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**A Rough and Ready Guide**  
to  
**Teaching the Piano**

**Alison Ruddock**

With a foreword by  
**Melvyn Tan**

## ***Foreword***

People who discover that I am a pianist often remark by how lucky and privileged I am to be able to play the piano. Very few other instruments can evoke such feelings of envy and excitement. Many have, at one time or another, played or tried to play the piano.

Learning and studying piano technique is a multi-faceted affair. Numerous obstacles and problems have to be overcome before any real sense of achievement is felt. But how does one start? Where does one begin?

This book is a valuable reference and guide to the complexities of piano playing, and for those embarking on teaching the piano, whether for beginners or more advanced pupils. Every aspect and difficulty is deftly handled and discussed clearly and precisely.

Behind each good musical performance lies an apparent simplicity and serenity - but beneath that simplicity lies an entire universe. This guide helps us to begin that journey.

Melvyn Tan  
London, 2001

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## **Rough and Ready Guide to Teaching the Piano**

### ***Chapter 1 – Before you start***

#### ***Musical Children***

It is not easy to turn down pupils, no matter what their potential when we, as teachers, rely on a steady income. Thus, we delude ourselves into thinking that all children are musical and their ability to learn an instrument is ever-present, so long as we nurture it properly. As a schoolteacher, I prided myself on my *music-for-all* policy and felt that the work my students did was of a significantly high standard, that they were all budding musicians and composers. I confused this musicianship with another type that, on reflection, is only tenuously linked: my pupils were, in reality, cloning what I would have done, almost as if they were an organic instrument and I the performer. I do not think that this belief was restricted to me. As school music-teachers know, we have to provide a balanced curriculum that will satisfy the needs of the National Curriculum, GCSE, A-level and B-Tech. Because a modicum of success is assured in the classroom, teachers equate the (in real terms) mediocre results with the assured quality of dedicated professional musicians. They are poles apart and although music teachers might believe the opposite, the two will never meet. Learning an instrument requires much more effort on the child's part than learning to appreciate music through composition exercises in the classroom.

This is not to say that the classroom is not a good breeding ground for potential musicians and many amateur and professional musicians alike owe their initial stimulus to their school music teachers. They formed part of an elite group, however, which had the need to take things further, as do children who excel in any activity. Many have academic potential, but there remain many who by the age of fourteen are incapable of structuring a grammatically sentence properly or understanding simple algebra. I cannot do physics; I am useless with mechanics and do not know how to plane a piece of wood. I know, however, how the eye works, where to put oil in my car and can appreciate a craftsman-built cabinet. My knowledge has not turned me into an optician mechanic or cabinet-maker and likewise we must accept that a few experiences in school might make us appreciate, but not necessarily do.

To a musician, music is a natural activity – interpretation and performance are second nature, as is the physical manipulation of an

instrument. Children do not know if they have this ability and can only display a few telltale signs. Teachers have to assess the child's potential as to whether or not they feel the child will succeed in what they want to do. We cannot take on a pupil in the hope that s/he might eventually get somewhere – instead we have to be responsible and ensure that we are neither wasting neither our time, nor the parents' money.

So how do we go about assessing the musical abilities of a potential pupil? This is not easy since there are many variables to consider, and we must not forget that a child who looks as if they will be poor on one instrument might excel on another. Similarly, children who like, and even talk about the music of, for example, Bach, Schubert or Stockhausen, might not have the aptitude for any instrument. Although we are only concerned with the piano, we must find a fail-safe method that will immediately allow us to access the child's potential, and, based on our insight, make a recommendation to the parents.

### ***"I want my child to play the piano"***

Now I have heard this a few times! Sitting at the piano is Kylie-Anne. She is short, myopic and has only three fingers on her left hand. She does not have a piano but does have a keyboard to play on ("well it's the same thing isn't it?"). When she went over to the piano, she stood on the cat and knocked over a vase, hand-painted and hellishly expensive, the gift from a grateful Russian student, Sergei, shortly before MI5 had him deported. The writing is on the wall before we even start and the reservations of any self-respecting piano teacher, whose alarm bells by now should be doing overtime, will be superseded only by the panic felt when in receipt of one of the bank manager's "come up and see me sometime" letters. This prompts the reply, "Yes Mrs. Tinkerton, Kylie-Anne will be fine!"

The trouble is, Kylie-Anne has no talent whatsoever and only likes the idea of being able to play. You will spend the next few weeks/months/years dreading 4:30 on Wednesday afternoon. She has not done any practice, and has no personality other than being able to gossip about her boyfriend, clothes, or come out with, "Michael's new song, now that's what I call music."

So, what went wrong? Apart from the missing digits, we all knew instinctively that Kylie was unsuitable for the piano. Call it a broken Russian vase, call it a gut feeling, but despite turning up week in week out, she still got nowhere.

Then again, the old adage of "you can't judge a sausage by its skin" applies. John Ogden – a remarkable musician – shambled on stage, plonked himself down and transported his audiences to another plane of existence with his playing. He never appeared to be at one with the world and I often

wonder how many piano teachers would have given up on him at the initial interview. So how can we tell from the beginning whether or not Kylie-Anne will end up a *Take That* groupie with little interest in playing the piano, or a budding John Ogden waiting for her talents to be nurtured? well, if properly approached, the interview should help the teacher, parent and pupil to decide this.

### ***The Interview***

Ultimately an interview is a false situation. Employees and would-be employers, schools and would-be pupils all make an effort to appear at their best. It is worth trying to break down the façade as quickly as possible by chatting to your prospective pupil about anything – school, pop groups, fashions, etc. However, somewhere in this opening banter, tell them a joke and teach them a short song of no more than a couple of bars length. These are important as you are going to refer to them later on. It is also a good idea to have mum or dad present, if possible armed with the child's last school report. The parents' presence is important, as you will need to watch their reaction to what you say and what you do. The report will give you a good indication of how the child works in learning situations.

Direct the course of the interview into doing some practical games – for example, echo clapping, singing, finding particular notes or playing back short melodies you have played. I am not going into details here because we all know what to do. However, two quick tests are very informative. The first is to check the pupil's mathematical abilities. Before you start on me with "I was no good at maths when I was a child", I think we need to distinguish between real maths of and the awful tortures of calculus, trigonometry and quadratic equations. Reading music is nothing more than assimilating data from a graph – the position of a dot on the y-axis corresponds to a pitch. The shape and placing of that dot on the x-axis represents duration. Being able to assimilate this data into sounds and durations requires a very difficult cognitive process. If a child has difficulty with simple maths problems, there might be difficulties in reading two-stave music from the outset. This is not to say that a teacher should not take on a pupil whose maths is poor, but it will at least prepare the teacher for difficulties the child might experience later, allowing the him/her to build strategies from the outset. I shall say more about this later. The second test assesses the child's concept of lateral motion.

Playing a keyboard is a very unnatural process. It is surprising that the ergonomically designed keyboard has not yet been introduced as we have already a plethora of objects that have been designed to relieve the user from repetitive strain injuries! Anyway, moving hands and arms laterally is difficult and a pupil has to develop a spatial awareness and peripheral vision

along with finger dexterity. The following test will give an indication of any difficulties the child might later encounter:

1. Sit facing the pupil, looking into his/her face.
2. Move your hand laterally just inside the child's vision.
3. Ask the child to place his/her hand about an inch above yours.
4. Move your hand laterally in a particular direction that s/he must follow with his/her own.
5. Repeat this exercise with the other hand and then both. (A fun variant is to ask the child to hit your hand when it passes a certain point.)

You can test the child's cognitive development by giving him/her two balls of plasticine of the same size to study. Tell the pupil that they contain the same amount of plasticine, and then, in front of the child, alter the shape of one of them. Ask which is now the bigger. If the answer is as you might expect, they are still both the same size, then this demonstrated that the child is capable of conserving space, a valuable cognitive skill in his/her mental development. More details and a more specific explanation of this can be found in the next section, *Beginnings*.

Finally, ask the child to repeat the short phrase you taught at the beginning of the interview, as well as the joke. This will give an indication of his or her short-term memory, something that is as important in lessons as in practising.

