The Joy of Teaching the “Untalented”

...and Those With Learning Challenges

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“Music Washes Away from the Soul the Dust of Everyday Life” – Auerbach

“The art of teaching is created out of a study of the people we teach, of how they learn, and under what circumstances they learn best.”

--Richard Chronister

- Visual Impairment
  - Enlarge the music
  - Color-code accidentals or other small markings in the page.
  - Use enhanced ear-training—recordings played as “musical wallpaper.”
  - Teach improvising. (This is good for all students, of course!)
  - For pianists or guitarists:
    - Improvise with I-vi-IV-V pattern; later add seventh chords.
    - Teach how to make up chord accompaniments for melodies.
    - 4-chord songs: “Lean on Me,” Ukrainian Bell Carol, and other popular songs.

- Autism Spectrum
  - Always proceed in the same order.
  - Teach direct page-to-key reading unless he has an affinity for math.
  - Encourage playing by ear and by rote as well.
  - Encourage reading by interval and relationships.
  - Retain learned pieces a long time.
  - Remember that eye contact and touching can be threatening.

- Attention Deficits, Hyper-vigilance, and Hyperactivity
  - Reduce distractions.
    - In the room—no windows or doors in line of sight, don’t answer the phone, teach family members to wait for a break to interrupt you.
    - On the page—use pure music with clear instruction.
  - Use focusing assignments and games.
    - Practice and photograph perfect posture.
    - Count while student keeps eyes focused on thumb and holds body still.
    - Put a quarter under his shoe at the lesson. If you don’t see the quarter during a certain specified time period of the lesson, he gets to keep it.
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- Praise quickly and frequently, but never in the middle of something.
- Give many short assignments.
- Allow breaks for a drink or a stretch.
- Use “Business Hours:” chat before and after, but during the lesson, stay focused on the lesson. (I use the Japanese bow to start and end, a ritual learned from the Suzuki Method.)
- Use their desire to move—dance, march, tap and clap, floor games.
- Give clear rules for group lessons (credit to Barbara Eliason)
  - Sitting on pockets
  - No touching others
  - No obnoxious noises
  - Consequences
  - Second chances
- Experiment with having the (piano) student sing and play at once so more of his awareness is engaged.
- Experiment with teacher duets for the same reason.

- **Neural Pathway (K-Line) Deficits** (Credit to Gary McCallister, Professor of Biology, Mesa State University, Grand Junction, CO)
  - Avoid abstract concepts.
  - Teach, demonstrate, and have the student try. Over and over. Use exact repetition; avoid trying new ways of explaining the same thing. Once it is learned, continue to repeat for a long time.
  - Instead of moving ahead, move sideways: stay on the same level a long time, using lots of different books to simulate progress and provide repetition.
  - Make use of the great beginner student classics that employ repetitive parts—pieces that sound harder than they are, and that have a cool composer name.

- **Visual Tracking Problems.** This often shows up in an otherwise normal piano student. He looks up and down too much and loses track of where he is on the page. Although in the long run, the fastest sight-readers look back and forth and up and down with rapid eye motions, they do that after they have learned to track well.
  - Point to his page location as he plays.
  - Have him practice playing with one hand, pointing with the other.
  - Sometimes hold a music book over the piano student’s hands so he will realize how often he is looking down and break that habit.
  - Have him follow the music with his finger as you play the piece.
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- **Short-term Memory Deficits (common with Fetal Alcohol Exposure) and Sequencing Disorders**
  - Avoid multi-step processes such as teaching reading using the note letter names, or using memory tools like FACE. Use direct page-to-key reading.
    - *Reading Keyboard Music* (see above) is hands-down the best approach for teaching music reading to piano students with sequencing disorders.
  - Allow the student to perform with the music if necessary.
  - Key signatures present special challenges:
    1) Write in accidentals or highlight the notes.
    2) After a while, have the student fill in the accidentals himself.
    3) Later, try going without writing them in.
  - Use picture scales or a scale book; don’t teach by mental patterns.
  - Use loads and loads of repetition on the same level.
  - Avoid teaching by rote, but do point out patterns in the music constantly to help build patterning abilities in the brain.
  - Expect to have to repeat things many, many times. Never get frustrated with this.
  - Once a piece is polished, keep reviewing it for a long time, encouraging gradual memorization.

