

Coasting, Roasting or Toasting - Designer Piano Teachers

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What is the relationship between our main objective as piano teachers, the delivery of the lesson, and the weekly content? What we determine as our most important goal will influence significantly how and what we teach. Against a backdrop of familiar teaching models this paper assumes an underlying goal: to help the student be musically independent as quickly as possible. This illustrated paper explores the eight essential elements that would be required in the lesson and a quick and easy checklist for the teacher. If educating independence is high on the agenda then how will this effect delivery? How does this approach to teaching help the teacher maintain high levels of energy and enthusiasm? What type of teacher are you? We are what we choose to be: a coaster, a roaster or a toaster.

I am sure we would get a variety of answers if I asked those present to answer these questions:

- What age group do you feel the most comfortable teaching?
- How many students do you have in your studio?
- What level of piano do you teach?
- How do you like to teach – in groups or one to one?

But of course we would hear similar answers if I was to ask what sort of teacher are you? Caring, honest and open, respectful, flexible, modest, astute, motivating, organized, patient, creative, focused, relaxed, detached, encouraging, inspiring, appreciative of humour, imaginative, communicative and firm. Well maybe the answers would be a little different. It's okay. No one has all these qualities in the right proportion but we should not stop asking the question – What sort of teacher am I?

Over the years I have observed various types of piano teachers. The following is rather simplistic but I am sure we will recognise glimpses of other teachers and ourselves or remember times when we might have been this way. Here are a few scenarios.

These are the coasters:

“I love piano teaching because I trained as a pianist and there is much about the way I was taught which can be passed on to my students. I like the way I teach and am satisfied with the material I use – the method books I am familiar with from my childhood.”

“I love piano teaching because it gives me a pay packet.”

“I love teaching because you can drift along from week to week doing fun music and entertaining children and because it takes such a long time to master the instrument no one really minds if results are slow in coming. I've been known to have students sit in Preliminary grade for three years. If I take much longer than three years then some parents can start to ask questions.”

These are the roaster/boasters:

“I love teaching and the results I achieve. My students have a very healthy degree of fear when they come to lessons. They have even been known to look rather

white and trembling before entering the studio and a great many of them cry when they leave. Of course it is just my weariness with the whole nature of piano teaching that makes me impatient. It is nothing personal.”

“I love teaching because my students sit for exams and if I push really hard and if they ignore all those areas of music that are accessories – like sight reading and improvisation and harmony work - then we can progress through a grade a year and sometimes even two a year. The achievements of my students are really important to me.”

This is the toaster:

“I love teaching because when I answer the studio door I have similar feelings to being part of a toast at a celebration. Three cheers to life and to good music and to all the wonderful work that this student has achieved this week. I am prepared to design a special course for each student tailored to their needs that will give them a well-balanced musical diet so they grow to musical maturity.”

Those who are already teaching try this test. Answer Yes or No.

- I have sight read new music every working day of the last week.
- I have listened to a new work of music in the last week – that is *truly* listened – sat still and without doing any other thing concentrated on the music.
- I mostly feel good when I am about to start a few hours of teaching.
- I mostly feel terrific when I have finished a few hours of teaching – the journey has been exhilarating and I have learnt something.

There are aspects of the coaster and roaster teacher that I do not have a problem with.

- Lessons often profit using material from the dim dark past.
- Learning does need to have an element of fun.
- Respect between teacher and student is important.
- A pay packet is a necessity.
- Goals play a big part in motivation.

Using fear seems to motivate some students in the short run but I think it is a dangerous way to work. I come across many students who have a chip on their shoulder because of emotional abuse in the lesson situation but fortunately love of music helps them to overcome bad experiences. What happens should the student discover the pleasure of being self-motivated and learning in a respectful environment? From their previous experience they may feel short-changed and resentful.

What sort of teacher would you like to be? We have a choice. It can be the teacher that the students want you to be or the teacher that you decide to be. A short time ago I received a communication from a very experienced piano teacher who I greatly admire because of the fine playing of her students. She said that she was very interested in the talk I gave at the last state piano conference on giving students a well-rounded musical diet and agreed that it required creative teaching to produce *musicians*. Because her students were bent on achieving the next exam grade she felt that she could not participate in my suggested model of teaching. She has decided to

teach in a particular way because of the pressure from her clientele. This does not diminish the respect I have for this teacher and the very good results that her students obtain. However, I make this point to illustrate that we have choices to make and one of them is “Do I want to help create whole musicians or students (parents) who are determined to pass one exam per year?” I am not against exams but I am when it means that certain areas of music making need to be ignored because of the lack of time. We can be of whatever design we determine. I hope that it will be a toaster!

