

Piano Lessons ARE a Laughing Matter
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We live in a world that moves at breakneck speed. With the oftentimes dubious help of technology, we are relentlessly forced to become even faster, more efficient, more accurate, less human. Accomplishment rules the roost with an iron hand, and festival firsts, achievement diplomas, examination grades are now the yardstick by which we are all measured. This philosophy has invaded the piano world, often with a gravely detrimental effect on the very students that it is supposed to serve.

Art is a miracle, and accomplishment in art is not a commodity or trophy to be thoughtlessly displayed. The skill to play an instrument, paint a picture, write a line of poetry helps fulfill a fundamental drive in people, that of self expression. Every culture on the planet, past and present, has some form of music. Contemporary society spends a staggering amount of money on music each year, from CDs to music lessons to instruments to sheet music. Music is a very special language, speaking directly to the soul if one is listening. Even if one is not listening, it still manages to filter through and make life better. Friedrich Nietzsche said that "without music, life would be a mistake".

The language of music has its own rules, grammar, syntax, styles and so on. The more one knows about music, the better one can appreciate it, and the more it will enrich one's life. If a person wishes to express themselves through music, at the piano or any other instrument, there are several basic skills that need to be mastered before any self-expression is possible. The teacher's job is to communicate these basic skills to students in such a way that they understand and retain. There is nothing so frustrating for a teacher as having to re-address fundamental concepts with senior students.

Many students seem to have been effectively trained to regard anything new and unfamiliar as being difficult. Of course, if they truly believe that, then they are right - they make learning difficult for themselves. Despite constant encouragement to the contrary, they often continue with that belief and many fairly simple problems to solve become massive obstructions in their minds. A standard trick of public speakers to help overcome stage fright is to imagine that their audience is naked. This gives them more of a feeling of control, and the humor of the imagined situation helps them relax.

One teaching technique that I am developing over time and enjoying immensely as I go is the technique of constructive silliness. Some time ago, I would enjoy occasionally cracking a joke that would have both the student and myself in stitches. We would laugh like crazy for a few minutes and then get back to work. It wasn't long before I noticed after a laughing spree, both of us would be more relaxed, happier, and whatever I was trying to teach at the time would be communicated more effectively than usual. My own mind seemed to work more freely, creatively, and the student was always more receptive after laughing. Of course, sometimes we just couldn't stop laughing, but that was a risk I was willing to take! Some time later, I noticed that concepts communicated to the student through humor seemed to stick better. I think that when they discovered that I wasn't the stereotype grouchy piano drill sergeant (despite my unfortunately sour face), ready to rap their knuckles with a sharp ruler for every tiny slip, the surprise and laughter connected with the concept I was conveying helped make it more memorable. I now try to find humor in many facets of teaching, and I have found that my students

enjoy it more and learn much faster than when I try and get too serious and academically didactic (try saying that 10 times in a row!). I certainly have more fun! The following suggestions are a few possibilities for exploring musical and technical concepts while tickling the funny bone. I also recommend watching for and using new ideas as they occur in lessons.

Every Green Bird Dingles Flatly

There are countless ways of teaching students to read notes. The essence of learning anything, though, is repetition. Inattentive, thoughtless, repetition can be boring and will soon lose the attention of even the most interested child. The important thing is to encourage the student to think creatively and make connections for themselves, which is the most effective way of teaching them to be independent. The standard mnemonics for lines and spaces on the staff are probably well known to every teacher in at least North America and possibly the world. Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge, Good Boys Deserve Fudge Always, All Cows Eat Grass, and FACE does work reasonably well for most students for a time, but if they are encouraged to create their own mnemonic, it will establish a stronger connection. Besides that, what about girls? In addition, it is debatable whether good boys or girls really do deserve fudge, and the question of what it means to be good can raise a number of thorny philosophical issues.

I have found that using images of animals always catches a child's imagination, whether describing a type of movement, size, texture, emotion and so on. They can also be used effectively in creating little mnemonic sentences for staff lines and spaces. Using animal images in human situations is a tried and true technique for cartoonists and helps to introduce a note of constructive silliness in the lesson. Children are not afraid of something that they can laugh at, and this takes some of the fear out of learning the unfamiliar and initially confusing grand staff. Here are some more suggestions: A Clumsy Elephant Grouches, Fantastic Aardvarks Cook Eggplants, Goofy Beagles Definitely Fool Around. It is better if the student can be convinced to make up their own, but some students are too shy. Using a silly mnemonic can help break the ice!

