

TEACHING TIPS FROM BILL AND MARY ANN KNIGHT

As the saying goes...

I make no bones about it. I feel strongly that the piano teacher needs to play artistically at a level higher than the music being taught. Any attempt at being artistic is worthwhile – actions do speak louder than words. Think of your playing as SHOW and TELL in its finest sense.

I am amazed at how my Hot Button gets pushed and I get “turned on” to teach when I struggle to learn a new teaching piece. When I have a “hands on” “ears on,” and “brain on” experience, I can transmit so much more to my student. The piano teacher becomes an ACUPUNCTURIST stimulating the nerves to the student’s brain, ears, and hands.

When I have prepared the music instead of winging it, I feel as though I am conducting a personal master class for this “fortunate student.” I don’t believe anyone can go as deeply into the spiritual, poetic, emotional, musical and mechanical aspects of the music unless he or she attempts a “HANDS ON” experience.

There is a radical difference between the PASSIVE “listening to recordings,” looking at the score AND the ACTIVE playing, decoding and getting more out of the black notes on white paper.

As my students would say, I “lucked up” on the following adage that applies to all learning:

I HEAR and I FORGET

I SEE and I REMEMBER

I DO and I UNDERSTAND

I will grant you that some music is “caught rather than taught,” although I am a staunch believer in explaining the WHY, WHERE, and HOW of it!

We teachers shouldn’t just say, “Do it.” We should say, “Do it because...” and then we should go to great lengths to try and find the right words to describe the SOUND, the LOOK and the FEEL.

Let’s talk about playing artistically at a certain level. Just as 200 horsepower on a car makes the motor run more smoothly at 60 M.P.H., I think a teacher of elementary students should be proficient in intermediate repertoire; a teacher of intermediate students should be proficient in the advanced repertoire; and a teacher of advanced students needs to sit and incubate on the piano bench!

PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES



BEFORE

and

AFTER

Pre-Op in 2000 B.C.

Post-Op in 2000 A.D.

Barry- Before the Curtain Call

After the Deed - Barry

Before -Before with chills

After the Defrosting- **After**

Before the Calamity

After with Disgust

Before with self Criticism

After with Discovery

Before as a Conqueror

After with Defiance

Before with Calmness

After with Delight

Before with Courage

After with Determination

(The Before and After Syndrome)

- I. **Three Months Before a Performance** (the first time a student performs in studio):
The Motto for Performance is to be presented {Students say this prayer, meditation or mantra}
 - A. Let the music unfold.
 - B. Let me lose consciousness of myself.
 - C. Let me live in the music.
- II. **Two Months Before Performance:** Start with visualization (younger students: pretending performance).
 - A. Sit in straight back chair, eyes closed.
 - B. Picture the recital hall.
 - C. Picture walking slowly on stage, hearing applause, bowing, sitting down, adjusting the bench, breathing out, thinking, "This is it," and playing.
- III. **One Month Before Performance:** (The following routine matures the performance).
 - A. While sitting at the keyboard, hear a "section."
 - B. Hear and feel the music in your imagination (don't move fingers).
 - C. Play and judge.
 - D. Present this when mechanics, accuracy of notes and rhythm, and expressive detail are satisfactory.

INTENTIONS: DID YOU DO WHAT YOU HEARD IN YOUR HEAD?

(This exercise can be done with or without music)

IV. One-Two Months Before Performance:

Go for the BIG PICTURE: Use spotlighting, Highlighting, and Outlining to “mature the music.” The teacher and student have discussed each phrase, each section, and whole overall piece, and decided the high and low points (volume) of each. Next, the teacher discusses the purpose of a spotlight in a theater production (to shine on the important character or action). Student and teacher also discuss which voice is important or would both be spotlighted. Then the student plays only the important part of the music in a faster tempo. Other teachers call it “outlining the music” or “getting rid of the extras,” the no-frills version, going straight to the basics. This organized approach to develop one’s musical plans for a piece also teaches the architecture of the piece.

V. One Month before Performance:

HEALTH HINTS:

Caffeine and sugar should be stopped completely one month before the recital. Vitamins for stress (the B complex and C vitamins) are needed. Never eat too close to performance time. Always eat something, but in *moderation!* Do not eat anything closer than two hours before performance time. Feasting comes after the performance. Ask your doctor about digestion (stomach and colon).