It’s clear that there are many different types of piano teacher and methods of delivery which reflect their goals. What is your primary goal as a piano teacher? When I ask this question of first year classes I always receive a variety of answers. Here are a few:

- To help students enjoy music
- To make great pianists
- To help students pass exams
- To have fun

I have no problems with these statements but they are not complete in themselves.

My main objective is

TO HELP THE STUDENT BECOME MUSICALLY INDEPENDENT
AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

The aim here is for musical maturity so that the pupil is brought to a stage of knowledge and understanding to be able to make good musical judgements. My goal is never to produce pianists but to help produce musicians. Pianists with fast fingers and a smooth action can still be inadequate musicians lacking in interpretation and expression. Rounded musicians will understand their instruments as well as technical and posture issues. Better to be able to tackle any score accurately and expressively than to be only able to play a handful of masterpieces precisely.

Why do I write “as quickly as possible?” Why would we want to be holding back on sharing such treasures? It is easy to coast along thinking that piano playing is a long haul. What’s the hurry? We should be making that journey as short as possible because we never know when circumstances will change and if the student does not arrive at a certain level then years of work can be completely lost. I had a letter from a teacher who had a studio for fifty years and she said that she had never been able to get her students to sight read. I found this distressing to read. Was there no help for the teacher to find the key to developing this area? All those students went into adult life without one of the greatest joys of music – to be able to play new scores. Of course, in the music field we rarely *arrive* and are always learning. We may choose to have mentors for feedback throughout our life. However, there is a stage where we can feel comfortable with the musical decisions that we make and be able to articulate the reasons for them. There may be only the occasional student we see arrive at this stage. Nevertheless, this is no reason to stop aiming for the goal.

If independent musicianship is our goal then how do we know what to include in each lesson? Are all essential aspects of music making being covered? I see the following eight areas as important elements.

AURAL

This is priority number one. Is the student hearing the symbols on the page? Many students wait until the note is sounded before they can hear the note. Reading is much more fluent and accurate when the mind can imagine the sound before it arrives. Any error that does occur can quickly be identified. How is our inner hearing best developed? By making sure that all the different elements of the music are secure – Can the rhythm be drummed out on a table? Can the melody be sung, all intervals judged without the help of the piano and the light and shade of the voice express the phrasing? Can the chords also be pitched singing up and down them? Can the articulation be vocalised? These sorts of activities can take place from lesson one although I find it most useful with beginners to work the other way around for a while: Teach them a simple tune by rote so that the sound is experienced and then look at the layout on the page. Once the confidence is there, starting with short simple examples, work from symbol to sound.

The other aspect of aural work is making sure that the student is hearing the sounds that they are producing. This might seem a strange statement but it is the core reason for unmusical playing. When asked the question “what did you hear” for the first time, transfer students are often unable to answer. In fact they can even be a little indignant because they think that they have done well just playing the right notes and rhythms. “And you expect me to be able to hear the sound as well?” Well, *yes*. As well as playing at the moment and preparing for what is ahead, we need to be judging what has passed: three activities, simultaneously. No wonder it takes time to master.

REPERTOIRE

This is why most people want to learn the piano. Of course there is the occasional oddball who revels in scales and technical work and can easily bypass the pieces. Sometimes I feel like I am part of a very small minority who are willing to stand by the quality of the keyboard works of the great masters. Why have we pushed aside the voices of such great music educators as Kodály who stressed that only music of the highest artistic value should be used? I recently accepted into my studio an eighth grade student who declared “I hate playing Bach.” What was the experience of the past which had put him off enjoying one of the best composers of all time? It can’t have been a positive one to have left him feeling that J.S. Bach’s music is boring. Eight months later the first movement of the Italian Concerto ended up his strongest and favourite work for his final year school examination. It would have made me very sad to have let this talented student enter adult life without an understanding of this great composer. We are in the midst of a mania for pop, jazz and blues. While I fully support the use of good quality examples from these genres I don’t think they alone should be used, bypassing classical literature. It is the best quality music that teaches us the most about music. There is plenty of good quality music so why not go for the best?

