm. 5-6, and 7-8.

During this whole process, I also point out the things the student is doing *well*. As we are all aware, (and as is emphasized in the teachings of Suzuki), nothing breeds success more than success — the student must always be encouraged!

A good physical approach can also help the student be more precise rhythmically. I always make sure the student’s fingering is correct and consistent right from the start. I also always think of each phrase as being a *handful* of notes. The student’s wrist must be supple, and he/she should play deep into the keys in order to have a feeling of control.

The left hand must be practiced separately, keeping an even 4/4 basic pulse. If the student is advanced enough, it is also wise to teach the harmonic content of this left hand part; if not, at least the sounds of major and minor triads should be pointed out and perceived by the student.



When the left hand is secure (including the rests, which should be given their proper due) the hands can be put together at a very slow tempo. It is beneficial at this stage to use the metronome at different speeds, i.e., MM = 40, 52, 63, or 72 for each quarter note. This would also depend on the ability of the student. However, this must be judiciously done (using the metronome only *part* of the time). Otherwise it may produce a “wooden” performance — one that has accurate metronomic timing but is lifeless, with no flexibility or feeling.

In my teaching I have found it beneficial to the student (particularly in regard to rhythmic accuracy) to tape my performance of the piece for the student to listen to at home. But I have found it even more valuable to have students tape different sections of *their own playing* so they can listen more objectively to themselves. One of the most important attitudes I can convey as the student’s teacher and perhaps most influential musician, is that in order to achieve a beautiful and meaningful performance, we must always *listen* to ourselves. This will help us do the things the composer communicates in the score. If our students can be empowered to do that effectively, we as teachers have done our job well. ▲

## What problems are inherent when playing persistent dotted rhythms?

by Bruce Berr

Pieces that have persistent dotted rhythms (ones that appear in many measures consecutively) present a special challenge to intermediate and even advanced level pianists. Learning how to subdivide accurately at moderate and fast tempos is enough of a challenge in itself; reliably producing accurate results over many *repeated* occurrences when there is no down time for mental or physical rest is even more challenging and is actually a separate problem in itself. The evidence of this is that students who can produce dotted rhythms accurately when they appear *occasionally* in a piece cannot necessarily do so when confronted with *persistent* dotted rhythms. Usually the first few dotted patterns are accurately played, and then the timing insidiously modulates into “swing” rhythm where it stubbornly remains. This is understandable: swing rhythm is easier to play because the fast notes are not as fast as 16ths. Also, students living in our modern pop culture hear swing rhythms often but rarely hear dotted rhythms unless they listen to other classical music in their household or at formal concerts.

Even when students can play persistent dotted rhythms accurately, there can be a price paid musically. Students are usually so busy subdividing that they stop paying attention to shaping the line and giving it direction. Even tone quality can suffer when dotted rhythms permeate a composition. Fast rhythms induce pianists to play fast and deeply into the keys, which can produce *marcato*; if the piece instead calls for *cantabile*, such motions can be counterproductive and unmusical. It can seem to the student that solving one problem creates another.

I teach my students to use a practice plan that helps them eventually solve all of the rhythmic issues at the same time!

A practice plan that works!

When I teach music that has persistent dotted rhythms, as in the Kabalevsky “Sonatina,” or in similar pieces, such as the second movement of Clementi’s “Sonatina, Op. 36, #2” (see excerpt 12), I teach my students to use a practice plan that helps

them eventually solve all of the rhythmic issues at the same time! (Notice that the suggested tempo of both the Clementi movement and the Kabalevsky is the same — *Allegretto*.)

Excerpt 12: from “Sonatina, Op. 36, No. 2” by Clementi

**Allegretto**



## Phase 1

The student learns the piece with no dotted rhythms at all! Instead, all dotted-8th-16th patterns become “sanitized” into pairs of even 8th notes. (See example 13.)

This allows the student to master the other aspects of the piece, including the all-important sound and feel of *cantabile* phrasing. Meanwhile, the student is practicing scales with dotted rhythms using tonalities found in the piece; here the emphasis is solely on accuracy of subdivision so if the student plays the scales *marcato*, I am not concerned.

Students graduate from Phase I when they can subdivide the scales accurately at a few different tempos; and when they can perform the undotted version of the piece with accuracy and ease, and *beautifully phrased with cantabile*. For a typical mid-intermediate student, this usually takes about three weeks.

## Phase 2

The student begins using dotted rhythms, but only in every other measure. (See example 14.)

Why burden the student with a procedure that seems so arbitrary and artificial? This is actually a highly effective practice technique whose apparent oddness belies its power. (It was already briefly mentioned in Maggie Channon’s article — this fills in more details.) Playing dotted rhythms persistently requires not only the skill of knowing how to play a dotted rhythm, but also requires intense concentration over time, concentration which tends to wane. (This is often the same difficulty early level students have in playing fast passage work, hence the technique of impulse practice which helps train a person to think quickly over increasingly longer periods of time.) By applying dotted rhythms in alternate measures rather than all of them immediately, the student has no choice but to concentrate intensely for a short time, then relax a bit, then resume concentration. (With some students, I’ve even had them start out with every *fourth* measure being dotted — whatever it takes to achieve success.) Rhythmic accuracy is usually high using this technique, and there is much less diminishing of accuracy as the student plays for longer periods.

An additional benefit of the above practice plan is that students cannot go on “autopilot” but must instead remain in conscious control of their playing. This is the same advantage that students get by practicing many starting and stopping places in a piece.

Example 13



Example 14



Example 15



While students are applying the dotted rhythms, if any *marcato* starts to creep in (not uncommon at first), they immediately hear it because they’ve been playing the piece *beautifully for a while*, hence the payoff of the time invested in Phase 1. They are thus more likely to proactively experiment to find ways to get rid of the offending sound.

If students still lapse into *marcato* while playing dotted rhythms, I teach them a specific physical gesture: a smooth undershape with the wrist while binding together the 16th note to the next dotted 8th, following through with a breath to the next short-long pair.

**Editor’s note:** To see a short video clip, visit Keyboard Companion’s website: [KeyboardCompanion.com](http://KeyboardCompanion.com)



After accurate rhythms and *cantabile* can reliably be produced simultaneously, then the system of dotting gets reversed. (See example 15.)

The typical student for whom this is a first piece with persistent dotted rhythms remains in Phase 2 for about two to three weeks but sometimes it may take even longer. Meanwhile, I implore the student to *not even try* to “dot” the whole piece just yet!

Students graduate from Phase 2 when they can easily produce both alternate versions of the rhythm with ease and accuracy, both technically and musically.

## Phase 3

Playing all rhythms as written. However, even while students are doing that, I have them also play the piece once a day with no dotted rhythms so that their best, most easily produced *cantabile* sound is still in their ears each day. This helps to foster the marriage of rhythmic accuracy and *cantabile* that is so important to an artistic performance of these kinds of pieces.

If Phases 1 and 2 were not hurried through, Phase 3 can often be mastered almost immediately. *Sometimes the quickest way to get somewhere is to go there slowly!* ▲

*In the next issue:*

How are timing and rhythm different from one another?





Issues and Ideas:

## Perspectives in Pedagogy

Kathleen Murray, Editor

**Kathleen Murray, NCTM**, is Dean of the Conservatory and Professor of Music at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Music Teachers National Association. Her degrees are from Northwestern University, Bowling Green State University, and Illinois Wesleyan University.

This issue's contributors:

**Yu-Jane Yang** was recently awarded a full professorship in the areas of Piano/Piano Pedagogy from Weber State University in Ogden, Utah where she also serves as Director of the Piano Preparatory Program. She currently also serves as the State President of Utah Music Teachers Association. Dr. Yang received her Ph.D. degree with the highest honor from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, in 1994. Dr. Yang was one of the three national winners of the distinguished D. H. Baldwin Fellowship for Teaching Excellence in Piano in 1991, and was selected and listed in "Who's Who Among America's Teachers" in 1996 and 2002. She is active as a performer, adjudicator, clinician, and workshop presenter nationally and internationally.

**Karen Zorn** is the Associate Provost at Berklee College of Music in Boston. Previously, she was the Director of Instruction at the MacPhail Center for the Arts in Minneapolis. She had taught piano for 20 years to students of all ages. Karen holds degrees in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Missouri's Conservatory of Music and Goshen College. Her teachers included Marvin Blickenstaff, Joanne Baker, Carol Winborne and Keiko Utsumi-Grosgurin.

## How do you deal with the sometimes marvelous, sometimes maddening teenage years?

I posed this question because I felt the need for some new ideas to use in my dealings with adolescents and emerging adults. Well, I feel like I hit the jackpot

with these responses provided by Yu-Jane Yang and Karen Zorn. I hope that you, too, will find lots of ideas here to incorporate into your teaching in the coming year. ▲

## Who is this teenager we're trying to teach??

by Yu-Jane Yang

Can you think of three adjectives to describe teenagers? Moody, silly, self-conscious, egocentric, peer-centered, rebellious, confused, awkward, temperamental, inconsistent, unpredictable ... and the list could go on and on. I think dealing with teenagers can provide as much variety as offered by the weather reports on television's weather channel. The main difference is that with teenagers, we may experience every weather condition imaginable all at once on the same day!

### Characteristics of adolescents

The many changes adolescents face during teenage years include sudden physical growth, sexual awareness, escalating psychological/emotional needs, intellectual augmentation, and social development. Rapid physical growth can make teenagers feel uncoordinated and even embarrassed. Their unanticipated sexual awareness accompanied by swift hormone changes triggers feelings ranging from guilt to amazement. The chemical oscillation in

their bodies takes them on an emotional roller coaster ride that often causes exaggerated feelings, uncontrollable mood swings, and illogical behaviors. Teenagers can be full of excitement at one moment and then suddenly lose all their energy the next. The tendency to use "emotional reasoning" frequently results in erratic, unpredictable, and overly dramatic reactions.

They are very self-conscious and extremely concerned about their appearance.