During the course of the interview, it is worth keeping an eye on how the child reacts, concentrates and how quickly s/he responds. It is also worth seeing what interest the parents take, as they will from an integral part of your teaching; involving them in each lesson by inviting them to be present, asking them for support and allowing them to see what they are paying for will give you a lot of backing, especially when the ever-present problem of practice rears its ugly head. There appear to be four kinds of parent:

1. The *don't-bother-about-me* type - if they come to the lesson they will want to sit in another room. Now and again, they will chip in with the odd comment, usually to tell off the child.
2. The *I-want-to-do-this-myself* type - they are a nuisance and need to be handled with care. They will hang on your every word, ask for explanations, make excuses for little or no practice and will basically make your work twice as hard. Alex was one such parent - she was so enthusiastic for her child to succeed that she would literally sit over him during his practising and re-teach him daily. Eventually I had to be firm and tell her to stop as she was doing more harm than good!

3. The *give-me-a-ring-if-you-have-any-problems* type who say they will support you. Do not always believe them.
4. The *I-wish-I'd-had-this-opportunity* parents are worth their weight in gold. They sit quietly, listen and encourage both you and the child through years of work. Take care of them. Nurture their interests, as they will be invaluable.

More on parental involvement later.

You have to make the child decide if s/he really wants to learn the instrument. You must stress that it is going to be hard work and you will expect a lot. Children will try to be honest, but you must get under the surface and ask them to project how they will feel in six months or a year, having to practise daily and keep you happy as a teacher! You will hold them to this so it is worth getting it out in the open as soon as possible.

If you, the child and the parent are all happy, then you might as well start as soon as you can, later in the week if possible to capture the child's initial enthusiasm. Always suggest a trial period and during this time, if you have any reservations, try to iron them out. If you have any other worries about how the child will fare, e.g. if they will be suitable for a rigorous programme of lessons and practice, you could, with the parent's permission talk to his/her form teacher or the school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator - these people are an excellent source of information.

Finally, you must come to an agreement with the parent on fees, what you expect from them and what they should expect from you.

### ***Agreements***

Contracts with pupils, parents and teachers are very useful. The part that the pupil signs states that in return for lessons, he/she will practise daily at a set time, and if a day is missed, that the time will be made up. Now I realise that this might seem a little extreme, but the child does need to take lessons seriously and you will find that this demonstrates the level to which the pupil must commit himself.

For the benefit of the pupil, ask the parent to sign the contract. Their part states they will support the child, help to create an environment in which the child can work and organise the child's time so that practice can be done. This contract also details fees and conditions of employment.

Finally, I sign the part that spells out my side of the bargain, that is to teach on a weekly basis, report verbally to parents if needed, to produce a

written report each summer focusing on National Curriculum attainments, attitudes etc., and to forward this information to the relevant school

Fees are always a contentious issue and it is wise not to be worried about bringing the subject up. You must state how much you charge, how you want to be paid and what the terms of your employment should be. I can be quite hard about this and require parents to pay for a number of lessons in advance. If lessons are missed for any reason, they should still be paid for; a child at a fee-paying school does not get a rebate because s/he is away with an illness for a week. Neither should your pupil. Similarly, you should state that if a pupils wishes to give up, a period of notice should be given. Obviously, school holidays are different, but do not sell yourself down the river - you must strictly adhere to a charging system. If parents are wary, think hard about how difficult the financial aspect might become and re-evaluate your position.

### ***Recapitulation***

- Interview the child carefully checking memory, spatial awareness, cognitive and musical ability.
- Watch the child for reactions and assess how supportive the parent might be.
- Spell out exactly what you expect from the pupil, from the parent and what they must expect from you.
- Start lessons as quickly as is feasible to capture the child's interest
- Discuss finance and terms of employment.

## ***Chapter 2 – Beginnings***

The way you work with your pupil will depend on any number of factors. For example:

1. Age and the child's cognitive development.
2. Gender
3. The pupil's ability to concentrate
4. Personalities
5. The material you provide

Age and cognitive development are important considerations. Some teachers believe that the younger the pupil, the better. I am not convinced that this is always the case - a twelve year old beginner will generally make much faster progress than a seven year old; a twelve year old's manual dexterity should be better, as should his/her cognitive abilities. It is probably worth examining the development of the child's thought processes to find out why.

How does a child think? How does s/he speak? What are the characteristics of his/her judgement? Such questions have been the centre of child psychology for three-quarters of a century. Up until the enquiries of Jean Piaget, such studies of language and intelligence in the child were for the most part analytical. The different forms, which the abstraction, the acquisition and formation of words and phrases may take in the child, have been described, and a detailed and admittedly useful catalogue of mistakes, errors and confusions of the undeveloped mind has been made. This does not appear to have taught the psychologists everything they wanted to know; for example, how the child thinks and voices an expression in a particular manner; why the child's curiosity is aroused so easily and satisfied with a single answer s/he may be given or may give him/herself; why a child believes in him/herself despite being so obviously controversial to fact and more importantly how this incoherence (for want of a better word) is superseded by the logic of the adult world. The problems were stated but no key to the solution provided.

Thought in a child may be likened to a network of tangled threads that may break at any moment if one tries to untangle them. The main problem seems to be that whilst examining the child's thought process, psychologists applied to it the mould and pattern of the adult mind. The French psychologist Jean Piaget's investigations offered a new concept of the child's mind as he was able to assimilate and extract from those around such as Dewey, Freud, Durkheim, Hall and others, and use those findings in combination with his own to form a new comprehension of child mentality.

Piaget's results indicate that the child's mind works on two different levels that are placed one above the other. By far the most important during the early years are the things accomplished by the child itself – the plane of *subjectivity* of desires, games and whims. The upper plane is gradually constructed, however, by the environment that presses increasingly upon the child as time passes. This is the plane of *objectivity* of speech and logical ideas.

Piaget's methods, as he describes them, have been essentially clinical in the sense of a combination of observation and interview from which he has classified the spontaneous conversation of children from the standpoint of logical sophistication. His method was original in that he was not content to record the answers to questions put to the children alone, but rather allowed them to talk of their own accord. Unfortunately, his earlier approach was very loose: for example, his failure to control significant variables made it very difficult to draw the same inferences he has from his data. He has been criticised for failing to standardize his methods, which have varied at times from one subject to another, even in the same study, so that one is expected to accept on faith his findings in lengthy and ponderous discourses, leaving himself and his co-workers vulnerable to misinterpretation.

Piaget viewed intellectual growth as a matter of sequential stages in the maturation of the child's capacity to use increasingly difficult logical operations. He describes the intuitive thinking of the young child, for example, as egocentric and syncretic-egocentric, in that his/her thoughts are self-centred and syncretic – ideas, objects and events are not based on an analysis of their qualities. The young child thinks of individual objects rather than of classes of such having common characteristics. At seven years old, the child does not realise the need to satisfy others as to the validity of his solutions; s/he simply reaches decisions to suit his fancy and accepts them uncritically. S/he is so egocentric that s/he cannot step outside himself to view things objectively; is only when social pressures develop that s/he begins a more objective appraisal.

Piaget categorises the child's thought processes into three main stages of development, each of which he further divides into sub-stages:

### **The Sensori-Motor Phase**

This lasts until the child is approximately eighteen months old. Here s/he reacts to each object based on its physical characteristics; symbolic activity is at a minimum.

## **Concrete Operations**

(Up to approximately twelve years). This stage involves a gradual increase in the child's ability to extract concepts from experience and to gain control through anticipation of consequences. It includes three sub-phases:

1. A pre-conceptual phase (18 months to 2 years) during which objects gradually take on a symbolic meaning, e.g. a bottle as a source of milk.
2. An initiative stage (6 - 8 years) during which the child's concepts become more elaborate and complex. S/he gradually shifts from seeing a tall jar, for example, as containing more sweets than a shorter but wider jar -- e.g. s/he equates height with size to a greater appreciation of the conservation of quantity.
3. A stage of concrete operations (9-11 years) in which the child remains handicapped in dealing with abstract concepts and prefers concrete objects.

## **Formal Operations**

(12 years onwards) during which there is a gradual increase in the youth's ability to master formal operations through the logical deduction of possibilities and consequences.

There is therefore a development of thought from sensori-motor acts of intelligence through various stages of conceptual thinking. One could not, however, expect the development to be more rapid or discontinuous, and Piaget demonstrated that concepts that develop in, for example, the seven to eleven year old period, depend in part upon the schemata built up as a result of the sensori and motor activities taking place beforehand. These findings are in contradiction with the Gestalt psychologists who believe that the grasp of a structure (e.g. a triangle) is almost an immediate act that cannot be analytical and in which learning plays only a minor role. On the contrary, the mental skills that make up the thought processes are final products depending on our experiences.