Don't get in a flap... it's only a shark!

Most students have a phobia about black keys, sharps and flats. I'm not sure why, but sometimes even senior students complain about learning any piece that has more than three sharps or flats. This puts a serious and completely unreasonable limit on the amount of available repertoire. One student was more than normally terrified of the sharps and flats, so I did two things with her (after finding that constant drill did absolutely nothing to help). First, I wrote her a pretty piece with silly words and a familiar melody in the middle. I played it for her without letting her see my hands, and asked if she liked it. She did, and then I let her watch. Her response was, "Cool! It's all on the black keys!" I asked her if it looked difficult, and she said no. Then I showed her the music, but when she saw the six flats, she turned pale! "That looks hard!", she said. It's quite incredible the amount of power that an innocent little mark on a page has!

Some time later, we were talking again about accidentals. Younger students often don't pronounce carefully, and I'm not sure whether I misheard her or if she actually mispronounced the word, but I heard her say "flap" when we were discussing flats. Thinking fast, I told her to show me six flaps. So, she flapped around my studio like a startled pigeon, giggling like crazy, and I suggested that she think of flaps every time she

saw flats. The word sharp sounds like “shark”, so for a time, I would make a big melodramatic scene out of every shark she had to play, pointing out how dangerous it was, what big sharp teeth it had, and so on. This was accompanied by a bit of clowning around that was guaranteed to bring a smile to her face. After this episode, she learned the piece in a week without any problem, and has not complained about Sharks, Flaps or black keys since. She actually looks forward to finding black keys and is very proud when she’s found them all.

Old MacDonald had a Dot

Many students get snagged on dotted rhythms, even after they have learned to count quite comfortably. After having had every number paired with a note, the idea of not playing when a beat is counted can be confusing. In order to accurately play a dotted rhythm, though, the unplayed beat must be felt strongly. If a student shows signs of being unnerved by having too much difficulty, I stop what we are doing and ask them what their favorite farm animal is. Some students like pigs, some like dogs, some like cows. We spend some time imitating the sound of the animal, sometimes having a contest who can sound the silliest. Although I can sound pretty goofy, on occasion I find that I have met my match and often I let the student win! They always enjoy out-doing the teacher. I make sure I stop the exercise, though, before it deteriorates into a condition where the student is so wound up that they can’t concentrate. Then I show them how the rhythm works, proceeding one easy step at a time. I have them play the note on the first beat, and oink (for example) on the second. Then, play the first beat, oink, and play third beat. Finally, we put in the eighth note. With enough patient repetition, gentle correcting, and friendly laughter, the student usually picks it up quickly.

This technique also works very well with missed rests or long notes. It may not be appropriate for a senior student to oink, moo, or quack their way through the Grave of Beethoven’s Pathetique sonata. The game sure is fun for the younger ones and sets them up to eventually play the Pathetique without taking a detour through the barnyard!

Oooo - ahhhh!

The most natural and physiologically efficient movement for each particular sound is the best one. A natural movement, free of unnecessary and fussy additional gesture, automatically produces the desired sound without effort; it is simply a matter of matching the movement to the sound. One of my favorite demonstrations for this concept is implied by the title of this paragraph.

First, I ask that the student say “Oooo”. Without exception, their lips funnel out into an “o”, and the “ooo” emerges without any thought or effort. (They often inflect the “ooo” as if asking a question. This can provide ample fodder for other demonstrations). Then I ask them to say “Ahhhh”, like at a doctor’s appointment. Their mouths open wider, and again, an impeccable “Ahhhh” comes out without struggle or effort. For each of these sounds, they automatically shape their mouths and vocal apparatus to produce the sound that I demanded. By now, they’re curious but nervous! Past experience has probably taught them that usually when a teacher asks them to do something, it will be difficult and require effort. They are prepared for a struggle! This is suspiciously easy, and I can often see wheels turning in their heads. “What’s that crazy teacher up to now?”