Adolescents start to acquire the ability to think more abstractly. Their new mental evolution also helps them learn to think for themselves, which often results in a constant questioning of authority. "Why?" becomes their favorite word! Teenagers quite commonly demonstrate poor

communication skills; they frequently feel misunderstood and become terribly frustrated by their inability to express their thoughts clearly. Adolescents also develop increasing peer awareness and sense escalating peer pressure. They need frequent validation from others and are often des-

To be effective teachers for teenage students, we must be able to recognize the nature of adolescents and to adapt our teaching to suit their needs.



perately searching for peer acceptance. Peers' opinions become most influential to them. Teenagers show much greater interest in and a heightened desire to interact with the opposite gender. They frantically long for independence and often try to imitate "grown-up" behaviors to signify their wish to be treated as "adults." They experiment with "rebellious" activities to search for their own identity and to find their answers to the question, "Who am I?"

### Survey results that help us understand our music clientele

Teenage piano students are quite busy and are often very involved in many activities. In their 1998 *National Survey of High School Pianists*<sup>1</sup>, Kafer and Kennel found that 65% of the students practiced piano between one and five hours weekly. They discovered that more than half of the piano students played at least two instruments, and 60% of them were also involved in weekly sports activities. Moreover, social time with friends, doing homework, spending time with family, and talking on the phone were a high priority for them. The

data collected further showed that only 4% of the teen students indicated that winning piano contests was an important goal for them, and only one third of them stated that they were seriously considering majoring in music in college. Practicing was listed by them as the one thing they least enjoyed about piano study, with reasons mentioned as "boring," "frustrating," "not in the mood," "requiring a lot of discipline," and "not having enough time."

I sent out my own survey to four very well-established Utah piano teachers and a total of 100 of their teenage piano students in 2002.<sup>2</sup> In responding to the question, "What motivates you to practice?" teenage students reported (in rank order of response frequency): (1) their parents, (2) the desire to get better at the piano, (3) the right repertoire, (4) the fun and joy of making music at the piano, (5) their teacher, and (6) to be prepared for lessons, as their motivators. For "highly desirable qualities of a good piano teacher," ranked highly on their lists were: (1) patience, (2) understanding/really cares about the student, (3) fun/humorous, (4) challenges the students

but not overly demanding, (5) kind and encouraging, and (6) knowledgeable. For "characteristics/manners that you would *not* like in a piano teacher," the top five responses noted were: (1) rude/mean/puts down the student with harsh words/yells at the student, (2) impatient, (3) inflexible and overly demanding, (4) overly complimentary/not challenging the student enough, and (5) always negative.

### Strategies for dealing with the "sometimes marvelous, sometimes maddening teenage years"

To be effective teachers for teenage students, we must be able to recognize the nature of adolescents and to adapt our teaching to suit their needs. Otherwise, music teaching can become a horrible nightmare for the teacher, and music study can turn into dreadful torture for the students. By accepting the reality that teenage students are going through a unique stage in their lives with very special needs (physical, emotional, intellectual, and social),

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and by understanding characteristics of adolescents, we will have a better chance of successfully guiding them through this challenging phase of their music journeys. I would like to propose the following:

- Identify our musical goals for teenage students, then exchange and discuss our musical goals *for them* and *their own* musical goals. This integrated list will help us prioritize our decisions in guiding their music study.
- Involve teenage students in making decisions related to their piano study. Recognize them as individuals with diverse interests and needs. Avoid using only one set menu to fit all appetites.
- Assign carefully selected repertoire that we know the teenage student is *ready* to learn and will be able to play with *ease* and *security* within a *reasonable amount of time*. Match the *right piece* with the *right student*. Find repertoire that is attractive for teenage students (pieces that are lyrical, tactile, fun, rich in harmony, romantic, passionate, or dramatic).
- Accept the reality of the increasing time demands in their lives. Have realistic expectations, yet make the most out of the moments that they have. Be sure that students can experience *how* to do things well *during* their lessons.
- Offer creative and engaging practice guides to ensure effectiveness and success. Show them how much can be accomplished within a limited amount of time if they know *exactly what to do* and *how to do it*. Promote the concept of being “goal-oriented” rather than merely “time-oriented” when practicing.
- Separate weekly goals from monthly/semester goals. Set specific, clear, and measurable goals to achieve within a reasonable amount of time. Provide incentives to reward their effort and accomplishment and to make them feel special! Notice and comment on even limited progress and the effort invested in trying to make things better.
- Allow for one or two not-well-prepared lessons by issuing “give me a break” cards every semester. Develop a lesson swap list for students to exchange lessons on their own when unexpected conflicts occur.
- Provide opportunities for music lessons to meet their social needs. Promote the use of their musical talent in a practical way by

arranging for them to perform for various social occasions and encourage them to relate music with their school projects whenever possible. Make good use of music technology as a motivating teaching tool.

- Document their progress in a “measurable” manner with visually stimulating charts or graphics. Design lesson-grading criteria for their own self-assessment. Advocate constant self-evaluation through critical listening to foster their musical independence.
- Know what teenage students need when they walk into your studio. Watch their non-verbal messages attentively to provide any needed consolation in time. When necessary, alter the routine of the lesson, or even change the entire lesson plan! Be sure to begin and end lessons with something the student can do well and that will make him or her feel successful.
- Be patient, don’t take things personally, and always keep a great sense of humor! Genuinely like the teenagers and care about them in other aspects of their lives besides their music study. Really listen to them and be truthful in your responses. Treat them with respect. Be encouraging, yet challenge them to accomplish excellence. Believe in them and be there for them — especially during the “tough” times.

Teenagers can sometimes be annoying, irritating, and frustrating, but they are *never* boring. They help us stay young at heart and manage to keep us on our toes constantly. We need to accept them for who they are, inspire them to dream beyond what others think is possible, and guide them to follow their imaginations and aspirations. We should enjoy and treasure the quality time that we spend together to really make an impact on their lives with the power of music. I consider it a privilege to have the opportunity to help mold teenage students into something truly exceptional. We can be a true inspiration to them and really make a difference in their future! ▲

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kafer, Harold and Richard Kennell, “1998 National Survey of High School Pianists,” *American Music Teacher*, August/September, 1999, p. 34-38.
- <sup>2</sup> Laurisa Cope, Carolee Eriksson, Debra Gamero, and Cheryl Norman are the four Utah piano teachers who participated in my survey.

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## Give up, give in, get even!

by Karen Zorn

Teenagers are going through one of the biggest transitions in life. In a matter of a few years — or for some, only a few months — they move from a child’s world toward the infinite possibilities of adulthood. Each week as our teenage students arrive for their lessons, we never know just who might appear. Is it the adoring student who hangs on our every word as she plays with perfect hand position, or her nasty twin, silent and sullen, and, by the way, growing out her fingernails — if they don’t break off first while playing volleyball!

While the kind of “bait and switch” we have to put up with when teaching teenagers can be downright annoying, I say ... embrace it and learn to love it! My mantra: give up, give in, and then, of course ... get even!

### Give up

During my first few years of teaching, I noticed a pattern of behavior in those students transitioning from childhood to adolescence. Students who had always been so conscientious about practicing their whole assignment started picking and choosing, practicing some parts and not touching the rest.

Natalie comes to mind. Natalie turned thirteen and completely stopped practicing her scales. She seemed to have no interest in pieces unless they were in a minor key, preferably morose in character, *à la* “Moonlight Sonata” (first movement). “Well,” I thought, “who does she think she is to make these decisions on her own? Does she have the years of training in pedagogy that enable me to shape a picture perfect curriculum for her? I’ll show her.”



And show her I did. I proceeded to punish her for her every act of independence. “Natalie, you didn’t practice your scales? OK, fine. Let’s spend the lesson practicing those scales ... the *entire* lesson.” You can imagine the kind of joy this approach to teaching brought to me, not to mention Natalie! After some time I realized that I wasn’t teaching Natalie, I was fighting with this wonderful teenage soul. I was stomping all over her developing tastes and opinions. I had an idea about how she should learn and I thought she needed to adjust to my “one-size-fits-all” approach. As I write the story here, in this somewhat exaggerated version, it becomes obvious that being rigid with teenagers just does not work. This is why we must **give up**, stop fighting, and find a way to become partners.

## Give in


While there are a variety of ways to work toward a partnership with our teenage students, I have found one approach to be especially effective. It starts like this: first, ask them what kind of music they listen to. Next, ask them to bring in a CD of this music to their lesson so you can listen to it together. Finally, *give in* — let them play this music and work on it in their lessons. With few exceptions, the music they are listening to will be pop music.

Teaching pop music to piano students can be a real drag. The piano arrangements available for purchase are usually awkward, in strange keys, expensive, and in the end sound nothing like the original. Often the pop music they are the most interested in is not even available in sheet music. I have found that the most interesting and effective way to teach pop music is to skip the sheet music, and work directly from the recordings.

We start by listening to their favorite tunes together in their lesson. Then we try to zero in on the one they are the most excited about, or the one *I* think will be the most successful as a piano piece. Then I *give myself* a week (or more if needed) to get to know this piece. I listen to it while I sit at the piano, picking out the bass line and playing along. Then I add the melody, and as I hunt around, I try to see if I can fill in the harmony (generally speaking pop music is quite simple harmonically). This is my homework to prepare me for the lesson when the two of us will discover this piece together. This “homework” step is

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important, especially if we are not confident about our aural skills. With this preparation we can then walk/lead our student through the same discovery process in the lesson.

I suggest taking it step-by-step. For example, at the first lesson we might want to focus on the bass line of a small section of the piece. Then at the next lesson, we might add a section, or a part of the melody, or sort out a harmony. With each step we need to involve the student in the “figuring-it-out” process. With each step, I find that it helps if I can sketch something into their practice notebook to help them recall what to play once they get home. This is a great time to use alternative notation, prose, or whatever works best to cue their memory (they may have the best ideas of how to notate it for themselves).

Once we have the skeleton of the piece put together, the real arranging can begin. Now it’s time to work on an introduction, add an accompanying pattern that better represents the “groove” of the piece, and re-voice the harmony to make it more pianistic. We need to keep working on it until both of us are satisfied with the arrangement. Never mind that we may have entered into this project with very little knowledge of pop music and no expertise as an arranger. If we take it step-by-step, we will put together an arrangement that is probably better than any sheet music on the market. And, in the process, we’ve created it in partnership with our student.