The general outcome of Piaget's work suggests that what we so often accept as thinking—the recognition of relationships, the association of ideas, the capacity to see the point and the ability to make sound judgements—are in reality the end products of our thinking. In fact, every notion of space, time, weight etc., is not an intuitive capability but is gradually built up, slowly through early infancy and sensori-motor activities and then more quickly through social intercourse and language. The

background organisation thus acquired by the brain affects all later thinking and is essential if thinking is to be possible at all.

Before Piaget reached conclusions arising from his studies, Head, a neurologist, had proposed that the cortex was a storehouse of past impressions, which normally remain outside the consciousness. These impressions form organisations called schemata that modify all future impressions produced by incoming sensory data, so that all perception and learning are affected by what has gone before. Others have proposed somewhat similar views on the construction and functioning of schemata. For Piaget, *assimilation* and *accommodation* are fundamental processes. The former term implies the absorption and integration of new experiences into previously organised schemata and the latter term, the modification of schemata by new experiences or the build-up of new schemata.

In more recent works on the growth of such concepts as quantity, number, weight, volume, time and space, Piaget used an experimental population of four to twelve year-old children. Experiments were performed in front of the children using familiar material such as counters and plasticine, and they had to forecast the outcome. Therefore, in a study of the development of the concept of quantity, two balls of equal size, made from plasticine, might be shown to the children. Both balls are to be recognised as containing the same amount of material. One of the balls is then altered in shape; at first the child will not accept that the two contain the same amount of material, that is, s/he denies the conservation of quantity in the example. Older children might accept it in some cases but not in others; later still, s/he will agree to the conservation of material in all cases. In the first two cases, the thinking appears to be influenced by cross-section, shape or thickness: the concept of quantity conservation is formed only when s/he realises that the plasticine can be returned to its former shape and what has been lost in one dimension may be gained in another. For Piaget, this "reversibility" is a fundamental of thought and is essential for any form of mental experimentation and logical inference. He claims that the concept of quantity appears on average between seven and eight years, that of weight between nine and ten, but that of volume seems not to appear until the child is about to enter the formal operations stage, on average at about the age of twelve.

Now what has this to do with teaching the piano? Quite a lot, because Piaget's work on the development of the child's mind has shown that teaching children before they are conceptually ready can only produce superficial learning, true learning coming only with mental growth. The transmission of knowledge in an abstract way is ineffective as true learning can only take place through the child's activity, discovery and assimilation; real comprehension of a concept or theory involves the re-invention of this theory by the subject. Consider the learning of musical skills in light of the above information. By demonstrating that children cannot work in an

abstract manner, Piaget has shown that some children might not be able to understand that "this distance means this interval" and "this symbol means this duration". This means that with certain children one might need to temper one's approach to the acquisition of skills, and where necessary, undertake planning that approaches the whole area of note-learning, pitch definition and recognition in a more concrete way. Remember that some children never reach the formal operations stage. The implications of this for your teaching (and patience) are self-evident.

Gender is also an important consideration. No matter how many people tell you that there is essentially no difference between younger girls and boys, go and watch them in school playgrounds and make up your own mind. Their attitudes will be different and you might have to approach some girls differently from some boys. Similarly, the child's personality is going to hinder or accelerate progress. There is inevitably going to be the shrinking violet, the over-ebullient youth, the impolite and the downright rude. All these differences can be wearing over the course of an afternoon, and as a teacher, you are going to have to adapt to them. Some children will also react differently to the sort of material you provide: a more mature pupil will need a different approach to those of a more immature nature - the latter might need a tutor that makes them feel that they are making fast progress, which is attractive to look at and doesn't have too much information on a page. Do not use a particular book because you always have. One teacher I knew taught her children from the same book she had used as a child sixty years previously! Her pupils were underachieving and she did not realise why. After looking at different material she found that using a more up-to-date book gave her pupils a repertoire of short, fun pieces. They were enjoying themselves and began to make quick progress. Hunt around for the right tutor for your pupils. They will not all need the same book and your role in providing the right material for the right child is vital.

Note learning is a hard task, hard enough for such methods as Suzuki's to abandon conventional notation in the first instance. Colour co-ordination and pattern recognition are among many methods that have been tried, but when it comes down to it, they must learn two-stave notation at some point so pupils may as well get on with it.

You will not have to be too inventive at first as most good tutors provide some carefully-devised schemes that allow for the careful accumulation of skills. Your job in these early stages is to act as the intermediary between the book and the pupil, explaining and providing support and extension material that aid the child in his or her studies.

During these initial stages, your enthusiasm will do as much for the pupil as anything – there is not a lot to learn as your pupil needs time to develop those important musicianship, motor and reading skills. Do not expect too much to start with, it probably will not happen - practice will be

difficult and not very productive. Imagine a young child being faced with the following:

1. A physically demanding instrument to play - violins come in half and three-quarter sizes but pianos do not. They are designed for fully-grown adults to play.
2. An abstract language and a series of foreign words and abbreviations that signify something!

Add to this the need for the child to practise on a daily basis and you have a recipe for disaster!

### ***Recapitulation***

- Temper your approach to the individual.
- Try to be natural and not patronising - do not make the child feel inferior.
- Show your enthusiasm.
- Choose material to suit the pupil.
- Remember, initial progress might be difficult and slow - do not expect too much to begin with.

## **Chapter 3 –The Lesson**

The structure of a lesson is important. Try not to sit the child down and start playing immediately as s/he might not be ready. Instead, warm up with some of the following:

*Rhythm work* - clap simple four beat rhythms to the pupil and get them to clap them back. Use different body sounds, slapping your thighs (*patschen*), clicking your fingers, etc. Get the child to try making up rhythms that you copy. Alternatively, clap a phrase and get the child to improvise one in response. (As the child progresses, make sure that you start to use other time signatures; 3/4 is hard to work with when improvising - pupils and teachers alike prefer 4/4)

*Sight singing* - this is important as it helps to develop the aural skills that are so important in so many aspects of music making. Excellent material for sight singing has been written by Zoltan Kodály and is published by Boosey and Hawkes. These start with pentatonic exercises using tonic sol-fa and develop through major and minor modes. More on this later.

*Sight reading* - something most piano teachers don't like to touch unless there is an exam in the offing. You should teach the techniques of sight reading and stress the pleasure of being able to sit and play what is seen.

*Aural skills* - these can be developed from the music the child is studying. Don't allow these to fall behind as they can create difficulties in exam situations.

A forty-five minute lesson should have a good portion given over to the development of these skills. It is then that things can move on to practised music.

It is easy to say "teach", but the right techniques and approaches are difficult to know, especially for inexperienced tutors. I am convinced that my first pupils learned their playing through a form of psychic osmosis! I was not really teaching - I only listened and made a few general comments. Lessons became increasingly boring for me, my concentration became limited, and in some lessons, I began even to fall asleep! The problem was that I was not focussing on developing specific skills and was becoming too distracted. After I started talking to examiners, however, I found they marked using specific criteria and, by adopting similar approaches in lessons, discovered a valuable focus for my attention.

One such set of criteria is used effectively by the Guildhall School of Music and Drama for their external examinations. By concentrating on what specific skills are required in performance, they have come up with the following 'basic' elements:

1. Musical Awareness – the candidate's sense of expression, awareness of structure, shape, style, mood and character.
2. Quality of Sound – the consistency of tone, clarity of line, focus, attack, use of dynamic ranges and musical projection.
3. Accuracy - observance of performance directions, whether the notes are right, tempo, rhythmic accuracy and fluency.
4. Communication – whether the music has an overall sense of performance, etc.
5. Control of instrument - technical control, co-ordination, postures, sound production

Some of you might be shrinking away from the idea of categorising music in this manner, but both the Guildhall and good teachers alike know that there are overlaps, and that one area might easily influence another. But focussing on such criteria helps the teacher to pick out specific faults in a student's playing, and allows the teacher to come up with plans to help solve these – a lot better than the general mish-mash that can take place in piano lessons!