My piano pedagogy students ask how you determine if music is good or second rate. Experience helps here but two features need to be present for it to rate as worthy of my attention. It must be interesting (rhythmically, melodically or harmonically) and it must be capable of stirring my emotions. There is plenty of music of all genres that fit these categories but unfortunately there is much that doesn’t.

TECHNIQUE

It is no good trying to play wonderful repertoire without the means to do so. We have to build up the student's facility and strength slowly, a training that is on par with a first rate athlete. The minute mile will just not appear overnight. I favour using scales and arpeggios and their variations as the foundation of this work. This is occasionally supplemented with a special exercise from the Hanon, Brahms or Dohnányi exercises. Creating an exercise out of the music that is being studied is also my preferred method. I wish that I had had more guidance on the matter of technique during my student years. I would spend much time working at exercises to get my fingers to play faster and faster. However, time was lost. It would have been more beneficial to explore new music and broaden my horizons. I think I was avoiding thinking and feeling. One can go quite brain dead in the catatonic state of working through Hanon. At the same time this area cannot be sidestepped. I once heard an adult perform one of Brahms's Op.79 Rhapsodies in an eisteddfod and it was extraordinary. One measure seemed to meld with the next as the fingers ran completely out of control. It was very hard to determine just what part of the piece was being played. If the basic tools are not there then all good intentions will not make the music work.

MEMORY

Every aspect of music making involves memory. Here are a few examples to show how important it is. Accidentals cannot be cancelled out until the new measure. Motivic figures often return and to know the fingering gives an instant advantage. How can we make a piece belong as a single design if we do not remember the way that we expressed the first entrance of the main theme? Memory work was an area that I had very little experience in as a student. My sight reading ability and speed at which I could prepare a score is what got me through tertiary education. I remember performing Liszt's *Totentanz* with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra without music mostly through muscle memory – a very scary scenario. Fortunately all went well. I did not realize that memorisation was a skill that could be learnt thoroughly.

This skill is best taught from the beginning and followed through as the years progress. It should not be an area of music making that is left to the student so that those for whom memory work comes naturally succeed and the others feel like failures. I do not think I have come across any natural memorisers that are really doing the job thoroughly. Most rely heavily on muscle memory and a lucky few have elements of photographic memory. At the end of a lesson I threw a comment to a new student. "If you feel like memorising your sonatina please do so." All I had time to say was look for the patterns and try to retain them. I then showed him a scale in the work and we worked out what key it was and what degree it started and ended on. The next week he came into the lesson with four pages flowing elegantly without the use of music. I said "I thought you told me that you have never memorised before except by playing a piece of music a zillion times." He said "Yes that is right but I have not been told to look for the patterns before."

Not everything has to be memorised but I think the process should be understood and a percentage of the student's repertoire known this way. There is much to be discovered when a great repertoire piece is known inside out. It is also good for the student to be able to play anywhere and anytime without relying on the

score. It has a positive effect on confidence. It is irrelevant if the student ends up using the score for performance. If the music is thoroughly known but the performer is still more confident with the score present then one should go for whatever produces the most musical result. Some performers are better with the score so I do not think that having it at the stand should preclude music making if the end result is still satisfying. Of course, unfortunately, some competitions and exams require memorisation.

UNDERSTANDING

The usual way of describing this is general knowledge. I like the term understanding because it means having a complete picture. It includes any knowledge which helps the student interpret the music better. Here are a few examples:

- The life and times of the composer
- Corresponding art and literature movements
- All signs and terms on the page of music
- Analysis of harmony, tonal system, rhythmic design, etc.
- Other music composed contemporaneously

It is most useful if this information goes hand in hand with learning the music. It is inappropriate to leave this knowledge until just before an exam. All sorts of resources can be used: books, internet sites, videos, CDs, concerts, newspapers, magazines, exhibitions. The choice is endless but once again a little effort in this area adds greatly to the students' knowledge. We need to use every means possible to develop our students' curiosity. This characteristic is a most useful one for musical growth to continue through life. With a five-year-old I illustrated a diminuendo by imitating the call of a Balinese gecko. I had only just returned from holidaying on the island and had in the studio a metal gecko hidden under the piano. Great delight was shown when I sent the student down to find it. When teaching a song "F's a fat and foolish frog sitting on a mossy log" to a five-year-old, I was reminded of the need to check that all the words are clearly understood. He thought I was talking about a mosquito and had no idea what mossy meant.