## Get even

Now, how is it that we finally *get even*? Hopefully, in most cases, the student will have picked up a few skills that were probably in our “original” plan for them. Think of the ear-training and form and analysis that would develop while creating a pop tune arrangement. The step-by-step process of learning, which is a necessity in this case, models an excellent practice approach for any piece. Good fingering, technique and voicing are just as important in performing a pop tune as they are in standard repertoire. Add to all of this the sense of accomplishment and we’ve reached a goal we all have when we teach — to bring joy to our students through music.

One last thought: working with our students on pop music in their lessons is a way of validating who they are and where they are in life. It is one of the best ways I know to show them how much we respect them as people and as musicians. Partnering together through respect will almost always bring out the marvelous instead of the maddening. ▲

In the next issue:

What special resources  
are available for  
teachers working with  
gifted students?





*It's Never Too Late:*

## Adult Piano Study

Brenda Dillon, Editor

**Brenda Dillon** continues to hang out on that bridge between music industry and academia. Currently educational consultant for Roland Corporation U.S., this bridge led her previously into the music educator world on behalf of Coda Music Technology, the piano world on behalf of the National Piano Foundation, and the materials development world as a consultant to various companies. She enjoys the diversity of this bridge and hopes to never fall off it.

### This issue's contributors:

**Cheryl Everett** has an active career as teacher, solo recitalist, accompanist and church organist. She has performed in recitals and master classes in conjunction with the International Workshops in Canada and throughout Europe. Ms. Everett is the accompanist for the Wabash College Glee Club and Organist/Choral Director at Wabash Ave. Presbyterian Church in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She is on the Executive Board of the Indiana Music Teachers Association, and serves as Ensemble Concert Chair. The IMTA honored Ms. Everett as "Teacher of the Year" in 1999. She is currently studying with Dr. Louis Nagel at the University of Michigan.

**Pamela Pike** is an Assistant Professor of Music and Coordinator of the Class Piano Program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Dr. Pike particularly enjoys working with her "3rd-Age Piano Class and MIDI Ensemble" for retired adults in the central Arkansas region.

## How can teachers help the over-analytical adult piano student?

**A**lthough teachers of adult students usually have many positive comments about this category of student, we do hear teachers expressing concerns about adults missing lessons and practice being at the bottom of their "do list." However, our topic for this issue usually ranks as the leading concern for those of us who teach adults.

I maintain that the best way we as teachers can understand what the adult piano student is experiencing is to go learn something new ourselves, particularly something for which we seem to have no particularly affinity. I can still break out in something resembling hives when I reflect on a statistics course I took a few years back. I know I

have reasonable intelligence and have a history of being pretty good as a learner. Why did I think this instructor was speaking another language besides English? Why did my brain seem to grind to a halt with my life passing before my eyes? If anyone in that class had read my thoughts, someone would surely have dialed 9-1-1. *Paramedics, get here fast!*

Cheryl Everett and Pam Pike obviously teach adult piano students as they recognize all the symptoms and offer excellent suggestions. What I most appreciate about them is their willingness to work in the "land of the discomfort" and encourage these adults to continue making music at the piano. ▲

## Goals must be reasonable and expectations realistic

by Cheryl Everett

**A**n overly-analytical adult piano student is obsessed or preoccupied with rationalizations. Teachers may help such a student by removing the obstacles the adult student perceives as justifiable rationalizations for lack of success at the keyboard.

The rationalizations presented to the teacher will vary depending on the playing proficiency of the student. Beginning adult students have a different set of circumstances than adults who took lessons in their younger years and who are now eager to continue music study. Because many adult piano students are successful in their vocations, they find it frustrating when they are not *immediately* successful at the keyboard. In today's society, time is our most precious commodity. Adult students almost always are balancing other commitments, and they feel the pressure of wisely

managing their time more strongly than younger students. This often makes them overly concerned with their rate of progress.

My first challenge in dealing with the adult student is to create a set of reasonable goals and realistic expectations. My adult students have uttered phrases such as "I'm so discouraged," or "I'm frustrated," or "Why can't I do this? I tried all week!" My aim as their teacher is to give them an honest answer with a word of encouragement.

**Some true stories — only the names have been changed to protect the ambitious!**

### Dr. Hopeful

Dr. Hopeful is a medical professional. His wife plays piano and his several chil-



# Create Family Harmony.

My brother has to be pried away from the piano at dinner time. He actually loves practicing, or at least creating his own music, with all the instrument sounds. (I know for a fact he's tried all 800.\*) Yesterday, Dad even thought he'd taken up the saxophone.

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Mom and Dad were a little nervous about the technology. The free phone support and Watch & Learn video made them feel better, though. (Plus, my brother and I promised to help them.)

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dren have taken lessons from me. Dr. Hopeful has always wanted to play the piano but never had the opportunity or means when he was younger. Now is his time. He comes faithfully every Saturday morning. However, his beeper routinely goes off three or four times and the lesson is interrupted as he returns calls to the hospital. He cannot practice until midnight after making rounds. He's been taking lessons for three years, is only in level 2, and wonders why his progress is so slow. He estimates that he should be in level 4. My job is to be honest. We have to talk about realistic expectations in regard to the amount of time and energy Dr. Hopeful has to invest in piano study at this time in his life. He is a dedicated piano student, attends every lesson, practices every minute he can, and loves music. The reality is that studying piano is not easy for someone with his level of responsibility. Progress may not come quickly — but it will come with the level of commitment I see in him. He will have to develop patience (no pun intended) with himself.

### **Dear Heart**

Dear Heart is the director of music at her church. Her goal is to play the piano and to share her music in a worship setting. She had taken lessons as a child and her reading skills are level 3. She is trying to play "Amazing Grace" and does not understand why her husband doesn't recognize it. The reason he doesn't recognize the tune is that there is no rhythm. Dear Heart understands the basics of counting, but is not skilled at holding half notes for their full value. At another lesson, Dear Heart came with the counting written on her music for every subdivision of every beat. Here I must quote Lynn Freeman Olson who once said, "Good counting does not fix bad rhythm." Once Dear Heart had photocopied seven pages, taped them together to avoid page turns, and draped the contraption over the entire width of the piano. After donning reading glasses, she had extreme difficulty seeing the music in such a distorted state. She was frustrated. My job is to bring Dear Heart back to the music that she loves. You may ask how I accomplish that task. I direct her to focus on the printed page, to use the original score — not seven pages of photocopies. We work on playing intervals in various rhythms. I thought the problem was solved. WRONG! The next week Dear Heart informed me that she does not want any pieces with words as they distract her from reading notes. She told me that she is playing wrong notes due to the presence of lyrics! Wrong!! Time to have a reality check. As

her teacher, I have to be honest and advise her that an important aspect of her musical progress is developing technical skill at the keyboard — and that this process may take some time.

### **Mr. Steamroller**

Mr. Steamroller plays in an extraordinary manner, but does not play what is written in the score. His current project is Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata, Op. 13. He has a wonderful "ear" for familiar music and most of his performance of this sonata is by ear in the style of Mannheim Steamroller. Sometimes an adult may not be aware that the ability to play "by ear" can be an obstacle. Persistently, I direct his attention to a passage in the sonata that needs diligent note work. We play the passage slowly five or six times. No improvement. The dilemma I face as his teacher is to find a way to stretch his ability to accurately interpret the score of the sonata without taking away his joy in playing. To develop his reading, I've assigned Mr. Steamroller to study the score of Bach's "Prelude and Fugue No. 2" (from *WTC Volume I*) as he is not able to play this piece by ear. He is to decide on fingering for beats one and three of every measure in the Prelude and to mark it in his score. We are studying the score in this manner before playing it. My hope is that Mr. Steamroller will become more aware of every note in a

piece. This will not happen in one or two lessons; however, it can happen with persistence and the correct choice of repertoire.

### **Alpha**

Six months ago I started Alpha, another adult student. She is the mother of two of my former students. For the last ten years Alpha transported her children to and from lessons with me. She diligently supervised her children's practice over the years. After ten years and two children, Alpha and I are good and frank friends. I was excited when she decided it was her time to take lessons. Given her love for music, it has been a surprise to me that Alpha "cannot" find time to practice. Her reasons for lack of practice range from being too busy to having to babysit for her grandchild, but I suspect that she is frustrated by unrealistic expectations. She's struggling with reading the bass clef. Last week we had a "state of the union" chat about what will have to happen for her to accomplish her dream of playing the piano. Alpha presents a special challenge to me because she is a friend as well as a student.

Whatever the rationalization presented by adult students, it is the teacher's job to develop within the student the necessary skills which will remove the obstacles that separate the student from the music. ▲

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## ***Bridging the gap between intellectual understanding and technical finesse at the keyboard***

by Pam Pike

For me, one of the joys of working with adult piano students is that we can engage in intelligent dialogue about an analysis of music and music-making at the keyboard. Non-traditional aged students often have sophisticated methods of reasoning, possess a keen understanding of how they learn new concepts, have a refined sense of musical style, exhibit highly developed verbal abilities, and they bring a lifetime of experiences to their piano studies. However, it can be frustrating for many highly motivated, intelligent adults to bridge the gap between their intellectual understanding of music and their inability to coordinate their physical gestures at the keyboard with finesse. Many of these individuals who are used to functioning competently in the professional

arena suddenly feel disoriented when they find themselves stumbling along as novices at the keyboard.

Thus, many of my highly motivated adult students engage in identifying what they discern to be obstructions to successful keyboard study. These very qualities of perception and analysis that I value in my adult students, can cripple and even paralyze certain pupils to the point where they no longer enjoy making music and seem unable to make significant progress at the piano. I try to recognize the early symptoms of the overly-analytical student and intercede. By redirecting a student's attention toward other musical details, I can guide the pupil away from the pitfalls of over analyzing, thus thwarting the aforementioned problems.



## Dealing with unrealistic goals

Ironically, often what my adult students perceive as monumental issues, I consider to be typical problems associated with learning to play the piano at any given time. Therefore, I attempt to give these students examples of realistic expectations for technical and musical development from one lesson to the next. I also provide regular group or partner lesson opportunities where I encourage them to compare experiences with other adults who are working through similar difficulties. Many adults are more impatient than the typical younger student, so I remind them periodically that many concepts explored at the keyboard require a lot of time and practice before mastery will result.