Based on a system that the Guildhall have developed to help teachers in the lesson, the following table might be photocopied and used:

## Name

## Music

MUSICAL AWARENESS - expression, structural awareness, sense of shape, style, mood, character etc.				
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poor				excellent
QUALITY OF SOUND - consistency, clarity, focus, attack, dynamic range, projection etc.				
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poor				excellent
ACCURACY - observance of performance directions, notes, tempo, rhythm, fluency etc.				
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poor				excellent
COMMUNICATION - sense of performance, intent, presentation etc.				
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poor				excellent
CONTROL OF INSTRUMENT - technical control, co-ordination, postures, sound production etc.				
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poor				excellent
COMMENTS & AGREED TARGET FOR NEXT WEEK				
 _____				

The table can be easily adapted to suit your own requirements, but in essence, this sheet gives both the pupil and parent a visual record of how they are performing and where strengths and weaknesses lie. You can

suggest one or two areas that the pupil needs to keep in mind when practising during the week. For beginners and younger pupils, a simplified system using only three levels can be used (see following table).

## **Name**

## **Music**

WAS THE MOOD RIGHT?		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
WAS THE SOUND GOOD?		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
WERE THE NOTES RIGHT?		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
DID I MAKE A PIECE OF MUSIC?		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
WAS MY PLAYING IN CONTROL?		
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
WHAT I HAVE TO DO FOR MY NEXT LESSON		
		

In line with school educational policies, such assessment tables as these might be kept, helping the pupil to form a personal musical profile which can be used at a later date as evidence of achievement.

The length of a lesson is important and you should be aware that not all pupils are capable of concentrating for extended periods. This is particularly the case with very young children. If you are to teach all areas thoroughly, a lesson should take approximately forty to forty-five minutes, but, in certain instances, this might prove to be too much. There is no

reason why lessons cannot be split between two sessions, one concentrating on the playing and the other on tests. Failing this, a shorter lesson **in the first instance** should be acceptable, although not preferable.

The rate at which children learn can often be a slow process, especially if sight reading skills are ineffective. I have tried various methods over the years but the most effective involves centring on the skills which a piece of music teaches a student.

I experimented on two children of similar age and abilities, asking each of them to learn the same piece of music, but in a different way. One pupil learned the music from the beginning as a complete unit whereas the other was required to use a skills-based approach thus:

1. I learned the music fully, making a note of where all the problems lay for an inexperienced musician, the techniques that were needed and how they were to be adapted to the music. These I legally photocopied and used to create a montage of different techniques. The rest of the music was discarded.
2. The pupil was required to learn the individual sections, paying attention to the techniques involved and how they could be used in other situations. These were combined with technical exercises, in this case from *A Dozen A Day* that would strengthen the concepts they were learning.
3. When the pupil had prepared the montage, it was discarded in favour of the original and the whole piece learned.

Both pupils had agreed to do the same amount of practice on the music, but the results were quite different; the one who tried the latter method had the music perfected well in advance of the other. A similar experiment, using the same piece, with pupils of differing standards (one Grade 4 and one Grade 5) had similar results. By taking the technical problems out of context and studying them, and by being made aware of the techniques needed, a pupil should be able to work more independently, choosing the correct technique for the correct situation. The reason for this is quite apparent: when practising, pupils can become too carried away with superfluous material that one often finds, because it can be played easily, the centre of attention. The difficult areas are not done because there are more pleasant things to do. By re-directing the pupil's attention and efforts during preparation, more can be achieved in a much shorter period.

When the music gets to the point where the pupil is perfecting it, or for that matter if you decide to teach a piece as a complete unit, it is sometimes a good idea to make the student learn it "backwards" - that is, starting it with the last few bars or section and playing through to the double-bar. This is because when a musician learns a piece from the beginning, the number of times s/he plays through from the start until the point at which s/he can go no further is quite remarkable. The beginning is being strengthened. As the piece progresses, generally it becomes weaker

and weaker due to the later sections having not been played as many times. Working backwards will allow the end to be equally as strong.

### ***Recapitulation***

- Break the music into differing sections, allowing work to be done on several different musical skills.
- Assess each piece weekly, focussing your teaching on specific criteria and make notes where necessary.
- Rather than ‘rail-roading’ a pupil through a piece of music, break it down into several smaller sections chosen to develop specific skills and techniques.

## ***Chapter 4 – Practice and Progression***

We have established methods of teaching, assessing, planning and implementing lessons, but if a child is unwilling or unable to practise, we are destined for problems. For beginners, practising is difficult since there is not really a lot to do, and giving them too much can be counterproductive. For young beginners, practice can become tedious and a set length of time each day will seem like an eternity. It is not surprising, therefore, that children who have all the right qualities can fail miserably because they are unable to concentrate or work alone. Although it might be easy to dismiss this with the beginner, remember that the need to develop a routine from the word go is very important. Difficult and unpleasant though it may sound, a child who shows a reluctance to practise in the early stages should be made to work, and this should feel as commonplace as, for example, sitting down to an evening meal. This is where calling in the parental hit squad is quite useful, since only they can help a reluctant pupil. A set of guidelines is useful and is worth giving out when you start the pupil off. (Do not forget how easily pieces of paper can be lost - a good idea is to glue these onto the front cover of their tutor, or hand them out regularly):

Practising is a very difficult and lonely occupation and younger children thrive on company. Take an active interest by sitting with your child, listening and commenting. This will give your child an audience and will help develop his/her confidence.

Where you keep the piano is important - try to have it in a room where the child feels comfortable and not in a place where, for example, the family meet only for formal occasions. Sending your child alone into the dining room, for example, is a form of banishment and with some children, might seem like a punishment.

Find a time of day that is sacrosanct, when the television is switched off and the whole family sits down to do something quiet. This reduces the likelihood of distractions. Ideally, this should be at the same time each day. Don't "reward" your child by allowing him/her a day off. Practice is not a punishment - being given the chance to learn an instrument is a privilege. Don't ask a younger sibling to sit with your child because you are too busy - this will invariably cause distractions and is a recipe for disaster.

At the end of each session, ask your child to write down exactly what s/he has done and how it went - e.g. any difficulties encountered. If you noticed any, don't forget to say what they were.

The more advanced pupil should have an established routine and, using the teacher's notes, be able to work effectively. Do not be surprised, however, if there are fallow periods - they will occur and there is little the teacher can do other than encourage, if not push, the child back into line. Often, such times occur after periods of intense work, for example, after an examination or a concert; when anyone has had to work fervently towards a deadline, the mind does need to shut down for a period, but this should not be allowed for long. It is better to get your pupil up and running as quickly as possible.

More advanced students should be encouraged to listen to themselves by using a tape recorder. They will not enjoy this, but it will prove to be very revealing and an excellent method by which they can analyse their playing.

The eighteenth-century French virtuoso harpsichordist, François Couperin might be worth mentioning because of the methods he used when working with beginners. He taught at his students' homes and, at the end of lessons, would lock their harpsichords and take away the key. He did not want his students to practise until they were capable of working independently, as they would be sure to get into bad habits between lessons. He must have taught more frequently than once a week, but there is a case to suggest that with beginners a more extended lesson, a super practice session for want of better words, might be productive.

### ***Progression***

For beginners we have it cracked since there are scores of different graded tutors on the market that plan teachers' work. They never go the whole way, however, and often we are left with having to make our own direction after our pupils have achieved a standard of Grade 3 or so. It is up to us to know how to go on, rather than floundering about and dipping into whatever happens to be sitting on our music desks. We owe it to the pupil to make sure that progression occurs by preparing schemes of work that give us provision for support and extension activities.

Let us take a hypothetical pupil, Emily. She is about to embark on a Haydn sonata and we need to know what else to give her by means of extending her abilities and knowledge, and supporting weak areas.

Using a table like the one below helps us to plan effectively:

SUPPORT	CORE	EXTENSION
<p>Language - tonic, dominant, subdominant. Scales/arpeggios in E, e; B, b</p> <p>Scales in 3s and 6s in E, B, f#, c#</p> <p>Read Ferguson &amp; revision of Grade 5 workbook, section "ornamentation"</p>	<p>Haydn - Sonata in E/1st mvt.</p> <p>Principal keys E &amp; B</p> <p>Triplet and sextuplet movement in E, B, f#, c#</p> <p>Ornamentation - turns and trills</p>	<p>Knowledge: 1<sup>st</sup> movement sonata form</p> <p>Scale and arpeggio of E, e</p> <p>Theory: scales E, e; B, b; cadences - perfect, imperfect, interrupted</p> <p>Comparison &amp; practise of Baroque and Classical trills</p>

This is only a partial scheme, but to develop one will require the teacher to sit and examine the score carefully. There is no reason why this cannot be done with the pupil. One of Emily's abilities is that she is capable of discussing what skills she needs to look at in a piece, and where her weaknesses lie; approaching this with pupils makes them feel that they are having a say in their education.

