

To the Parents of Our Prospective Beginners

Believing that perhaps a child's most important year of piano study, his most important teacher, and his most important music book is the first one, the following information has been prepared in the hope that it will provide some guidelines for parents seeking both an approach and a teacher for their child when he or she is ready to begin piano study.

The "Rote" Approach

Although there are many different "method" books in use today, almost all of them are based on one of two basic approaches – either rote or reading. The primary goal of the rote approach is to teach the student how to play pieces on the piano, and the goal is accomplished by having the student first hear the sounds of the piece, then watch the teacher produce these sounds on the piano, and then imitate this process. The merit of this method is that the student is unencumbered by the complexities of having to first read and understand notational symbols before translating them into sound at the keyboard and is therefore free to focus all of his attention on reproducing the pieces he is exposed to. Thus, almost all children – even those of pre-school age – can be taught to play reasonably difficult, impressive-sounding pieces in a relatively short time.

It should be noted, however, that success with a largely rote approach is almost always dependent upon parental attendance at all lessons and supervision of all practice. Parents should also understand that although the rote approach may produce students who appear to play "a lot of piano" in a short time, it does not develop musical literacy – that is, the ability to read and translate musical notation with understanding at the keyboard. Nor does it develop independent practice habits. An additional concern is that the longer learning to read music is postponed, the more difficult it is apt to be to motivate the student into "backing up" to acquire this skill.

The "Reading" Approach

In addition to rote, the other basic way of teaching beginning piano involves the presentation of reading from the outset. In this category, there are two main approaches. One might be described as the traditional "grand staff" approach, and the other, a "reading-readiness" approach. In each case, the student's initial pianistic experiences are related to the reading of notational symbols.

With the grand staff approach, the student is exposed to pieces written on the treble and bass staves from the very outset. The disadvantage of this method is that understanding even the easiest first piece written on the grand staff necessitates the presentation of some eighteen different concepts – for example, the meaning of the two clef signs, time signatures, bar lines, line and space notes and which hand plays them, fingering, direction, the names of the notes on the staff and their corresponding names and location on the keyboard, dynamic marks, rhythmic values, counting, etc. etc.

It is understandable that the confrontation with all of these concepts at the very first lesson can produce a considerable amount of confusion for the average young child. And this initial confusion is often compounded when more and more concepts are added in subsequent weeks without allowing sufficient time for "internalization" and sufficient material for reinforcement. Because the pieces in many beginners' books based on a grand staff approach advance in difficulty much faster than does the child's comprehension, much of the teaching of these pieces must once again be done largely by rote. This factor often produces a student who appears to be progressing quite rapidly through a book of pieces which both look and sound "hard," but his understanding of the basic principles underlying fluent music-reading is often quite deficient.

The second approach to teaching reading might be called the “reading-readiness” approach. Here the goal is two-fold: to insure complete comprehension of every principle related to the fluent reading of musical notation, and to develop the ability to translate this understanding with technical security and control at the keyboard. Because of its emphasis on understanding (musical literacy), this approach often begins with unstaffed pieces whose purpose is to prepare the student, one step at a time, for the concepts related to grand staff reading rather than inundating him with all of this information at once. Parents choosing a reading-readiness approach for their child should be aware that at the outset, the student may appear to be progressing more slowly than do others whose pianistic skills may be being acquired, at the expense of becoming musically literate. Using the reading-readiness approach, it generally takes between twelve and eighteen months for all of the notational fundamentals to be presented and successfully assimilated, but after this foundation-building period, the student is usually ready to forge ahead at a much more rapid pace that was previously evidenced. As a matter of fact, he may very well “catch up” to and even “pass” some of his peers who seemed to be “ahead” of him during the first year of lessons. More important, when the primary emphasis during that first year has been on developing musical literacy and good practice habits, the drop-out rate later on is apt to be much lower than it is for those students who have not become good readers and whose playing ability and practice continue to be largely dependent upon rote teaching and parental supervision.

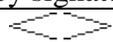
Because we are thoroughly committed to the development of musical literacy right from the start, we use a reading-readiness approach and have adopted the MUSIC TREE series of the Frances Clark Library for Piano Students as our basic text for beginners. Starting with TIME BEGIN (the reading-readiness book), and then proceeding on with MUSIC TREE, parts 1, 2A and 2B, we expect the average eight or nine year-old beginner to know and be able to successfully demonstrate at the piano the following concepts by the end of approximately a year of study:

With the completion of TIME TO BEGIN (after approximately 10-12 weeks of lessons):

<u>Reading</u>		<u>Rhythm</u>
<u>Pitch</u>	<u>Other Musical Signs</u>	
up and down	R.H. L.H. finger numbers	Quarter and half notes
Repeated notes	<i>p</i> and <i>f</i>	
	8va higher and lower	
Intervals:	2nds	
	3rds	Dotted half notes
	4ths	
	5ths	time signatures
F clef and G clef		
Ledger-line notes		Whole notes
Grand Staff		

Through the use of MUSIC TREE, parts 1, 2A, and 2B, all of the above concepts will continue to be reinforced via pieces and drills and in addition, the following new concepts will be added:

Part 1		Part 2 A
	landmarks F, C, G	8 th notes
	playing 2nds up and down from landmarks	half steps and whole steps
	<i>mf mp</i>	major 5-finger patterns
	beginning a 2 nd above landmarks	perfect 5ths as accompaniments
	beginning a 2 nd below landmarks	transposing
	5ths	damper pedal; 1 st and 2 nd endings
	beginning a 5 th above or below landmarks	minor 5-finger patterns
	3rds	perfect 5ths as accompaniments for minor melodies
	beginning a 3 rd above or below landmarks	major and minor triads
	staccato	non-triad tones
	4ths	accompanying with tonic and dominant
	beginning a 4 th above or below landmarks	Dotted quarter-8 th note
	ties and upbeats	new landmarks high G, low F
	rests: quarter, half and whole	<i>pp</i> and <i>ff</i>
	sharps and flats	beginning a 2 nd above or below the new landmarks
	sharps and flats last through a measure	<i>ritard. fermata a tempo</i>
	naturals	beginning a 3 rd above or below the new landmarks
	using letters to show the plan of a piece	8 th rest
		beginning a 4 th above or below the new landmarks
		beginning a 5 th above or below the new landmarks

Part 2B	
	major keys and key signatures
	<i>D.C. al Fine</i> and 
	6ths
	
	changing from a 5-finger position to a 6 th (by moving the fingers away from the thumb)
	more about using 6ths in an accompaniment
	times signatures (compound meter)
	Crossing finger 2 over the thumb
	Quarter-8 th in compound meter
	crossing finger 3 over the thumb
	sliding the thumb under

At the end of Part 2B, the student is beginning to read with ease and security any note from a 5th above high G to an octave below low F.

Certainly it is remarkable that an eight or nine year-old child is able to assimilate and thoroughly understand this much material in just one year! Just as important, however, is his development into a complete, well-rounded, performing musician. This entails a live, secure, and imaginative performance. As teachers, we feel a tremendous responsibility for what happens during this beginning year of study because it is here at the beginning that the foundation is laid for all that is to emerge during subsequent years of study and growth.

Of course, none of the above can truly flourish for long without the understanding, interest, and support of the child's parents. This is why we feel that it is essential for parents to be knowledgeable about the available approaches and "method" books being used for beginning piano study and to carefully assess the goals and results of the available options before enrolling their child for lessons.

We hope that the above information has been helpful in defining the goals of our own beginners' program, and we welcome the opportunity of discussing in more detail any aspects of the program about which parents might have additional questions.