Whenever adult students enter my studio with unrealistic goals, I try to reframe their specific unrealistic expectations, i.e., wanting to master a specific, technically demanding piece in a record amount of time; or anticipating rapid progress through the advanced piano repertory after just several months of lessons (often while juggling a career, a family, and other commitments outside of piano study). Through honest discussion and exploration I try to ferret out the real goals of my students. Prospective adult leisure students typically fall into one of two categories: they have “always wanted to learn to play the piano,” or they regret quitting piano as children and have “promised” themselves that they would “find time to *return* to the piano.” In other words, their true desire is to play the piano and make music.

If a particular composition is beyond the student's technical capabilities, identifying the style of music with which the student has a special emotional connection can be helpful. Working on such music may allow the student to focus on the musical or emotional attributes of the piece, thus diverting his or her attention away from counterproductive analyzing. Most of my adult students have very sophisticated musical tastes and know how a piece of music should sound, even if they do not produce these sounds while they are in my studio!

## Accentuating the positive

It is not easy for adults to listen carefully to the sounds they are making while engaged in piano-playing. Listening to orchestral recordings and developing an awareness of different instrumental timbres during lessons can be a valuable exercise. Learning an impressionistic piece such as a

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Debussy composition in which the student is encouraged to explore different ways to produce specific tone colors at the keyboard can also promote more structured listening. Noticing how certain tones are produced and discovering how to reproduce these sounds at the desired moment can also be a lot of fun for the analytical student. Additionally, activities that encourage adults to physically move to music help them to internalize rhythm, and can promote more relaxed gestures at the piano. When I employ the aforementioned techniques during lessons, I am simply shifting the student's focus from the negative internal dialogue and technical concerns to more aesthetic and musical issues involved in making music.

## The positive effect of ensemble experiences with peers

The best method that I have found for helping my over-analytical students to refocus their attention is by involving them in duet or ensemble experiences with peers. As a teacher, it is my primary responsibility to match up students so that the partners (or ensembles) complement each other, both in terms of musical and technical ability, and with respect to personality compatibility. I have discovered that adult students are eager to learn from their peers and encourage each other so long as they do not feel threatened. Furthermore, duet and ensemble music encourages our students to listen more carefully when they play. Making music with others offers little time for self-critical reflection.

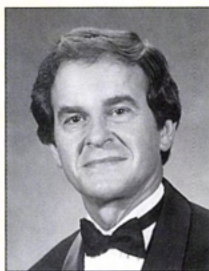
The social advantages inherent in playing ensemble music are also valuable. Often our adults feel very isolated on their journey of piano lessons after the age of 18. Many of my students have expressed relief upon learning that they are “normal” — discovering that others are also experiencing similar insecurities, technical struggles, and joys as they pursue music-making at the keyboard!

There is no foolproof method for helping the overly-analytical adult piano student to move beyond the unproductive analysis that can occur during piano study. Employing creative teaching techniques while taking into account my students' personal goals and musical tastes, allows me to choose appropriate music that speaks to their emotional need for playing the piano. Focusing my adult students' attention away from the negative can free them up to move beyond the mere technical requirements of a piece and engage them in music-making at the piano, which is likely a big reason that they seek my guidance on a weekly basis. ▲

### *In the next issue:*

How does studying the piano become a path to the “fountain of youth?”





## Putting It All Together: Repertoire

Marvin Blickenstaff, Editor

*Marvin Blickenstaff lives in the greater Philadelphia area and teaches at The College of New Jersey, The Westminster Choir College of Rider University and the Westminster Conservatory, and directs the PEPS program for advanced students at The New School for Music Study in Kingston, NJ. He serves as Board President for the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy.*

### This issue's contributors:

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*Sherilyn Ortman earned her BA in Music from Bethel College in North Newton, KS. Upon her graduation, she taught at Bethel's Academy of Music before moving to Marion, SD with her husband, William. She currently operates an independent studio of 36 students and is active as an accompanist and church musician.*

*Vivian Miller Dula is on the faculty at Elon University where she teaches private and class piano and is director of the Preparatory Program. She has served as president of North Carolina Music Teachers Association. She holds both National and State MTNA Certification in piano.*

## Are there special pieces that help you start a new teaching year on a positive and successful note?

There is something in all of us that relishes a new beginning, a second chance, a fresh start. I think it comes from that "hope springs eternal" thing. We feel confident that we can do a better job the second (or third, or fourth) time around.

Breaks from routine are refreshing. Office managers know that, factory foremen practice it, and our academic schedules reflect the principle. Piano teachers give themselves and their students some summer break from the regularity of weekly lessons. And during that break, hope springs eternal for an even more successful year ahead. We plan enticing repertoire, technical goals that might be stimulated by charts on our studio walls or games and challenges, and strategize the contests and festivals that might generate practice and provide documentation of a student's success.

### Some of my own resolutions for the new teaching season

I'm one of those "hope" guys. Each fall I resolve to be a better teacher for my students, young and old, and each fall I make lists of changes I will employ to stimulate my students' musical growth. "More duets," "regular sight-reading in the lesson," "new technique books," "practice charts," "taping the repertoire," "more keyboard theory," etc.

But, you know what? It all boils down to the repertoire we assign and how we teach it. Selecting repertoire for our students is a very serious consideration, for those pieces represent "piano lessons" to the student. To play "cool" pieces is the student's goal. Playing pieces with involvement, expression, and understanding is my goal for the student. Part of my responsibility is to select pieces which the student can play wonderfully well. Another part of my job is to impart the spirit of the piece and to raise the student's understanding and interpretation to its highest level. The higher my standards are, the more the student accomplishes. Students know when a high standard has been reached, and their sense of accomplishment is tangible.

We all know that it takes more than a CD at the back of a book to insure a successful experience with a piece. (I am an advocate of students' listening to performances of their pieces, and those CDs can be very helpful models.) Preparation for each piece is vital to a successful study experience. So we work on reading skills, on technical exercises, and theory. But if "hope springs eternal" for me this fall, it is that I will select repertoire more carefully and appropriately for each of my students, and that I will guide each piece sensitively and carefully to a meaningful musical experience for the student. ▲

Students know when a high standard has been reached, and their sense of accomplishment is tangible.



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# Creating a “vibrant” beginning to the fall season

by Barbara Wing

It started out to be a beautiful day. It was one of those cool, crisp fall mornings, so welcome after the heat of the summer. Having had a good break from piano teaching during vacation, you were eagerly awaiting the return of the students on this lovely afternoon.

Unfortunately, things did not turn out so well. Susie came in ten minutes late, with no books at all. Her attitude seemed less than eager, and her musical memory seemed to have vanished with the summer heat. She was unsure of her scales, faulty in her counting, forgetful of the names of the notes. How, you wonder, are you to spark her interest in another year of piano lessons?

## A special fall assignment that ensures success

First fall lessons need not be like the one described above. With one simple summer assignment, we have created in my studio a vibrant beginning to the fall season. All students are given in June the same assignment for the first lesson in September: an old piece from last year and a new one which they learn by themselves over the summer. These pieces are performed in our first repertoire class of the year.

Some students take a full summer’s vacation from music study. But this assignment assures that they will continue to play many of last year’s pieces in order to select a favorite one for the first lesson in the fall. It also provides the incentive for them to scan through their music and find the special piece that they will prepare independently. Many students take this as a challenge and select a difficult work. They know the piece needs to be played well but not necessarily memorized. Some students choose a popular piece from the local music store. Some students wait until the last minute to do this assignment and then are sorry when they hear that others have mastered more interesting music.

Some students take lessons in the summer. They may wish to choose a summer piece as the “old piece” but they must still learn a new one on their own. Consider the advantages of this assignment. All students come to their first lesson with something to play. They are eager to share their selections and look forward to their return to music study. As the teacher, we can easily judge their current level of motivation by the repertoire choices they have made and

the quality of their preparation. This makes it far easier to determine whether remedial work needs to be done on the fundamentals of reading or technique. I always enjoy the surprises that I hear in the performances throughout that first week.

## Other ways to get the new season off to a good start

I often choose a short piece for the first new work to be learned in the fall. This gives the student a feeling of accomplishment and pride. In our studio we schedule a Technical Olympics in October, assuring that all students start off the year with a solid grounding in scales, chords and arpeggios. Having certain emphases in different parts of the year keeps piano lessons exciting. Some of these might lead toward

special recitals or festivals; others can relate to skills such as sight-reading, theory, technique or composition.

Parents are used to attending a “Back to School Night” at their child’s academic school. They hear a presentation about the year’s plans and have an opportunity to ask questions. I schedule a similar event in my studio. This gives me a chance to explain my educational philosophy and program to the parents. I emphasize the important role a parent must play in music study and give advice on keeping a piano well tuned and in good repair. Many parents have questions about practicing, initiating a useful sharing session among those present. The parents’ meeting is followed by a brief social hour, and results in a good feeling about piano study for the coming year. ▲

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# My fall mission: To help every student achieve extraordinary results as often as possible

by Sherilyn Ortman

My immediate answer to the question of how I start a new teaching year is “with a solemn vow to do everything right.” I find myself desperately wanting to believe that *this* year will be different, that somehow I’ll become the teacher with limitless patience, with an incredible ability to motivate, and with uncanny know-how. Reality usually strikes about twenty minutes into my first lesson.

In August of 2001, I, like many of you, attended the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy in Oak Brook, Illinois. I returned home feeling affirmed, inspired, and determined as an independent instructor. The theme of that conference has stuck with me ever since reading it on the first brochure: “*Extraordinary results with every student through exceptional teaching.*” At first I was cynical — the conference planners had obviously not encountered certain students of mine.

As I pondered this theme, however, the word “*results*” jumped out at me. In any given week, the results of my students’ practice range widely. Some of those practice results hardly qualify as “extraordi-

nary” — at least not in the positive sense. However, I had assumed the conference theme implied, “Extraordinary results every week with every student through consistently exceptional teaching.” Thankfully, no such specifications were made. I can testify that at least occasional extraordinary results *are* possible with even the most challenged students. My mission at the start of each teaching year is to help students achieve extraordinary results whenever possible.