Planning what we need to teach gives us direction and stops us from wasting time. But it is necessary to know in advance what we want to look at over an extended period. We need to choose pieces of music carefully, allowing for the accumulation of skills. Again, this saves valuable time and has other benefits - the parents will know what music to get (how many times are we kept waiting by inefficient music suppliers?), and the pupil will have an indication of how s/he needs to work over the time specified.

Planning in tabular form again is useful:

Emily - Autumn Term		
MUSIC	TIME	SKILLS/CONCEPTS AS FOCUS
Haydn - Sonata in E major, 1st movement	8 weeks	1. Understanding 1st movement sonata form 2. Even playing - trills, turns etc. 3. Dynamics - deciding what, how and when 4. Playing repeated chords 5. Even playing in scalic passages 6. Techniques - over-holding, rubato, rits and ralls
Kabalevsky - Sonatina, 2nd movement	4 weeks	3. As above 4. As above 6. Legato playing without the pedal 7. Solo and accompaniment - arm weight, touch, tone 8. Pedalling
Debussy - <i>La Fille aux cheveux de lin</i>	8 weeks	3. As above 4. As above 6. As above 7. As above 8. As above 9. Colour - tone production 10. Consistency within a composition 11. Rubato and tempo changes

Now we all know that Emily will be using more skills than those listed, but here there are many that are being emphasised and revised. As demonstrated above, pieces should be planned to overlap so that boredom does not set in with having just one piece to play. I realise that there is a lot of paperwork, but the important thing is that your pupil will have an individually-differentiated curriculum that has purpose and direction.

The *National Curriculum for Music* requires students to progress through a series of skills and concepts which give various strands showing the levels of attainment expected by certain ages. This approach is one that is relatively easy to adopt – especially if preparing for examinations. Below are guidelines to indicate the levels of attainment piano students should achieve by certain points in their development. These are developed in line with the examination boards' requirements for practical and theoretical study and should form a practical checklist. You can focus a scheme of work for your student on these to show what new skills need to be developed.

### ***Recapitulation***

- Think in terms of developing a logical progression for your pupils

- Plan the skills they need to attain and ensure that these are the focus of your lessons
- Make your students aware of what you are doing – ask for their help in achieving your joint goals

## ***Exam Board Levels of Attainment***

LEVEL	TECHNIQUES & SKILLS	TONE	INTERPRETATION	DURATION
Preliminary	[1] Rudimentary knowledge of posture and hand position and how they affect playing. [2] Be able to strike keys effectively without too much hand or extraneous finger movement. [3] Be developing evenness of playing, especially with weak fingers and weak hand. [4] Understand and use the principles of crescendo and diminuendo, accenting, staccato etc.	[1] Be able to play at different volumes, using reasonable crescendo and diminuendo.  [2] Tone quality is generally even and hands showing some balance.	[1] Show rudimentary knowledge of phrasing and articulation  [2] Rudimentary knowledge of interpretation should be evident in playing	[1] Be able to play with and maintain a steady pulse  [2] Be able to play simple rhythms accurately
Grade 1 & 2	[1] Begin to demonstrate how posture and hand position are important in the production of tone, etc.  [2] Begin to show a conciseness of finger movement and evenness of playing  [3] Show they are developing control of instrument	[1] Play with good tone and some variety of dynamic expression and colour  [2] Control of balance between hands	[1] Be able to play with a degree of articulation and phrasing  [2] Be able to interpret music using a rudimentary knowledge of style	[1] Use appropriate speeds  [2] Show a firm grasp of rhythm [3] Show effective use of rallentando, ritardando, etc.
Grade 3 & 4	[1] Show good grasp of posture and hand position and use them effectively in tone production  [2] Be able to incorporate simple hand movements to help articulation and phrasing and to facilitate ease of playing  [3] Start to use arm weight in developing gradations of touch and control of the music	[1] Be able to control tone and colour with good use of dynamics and performance markings  [2] Show an ability to differentiate balance where necessary  [3] Understand the rudiments of pedalling and how this can affect the tone of the music	[1] Demonstrate an ability in phrasing and articulation, playing with fluency and technical control  [2] Start to communicate and project their pieces for a listener	[1] Have a fluency in rhythm and metre  [2] Be able to play in simple and common time using natural accenting and stresses
Grade 5	[1] Use posture and hand position effectively in most aspects of the music in gaining certain effects and to facilitate phrasing, articulation and ease of playing  [2] Be able to display good practice in fingering  [3] Use arm weight effectively in developing	[1] Control tone, colour and dynamics and carefully observe performance markings  [2] Be able to differentiate varieties of balance, including the ability to use various tones	[1] Carefully phrase and articulate music with fluency and good technical control  [2] Be able to interpret composers' requirements where marked and sensibly use judgement where none are indicated  [3] Show commitment to the performance and project this to a listener with a confident manner	[1] Display a firm rhythmical security  [2] Respond well to changes in metre or rhythmical qualities within a movement or composition [3] Begin to understand the

	gradations of touch and in control of the music [4] Be able to effectively use various staccato and legato techniques including wrist & finger staccato, over-holding and pedalling	simultaneously [3] Pedal and over-holding notes in the production of good tonal ambience [4] Make good use of silence	[4] Will be able to respond and project the music's character and style and play with an increasing naturalness and conviction	relationships in speed variation within a composition
Grade 6 & 7	[1] Show a musical maturity in style and interpretation, demonstrating a clear musical intent and be able to project this to the listener  [2] Demonstrate a good technical control of the piano, facilitated through correct use of arm weight, finger dexterity, posture and hand position  [3] Show increasing stamina and accuracy over an extended period of time	[1] Be able to play contrapuntal and homophonic music clearly with increasing accuracy of tone, articulation, variety and spirit [2] Be able to use arms, finger and hand position in a unified stylistic performance [3] Show increased variety of tone, volume and colour and be able to use these over extended periods of time	[1] Play with flair, control and fluency [2] Start to understand the composer's logic and respond to this in interpretation	[1] Show a firm rhythmic and metrical fluency [2] Understand the relationships in speed variation within a composition and use this with direction and purpose
Grade 8	Show a fully-developed maturity in style and interpretation, demonstrating a clear musical intent and be able to project this to the listener. Demonstrate full technical control of the piano, facilitated through correct use of arm weight, finger dexterity, posture and hand position	Use appropriate techniques in the production of a subtle performance that demonstrates an understanding of tone, colour and volume	Give an assured performance that communicates the composers' intentions fully, interpreting all aspects of the music in a stylistic manner. Where needed, should make objective judgements being able to demonstrate reasons within a broadly historical context	

Level	SCALES & ARPEGGIOS	AURAL	SIGHT READING	THEORY
Preliminary	[1] Be able to play selected scales hands separately at a steady, although not too fast, speed  [2] Be able to play evenly in fours	[1] Be able to clap simple rhythms [2] Be able to feel the pulse of a simple piece of music [3] Be able to sing simple phrases and state which is higher or lower [4] Be able to anticipate key notes as finals of phrases [5] Be able to spot obvious features in short pieces of music	Be able to play simple melody with left or right hand, but not hands together, in simple key and without accidentals	[1] Know the staff, treble and bass clefs [2] Understand the values of notes and rests [3] Be able to use simple leger lines [4] Understand the function of tones and semitones [5] Know simple major scales [6] Understand how time signatures work and simple note groupings