SIGHT READING

This is one of the most useful skills for a musician. Besides its practical value every musician desires to be able to sight read with music flowing from the fingers. Observing the level of skill in this area with keyboard majors on entrance to university, I am often shocked how far behind sight reading is in comparison to repertoire and technique. I believe that with knowledge, discipline and focus, a musician can match technical ability with reading ability. Whatever recital piece is being worked on, it is possible to be able to read through an unlimited number of similar scores in a satisfactory manner – evenly, accurately and expressively – but probably slower than the suggested tempo. This can only happen if sight reading is an integral part of the lesson from day one.

When I was asked to teach sight reading at university I thought it would be easy. However, being confident in a skill does not necessarily relate to understanding why

others are having such a hard time. It took much reading, thinking and experimentation to see significant changes occur with the students. An approach that combined three areas worked well.

- Reading the Signs – The rapid recognition of the material in the score
- Keyboard Orientation – feeling free at the keyboard so that the eyes do not have to look down continually but can remain trained on the music
- Guided Reading – playing along with student to help rhythm and expression

A manual that I have written, *Sight Reading Skills - A pianist's guide for learning to read music accurately and expressively* (New Arts Press, 2005), outlines how to develop these three areas.

IMPROVISATION/COMPOSITION

This is the ability to be able to create music on the spot at the keyboard. It could be something as simple as supplying an accompaniment for a folk-tune to making up your own piece or cadenza.

Why is it an essential part of learning? There are two reasons. Firstly, it helps the student to understand the nature of sound so that the imagination can be extended. There are then many more possibilities from which to decide when planning how to play repertoire. Secondly, it releases a creative side in the student and the final composition can be surprisingly wonderful. Be specific when giving these sorts of projects. It can be helpful for the student to work within a boundary– for example a set number of measures, a rhythmic figure to work with, a key or a title. Make the project tie in with what is being studied in the main repertoire pieces to help reinforce learning.

CHORDS/HARMONY

Because of the nature of the instrument, the understanding of harmony is essential if students are to know what it is they are playing. In the first few lessons I introduce this concept teaching a simple folk-tune by rote and with the left hand playing the bass and fifth note of the tonic chord. This material is extended each week with the tunes transposed into all keys and new chords gradually introduced. It is good to start a list of your favourite tunes and the chords required so that you have a sequential resource to draw upon. If the chords are transferred to the right hand and a single note added to the base then all the cadences can be taught then series of chords. This sets the student up for realizing Baroque chamber music which in turn helps in understanding classical harmony.

In summing up the essentials for the lesson we have the mnemonic device ART MUSIC

Aural

Repertoire

Technique

Memory

Understanding

Sight Reading

Improvisation

Chords

This is an easy checklist to run through every now and then for each one of your students, making sure that the essentials are covered.

I can hear your question - “How can this be done in one lesson?” Let’s set up a hypothetical situation. Supposing you are introducing a new piece to a student and having just played it through so they can experience the sound and essence of it, you spend the next portion of the lesson examining the first two-measure phrase. The following activities for the student could include:

- The rhythm is drummed out on the fallboard, right hand taking the treble line and the left hand tapping the bass simultaneously (If this cannot be managed then one hand at a time).
- The melody is sight sung (Maybe at first, sounding the notes involved).
- Fingering is marked where appropriate. The fastest way to do this is often not even sounding the notes but just feeling the distances between and marking the fingering with a pencil in the other hand. This helps the fingering issues to be isolated and dealt with quickly and efficiently.
- Look up the definition of the new Italian word above measure one in a dictionary and have the student write the definition in their sight reading diary which has a page for new terms.
- Analyse the first two chords and sing them up and down.
- The student plays these chords in a repeated pattern by memory while the teacher improvises a melody.
- Sight read the right hand and then the left and then very slowly together.
- Adjust the balance of the hands so that the texture works well.

