

Proper Use of Pre-Reading Activities

By Kevin M Coan

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of a modern piano course, in contrast with those that were published prior to the mid 1970's (the "older" type, for convenience in having a term to refer to them by), is the existence of a period of "pre-reading" or "off-staff" reading. As I talk to teachers, however, I am finding that many teachers aren't really sure just what exactly the purpose of these activities is. Some teachers even refuse to use courses with off-staff reading, thinking that the activities are just a bunch of nonsense. Others use the newer methods, but they think of the pre-reading stage as a necessary evil; they can't wait to get down to "real" teaching. Even teachers who believe in the pre-reading philosophy sometimes even think of the stage as a "ramp up" to ease the way into "real" lessons. None of these philosophies demonstrates an understanding of the full purpose of pre-reading at all.

We need to remember that our goal is to produce well-rounded musicians, not just note readers. No teacher worthy of the calling would contest that objective. What is at issue, however, is the belief in the older teaching philosophy that teaching a student to read music is the first step in developing a complete musician. The thought is that we must first teach a student to read notes, then to play rhythmically correct, and then to add the other elements of music, such as dynamics, touch, articulation, and interpretation. A glance at most typical middle C methods reveals that scope and sequence.

Piano pedagogy is a relatively new field of study. Until research into learning methods began in the middle of the last century, musicians pretty much followed a system of logic in developing a series of objectives. The middle C sequence makes perfect sense, and most approaches prior to the rise of pedagogical research simply accepted what made sense. However, research, especially the kind of research that has focused on the thinking of Piaget and Bruner, demonstrates that any approach that puts music reading first in the learning sequence, is counter-productive to producing good musicians. It is very understandable that the older learning approaches only resulted in well-rounded musicians in the early years about 10% of the time. Most students ended up doing a note-by-note "typing" process in their initial sight reading of a piece, and they only produced musical results after several weeks of practice, often accompanied by the teacher playing the piece for the student so the student could "see how the piece goes."

Good teaching always goes from the "thing" to its name and its "sign" or symbol. When a teacher begins by pointing to the written music as the first step in teaching anything, he or she is going about the process backwards. Just as an example, if we are teaching the concept of a sharp, we should never start by showing the student a written sharp symbol, and yet, that is what many of us do. Instead, we should work at the keyboard and show the student how to find a half step and a whole step. We should then show the student how to raise a tone by a half step at the keyboard. We should do this until the student can readily play the key that is a half step above any given key. We then should give the process of raising a tone a half step the name of "sharp." Finally, we should show the student the symbol of a

sharp. We then should show the student the two ways that sharps are used in written music (accidentals and key signatures), and discuss the rules governing these uses.

When a student comes to his first lesson, if he is like most, he has little concept of what music even is. If he were asked to give a definition of music, his response would be of the nature of hitting the correct keys in the correct order. There would be little chance of him conceiving of music as the rhythmic movement of tones. Our first objective, therefore, needs to be that of building a correct concept of music. There is no reason whatsoever in teaching a student to read notes if he has no concept of music. The most important element of music is rhythm, and the most important aspect of rhythm is that of the steady beat. Until a student can maintain a steady beat and then create sounds that move according to that beat, he is not making music. And until he is making music, there is no reason to learn to read something he does not even conceive of.

The best way to teach a student to make music is to have the student learn to play a few early songs entirely by rote. It is not enough just to be able to play a simple tune with correct notes and rhythm. Rather, the student needs to learn all of the following:

- Correct notes
- Correct rhythm
- Correct hand position
- Good tone
- Good legato and/or staccato touch
- Use of dynamics

The second step in the process is to learn the written process of notating rhythm. Early pre-reading tunes that require the student to recognize only the rhythmic element enable this process to occur. The reason that most methods begin with finger numbers is that children respond most readily to numbers rather than letters. By using finger number tunes, the student only has to learn the rhythmic difference between the various notes.

If the primary goal of finger number melodies were the learning of finger numbers, a single song would be sufficient to accomplish the objective. But that understanding is short-sighted; the real goal of these first pieces is to learn to play musically in rhythm. A student should not go on to letter-name melodies until he can play with perfect rhythm. For some students, three or four such pieces are sufficient. For many students, this objective will not be reached even after ten pieces. I firmly believe that additional finger number pieces need to be used until the student can maintain a reasonable semblance of a steady beat and can readily differentiate the difference between a one-count note and other, longer-held notes.