Grade 1 & 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Be able to play selected scales hands together at appropriate speed</li> <li>[2] Be able to play selected scales in contrary motion</li> <li>[3] Be able to play selected chromatic scales, hands separately</li> <li>[4] Be able to play scales using staccato</li> <li>[5] Be able to play broken chords in simple keys, hands separately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Clap from memory melody in simple duple or triple time</li> <li>[2] Conducting and tapping pulse to simple piece of music</li> <li>[3] Sing as an echo short phrases and series of notes</li> <li>[4] Identify simple intervals</li> <li>[5] Identify rhythmic and melodic changes to a short piece of music</li> <li>[6] Identify certain features in a piece of music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be able to play a short piece in simple time in a variety of keys, but not exceeding three sharps or one flat. Inclusion of accidentals, ties and dotted notes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Be able to use more complex leger lines</li> <li>[2] Understand the functions of compound time</li> <li>[3] Know how to form harmonic minor scale</li> <li>[4] Know simple major and harmonic minor scales</li> <li>[5] Understand major and perfect intervals</li> <li>[6] Understand simple major and minor triads</li> <li>[7] Be able to add bar lines to phrases</li> <li>[8] Be able to use simple terms and signs</li> <li>[9] Be able to compose responses to simple rhythms</li> </ul>
Grade 3 & 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Be able to play selected scales and arpeggios with fluency and direction at an appropriate speed</li> <li>[2] Be able to play selected scales in contrary motion</li> <li>[3] Begin to use different accenting patterns</li> <li>[4] Be able to play using gradations of tone</li> <li>[5] Use staccato and legato techniques for scales</li> <li>[6] Be able to play arpeggios and broken chords, hands separately and together at a reasonable pace.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Clap from memory melody in simple duple or simple triple time, compound duple or compound triple, and state the time</li> <li>[2] Conducting and tapping pulse to piece of music in simple and compound times</li> <li>[3] Sing as an echo short phrases and series of notes</li> <li>[4] Identify and sing intervals</li> <li>[5] Identify rhythmic and melodic changes to a short piece of music</li> <li>[6] Be able to discriminate between major and minor thirds</li> <li>[7] Identify more complex features in a piece of music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be able to play a short piece in simple time in a variety of keys, but not exceeding four sharps or three flats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Know the technical names for the degrees of a scale</li> <li>[2] Understand the grouping of notes and the arrangements of rests</li> <li>[3] Know more complex key signatures</li> <li>[4] Understand more complex tonic triads</li> <li>[5] Understand intervals, inc. augmented &amp; diminished</li> <li>[6] Understand simple transposition</li> <li>[7] Be able to compose simple rhythms</li> <li>[8] Be able to use more complex sharps and flats</li> <li>[9] Understand the function of the double sharp and flat</li> </ul>
Grade 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Be able to play all scales hands together with fluency and direction at a quick pace, using legato and staccato, piano and forte</li> <li>[2] Be able to play selected contrary motion scales, major and harmonic minor, using legato and staccato, piano and forte</li> <li>[3] Be able to play chromatic scales, hands together, in similar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Clap from memory melody in simple duple, triple or quadruple, compound duple or compound triple, and state the time</li> <li>[2] Conducting and tapping pulse to piece of music in simple and compound times</li> <li>[3] Sing as an echo phrases or series of notes</li> <li>[4] Identify and sing intervals</li> <li>[5] Be able to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be able to play a short piece of music in simple or compound time in up to four sharps or flats including accidentals and unusual musical styles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[1] Know and use all major and minor scales and their key signatures</li> <li>[2] Understand all intervals (including compound)</li> <li>[3] Understand syncopation, complex time signatures and their barrings</li> <li>[4] Know and use simple ornaments</li> <li>[5] Composition of (a) answer to opening statement; (b) melodic line to words of a poem</li> <li>[6] Know expansions</li> </ul>

	<p>motion and selected contrary motion scales</p> <p>[4] Be able to play all arpeggios, major and minor, in root position, with fluency and at an appropriate speed</p>	<p>discriminate between thirds in root, 1st or 2nd inversion</p> <p>[7] Identify more complex features in a piece of music</p>		<p>and contractions of scores</p> <p>[7] Know and use primary chords, in all positions and their various indicators (inc. figured bass)</p> <p>[8] Know tonic triads of all keys &amp; inversions</p> <p>[9] Be able to analyse various scores and answer questions relation to key, time, chords, instruments, terms and signs etc.</p>
Grade 6 & 7	<p>[1] Be able to play all scales, major and minor (both forms) as above</p> <p>[2] Be able to play selected contrary motion scales -as above</p> <p>[3] Be able to play chromatic scales - as above</p> <p>[4] Be able to play scales a third and sixth apart and in thirds and sixths (hands separately and staccato)</p> <p>[5] Be able to play all arpeggios as above and selected dominant and diminished seventh arpeggios in root position</p>	<p>[1] Clap from memory a melody in any time</p> <p>[2] Beat time</p> <p>[3] Sing the lower of a short 2-part melody, and sight sing a melody with accompaniment</p> <p>[4] Show full understanding of intervals</p> <p>[5] Identify major and minor, diminished or augmented triads in root, 1st and 2nd inversions</p> <p>[6] Identify all cadences and primary chords</p> <p>[7] Answer questions on musical features of a piece of music</p>	<p>Be able to play a piece of music in simple or compound time (including five and seven) all keys including accidentals and unusual musical and metrical shifts</p>	<p>I have not given the requirements for Grades 6 - 8 as these are not necessary for practical progression. If one refers to the section marked "Theory" there are examples of what may be done.</p>
Grade 8	<p>[1] Be able to play all scales, major and minor (both forms) as above</p> <p>[2] Be able to play selected contrary motion scales -as above</p> <p>[3] Be able to play scales a third and sixth apart and in thirds and sixths (hands separately and staccato)</p> <p>[4] Be able to play chromatic scales - as above and selected minor third scales, hands separately</p> <p>[5] Be able to play all major, minor, dominant and diminished seventh arpeggios as above in root position, first and second inversion (maj/min only)</p>	<p>[1] Clap from memory a melody in any time</p> <p>[2] Beat time</p> <p>[3] Describe selected note values and time signatures</p> <p>[4] Sing the lower of a short 2-part melody, and sight sing a melody with accompaniment</p> <p>[5] Show full understanding of compound intervals</p> <p>[5] Identify major and minor, diminished or augmented triads in root, 1st and 2nd inversions</p> <p>[6] Identify all cadences, primary and secondary chords</p> <p>[7] Discuss matters relating to features of a piece of music</p>	<p>Be able to play a lengthy piece of music in simple or compound time (including five and seven) in all keys including accidentals and unusual musical and metrical shifts</p>	

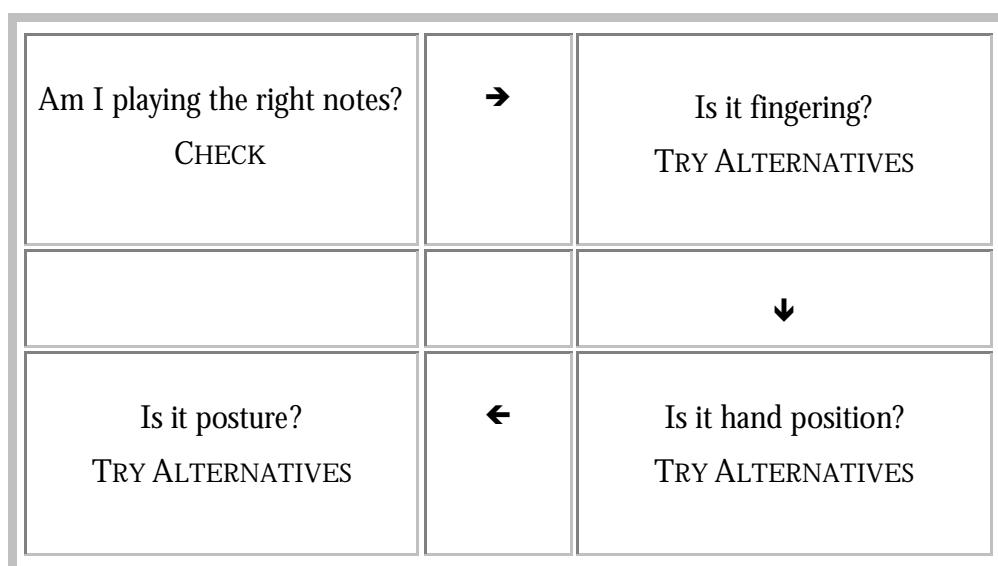
## **Chapter 5 – Independent Learning**

The Utopian dream: your pupils are doing their practice happily, are progressing well, are thorough and understand technique and style. All you have to do is sit back and bask in their playing.