This is just one possible scenario. We have touched on all areas of ART MUSIC and the student is well set up for learning the remainder of the piece at home. All of these activities may add up to a few moments or a whole lesson. There are many factors involved and it is up to the teacher to determine how fast the student can work, how long they can remain focused on one area, etc. I favour this type of teaching where everything comes from the music and the lesson is not compartmentalised too much. One of the reasons many students dislike aural work, sight reading and theory is that they are often taught without being directly related to real music.

There will be lessons when it will be appropriate to spend a long time on one element or idea. I find it easier to write about what should be included in a lesson than

how it is to be taught. There is no prescriptive way of doing things because of the uniqueness of both the teacher and the student and their various strengths and weaknesses. And what a good thing too! It would be boring if we all did it the same way.

Can you see the specialised nature of piano teaching and how the teacher's diagnosis happens on the run? I'm uncomfortable with the thought of music teaching being nothing more than a list of activities to be achieved in a lesson. At the same time we need guidelines to help determine that all the essentials are being covered and that each student is making good progress. It's too vague to assert that the student will reach a certain stage by next year. How are we going to keep all areas of musicianship in balance? It is a brave teacher who tackles ART MUSIC but the one who does can be assured of exciting and rewarding experiences.

Just a word of warning: How much do we avoid the weak areas and how much are we favouring the strengths? Of course this is very human and it is less work and stress but in the long run we won't achieve the best results. There are many books and courses to help us and it is worthwhile availing ourselves of them. I am most concerned by the attitude of the teacher who feels that they have been teaching for years and years and have all the answers they need. I have been teaching for many decades but our teaching area is such a huge and intriguing one that I really feel that it is a lifelong journey. Moreover, it is this challenge to which I am attracted. We need never be bored and there is no limit to learning. Constantly we can check that every student is receiving a healthy musical diet and find new and better ways of delivering it.

The tertiary piano teacher probably has more support with the students receiving help from experts in aural, harmony, choral, and history and, if you are lucky, sight reading. Teaching needs to be particularly thorough and well rounded from the very first lessons through to these years.

Although I aim for what I have just outlined above, I know I often fall short of the mark. This can be for various reasons. Mostly it is because I get too busy or distracted, or tiredness sets in or I feel the pressure of preparing a student for an up and coming exam. If a survey was taken of piano teachers and the question was asked "What is it that makes you the most motivated?" I am fairly confident the major response would be, "To see musical growth in my students." To enjoy results we have to be responsible to kick start the cycle. Once we start to feel the change and the learning has momentum then we will not be able to be anything other than fully motivated. Here are a few suggestions that help me get closer to my goals.

- Exercise thoroughly on a regular basis. Teaching can be an exhausting business and to be fit is a great benefit. I used to think that running around after five children was enough to keep me fit. It wasn't until I started some serious exercising that I realised I had been kidding myself. Along with eating, drinking and sleeping well, exercise is essential if we are to give our all in the studio.
- Record in a journal those things that puzzle you and also the delightful moments. This helps the mind to keep mulling over problems until a solution is found and it is also a record of the successes and the funnier moments. Do not do this if you feel in any way that it is a drag because it will not be a benefit to undertake such a project with negative feelings.

- Keep on playing so that your performance expertise is not lost. If we do slide backwards our confidence can be badly affected. I often hear teachers deprecate themselves with statements like “I’m only a piano teacher.” The studio sets up a unique situation of performing to an audience of one in a very intimate environment. These situations can have a profound effect on a student and their thoughts on music. Teachers are performers.
- Meet up with other teachers in a relaxed atmosphere to talk over your feelings and thoughts on your career. To hear that others are facing the same difficulties can be very reassuring. We can learn much from one another.

About the Author

Faith Maydwell has specialised in teaching sight reading and piano pedagogy at West Australian Academy of Performing Arts. She recently completed a text on the former subject and is presently working on one in the area of Piano Teaching. In order to keep her teaching skills honed she teaches all levels and age groups. Her recent activities have included adjudicating, seminars, solo recitalist, accompanying for recitals and for the West Australian Symphony Orchestra Chorus. Faith studied at UWA working with David Bollard (founding member of the Australia Ensemble).

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