

It has been my pleasure to teach music for many years, nearly 24 of which have been in the state of Georgia. Teaching in my own diverse studio of many ages, levels, cultures and interests has been eye opening. Music truly is a universal language and I look forward to many more years sharing with others.

Teaching Tips from Debra Ramsey Dickensheets 2022

1. Take care of your Health.

In March of 2021, to my surprise, I was diagnosed with invasive carcinoma, a type of breast cancer. Dutifully, I went masked during the covid-19 pandemic to get routine screening thinking there would not be a problem as with all my previous mammograms. But this time was different. The radiologist said there was an abnormality that needed to be biopsied and subsequently needed surgery and radiation treatments. Fortunately I was able to schedule surgery the week after my studio's spring recital. Treatment continued over the summer and I was ready to be back teaching in August soon as school started as a grateful cancer survivor. I attribute my comparatively easy treatment routine to early detection. We all know colleagues who have gone undetected for longer periods of time and had a much worse experience. Regular routine screening is the key to minimizing the effects and treatment of many types of cancer. Please get your cancer screening.

Other preventative health care, especially appropriate vaccines, at minimum, help keep you out of bed and working in your studio, and at best could save your life. A healthy teacher is a better teacher. Visit your primary care physician at least once a year and follow his/her advice for cancer screening and vaccinations. Recommendations can change over time.

2. Take Care of your student's HEALTH.

I have a sign at my front door that says "Wash hands. Many fingers use these keys." Every student uses sanitizer before putting their hands on the keyboard. We use masks as recommended by the CDC, keeping in mind individual risk of infecting, and social distancing. Parents know there is an option for Zoom lesson at their regular time or make up lesson later on and use it if their child has a fever or other symptoms of illness out of respect for me and the other students.

3. Set Goals at the Beginning of each Year.

Your student will have individual needs to be addressed. That is one of the beauties of private lessons. These can change year to year, sometimes even mid year with cultural changes and school work demands. Be flexible. The pupil might want to learn a particular piece or style of music. Set realistic practice goals. I often find that accomplishments lesson to lesson, and efficient practice habits are more important than minutes/hours practiced each week. Plan short term, midterm, and long term projects for your students. Not every student wants to be a concert pianist and your goals may not be their goals or their parent's goals. Keep a dialogue going.

4. Positive Reinforcement goes a long way.

When my husband and I moved to a home on acreage in rural north central Florida we decided it was time to get a Labrador Retriever puppy. We joined a dog class with a very good trainer who recommended the book “Don’t shoot the Dog” by Karen Pryor. It is all about changing behavior through positive reinforcement. It not only works for dogs, but for athletes and musicians. This book was a game changer for my teaching.

5. Meet the student where they are.

Not all musical backgrounds are the same. No matter what age, some know more, and some are more receptive than others. It is our duty as a teacher to find out where each student is in their musical journey and help them along the way, sometimes filling gaps.

6. Keep up to date on new technology.

Use of the internet, and apps can be very helpful teaching aids. Almost daily since the pandemic, I use Zoom, ForScore, and MuseScore. www.coursera.org is a good solution for training at a reasonable price. There are some especially good music technology classes through Berkeley for Protools, electronic music, and general technology.

7. Sing with your students.

Whether or not you are a vocal trainer, it is good to demonstrate musical line and phrasing through singing. It is one reason new Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Nathalie Stutzmann, is successful.

8. Break it down.

When tackling a difficult piece of music, break it down into small pieces and then string them together. Routinely practicing start to finish, as many students tend to do, can be overwhelming and counterproductive.

9. Take ADVERSITY and make a good thing out of it.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic my students were not allowed to attend lessons in person at my studio. Zoom lessons over the internet that I had never even considered doing prior, became a lifeline for my studio and are now a regular part of the week. For various reasons, mostly distance and transportation it is a good option for some students.

Our regular concert hall venues became unavailable during Covid-19. I started informal “Front Porch” recitals in our yard as an alternative way for students to share music. Families and friends bring lawn chairs and blankets to sit on for a relaxed afternoon of music played from the studio Cassio digital piano and Nord Keyboard set up on the porch. This recital has become so popular we still have a “First Saturday in Fall” recital on the front porch