Even for experienced musicians this is a tall order, but at least they have the one thing that most students need to develop: the ability to make correct decisions and work independently. Think about the times you went to your teacher, or have had a pupil come to you, with only a fraction of the set work completed; they could not go any further because of particular difficulties, the *I'll let my teacher take care of that!* syndrome. As pupils progress one should expect a modicum of independence to develop, but this often comes too late, so we should be careful to encourage it as early as possible. This can be achieved quite easily by getting the pupil to analyse his/her problems, which generally fall into one of the following categories:

1. Notes
2. Fingering
3. Position
4. Posture

Working with Angela, a student piano-teacher, I was subjected to a barrage of whining concerning a left-hand scale that she found difficult to execute. The notes were all there, the fingering seemed fine but no matter how hard she tried she could not get it light enough. After the suggestion that she turn her body slightly to the left, a new sound emerged. Angela could have worked out this problem by herself by trying to analyse its root. Producing a little flow diagram for students might help them to analyse the problem:



Perhaps getting the pupils to write down problems will also help this process. Here they can be very specific:

DATE: _____			
MUSIC: _____			
BAR	PROBLEM	WHAT I TRIED	SUCCESS
15-16	I can't get a good enough staccato, it's too heavy	[1] Loosening the wrist [2] Raising the hand slightly [3] Not using wrist but raising and "grabbing" the notes	✗ better ✓

This might appear to be a difficult process, but it does work and pupils have a record of what they tried should a similar problem arise, as they have a written record of their accumulated techniques.

### ***But I didn't know it was wrong!***

We know that mistakes can be easily overlooked by both pupil and teacher. Furthermore, once discovered, the problem cannot be easily rectified since it has been practised; these mistakes become ingrained into the pupil's rendition to the extent that much time and effort will be needed to correct it.

With younger children this is even more perilous and perhaps more likely to happen because the child has not yet developed a complete sense of harmony - even when notes go wildly wrong, most inexperienced pupils will accept the mistake. There are tutors on the market that try to counteract such problems from the outset by developing a pupil's sense of harmony and melody, achieved by introducing chords and skills such as transposition, even at very early stages.

But whatever the situation, it is up to you to spot these problems as they occur. With easier pieces this is quite simple, but imagine the problems encountered when the pupil is playing, for example, a swift three-part fugue by Bach! The most common problems with pieces such as this relate to wrong notes that sound perfectly all right. If your own reading is not up to it, you must prepare the piece yourself fully so that you know what is going on.

Another good way of developing independent learning is to encourage your students to 'practise' away from the piano by making them read their scores as if they were books. Not only does this help them to become familiar with the music, it will also ultimately help their aural abilities as they 'listen' to the music in their heads.

## **Chapter 6 – Exams**

Children can do the most amazing feats. To start with they seem to show no fear and stand up in front of parents and friends in school concerts doing things of which most adults would not dream. But when they sit in front of one person who has a mark sheet and pen, and have to perform to the same standard that would be expected of them in a concert, they turn from the super-confident into the insecure. Kids are nervous of exams to the extent that some lose sleep, feel sick or even become hysterical gibbering wrecks. There seems to be nothing you can say that will make taking an exam any easier for some pupils. The music they have to play is a sort of torture and the examiner the torturer. The trauma they experience building up to the fateful day, the nervousness and finally the relief they feel after the hateful half-hour is enough to make most adults' hearts give out and them to breathe their last. I have never understood why, because the examiner is usually a pleasant chap, who wants to help them through and who will make all sorts of allowances that wouldn't be tolerated in a concert.

If it were up to some teachers, their students would never sit an exam. But there is a lot of pressure from all quarters for the students to measure their skills against a graded yardstick. Parents want to see what they are getting for their money, fellow teachers want to be able to judge a colleague by how many distinctions s/he has gained, and worst of all, among the children themselves is a general rivalry that requires them to get a better grade than did a friend or sibling. So, year in, year out, we put ourselves and our students through a hell that costs a lot of money, only to receive a piece of paper displaying the level and standard achieved.

Do not get me wrong, it is not that I think exams are not valuable and, to be truthful, putting a little pressure on children is quite good for them; it certainly has the effect of making lazier students achieve higher standards than normal. I am not too sure of the effect they have on the teacher, however, as most will become as wound-up as their pupils – watch them stand outside the exam room when their pupil is playing. They will pace up and down expectantly, bite their nails and even wish the waiting area had a smoking policy and ashtray.

There are several music examination boards, each of which produces individual syllabuses, all of which have their pros and cons. These are: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (the ABRSM) - (*Royal College and Royal Academy of Music*); The Guildhall School of Music and Drama; The London College of Music (LCM); Trinity College London .

It is worth your looking at their syllabuses and finding out what each board offers. Pieces generally are equivalent in standard, although incongruities do appear now and again. Comparing all boards, however, reveals surprisingly few differences. The following criteria, designed to

demonstrate the standard required to pass Grade 8 with honours (distinction) are published in the Guildhall's piano syllabus. They are essentially the same as the criteria used by the ABRSM; here they are included in full and act as a good guideline for all examination candidates:

**Grades 1 & 2** – Musicians will be beginning to show a feeling for different styles and an elementary sense of phrase and line. They will display a basic understanding of posture and breathing and a developing control of the instrument will be evident. They will also be able to produce a good tone with some variety of dynamic, colour and articulation as appropriate to the instrument. Musicians will be accurate in time and notes, displaying an awareness of all signs of expression and articulation. Technical work will be fluent and confident. Notated music should be clearly understood and played at a speed appropriate to the grade.

**Grades 3 & 4** – Performances must clearly demonstrate an understanding of style, phrasing, expression and tempo. Musicians should now begin to give more committed performances and have established a secure knowledge of notes and rhythms. Fluency and a basic understanding of the language will be expected, with evidence of an ability to control tonal contrasts, rhythm and pulse. Technical work should display a sound physical grounding and understanding. At Grade 4, musicians will begin to convey a sense of projecting their performances to the listener. A more developed awareness of the relationship between the body and the instrument should be apparent.

**Grade 5** – Performances must be committed, with an understanding of musical interpretation revealed by a sense of character and style. A naturalness of expression, phrasing and a sense of line will take the listener beyond the notes. A good physical stance with the instrument must now be established. Musicians will show a flexibility towards the changing nature of the musical material within pieces. They will possess a greater range of tone colour and a firm grasp of rhythm and pulse with proficient control of speed at all tempi. The beginnings of an awareness of the significance of structure and form in interpretation will be projected.

**Grades 6 & 7** – Performances should reveal musical maturity through stylish and communicative playing. Increased stamina, tone, volume, colour, speed, an ability to play counterpoint clearly and expressively, balance and spirit will be exhibited through consistent technical control of the instrument. Clear musical intent will be

projected. An awareness of structure will be evident in terms of an ability to scale dynamics over a long range and to display an understanding of points of interest in form (second subjects, recapitulations or more simply the arrival to the dominant or at a double bar). Performances will be more consistent, maintaining tempo and character over longer periods.

**Grade 8** – Performances must have character and individuality, demonstrated by interpretative imagination, fluency, accuracy, stamina and tone. Musicians will present assured and communicative performances within well-balanced and varied programmes, which must display a high level of technical proficiency. The musician should offer a confident platform manner, reflecting an awareness of concert giving.

It is a good idea to find out where exam centres are and the quality of the piano that is being used - believe it or not, some centres have very unsuitable instruments that do little other than put a student off. When you have weighed up all the options, decide on which board is suitable not only for your needs as a teacher, but also for the needs of your pupils. There is no reason why you cannot tailor individual boards to your various students' requirements.

Disagreements with examiners will occur and often you can do little other than lodge a complaint. Exam boards will rarely change their minds, but if there is an incongruity in the general marks that a particular examiner gives across several areas, marks might be adjusted. You must remember, however, that all examiners are highly-trained professional musicians and teachers, and unless you feel that there is a case of poor marking or inaccurate commenting, then it is best to accept the examiner's decision. You will not be in the room listening and if you do manage to press your ear to the door, you still will not be able to hear as clearly as the examiner.

Once you have decided to enter a pupil for an exam, it is best to get on with all aspects as soon as you can. Teachers often leave things until it is too late, after which there is a last minute rush to get everything done. This will only unnerve the student and affect his/her overall performance. It is a good idea to be ready well in advance and allow the music then to lie fallow; this period will give it time to mature before bringing it out to revise. Only your knowledge of your pupil will give you the timescale you need for preparation - I have come across students who take six to twelve months to prepare for Grade 6 whereas others are known to prepare for Grade 8 in two or three.

It is a good idea to arrange for your candidates to play to each other or to another teacher in a mock examination well in advance of the date. This will allow children to get over initial nerves and it is often found that

other teachers will hear things that you will not - listen to them and base your teaching around the strengths they find, as well as the weaknesses.