## A case in point: Jacob, a student with mild physical and learning disabilities

When Jacob (name changed) began lessons with me three years ago, he attempted to play piano with the fingertips of each hand pointing at one another. Playing a single key without sounding several others required great physical effort. Jacob suffers from incredible muscle tension and, therefore, poor muscle control. Since our first lesson, helping him relax and develop a rhythmic sense have been constant challenges. However, I’ve repeatedly shared





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with Jacob my concerns in these areas, and he is one of my hardest-working students. This past fall, Jacob was learning one-octave scales. Imagine my excitement when he came to a lesson saying “Relax” between each note (as indicated in the method book) and actually *doing* it! And I nearly fell off my chair when he *requested* to count out loud on a new piece. While counting aloud successfully hardly seems an “extraordinary result” for most students, for Jacob (who had resisted anything resembling strict rhythm) it was a milestone worth celebrating!

## Goal-setting helps to set the stage for success

Achieving extraordinary results with students can have everything to do with goal-setting. When teachers and students engage in specific discussions together about their goals, they set the stage for success. Notice two key words in this thought:

- **Specific.** Students need definite goals and concrete strategies for reaching them. Teachers can guide this process by helping students brainstorm areas for improvement and suggesting ways for students to evaluate their progress.
- **Together.** The more input students have in personally establishing their priorities for development, the greater incentive they have to work toward them.

## The importance of repertoire in stimulating a positive attitude

In some cases, *repertoire* can make or break the positive attitude with which we wish to begin the studio year. I try to start each student on a piece that 1) the student will absolutely *love* and 2) will be able to master fairly quickly. The right piece of music can serve several purposes:

- It gets a student back in the swing of practicing if summer has been a downtime. (Nothing serves to focus students’ interest more than music they feel motivated to practice.)
- It balances the “picking-up-where-we-left-off” music; students will inevitably enjoy some musical genres more than others. If the method books or staples of piano literature are the main dish, the specially selected piece is the spice.
- It provides an opportunity for nearly instant success and pleasure, which can reaffirm for the student why he or she enjoys playing in the first place.

A piece that has proven quite effective for me in these regards is Nancy Faber’s *American Frontier* (FJH Music Co. Inc.). The driving rhythm, energetic melody, accessible fingerings, and dynamic ending combine to make a musical experience appealing to my students.

## In summary

All that said, how do I start the new teaching year? My vow to “do everything right” can be better stated as a pledge to take the necessary time in lessons for those things I know are important for my students: 1) making sure theoretical concepts are learned thoroughly, 2) explaining musical ideas in fresh and effective ways, 3) helping students identify specific areas and techniques for improvement, 4) deliberately selecting music to further each pupil’s musical development, and 5) demonstrating my own passion for and enjoyment of music in a way that nurtures theirs. ▲



# My goal: to make music study exciting for all of my students!

by Vivian Dula

What a pleasure it is to welcome my piano students returning from summer vacation! The studio has been cleaned, pianos have been tuned, new music has been purchased, and I eagerly await each student's arrival. Some of them are enthusiastic about returning to piano lessons and some have reservations about the new year. It is my job to make the study of music exciting for all of them.

## End-of-the-year evaluations help prepare for successful fall beginnings

In May when the piano and school year end, I have all students fill out an evaluation card of the year's piano study. They answer questions about their accomplishments:

- 1) What was the most important thing you learned or improved during the past year?
- 2) What did you like most (and least) about your lessons?
- 3) What would you like to improve?
- 4) Are there pieces that you would like to learn?

I write my own evaluation of each student's progress and list repertoire the student should cover in the coming year. In late summer, I review both evaluations. Then, at the student's first lesson, we set goals for the year:

- Technical work, including scales, arpeggios and technical studies
- Repertoire the student would like to learn
- Competitions to be entered
- A desirable practice plan

I believe students should set short-term goals: ("By December, I would like to know how to play 'Sleigh Ride'"), as well as long-term goals: ("In addition to working on contest and recital music, I want to perform Debussy's 'Arabesque, No.1', and a duet arrangement of 'The Star Spangled Banner'").

Before the student comes to that very first lesson, I have already chosen a new piece for him to study — a work which will showcase his strengths and challenge his weaknesses. Together we look at the title, composer and period,

rhythm, key center and form of the piece. I do everything I can to ensure a successful first reading of the piece, including the use of rhythm drills with younger students.

Compositions that seem to motivate students the most are those that are fast, rhythmical, short (two to three pages), and are about subjects of special interest. Students like works about sports, animals, dancing, travel, weather, and the different seasons. The objective is to match students with a work that is about something in which they are interested, a piece that is fairly short and one which they will enjoy practicing and performing.

## Some suggestions for fall repertoire

Listed below are some of the pieces I have used successfully in the fall of the year. (My "fun list" changes each year as I review new works and encounter new composers.)

### Primary

Aaronson: "Calgary Cowboy" (Alfred)

Cox: "Brontosaurus" (Lynne Cox Publications, PO Box 328, Belhaven, NC 27810)

Goldston: "Prelude Majestic" (Alfred)

Noona: "Moochie Poochie Blues" (Heritage)

### Elementary

Bober: "Magnificent Monarch" (FJH)

Gade: "Little Girls' Dance" (Alfred)

Rollin: "Jazz Cat" (Alfred)

Starer: "Bright Orange" (*Celebration Series*, Frederick Harris)

### Intermediate

Austin: "Warm Summer Wind" (Willis)

Hartsell: "Sunshine in My Pocket" (Alfred)

Mier: "Taking It Easy" (Alfred)

Vandall: "High Point Toccata" (Myklas)

### Advanced

Brahms: "Intermezzo in A, Op. 118, No. 3"

Debussy: "Minstrels" (From *Preludes, Book I*)

Dohnanyi: "Postludium" (Consolidated Music Publishers)

Joplin: "The Easy Winners" (Alfred)

The first lesson of the new year has come to an end. Hopefully, each student leaves my studio with a feeling of having had a voice in piano plans for the coming year and with a new piece in his or her Music Bag. We're off to a great start! ▲

*In the next issue:*

What repertoire have you used for "theme" recitals?

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**George F. Litterst** is a pianist, music educator, and music software developer. He has pioneered new technology in music education and performance, and has co-authored the intelligent, score-following software, *HOME CONCERT* 2000.

### This issue's contributors:

**Sara Hagen** teaches music education, theory, and technology courses at Valley City State University in Valley City, ND. Dr. Hagen is an active adjudicator, presenter, and clinician focusing on the applications of technology to music teaching and learning. She has written several articles for professional magazines and journals and serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Technology in Music Learning (JTML)*.

**Michelle Gordon** is an Independent Piano Teacher in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. She is also a church musician, a licensed Kindermusik educator, and is the Immediate Past President of the Massachusetts Music Teachers Association.

**Lori Rhoden** is Assistant Professor of Piano at Ball State University where she is Coordinator of Piano Pedagogy and Group Piano. A specialist in performance pedagogy, she is in frequent demand as a performer, adjudicator, and clinician. Dr. Rhoden is a board member of the Indiana Music Teachers Association, currently serving as student chapter chair and editor of the *Indiana Music Teacher*. She received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano pedagogy and performance from the University of South Carolina. Dr. Rhoden also holds the Master of Church Music degree and Performer's Certificate from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Bachelor of Music Education degree and certificate in piano performance from Florida State University.

## Tomorrow Today: Technology

George Litterst, Editor

## How do you use music technology for sight-reading?

Over the years, I have observed teachers employ a variety of techniques for training their students in the art of sight-reading. Some of the techniques have included:

- verbally analyzing the music and its technical challenges before starting to play;
- covering the student's hands;
- covering and uncovering select portions of the music while the student plays;
- providing the steady tick of a metronome;
- playing an accompaniment part that moves forward steadily.

Interestingly, most of the techniques that I have observed can be provided quite effectively by features found in MIDI keyboards, MIDI playback devices, and music software programs. The only sight-reading

technique for which I cannot think of a technological solution is the matter of covering up the student's hands.

In order to employ technology to teach sight-reading, we need:

- appropriate tools (such as a MIDI keyboard, MIDI playback device, and/or music software for the computer);
- musical materials (such as the MIDI files that are available from nearly all publishers of piano methods);
- good teaching strategies.

In the end, our implementation of technology will be as effective or as ineffective as our own teaching strategies.

Our three contributors to this article have approached these matters from three interesting perspectives, that of a researcher, private teacher, and college professor. ▲

## What we know from research

by Sara Hagen

Sight-playing can be trained on a number of levels with the use of various technologies. First, it is important to understand some of the underlying psychological and physical requirements of sight-playing in order to target technologies that will help students reach their sight-playing potential — from the top-down and from the bottom-up. Each of these strategies has multiple layers of problem-solving and performance skills within them.

### Top-down strategies

Top-down strategies are those that depend on understanding the information being presented on the page, such as knowing key signatures, how accidentals function, how rhythm is executed according to the notation, etc. In addition, Boulanger and Dalcroze both considered sight-singing ability to be a prerequisite to sight-playing. Agay also recommended that the student

should be able not only to read the notes and play them, but also to hear them. These combined abilities (knowledge, sight-singing, and inner hearing) allow the performer to form a mental picture of the score, anticipate in advance what is necessary to perform the piece, have an internal sense of what the music should sound like, and then actively create a performance based upon those expectations.

How do these ideas translate into using technology in the piano studio? Software that associates sound with key strike is helpful to train the eye, ear, and hand to respond in concert with one another. "Skill and drill" programs that teach basic concepts are excellent for building skills associated with understanding and performing the musical score. Whenever there is an opportunity to perform a response to software through a MIDI keyboard, there are "top-down" associations being reinforced.



Error detection activities offer excellent internal hearing practice; however, most software programs do not include these opportunities.

