

SUSAN MCDUFFIE TEACHING TIPS

I am deeply honored to have been chosen the 2017 Georgia Teacher of the Year. Although I enjoy performing as solo pianist, organist and even playing jazz piano with a jazz combo, there is nothing that gives me more pleasure than teaching budding young musicians and watching them grow from young beginners to seasoned performers, many who have advanced to being accepted into leading music schools -- even becoming music school faculty members and outstanding soloists.

You have asked that I submit teaching tips. It seems I have been teaching all my life beginning with neighborhood children during my high school years, but before I submit my teaching tips, let me tell you a little of my background.

At the age of 3, I could play any tune with the I, IV, V, and V7 chords by ear. At age 6 my parents enrolled me with a teacher who couldn't teach me because I played all the pieces "by ear". However, I did have a teacher who taught me to sight read and play difficult repertoire, but with terrible technique. My parents took me to community concerts to hear famous pianists. Watching them, I knew I needed an instructor to properly build my technique. Although I was playing very advanced repertoire and receiving top rating in music festivals, I knew I was lacking in fine technique and musicianship.

During my senior year in high school, a young Oberlin conservatory piano graduate was hired by our school system to teach piano. She was the first REAL teacher I had. She wanted me to enroll at Oberlin-even had her professor fly to my home town of Edenton, North Carolina to audition me. I was offered an attractive scholarship to Oberlin, but my parents wanted me to attend Wesleyan college.

When I returned home during Thanksgiving, friends and my former teacher gathered around to hear me play. But I could only play Bach Inventions and Hanon exercises hands separately but with perfect hand position, strong fingers and relaxed wrists. My Oberlin trained teacher told me I could not have received any better training at Oberlin. She said that was exactly what I needed. I knew then that if I was to become a teacher, I would be successful in teaching students the correct way from what I learned from my years at Wesleyan.

I had the great opportunity to study at Wesleyan with Ralph Lawton, concert pianist and a former student of the eminent Joseph Lhevinne and Madame Olga Samaroff. He was a master teacher and many of my teaching tips stem from his instruction. Other teaching tips stem from my pedagogy study with professor Gladys Pinkston at Wesleyan who studied methods from the eminent pedagogue Louise Robyn from the American Conservatory in Chicago. In fact, I had her teach my daughter Margery, who now with that fabulous background studying with Ms. Pinkston, has her doctor of musical arts degree and is a Steinway Artist.

The Robyn method covers every facet of technique that Lhevinne and Samaroff display, but is taught within a child's grasp of understanding. With this background, students are prepared musically and technically to master major works at an early age. While other

methods work well with many teachers, I have found that the Robyn books cover every facet of piano technique and musicality from the beginning stages that children can comprehend. In other words, by following this method, a child should be able to play pieces technically and musically as well as an adult. Although the pictures in the books are dated, I tell the child to disregard them. Of course, I use other supplementary materials.

From the very first lesson, I have the student establish a musical tone by doing arm drops into each finger for one octave. The finger should be curved and firm. Afterwards I have the student play either a 3 or 5 note slur. At the beginning of the slur the student drops into the key: retains a relaxed wrist and gradually lifts at the end. The slurs can either be played legato, staccato or non-legato. Within the slurs the student displays different gradations of dynamics and sings "soft and then grow loud" and then reverses.

I teach Technique as a means of producing correct tonal sound for musical interpretation of a piece and I insist on proper hand position, strong fingers and wrist motion which are both essential in successfully creating the various articulations and dynamic gradations within playing. This seems to have worked so well preparing my students to advance greatly in their studies, enabling many to win competitions, placing first in GMTA and Festival auditions and soloing with the Macon Symphony Orchestra.

Most of all, I want my students to love music and share their talents with their friends, schools and churches and their future students and children. What a joy it has been and still is to teach these wonderful students and watch their musical growth with much pride!!