Students' reactions to results are varied; they are quite capable of being enthusiastic, negative or indifferent. Whatever their response, the examiner's comments will give you a basis from which to work and these are usually very helpful and encouraging; examiners want the candidates to pass and will often hone in on the student's strengths. Weaknesses will be commented on, however, but in a constructive way. I have only once heard of a mark sheet coming back without something constructive on it, but then it was returned totally blank! Analyse what the examiner says and build your immediate teaching around it; do not just ignore it as there will always be good advice offered.

## **Chapter 7 – How children fail**

The dreaded word, *failure*, something that we, as teachers, cannot accept – none of our students really fail, do they?. They give up for all number of reasons but it could never be the teacher's fault! Could it?

Quite often children stop playing because they, and their parents, did not realise the enormity of the task they were taking on – as has been said, playing an instrument is very difficult and the child has to learn new motor skills as well as work on an abstract level with the music. If we think back to an earlier article where we examined the findings of the psychologist Piaget, and the problems that can ensue when a child is cognitively unready to start learning, we have a starting-point for understanding the difficulties s/he will face. If the approach you adopt in the first instance is wrong, then disaster can follow; but tempering your teaching strategies to the child's ability will have a great bearing on his/her learning capabilities. Unfortunately, each child has a different rate and manner of learning and no words of wisdom will really help you in this instance, only experience and your ability to learn from mistakes. This might sound a little hard but you have to understand that as a teacher you are going to have problems with various children along the way. If a child appears not to be working to potential, you should spend time thinking about the problem and trying to analyse its roots – try not just to close the door after the lesson and leave it until the following week. This is unfair on the child as well as on you. In situations where you feel your approach is wrong, do not hesitate to ask other teachers what they would do with similar situations or whether they have experienced anything similar. You can rest assured that unless they are a combination of Mother Teresa and Helen Keller's teacher, then they will have experienced something similar on many occasions.

I mention the teacher as a root of problems first because this is the easiest to rectify. There are other teacher-centred problems which might occur which you will learn to recognise as your skills develop. Here are a few:

- [1] **The child and the teacher have a personality clash.** In other words, they simply do not get on. This is not as straightforward as it sounds because in any relationship there is going to be a certain amount of acting. I have had many instances where I could not stand the pupil I was teaching, but, for the sake of my income, pretended that my pupil was the most important person in the world. There is nothing wrong with this - when you have a pupil present, you should have this attitude, but in reality, if you feel that you really cannot stand a pupil, it is going to show somehow. Put yourself in the position of having to teach someone you do not like and then add to

it the thought of having this child at the end of a long a gruelling session. It will not work, even if you feel stimulated by the work the child does.

Similarly, if the child does not like you (and let's face it, this is also a possibility), then similar situations will occur. In this instance, it is perhaps best to think again about what you are both getting out of the relationship and act accordingly. This is also likely to occur as the child veers towards adolescence. You, like any adult, will experience problems with some children. Here, any authoritarian is easy pickings for a pupil and as they become more familiar with you, their familiarity, as the saying goes, will lead to contempt.

Adopting the right approach to an adolescent is again a difficult thing to do and experience will provide you with a store of strategies that you can try to even things out a little. At this age, as any parent will tell you, pupils will become surly, arrogant and unpleasant in all manner of ways. But do not confuse this with personal dislike of yourself – this might just be their present nature, and perseverance and understanding will take you a long way. Be firm but friendly and take any snubs or insults, no matter how they might make you feel, on the nose. Remember that this is only a phase that the child is going through. Then again, you will probably have to cope with other problems as well, like a total lack of interest in the instrument. In today's world, playing a Beethoven sonata is not going to be as cool as dressing up as Obnoxious Spice and playing out the part!

- [2] **You are not allowing the child to work to his or her potential**
- Children will work their socks off if they think what they are doing is exciting or interesting and as long as they feel capable of the task. There is a problem related to this, however, which centres on the child's perception of his/her abilities and how s/he reacts to the work you set. It is easy for a pupil to go off the boil, which can be precipitated by not matching a task to his/her individual skills. A piece of music may be very difficult, for example, and no matter how you justify setting it, some children will become disheartened by its complexities. This might result in the child losing interest in practising, and could prove to be ultimately fateful with regard to long-term learning. Now I am not suggesting that you only give your pupils something within their ability spectrum – this is good way of ensuring a lack of progression. But if you over-burden a student with a barrage of pieces that are just that bit too difficult, s/he might become disheartened with an apparent lack of progress. Similarly, if you are the cautious type and play by all the ground rules, you might

find a pupil is not being stretched sufficiently to progress properly and again, boredom can ensue.

- [3] **You are bored.** Imagine seventeen years teaching the piano. You have seen them come and go, some with an Advanced Certificate, some with nothing. You have taught this or that piece of music countless times and you are, quite simply, tired of your work and tired with a particular pupil. Young teachers new to the profession can never see this happening – it is so unlikely - but a few years down the line it is quite possible to see them being cynical, even bitter, about their work. It is an unpleasant fact that one's work is not always a bed of roses, no matter what it is. In such situations it is quite possible that you will pass on some of your cynicism, contempt, or whatever, to those you teach. I like to think of Joyce Grenfell's school monologues as a guide to being able to maintain one's enthusiasm against all odds, but there will be times when even the most gifted pupil will try the patience of a saint. Again, there is no advice to offer in this situation, but be wary of boredom creeping up on you and damaging your students' potential
- [4] **Your pupil has out-grown you.** Again, this is common, and as a teacher you must be able to spot when a pupil needs to move on to a new teacher and be willing to release him or her. Perhaps it results from your student having been with you too long, or perhaps you haven't the skills to take him or her to the next level. Whatever the reason, you should start to suggest that a new teacher is in order (despite protests from the pupil and parents alike), and help in finding someone new who can carry on your work.
- [5] **The pupil understands the need for neither practice nor commitment.** Nine times out of ten, parents and pupils alike fail to comprehend the commitment. There is a lot of learning to do and, in the early stages, a false sense of security is developed since the pupil might make some very rapid progress. As the difficulty of the work increases, so will the need for a greater commitment; this can result in a battle of wills between you, the pupil, and the other activities s/he does. School teachers will always tell you of the problems they have when it comes to sports, for example, and in many instances, children are put into the unfair position of having to choose between one activity and another. It is wise to keep up with what your pupils are doing, both in and out of school, and at times you will have to help them to compromise. Give them support in helping them to manage their time and prevail upon their parents to help by making them stick to a timetable that allows them to do all they need. Bear in mind

also that when it comes to a choice of going and kicking a ball around a field or practising scales, a pupil might not always make the choice you would like!

- [6] **The pupil's learning environment is wrong.** I knew a good composer who wrote music in front of the television and who complained that it took too long to complete a piece. There is an answer to this and I, rather tactlessly, gave it. But if the pupil is unable to concentrate because of external pressures, then little progress will be made. The placing of the piano was discussed earlier, but there are other reasons to do with your pupils' social situation of which you must at some point be made aware. Sean was one such pupil who was asked by his parents not to practise at a certain time because they had recently had a new child who had odd sleeping patterns. Understandably, they did not want the baby disturbed, but what they did not understand was that his practice was suffering to the point that he eventually gave up the instrument. If his teacher had known about the problem before it was too late, something might have been able to be done. I presume you will talk to your students; when you do, try to find out if there are problems such as this and see if there is anything you can do. Be careful, however, as some parents might think you are interfering with their lives if you contact them for a chat. Tact and diplomacy are constant watchwords in these situations.
- [7] **You insist on far too much of your pupil.** Try not to ask your pupil to make the Red Sea part; know his/her limitations and work within these, even if an exam is on the horizon.

## ***Endword***

This booklet was produced initially as a series of articles in MusicTeachers.co.uk's Online Journal to provide teachers with an insight into how children learn the piano and the perils that can befall even the most skilled teachers. But before you run off armed with a whole collection of new ideas to try out on your pupils, remember that these comments are general, and were developed through the observation of one teacher's piano pupils over a 20-year period. Yours will be different and will probably react to your personality in a completely different manner. Throughout the series, I hope I have stressed the importance of tempering your approach to the individual pupil's needs: being flexible is probably the most important skill that a teacher can acquire and, importantly, remember that although music might be your life, it isn't necessarily your pupil's. Kids always want to do something else and the potential damage that an over-zealous teacher can create to family harmony and a pupil's enjoyment of music can be great. Be firm and professional, but above all else, keep the blinkers in the cupboard where they can do the least harm.

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