- **Poor Sight-Reading Ability** (in a piano student who has no disability)
  - This can be caused by the student never having let go of the intermediary steps in reading music. He is still thinking of which letter the note is, which piano key is that letter, and which register is the right one, and all these steps are too time-consuming for reading fluency.
  - Teach him to drop those steps and recognize a single note on the page as a single key on the keyboard instantly with *Reading Keyboard Music College Class Piano*, by C.W. Reid. Eliminate all the rest of his assignments for four weeks. Spend Week 1 doing everything in Section One in the method book as well as the workbook, and pass off the One Minute Test; Week 2 do the same with Section 2; Week 3 do Section 3; Week 4 do the Supplementary Music in the back of the book, review all One Minute Tests, review favorite pieces, and celebrate together!
  - *Sight-reading and Rhythm Everyday* teaches great sight-reading skills, after the student has overcome this initial hang-up.

- **Students with No Ear for Music (“Tone-Deaf”)**
  - Practice matching pitches, vocally or on two pianos.
  - Practice speaking the same sentence at a high pitch or a low pitch, a rising pitch or a falling pitch.
  - Play echoing games.
  - Play the student’s pieces in unison with him.
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- Use lots of rhythm exercises, played in unison with you. Students with poor pitch recognition often have poor rhythm recognition as well.
- Use lots of ear-training exercises, lots of singing—Solfeggio is helpful.
- Teach pieces that are familiar to the student.
- Assign him to listen to a recording of his piece before practice.
- Use teacher duets to instill rhythmic solidity.
- Learn to use a metronome while playing scales. If he can’t hear it, play along with him at first; he will hear you better than the machine.

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Other Types of Anxiety
  - The brains of children who have had terrifying early life experiences will “shut down” when anything stressful—life-threatening or not—happens and all the mental focus will shift to survival mode, i.e. terror.
  - Besides PTSD, anxiety often accompanies other learning challenges because just as “success breeds success,” “failure expects more failure.”
  - When a student “shuts down” or “freezes up”, refuses to move, make eye contact, and/or say anything, forget the music and ask, “What are you afraid of?” You may get an enlightening answer.
  - DON’T say, “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” That devalues her powerful emotion.
  - Tell her, “This is called a piano lesson because you are learning to play the piano. You aren’t expected to already be good at it. It’s okay to make mistakes and ask questions.”
  - Give small assignments guaranteed to be successful.
  - If you can’t break a fearful moment, have her get up and walk around, take a few breaths, and then come back to the keyboard. Ask if she is okay to start again.
  - Teach eye contact at the lesson and assign her to practice eye contact at home. Count how long she can maintain it. This is practicing being confident, and practicing staying connected to the world outside her head, which helps extinguish panic.
  - Work on tall posture, which sends a message of confidence to the brain. Have her stand, hands on hips, chest out, and take 10 breaths. You can do it facing each other and making funny faces, if you need laughter.
  - If necessary, have her practice saying, “I don’t understand” or “Can you explain that again?”
  - Use positive reinforcement and smiles almost exclusively until she is confident enough to handle correction.
  - Be aware of whether touch settles her or scares her and act accordingly.
  - Frequently tell her you are proud of her for managing her fear. Point out the fun or exciting moments of her progress and her playing as they happen to replace fear with joy and love for the process and the product.
General Guidelines for Teaching Any Learning Challenged Student