Then I ask them to put their mouths in an “Ahhh” position again, but instead of saying “Ahhh”, I want them to say “Oooo”. The result is never convincing and usually funny. It is quite easy to hear their intention to say “Oooo” locked in mortal combat with the position of their mouth. Neither sound wins; it does sound a bit like “ooo”, but compared with the natural, resonant, effortless “ooo” produced by appropriate position, it is obviously a pale, feeble imitation. This demonstration can be particularly funny (as evidenced by the amount of laughter coming from the student) if I twist my face into rubber contortions as I join in the struggle to produce a good “ooo”.

The point of the demonstration is generally clear to the student by now. For those who haven't quite connected the dots yet, I play the first few measures of the Moonlight Sonata (everybody's eyes light up when they hear that!). Instead of being reasonable about my movement, though, I duck and weave about like a boxer trying to avoid a knockout punch, left hand artistically flailing about at every chance, left foot scrubbing a track in the rug, right elbow pumping in and out like an old-fashioned water pump. Every student laughs at the discrepancy between my movement and the sound of the piece. We then discuss the concept that for every type of sound at the piano, there is an appropriate movement, just as in making different sounds with the voice. Because of slight differences in physiology and psychology, movements will vary slightly for each person. I always encourage them to try and find their own way by listening for the appropriate sound and paying attention to how it physically feels when they get it. I find that I can only provide a starting point for them, a friendly springboard from which they can make the leap to independence.

Triad, You'll Like It!

A common problem with students is that they get very tense when moving between notes, particularly in big leaps between chords. One of my students had trouble with accuracy in solid triads. As she cautiously moved her hand from one inversion to the next, I could see the profound concentration and complex calculation going on in her mind, mingled with an almost paralyzing fear about missing the next triad.

When I work on accuracy with a student, I always concern myself with the movement to the note, not the key itself. It is the quality of the preparatory movement that determines accuracy, beauty of sound, articulation, and so on. The movement must be relaxed, effortless, and appropriate. With my troublesome triad student, I suggested that she turn her hand into a cloud, gently floating from one triad to the next. She tried the first time, and her hand was still straining to get in the correct position well before she got to the next triad. I pointed out that I had never actually seen a cloud with bones in it, nor had I ever noticed a cloud struggling to get from one side of the sky to the other, elbowing other clouds out of the way and generally making a nuisance of itself. She giggled, relaxed, and the movement and consequently the accuracy and sound improved immediately. When she returned for her next lesson, I found to my delight that she had added a very gentle wind noise to the movement, “Whissshhhh...” An added bonus to her discovery was that this particular type of breath is a very relaxing one for the mind and body. It encourages the student to breathe well, and is often used in meditation.

I constantly experiment with images that help students relax between playing the keys. The image of jello also works very well, and after introducing a student to the image, I often simply have to say the word “jello” and the quality of movement immediately

improves. Occasionally, a student will not like jello, and I try chocolate mousse or peanut butter (smooth, not crunchy!).

Trudging Quickly

Many students erroneously get the idea that playing quickly is difficult and requires special effort. It can require special preparation and training in thinking fast, but the actual process of playing fast is not difficult. While explanations work quite well for those who are gifted at playing quickly, it doesn't seem to work well for those who aren't naturally able to do it. I find that this demonstration helps. First, I have the student run normally from the piano to the door (the longest straight line in my studio). I have them notice how light they felt, how easy it was, and so on. Then, while they are at the door, I ask them to face the piano, scrunch up their toes, calves, knees, thighs, butt, and once they are properly rigid, I tell them to run back to the piano. I have yet to see a student accomplish this gracefully; the best they can hope to attain is a creaky, clumping, rusty, robotic trudge, and they have to exert considerable effort to avoid crashing into the piano. They soon understand the analogy between running quickly and playing quickly. The famous runner, Jesse Owens, said "I run as if the track were made of eggshells" (quoted in Glynn Macdonald, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Alexander Technique*, Element Books, 1998, p. 60.) It was this lightness that helped him run so quickly; the same lightness helps pianists play quickly.

The Hypnotic Doorknob

Another weapon in my arsenal of constructive silliness is a demonstration of the power of the Hypnotic Doorknob. I've noticed that inanimate objects often exert a curious physical influence over people trying to use them, clouding otherwise intelligent minds and causing students to move in strange and often contorted ways. The keyboard is a particularly accomplished puppet master. I've coached a student who was convinced that an F# "made" her hand stiff, and she was cursing under her breath at Mozart (gasp... sacrilege!). She literally could not play the black key in this simple G-major passage. Even after I tried using the voice of sweet reason with her, she simply knew that she would never be able to do it. I was down, but not out yet.