The good news is that these activities are easy to create. For example, using a notation program, one can create a short, four-measure melody and save it as a Standard MIDI file (SMF), then go back to the score, change one note, and print the melodic example. Before doing the error detection activity, one should use the printed version as a sight-singing example. Teachers can learn a lot about how students perceive sound by doing this. Next, have the students listen to the SMF while looking at the changed, printed version and ask them to circle the note that is incorrect.

As teachers, we can learn a lot about our students' mental processes by asking them to reflect on their perceptions or guesses regarding how the music should have sounded. Ask them to talk about their expectations and to tell us what surprised them when they heard how the music actually sounded. As students improve their ability to hear accurately the music that they see, we can give them more challenging music by lengthening the examples, adding harmony, changing the rhythm, etc.

### Bottom-up strategies

Recognition of patterns in music is the bottom-up view of the structural components for sight-playing at the piano. Literature supports the intuition that skilled readers process groups of notes quickly (i.e., they are able to "chunk" materials into single units). The physical aspects of eye movement, fingering choice, and sequential aspects of performance are also considered to be a combined process.

The key to bottom-up strategies is deliberate practice: the same as that which is designed to improve general performance skill levels, as opposed to the specialized strategies to improve a single, sight-play performance. The *Power Law of Practice*, a cognitive psychology term, states that "the speed of performance of a sensorimotor task increases as a power function of the number of times the task is performed." This is no secret to pianists!

Deliberate practice of sight-playing skills can be reinforced with technology in many ways, such as:

- computer-driven speed drills that combine with performance skills, such as playing as many notes, intervals, or chords as possible — correctly — in a given amount of time;
- playing along with a SMF that has accompaniment tracks;

- using features of accompaniment software programs as support for melodic reading;
- recording the secondo part as a SMF and requiring the student to play the primo along with the playback of the secondo.

I have used music software programs to provide visual guidance, another important aspect of sight-playing. For example, I ask students to play along with either commercially available or teacher-created examples using a music software program that guides the eye in some way. Accompaniment programs that provide these features include *Home Concert 2000* ([www.timewarp.tech.com](http://www.timewarp.tech.com)), which blocks the current measure with a gray outline. Notation programs that can be used include *Finale* ([www.codamusic.com](http://www.codamusic.com)) and *Sibelius* ([www.sibelius.com](http://www.sibelius.com)), both of which sweep the eye forward with a visual scrolling feature. Other possibilities include

sequencing programs, like Cakewalk's *Home Studio* ([www.cakewalk.com](http://www.cakewalk.com)) or PG Music's *Band-in-a-Box* ([www.pgmusic.com](http://www.pgmusic.com)), both of which highlight notes karaoke-style with a colored note-head.

My research showed that students who practiced playing along with a notation program using a sweeping style of eye guidance performed more correct notes than students who practiced only computer activities for pattern recognition. However, the computer group was very positive about the experience and believed practice improved their sight-playing. Ensemble-playing proved to be the best way to practice correct rhythms and playing with a steady beat. These findings led me to conclude that sight-playing is a holistic activity that benefits from a combination of practice methods to improve both top-down and bottom-up strategies. In the end, it's all about practice! ▲

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## Technology for the private student

by Michelle Gordon

Sight-reading is an important skill for students to learn. It is easy to address sight-reading very early because beginning students face new music at every lesson. Building these skills right away is important so that students can progress in their lesson books and feel successful. In order to help them achieve their sight-reading goals, I utilize the technology that I have in my studio.

One thing that we do fairly often is to sight-read pieces in lesson books that are a level below the student's current level. In order to make this fun, I use my Roland MT300s Music Tutor ([www.rolandus.com](http://www.rolandus.com)) — a standalone MIDI player/recorder — to record the sight-reading pieces. I only record every other measure. We then play the recording at a slow tempo with the metronome on, and the student plays in the empty measures. As the repertoire gets more advanced, I record two measures at a time, and the student has two measures to fill in.

### Computer games that assist with sight-reading

I also have a computer/MIDI keyboard combination in my studio where I have two software programs that help my students with sight-reading. They use these programs in their computer lab time which follows their lesson. Both of these games are available from ECS Media ([www.ecsmedia.com](http://www.ecsmedia.com)).

The first, *Keyboard Speed Reading*, is a speed reading and memory drill program. To set up the program, the student selects from 3 to 7 notes to use at a time and chooses treble, bass clef, or grand staff. Then, the student is shown the notes and will hear them played. The student has 10 seconds either to play the notes on a MIDI keyboard or click the on-screen keyboard with the mouse. Not only does this game help with sight-reading, hearing the notes before playing them helps the students to refine aural skills.

The second game that we use is *Note Speller*, version 3.0. This game shows notes on the grand staff. After the student chooses his/her preferred clef (treble, bass, or alto), a series of notes is shown on the staff. The object of the game is to read the notes and quickly spell the word that they name. The answers are not entered onto a piano keyboard but are typed as words. Even though this is not sight-reading at a musical keyboard, it still helps facilitate quick note-reading as one has to answer within 25 seconds. After an answer is given, the notes are played back for the student.

### Other lab time activities that promote sight-reading

During lab time we also use *Home Concert 2000* from TimeWarp Technologies. This is a program that musically follows the student as he or she plays. The program



can be used with SMFs, and I use the commonly available MIDI disks which coordinate with the lesson book the student is using. When these SMFs are opened in Home Concert, the student sees the music on the screen. Then he or she can play along on a MIDI keyboard connected to the computer. For sight-reading, we use the program's Learn Mode. We select a slow tempo, and as the student begins to play, the accompaniment follows the performance. If the student makes a mistake, the accompaniment stops, and waits for the student to play the correct note. If the student has a hard time knowing which note to play, there is a keyboard on the screen that shows the correct note. After a student has played through a piece successfully, then he/she can play back what they just did and enjoy their success.

As teachers, it is important that we look carefully into the new tools that technology in music education has given us. Our students are very comfortable using technology in many other areas of their lives, and we need to be able to use all the "bells and whistles" available to us to ensure that we can help them achieve their greatest musical potential. ▲

## Technology for the college student

by Lori Rhoden

Even if you are new to technology, there are some basic things that you can try that will be easy to learn and will help you gain confidence in using technology. As a pedagogy professor at Ball State University, I combine traditional teaching techniques with various contemporary technologies to help my students work on sight-reading. In my studio I use a Roland Music Tutor and a Yamaha Disklavier connected to a computer through a MIDI interface. Our BSU keyboard lab has a computer, Visualizer, 16 Yamaha Clavinova student keyboards, and a Yamaha Clavinova CVP 207 teacher keyboard. This collection of equipment has enabled me to take advantage of MIDI technology to improve the learning experience for my students in a variety of different ways.

### What techniques promote good sight-reading?

Let's now consider some of the important techniques that promote good sight-reading:

- Keep your eyes on the music and off of your hands. Constantly move your eyes ahead of your playing so that texture changes, position shifts, accidentals, key or meter changes, and other things don't take you by surprise.

- Maintain a steady, slow tempo to give yourself time to absorb as many details as quickly as possible. Go slowly enough that you can play hands together.
- Look for patterns and groups of notes rather than focusing on individual pitches.
- Try to observe musical indications such as dynamics, articulation, sound quality, character, and style in addition to getting the notes and rhythms.

How can technology help us achieve these goals? Here are some things that I have done that might help you get started!

### Compact disc player

A CD player can provide accompaniments for sight-reading. Accompaniment CDs are available from the publishers of most piano methods. The accompaniment forces students to keep going and maintain a steady beat even if they run into trouble. A CD accompaniment will also set the mood and character for the sight-reading, resulting in a good aural image that should encourage a more musical performance. One disadvantage of choosing a CD player over a MIDI player is that the CD player cannot change tempo, but many CD's come with both practice and performance tempos. I suggest using the practice tempo for sight-reading.

### Slide projector

Although it might be considered ancient by today's technology standards, I have used a normal slide projector to help students learn to look ahead and read by grasping patterns quickly. I show one slide at a time to get students to recognize and grasp basic rhythm patterns and ask the students either to play or clap the rhythms. Then I gradually decrease the amount of time that the students are allowed to view the slide before they must perform it so that they will begin to see a whole measure at a time rather than just one note at a time. Next, I overlap the slides, forcing the students to remember and perform the previous slide while they are looking ahead to the next one.



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## Digital keyboards

I use digital keyboards to create accompaniments for sight-reading exercises. These can either be improvised on the spot or prepared in advance, using the built-in sequencer. Experimenting with the variety of instrument sounds and musical styles on a digital keyboard can help students sense the character and mood of the piece, which can encourage them to include expressive details such as dynamics, articulation, phrasing, and rubato.

## MIDI players

Virtually every piano music publisher now includes MIDI files with their printed music. One great advantage of MIDI files is that they can be manipulated in many ways: one can change tempo, transpose to a new key, add or subtract parts (i.e., left hand, right hand, or accompaniment), etc. MIDI files can be stored on floppy disks and played on different types of equipment. Perhaps the least expensive MIDI player is a portable device, such as the Roland Music Tutor. Many digital keyboards — including inexpensive ones — have built in floppy disk drives.

In my group piano classes I frequently use software accompaniment disks on my Clavinova. My college students really love the musical stimulation that the accompaniments add to their elementary-level sight-reading exercises. The Yamaha Disklavier, an acoustic piano equipped with MIDI capability, also comes with a disk drive. The *Roland Visual Music Tutor* ([www.rolandus.com](http://www.rolandus.com)), a software program, not only plays MIDI files but can be effectively used with a computer projector to show the music to an entire class. This is particularly helpful for group lessons and classes.

## Software applications

A great software program that I use in my studio is *Home Concert 2000*, which works with any standard MIDI file. The program comes with three settings that provide different modes of performance. In the "Learn" mode, students must perform all of the notes and rhythms perfectly. If the student performs an incorrect note or rhythm, the program will pause until the student plays the correct passage. The program even has an on-screen keyboard that will show the correct notes if the student can't figure out what to play. The Learn mode can help students gain confidence in sight-reading.

