

TEACHING TIPS
Susan Andrews, 2017

From an early age, I've known that I wanted to pursue teaching piano as a career. But teaching piano is not a job to me.....it's a calling which continues to bring me deep personal satisfaction.

My studio is a mixture of ages, levels, and innate abilities, which presents an interesting challenge. The youngest is five and the oldest is mid-60s. My students include six beginners, two adults; 75% are in method books and 25% are working on advanced repertoire. In the course of a week, there are students who enter my studio who display one or more of the following traits: difficulty counting and maintaining a steady beat, inability to quickly identify notes around middle C on the staff after years of lessons, lack of fluency in scale performance, confusion over theory concepts, technical deficiencies, or over-involvement in extra-curricular activities which prevents adequate piano practice. But, thankfully, there are also students who practice diligently, understand theory concepts, shape phrases well, can voice a melody properly in either hand and bring the music to life with some degree of artistry. Through the years, I've had more students in the first category than in the second, but my calling demands that I give the same effort to each and every one, regardless of the natural aptitude or degree of talent. A teacher must love people, children in particular, and possess an abundance of patience and perseverance. We should derive enjoyment from the challenge of imparting information in ways the students can understand, and gratification from observing a student who can finally perform a piece successfully after struggling with the technical challenges.

It is important to focus on the individual student, rather than attempt to keep the student on *my* pace of progression through the method books. Lessons must be tailored to each individual student's abilities and learning style, and they must be allowed to progress at their own pace. Most students have the following weekly assignments: scales, technique book, lesson book, theory, literature piece and/or supplemental sheet music in progress for an upcoming performance. Some students can only handle one or two assigned pieces each week. A portion of each lesson must be devoted to instructing the students how to practice.

I use a large amount of supplementary material in addition to the method books. Hymn arrangements, popular music, jazz and other books as well as sheet music spark students' interest. I often lend the students books, and frequently sheet music is assigned from my extensive music library. If a student is struggling in a level, assigning them supplemental materials on that same level will slow their progress, but will reinforce the concepts and result in a better grasp of the technical or conceptual challenges.

Motivation and recitals:

While recital and festival participation is strongly encouraged because it provides motivation, builds self-confidence and offers the challenge of working towards goals, it is not appropriate for every student in my studio. It's my task to determine which students can benefit from these experiences, and which students would be negatively impacted by the experiences.

The music for recitals and festivals is assigned far in advance of the performance date. This is vital for a successful performance and helps diminish performance anxiety. Memorization must be complete at least a month in advance. Several weeks before the recital, I record the student using an iPad. After viewing the video, we discuss recital deportment, stage presence, and the actual performance itself and ways to improve it.

Memorization is always required at my recitals. I usually have three per year, one in advance of fall events, one in advance of February/March performance events, and one at the end of the school year. Students are divided into groups so that the length of the recitals is no more than one hour. In addition to a solo piece, in the spring recital each student performs an ensemble piece that is performed with a parent, another student or with me. Collaborative music making is important to the students' overall development.

One of the successes in my studio is the point/trophy program that was developed by Jean Mann, which I borrowed and have been using it for years. The students earn points for well-prepared lessons, memorization, performing in public, and composing. Trophies are awarded for each 100 points the students earn. Trophies are presented at the recitals, and the parents assume the expense. Older teenage students may choose to opt out of the trophy program, but elementary and middle school students are very excited at the prospect of receiving trophies, and they usually work diligently to get the maximum number of points each week. The points given at each lesson give an immediate evaluation of the lesson to students and parents.

Through the years, most of my students have not chosen a career in music; however, I'm gratified by the several dozen former students who are currently public school or independent music teachers, church musicians, or pursuing other musical endeavors. Equally as important, most of the students whom I've been privileged to teach have learned a skill that can enrich their lives and gained an appreciation for music. They will recognize the significance of music study for their own children, and they will hopefully support and attend recitals and concerts. The music lessons I teach enable me to not only impact many lives in a positive way, but also allow me to participate in the advancement and preservation of music as an integral part of our culture.