VI. Several weeks Before Performance:

FINISHING LINE ROUTINE: Standard Routine (after school is the perfect time to do this). Arrive home.

- A. Perform “cold” – without warming up. Notice whether your playing is smooth sailing or a sinking boat. Help!
- B. “Spot check” with music beginning with a slow tempo, gradually building up to a performance tempo, gradually building up to performance tempo.
- C. Play the piece in ***Three Degrees of Slow*** (not necessarily in a row):
 1. Once with music, with counts and *without* pedal (extremely slow).
 2. Once without music, with counts, *without* pedal, counting aloud (medium tempo).
 3. Once without music, with counts, *with* pedal (slightly under performance tempo).
- D. Drill *starting places* which have been marked and discussed. If I were to wake you at 2 a.m. could you play the emergency Exit?
- E. Perform again to see improvement.
- F. Leave the piano with one more slow run-through (preferably just before bed-time).

VII. One Month Before Performance:

THE MAGIC CAPE (F’S CODE): *the magic cape for performance strategy.*

- A. Imagine being clothed in an elegant, flowing cloak, which when worn, makes you invisible to the audience.
- B. The student (dressed in cloak) takes time to think the F’s code.
 1. Fanny (Is the bench at the correct height? Take time to fix the bench).
 2. Feet (are they on the correct pedals? Look especially if you have on a long gown).
 3. Fingers (Are they over the correct keys?)
 4. Feel pulse, then breathe out and play.

VIII. One-Two Months Before Performance:

THE STUDENT AS THE TEACHER:

- A. Student should tape himself/herself, not to judge tone quality or color, but to JUDGE TIMING. The student should think, “How are my ritards, accelerando, balance and climax?”

- B. When listening to the tape, listen in “third person.” Try to hear objectively and judge the music; listen to the circles of sound, check on tempo and liberties. Conduct circles of sound and notice if they stay the same size, get smaller or larger (tempo fluctuations).
Teachers: *Never, ever start a student recital with a nervous child. I have found that if the first student has trouble, many will do so (Domino Theory). It is essential to choose one or two strong performers to start the recital. **A few words about longer solo recitals:** If a student is giving a solo recital, be sure to start with an “old friendly” piece that has been played publicly. Of course, I would present a shorter recital of secure pieces, rather than add pieces that are not yet secure. As a younger teacher, I erred by trying to impress the audience with a well-balanced recital and found out that my instinct was correct about some of the less secure pieces that should not have been on the program. Tsk! Tsk! Tsk! & OUCH!!*
- C. It is important to perform for people before the final recital.

IX. Week of Performance:

Teachers are not to correct notes one to two days before a performance.

(Teachers: Play along and see if mistakes can be absorbed unconsciously without talking about the mistake).

It is my duty to mention Beta-blockers for nerves. Some performers I know use this prescription, but only if a physician approves. Basically, Beta-blockers regulate the speed of the heart.

X. Day of Performance (the actual Big Day!): Morning and Afternoon

- A. **A.M. – Don’t** “play through,” “play through,” “play through,” “play through”, up to tempo.
- B. **A.M. –** Play slowly with music or without music (preferably without music).
- C. **A.M. -** Take time to think performance tempo. Your performance tempo should be a tempo at which you have practiced for a few weeks.
- D. **A.M. & P.M. -** Visualization of your music.
- E. **P.M. 30 minutes before concert –** use jazz, hymns, or old music to calm nerves & warm up.
- F. Some pianists use a metronome and play each piece a minimum of three times in the morning, all slower than performance tempo. Then two hours before performance, play program under tempo and backwards. *I read this somewhere.*

Many more tips for performers can be found in **MAK’S Almanak**.

Because I teach college majors and young students in pedagogy classes, I have been forced to get to the piano and stimulate the nerves to my brain, my ears, and my hands. Then I apply the ACUPUNTURE to them.

Even if I can only demonstrate parts or give the BIG PICTURE, the attempt enhances my teaching effectiveness.

In conclusion, good teachers are acupuncturists, constantly stimulating the right nerves to the right organs. Actually, we should be acupuncturists with multiple personality disorders because we also need to be audiologists, brain surgeons, electricians, engineers, painters, poets, mechanics, choreographers, neurosurgeons, singers and psychiatrists!

Don't you wish your piano students would say, **"I'M ALL EARS?"**