The next challenge is *Home Concert's* "Jam" mode, which requires the student to play at the tempo that the teacher designates. In Jam mode, the program will not pause for any errors. The final challenge is the "Perform" mode. In this mode, *Home Concert* will track the student's playing and coordinate the accompaniment tracks, making adjustments of tempo and dynamics. The Perform mode encourages students to play expressively — the ultimate challenge in sight-reading!

If you've not already done so, I urge you to take the plunge and make a commitment to explore some of these exciting ways in which to incorporate technology into your teaching! ▲

*In the next issue:*

How do you use music technology to teach improvisation?

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## Keyboard Companion's Bulletin Board

Keyboard Companion editors will be involved in the following events during the autumn of 2003:

### Elvina Pearce

• **October 3:** Workshop, Wabash Valley MTA and Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN.  
Contact: Janet Lyman, [Milyman@isugw.indstate.edu](mailto:Milyman@isugw.indstate.edu)

### Marvin Blickenstaff

• **August 26-27:** Recital (8/26) and Workshop (8/27), San Diego, CA.  
Contact: Gay Brewer, [showshoeinn.org@snowshoeinn.org](mailto:showshoeinn.org@snowshoeinn.org)

• **October 10:** Workshop, Madison, WI.  
Contact: Joanna Grace, [jgracemusic@yahoo.com](mailto:jgracemusic@yahoo.com)

• **October 18:** Workshop, Penn State University.  
Contact: Denise Strayer, [piano0420@hotmail.com](mailto:piano0420@hotmail.com)

• **October 31-November 1:**  
Workshop, Tri-State MTA convention, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, KS.  
Contact: Dr. Trilla Lyerla, [tlyerla@bakeru.edu](mailto:tlyerla@bakeru.edu)





## The World Around Us: News and Views

Helen Smith Tarchalski, Editor

**Helen Smith Tarchalski** is an independent teacher in Gaithersburg, Maryland and director of Annapolis School of Music and teaches at Anne Arundel Community College. In addition to teaching, writing for publications, lecturing, and performing, she has published software through Electronic Courseware Systems. Helen holds the Master Teacher Certificate from MTNA and a Bachelor of Music degree from Peabody Conservatory, where she studied with Fernando Lares.

This issue's contributor:

**Fernando Lares** has concertized and presented master classes on five continents. He received an award in London for his performance in cycle of the 32 piano sonatas of Beethoven at age 19, for which he was also awarded a grand piano by the faculty of the National Conservatory of Music in Lisbon. He was decorated by the Portuguese government with the rank of Commander of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator in recognition of his career achievements in music.

He has held artist faculty positions at the University of Texas at Austin, Interlochen Arts Academy, the Catholic University of America, Peabody Conservatory, and is currently Professor of Piano at the Eastman School of Music. In 1989 he was appointed Permanent Guest Professor of Piano at the Shenyang Conservatory of Music in the People's Republic of China. He is a co-founder and President Emeritus of the American Liszt Society and has served as a jury member of major international competitions.

His teachers included Lucio Mendes, Isidor Philipp, Ernest Hutcheson, James Friskin, and Winfried Wolf.

## Views: Placing the past, present, and future of pianists and piano teaching in proper perspective

The observations about the status of piano teaching that appear in Part One of this article are derived from a Keynote

Address given by Fernando Lares at the 1992 *National Conference on Piano Pedagogy*. ▲

### Part one: From a keynote address by Fernando Lares

When I hear people talk about my background, it makes me feel as though I am steeped in history.

As a matter of fact I am ancient, and I will tell you why. Perhaps you know that I was born in Portugal. But you may not know that Portugal has been "behind" other countries by many years. When I was growing up, I heard this repeatedly. So, if Portugal was behind by fifty years, I can tell you

that I was born before Franz Liszt died in 1886.

If you think that I inherited some of the Romantic spirit, I can agree with you. As a matter of fact, I studied with Winfried Wolf, who studied with Emil von Sauer, a student of Liszt. I also studied with Isidor Philipp, a student of the distinguished Chopin student, Georges Mathias. I also had as a good

friend, Oscar da Silva, who had vivid stories to tell about his studies with Clara Schumann, who died in 1896. Such experiences are very important, because they give us perspectives that we may not otherwise have. It is from such experiences that I would like to share some ideas with you.

#### Our role as teachers

Many changes have occurred in the United States since I arrived in 1956 as an

immigrant. These changes have been profound in the attitudes of the students, in the aims of the music programs, and in many other ways. Are the changes for the better? I do not think so. Not always. When we talk about the future of music, we have to realize that it is in our hands. Why? Because it is part of education; it is part of the process of guiding people to be better than they ever thought they could be. So,

when we teach piano, please do not think that you have to entertain the students. A little of that goes a long way. We are *educating* the students. Whether or not they actually learn to play something from beginning to end, the important aspect of their study is to be in the process of being led to a deeper humanity. That is how I see it.

Piano teachers are really more than piano teachers.

They are music teachers and tutors about many things, including life itself.

We do not want our students after two or three years with us, the teachers, to show the same immaturity, the same lack of interest for values. We want them to grow. Piano teachers are really more than piano teachers. They are music teachers and tutors about many things, including life itself. And sometimes the piano teacher is the only person the student has in these roles, because frequently the parents are not capable. The piano teacher is often one



of the only long-term authority figures in a student's life outside of the family to whom the student can turn for advice and guidance. It is asking a great deal of you, I know, but we definitely need a broad sense of mission in this world. If we give up, then we have to assume that everybody else has the right to do the same. Without the strength of our values, society collapses. We do not want that to happen to us.

### What are we doing? Where are we going?

There are certain fashions of the day that we must be careful about. One is that we as pedagogues glorify teaching too much. And by that I mean we are forcing people to remain students too long. We do it in our music schools and in our job market by demanding the highest degrees, which require people to stay in school until they are thirty or so. Well, imagine if Mozart and Schubert had stayed in school until they were thirty! Something is not right. But we become so accustomed to our ways that we end up believing that we are the best in the world. We look at some other societies, and we think that they are behind because they have not yet arrived at what we do. Aren't they lucky?!

The point is that we must really believe that people can learn and grow on their own after they leave school. Too often I find that we do not seem to believe that. We think instead that everything they (our students) are going to learn will have to be imparted to them while they are still in school. So we demand more courses and more work. The end result is that the students get so busy that they do not have the time available to concentrate on what they should do most, such as practicing piano if they want to be pianists. This is not meant as criticism, but as an idea to consider. *What are we really doing? Where are we going? Have we had enough of what we do? Should we consider some modifications?* I see no sign of this concern. We do not talk about it. Shouldn't we? Of course, people do not talk about this in schools, because they do not want to jeopardize their situation. They don't want to be viewed as rebels. I understand. But shouldn't all of us, not a few, but all of us, talk about it?

I do not imply that graduate work is not worthwhile. My wife finished her Doctor of Musical Arts degree at my insistence, and I have worked with many graduate students. I know the value of formal studies. But performance is an art form and not simply a subject in a scholarly program. And we must place more emphasis on training students to develop this art form on their own.

### When should our students be on their own?

Let me tell you of my experience. When I was nineteen years of age I played the 32 Beethoven sonatas in a cycle of concerts. Why? Because my teacher told me that I should do it. I followed his idea, of course, but the important part of this story took place when I was twenty years old, and I had another project — the performance, in cycle, of the ten Beethoven sonatas for piano and violin. I met with my teacher and said: "Wonderful. I have this invitation. Will you listen to me?" and he said, "No." Well, this was a *friend*, believe me. He added: "*You are on your own now.*" I do not

see anyone in this country doing that. You might wonder what in the world did I do. I accepted the idea that it was now up to me, that the challenge was mine. I played the concerts without playing the works for anyone's advice, and I have been largely on my own ever since. When are *our* students going to be on their own? At age 31? ... 35? I don't think it is healthy.

I wish you the best of success in your work, your teaching. You must love it, even if it is hard sometimes. We must not lose that quality. We cannot help but project to the young people the way we feel every moment. How we project is very important. I also wish you great satisfaction in your efforts to teach music. ▲

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## Part two: An interview with Fernando Laires

### Introduction by Helen Smith Tarchalski

We are privileged and pleased to share a conversation with Fernando Laires in which he offers a rare glimpse into the exceptional life of an extraordinary man and musician. In this interview, we learn how many of Fernando Laires' perspectives developed and evolved. Although some of his experiences were clearly opportunities that helped to shape his career, others were challenges that he turned into opportunities and life lessons.

Fernando Laires lives by his precept that "piano teachers are more than piano teachers, they are music teachers and tutors about many things, including life itself." He closes his comments by answering a decades-old musing by members of the piano pedagogy field: How do artists of the stature of Fernando Laires and Nelita True co-exist in the career of music while maintaining a deeply devoted marriage?" His advice is simple, and proves that his philosophies and approach to musical and teaching perspectives are indeed inexorably intertwined with his approach to life.

His fascinating story is rich in examples of how we can use our own experiences as "life lessons" that mold us into stronger human beings with a deep sense of mission and artistry.

### The interview

#### What are your memories of your early years at the piano?

My mother wrote in her memoirs that I was three years old when I began playing. She enjoyed singing and playing the piano, and she taught a few neighborhood children. She and her brother, an amateur violinist, made music together when they visited. There was always music at home and in the neighborhood. The neighbor women sang during the day, keeping their apartment windows open.

I repeatedly asked my mother to teach me how to play. She did not want to teach me because she felt that I was too young. But one day I cried so much about wanting to play that she finally put me on her lap, played each note while singing "Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Si," and also slowly played some short, easy compositions. I played the melodies that I heard. At the age of four, I was instinctively harmonizing every melody that I played. I learned to read music before I learned to read Portuguese, my native language.

#### How long did you study with your mother, and how do you believe that your very unusual life experiences impacted your career?

I studied piano with my mother until the age of twelve. There were no schools in the tiny towns where we lived abroad, so my mother taught me academic subjects as well until I went to school for the first time at the age of nine. She had taught me well; I was placed in the grade that corresponded with my age.