- *Teach the way he is comfortable learning, not the way you are comfortable teaching.*
- Have open expectations: You don’t know his potential, so just enjoy his progress.
- Teach parents to allow their student to enjoy hearing himself play.
- If a student says he isn’t as good as someone else, simply reply with, “Is that any reason why you shouldn’t get to play the piano? The piano is for everyone.”
- Advice from my most learning-challenged student: NEVER say, “Try it; it’s easy!” It might not be easy for him.
- For an upcoming performance, have the student practice performing 5-10 times for neighbors and relatives. Log them on an index card to show you.
- Everyone knows that it’s an honor to be the final student in the recital. Let a well-prepared student of any level or ability have that honor.
- Tell each of your students when he does something particularly well, “You are really becoming a pianist!” Everyone wants to be something; help them each identify with being a pianist.
Helpful Resources for Piano Teachers

- *Reading Keyboard Music*, by C.W. Reid. (Note: You *must* use the accompanying *Workbook Pages* book to provide enough repetition.)
- Picture Scales from SusanParadis.com
- *My Big and Easy Five-Finger Scale Book*, by Kevin Olson
- *Getting Ready for Major Scale Duets*, by Wynn-Anne Rossi and Victoria McArthur (FJH)
- *Piano Adventures Popular Repertoire*
- *ShowTime Piano Popular*
- *Teaching Little Fingers to Play Disney Tunes*
- *Hal Leonard Popular Songs or Broadway Hits 5-Finger Solos* *(NOT Easy Piano—those are really intermediate level at least)*
- *Alfred Fun Books*
- *LDS Hymns Made Easy*. My guide to teaching them is linked at lib.byu.edu. Choose the “Guides” tab in the left column; choose “Music:LDS”; then choose “Pianists”
- *Sight-Reading and Rhythm Everyday*, by Helen Marlais & Kevin Olson
- *Basic Rhythm Studies*, by Cathy Williams Hargrave
- *The Perfect Start* series, by Kevin and Julia Olson
- *Hal Leonard Lesson Books* *(Easier than others on the same level)*
- *Fun Solos* series, by Shilla Hekmat (SPK)
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Fabulous Beginner Pieces by Classic Composers Particularly Suited to Learning-Challenged Kids

These pieces have some or all of these characteristics:
- small sections that repeat and can be learned individually and linked together. (I like color-coding the sections with a “frame” of colored pencil.)
- a riff in one hand that lasts for nearly the entire piece.
- few hand position changes, or patterns that repeat exactly in other registers.
- the delightful characteristic of sounding harder than they are. (Except for the Musette: It really is that difficult.)

Level 1: The Bear, by Rebikov (No. 4 from The Christmas Gift Suite)
  Little Playmates, by Chwatal (Suzuki Piano Book 1)
Level 2: Playing Soldiers, by Rebikov (Op. 31, No. 4)
  March, by Shostakovich (Op. 69, No. 1)
  Music Box, by Gurlitt (Op. 187, No. 21)
Level 3: The Little Chinese Doll, by Rebikov
  The Little Harpist, by Kabalevsky (Op. 89, No. 24)
  A Little Scherzo, by Kabalevsky (Op. 39, No. 6)
  Arabesque, by Burgmuller (Op. 100, No. 2)
  Distant Bells, by Streabbbog (Op. 63, No. 6)
  Musette in D, from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook

Several of these are available in the following excellent volumes:
- The 20th Century, Elementary Level, by Schirmer
- Piano Literature, Vol. 1, by Bastian

And a Few Favorites From Today’s Composers

Level 1: Ramblin’ Rails, by Melody Bober (FJH)
  Creepy Crocodile, by Catherine Rollin (Alfred)
  Mist on the Lake, by June C. Montgomery (Alfred)
Level 2: March King, by Dennis Alexander (Alfred)
  Lady Bug Waltz, by Martha Mier (Just Imagine, Bk. 1, Alfred)
  Rain Dance, by Martha Mier (Just Imagine, Bk. 1, Alfred)
Level 3: English Rose Gardens, Martha Mier (Just Imagine, Bk. 2, Alfred)
  The Black Swan, Martha Mier (Just Imagine, Bk. 2, Alfred)
  Monkey on a Carousel, Martha Mier (Just Imagine, Bk. 2, Alfred)
  Starry Night, Carol Matz (Alfred)
Level 4: Allegro in A Minor, Robert Vandall (Alfred)