I asked her to walk over to the door and open it, reassuring her that I was not throwing her out for her seeming inability to play an F#. She walked gracefully over to the door, and with an effortless movement, put her hand on the doorknob. I thanked her, complimented her on her grace, and asked her to sit back down at the piano. I told her that she had just demonstrated how she was going to play the F#, easily, without fuss or conscious thought. Then, I showed her what she actually was doing. Beginning several feet away from the door, I started to walk normally towards it. As I approached, I stretched out my arm, and squinting through one eye as if down the barrel of a gun, I aimed my hand at the doorknob. My hand hooked into a claw and my movements got increasingly clumsy and erratic as I desperately tried to control every aspect of my movement. My coordination and grace had gone the way of the Titanic! The punch line came when I crashed into the wall beside the door, missing the doorknob by a considerable margin. I turned around to see the student convulsed with laughter at the sight of a normally respected and serious teacher in a well-known conservatory transformed into all three stooges at once. When we tried the passage, she would start laughing again as she approached the note, which was a considerable improvement over the previous distress and excess tension. The demonstration brought her attitude to

the point where we could analyze the specific physical movement that had initially caused unnecessary stiffness (in this case, her hand was way out of position on the E), and the next time I saw her, the F# ceased to be an issue.

Eschew Obfuscation

Almost every piano student that I have met demonstrates a genius for turning even the simplest thing into a threatening and nearly insurmountable obstacle. Working with one bright, quick-witted student on a particularly mundane problem, we were both getting frustrated because he couldn't seem to get it. The atmosphere in my studio was degenerating like a weather report before a picnic: winds coming up, rain clouds rolling in, electrical tension crackling in the air. When I snapped to my senses and realized what was going on, I stopped everything and recommended that he "eschew obfuscation". He naturally looked confused, so I thought I'd teach him how to say it first. He got hung up on the first word, and frustration mounted again (how soon we forget!) as I repeated over and over: eschew, eschew, eschew... He looked me straight in the eye, and said "Bless you!"

We both howled with laughter, antagonism draining from the atmosphere like water out of a sink. Now that we were both relaxed and happy, the solution was found without any fuss. The student now reacts well and immediately any time I ask him to eschew obfuscation. He also never forgets to politely say "Bless you!". For those who have thus far resisted the temptation to open a dictionary, the phrase means "don't make things complicated".

Richard and Claude's Shoelaces

It is often difficult to convince students that exaggeration is necessary to successfully project, be it articulation, phrasing, character, or whatever. One of my students, a talented but shy teenager, was playing Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk*. She had no trouble with the A section, but was making heavy weather of the middle section. The notes were no problem, but musically it wasn't going anywhere. I explained how Debussy was making fun of the *Tristan Prelude*, how he was taking extremely serious music and putting it in a humorous context. This was too abstract for the student, so we started talking about melodrama and "avec une grande émotion". She still didn't catch on, so figuring that a picture is worth a thousand words, I decided to show her what melodrama was.

I sauntered past the piano and as I came up beside her, I looked down. I pretended that my shoelace was undone, and went way overboard in hysterics about how the shoelace was ruining my life, how much time it was going to waste to tie it again, how everybody hated me and nobody loved me, and that my undone shoelace was a definite sign that the Montreal Canadiens were going to lose another game. My arms flailed around, and clapping my hand to my forehead, I almost started crying in dismay. After her initial surprise, my student started to laugh and we both enjoyed a good chuckle. I pointed out to her that the *Tristan* excerpt was my hysterics, and her laughter was the following passage (...oh woooooo is me... yuk, yuk yuk....must tiiiiie my shoe... yuk yuk yuk). For another excellent interpretation of this passage, refer to Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield's edition of *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, published by Alfred. With some practice, my student was able to successfully project the emotion of the music in a way that simply playing the notes could never do.

The opportunities for finding humor in teaching piano are inexhaustible, and when done with respect and gentleness, one of the most effective and enjoyable tools for teaching. I believe that humor teaches people to laugh at themselves, to realize that it is possible to learn and have fun at the same time. A person who is able to find the funny side of their own behavior can easily find humor in other situations, such as learning or just simply living. Humor encourages a kind of joyous freedom that helps awaken and inspire the expressive musician that lives within all our students.

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