When I was six years old, my father, who was a Navy sergeant, was sent on a mission to Mozambique, East Africa for six years. It was my very good fortune that my mother and I were allowed to travel on his ship often, which gave me the opportunity to experience unforgettable moments of danger and delight with the oceans, storms, uninhabited islands, and much more. I grew up in situations that gave me a deep sense of adventure. When we arrived in Mozambique, my parents bought a piano for me to play, but the climate was too hot and uncomfortable to spend long periods at the piano. My primary interests then shifted to my new environment: hearing

the lions roaring around the house at night, sleeping under a mosquito net, being awakened by a wild monkey jumping into my bedroom in the middle of the night, seeing sharks swimming close to the beach, being able to catch small fish from a window of our house, and seeing a whale suddenly coming out of the water not far from where a young friend and I were rowing a boat. That experience scared me to death. I was told to avoid walking under trees because snakes could bite me on the head. Many more adventures took place during those years that kept me fascinated with wildlife and the planet.

I learned to face danger and to be willing to take risks. All these early experiences helped me later in life, for example, to control performance stress, to take risks in performance, and to cultivate my imagination. Perhaps it explains my courage to leave my home country of Portugal with a wife, a young daughter, and another child on the way. We were traveling on plane tickets purchased with borrowed money, and I did not have a job waiting for me in the United States. I would like to add that learning how to adjust to very unusual life circumstances is a highly valuable skill for a performer, because that is what a life in music is all about.

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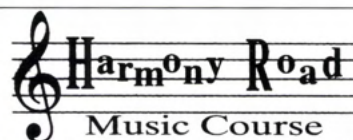
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**Yes; we have heard many gifted pianists whose performances are flawed by the inability to quickly and effectively cope with an unfamiliar hall, lighting, acoustics, piano action, audience, noises — myriad “obstacles” that can energize someone filled with a sense of, and comfort level with, adventure.**

The development of my own courage and decision-making also resulted from witnessing the dangers and adventures that my father faced in Mozambique. I saw him risking his life to save the lives of two men. He would not think twice about doing what was right, regardless of the consequences.

When I was twelve years old, we returned to Lisbon from Mozambique; at that time my mother enrolled me to study at the National Conservatory of Music. I obeyed with trepidation, because I felt that the piano would take over my life. I began my serious piano studies at that time.

At age sixteen I had committed my heart and soul to the art of piano playing. My father became worried about my future and talked to me in earnest about it. He believed that I should go into the diplomatic service. I was moved by his concerns, but said to him that I would take full responsibility for pursuing my goal of a life in music, regardless of the outcome. That talk has remained deep in my consciousness, and I admire him for not bringing up the subject again.

**Your work with Winfried Wolf of course places you only three musical generations away from Liszt because of his studies with Liszt’s student, Emil von Sauer. Your studies with Philipp, because he studied with Georges Mathias, place you only three generations removed from Chopin. How was the teaching style of Philipp different from Wolf, and what were the differences in their approaches to Romantic traditions?**

Teacher-trees are important, because they reveal generations of great teachers’ and pianists’ performing art experience. Winfried Wolf was an important teacher of German Romanticism. I am grateful for what he taught me. I learned through his teaching how the Romantic piano literature was understood and heard through Germanic eyes and ears, and how the piano was to respond to it in sound, structure, and projection.

Philipp did not begin our lessons by coaching me on how to play pieces. Instead, he guided me to a deeper understanding of how to play the *piano* — how to control and create its sonorities, resonances, vibrations, and the use of pedal. It astonished me how my sound became my own voice, my musical personality, and my creative spirit.

In the Romantic tradition, the piano was understood to be a singing instrument, not a percussive one. Pianists were expected to play with a personal sound, and to use that sound to express music in a personal way. To be able to play *cantabile* as divas sang was a trademark of greatness. Philipp taught me to know my hands and fingers better than I had ever experienced. He taught me more than about the hands, but it became clear to me that the miraculous hands we are born with, being the point of contact with the keyboard, and consequently the sound, had to be trained in depth. Philipp’s teaching opened a new world to me and deepened my relationship with the piano. After that phase of work, we began the study of repertoire, beginning with the Mozart *Concerto in F, K. 459*.

Because of my curiosity about artistic backgrounds and influences, I occasionally played the same works for teachers of different cultural roots to learn from their reactions. Their ideas were contradictory at times, though based on sincerity and conviction. It was an extremely valuable lesson to see how performance is transformed into an art of many possibilities. This is the way it should be, because the art of music invites strong convictions; but, on the other hand, it is also an elusive and fascinating imprint of human imagination and experience that continuously seeks new perceptions. *Art cannot be right or wrong. It can only be good or bad*, which demands for its training and knowledge an orientation unlike the one required for a scientific or scholarly education.

**You have mentioned a few key points that you believe have led you toward your musical, pedagogical, and general life ideas. Your upbringing and career are obviously very different from the norm, but your reactions provide an opportunity from which all can learn. You have said that piano teachers are more than that, including tutors about life itself. Can you summarize general advice for other piano teachers and students based on your experiences?**

Each individual has different life experiences that result in different convictions. Ideally, we should not force our ideas about performance on our students, because it is extremely important that they be guided to learn *how to learn*. To teach a student to become a replica of the teacher is a great disservice to the student. We must accept that we are all limited to what we have learned and have become through the process of our own development.

Students must be guided toward a high level and clear understanding of technical

development. Students who are not taught to pursue this objective, or simply are not interested in it, will not be capable of developing their personal musical voices and ideas.

Since technical development is primarily measured by time and speed, it is a simple way to evaluate progress for a student. However, relaxation must be understood before the student begins to exert extra effort in pushing for more sound or more velocity. Students must understand that relaxation simply means that the energy coming from the muscles, and movement, must flow freely to the fingertips. If the muscles tighten up, the student must learn to recognize it, because that is what causes tension. The energy must always flow freely, even when playing fast and loud passages. But the students have to be reminded, repeatedly, that performance relaxation does not mean lack of energy; it means free flowing energy that is never blocked anywhere.

My mother exposed me to a rich cultural environment. She always nurtured my natural instincts, and first took me to the São Carlos National Opera House when I was five years old. Students should hear professional performances often and early in life.

I had teachers who were not afraid to take chances; teachers who were not too concerned about the path that would be easiest at making them “look good,” rather, what choices would be the most enriching developmental experiences for the student. My teacher at the National Conservatory of Music in Lisbon, Lucio Mendes, told me that I had to do something of importance to launch my career. He asked me to choose from among the entire output of Chopin or Schumann, the 32 Beethoven Sonatas, or the Well-Tempered Clavier of J.S. Bach. I was astonished to hear what he thought I was capable of doing, but accepted the challenge to perform the “32.” I marvel at my teacher’s courage. Most teachers would be afraid to accept such responsibility.

I was fortunate that all of my teachers protected my own musical nature, in spite of the wide differences in their backgrounds and nationalities. Not one tried to shape me into his musical point of view. I try to offer the same type of relationship to my students.

Perhaps I should say that the same principles apply to my marriage with Nelita True. We do not interfere, advise, interrupt, suggest, or criticize each other. We each respect the other’s artistic integrity and background. And we gain from our diversity, because it stimulates and enriches us. ▲



# News: Music ~ Education ~ Humanity

## Music ~ Education ~ Humanity:

**M***A Festschrift honoring Seymour Bernstein on the occasion of his 75th Birthday*, published in December of 2002, is a collection of articles by students, colleagues, and friends, about music, piano teaching, and the experience of studying with Seymour Bernstein. Bernstein has shared his insightful approach to teaching in the U.S. and abroad through his lectures, master classes, and publications. As a composer, he is perhaps best known by piano students throughout the world for pieces such as *Birds*, *Books I and II*, and as an author, for his books *With Your Own Two Hands*, *20 Lessons in Keyboard Choreography*, and *Monsters and Angels: Surviving a Career in Music*. He has also written numerous articles for piano teachers' magazines, as well as for *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*.

The *Festschrift* consists of 129 pages of articles and photographs and was edited by Birgit Matzerath and Alison Thomas. It is published by the Hudson River Press. The publication is non-profit with all proceeds being used to cover its printing costs.

In its Foreword, Ms. Matzerath writes:

"In academic circles, a *Festschrift* is a publication in honor of a person on a special occasion, consisting of scholarly articles on topics of that person's professional

field, his research and teaching, written by colleagues, students, and friends. In this *Festschrift*, it seemed appropriate to expand the academic tradition. It includes the usual contributions on professional topics, as well as personal tributes to Seymour Bernstein. After all, with him we are honoring someone who not only contributes to



Seymour Bernstein

the professional world of music and music education in many ways, but who, in the course of the years, has touched and changed the lives of a great number of individuals....

"The authors of this *Festschrift* represent the variety of people who meet in Seymour's studio. He doesn't restrict his teaching to professional pianists and teachers wanting to improve their pianistic skills and musical knowledge. Among

his students, there are many amateurs in whose lives music plays an important role. This fact is just one reflection of Seymour's deeply humanistic belief in everybody's right to study music, because serious music study that strives for a balance between reason and emotion is bound to have a positive impact on personal growth. Seymour lives what he describes so convincingly in his book *With Your Own Two Hands*. He is the most genuine representative of the message and the most integrated person I know. It is left to those who have experi-

enced his teaching to understand this message and pass it on in their own lives and professional activities, and especially in teaching.

"The diversity of the contributions reflects the diversity of the people who wrote them. Topics cover the philosophy of ancient Greece, aspects of pianistic interpretation and musicological analysis, comments about competitions, and of course thoughts and suggestions about piano teaching, many of which have been inspired and influenced by Seymour's own teaching. Personal appreciations honor the pianist, the teacher, the composer, and the writer.

"With this *Festschrift*, we want to express our gratitude for all the ideas and inspiration Seymour Bernstein has given to us and to the musical world in the course of the years, and to convey our best wishes for all that is yet to come. We wish for him a long life in health and happiness, and for ourselves many, many more years of his wisdom, humor, warmth, insight, knowledge, and good advice."

For more information about the *Festschrift*, go to [www.hudsonriverpress.com](http://www.hudsonriverpress.com). ▲

*In the next issue:  
Must we memorize?*

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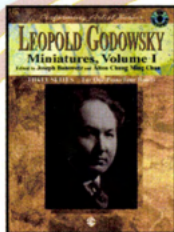
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