During this initial time, the student should also be introduced to dynamics and touch. Although many children have difficulty producing a clean legato, they all should at least have an understanding of the difference between legato and staccato. And almost all students can differentiate between a loud and a soft tone, and can do so in response to the *p* and *f* symbols in music. Musical playing should include

touch and dynamics, and the student should demonstrate a basic grasp of both in his playing before moving on.

The reason for introducing letter-name melodies next is that almost all students have difficulty thinking up and down in terms of the alphabet. It is worth spending some time reciting the alphabet up and down in steps and skips, including going up from G and down from A. Playing and thinking of letters is fairly challenging for most students, and many cannot do so and maintain a steady beat at the same time. It is ludicrous to attempt to teach a student to read notes on a staff in correct rhythm if he cannot play pre-reading melodies with letter name notation in correct rhythm. Again, a student may well need additional letter name pieces until he can readily sight read any easy piece in this notation while still maintaining a steady beat and correct note-to-rhythm relationships.

The teacher must not think of this early process as “getting ready to read real music.” Instead, the teacher must think of this phase as PLAYING REAL MUSIC with notation that enables him to assimilate one musical element at a time. The student must not be rushed through this process, but rather, he must be given ample time to incorporate ALL of the elements of music other than staff reading into his playing.

We know from research that staff reading is a process that is sufficiently difficult so as to require the student’s full concentration. Since we NEVER want a student to read note by note, it is essential for a student to be able to play musically before we introduce notes on the staff. It is important for the student to be able to play his very first staff piece musically on the very first reading of the piece. If he is able to respond correctly to rhythmic notation, play with correct hand position, touch, and dynamics, and can respond correctly to letter names, then his first reading of staff notation has a reasonable chance of success. If he is having to concentrate on learning some of these other musical elements at the same time, he is very likely going to have to resort to a note-by-note typing process. Note-by-note typing is NOT music making, and it is very unlikely to result in musical sight reading even in the long term.

Research also demonstrates that we will be more successful with most students (emphasis on most!) if we teach the process of reading a melodic contour intervallically first rather than focusing on the letter names of the notes. Although many students have difficulty recognizing fourths and fifths, most of them can readily differentiate between seconds, thirds, and repeated notes. We are not “cheating” by giving the student a hand position and the name of the first note, and then asking him to read the rest of the phrase or piece by interval. Some methods use a partial staff to do this. Other methods use the standard staff (mostly for our benefit!), but still give the student a fixed hand position and still tell the student the name of the starting note or starting finger number. In all of these cases, the intention is the same: to limit the student’s focus just to the intervals.

As much as I would like to say that research has found that the landmark method always works the best for note learning, there is not uncontested research that does so. Different students respond better to different approaches. The landmark approach seems to work well for the largest number of students, but hand position systems, the middle C approach, and the Every Good Boy approach work better for

other students. I have personally experience a good response to the ACE system and to Weybright's system of using FACE in the treble and GECA in the bass. The good teacher becomes adept at using a variety of systems. If a student doesn't grasp the teacher's favorite approach, the teacher should be able to switch to another system without having to switch piano courses to do so. The only time a switch in method becomes essential is when a student has real issues with the interval reading process. Such a student is probably going to need a middle C, note-memory course if he is going to be successful.

The key to all of this, whether the student eventually learns to read intervals first or note names first, is to allow the student to spend sufficient time in the pre-staff phase to master completely all of the music making skills prior to introducing note reading. While some students do master music making and note reading from an on-staff approach, many never really do, and they spend the rest of their music careers slavishly plodding along in a note-by-note process. These students find sight reading in rhythm to be difficult, and they learn new pieces one note at a time first, and toss in the rhythmic element later.

On the other hand, students who master the rhythmic, music making process during the pre-staff period have a much better chance (statistically) in becoming good sight readers who play rhythmically and musically on a first reading. But this only happens if the teacher takes the pre-reading period seriously and does not look at pre-reading as a necessary evil to be rushed through so the student can get down to "real" piano lessons. Real piano lessons consist of making music that is rhythmically correct and artistically beautiful. Eventually that includes staff reading, but it always must include the musical element first. The wise teacher looks at the pre-staff phase as the opportune time to teach the important areas of music making. He or she insists on the student playing these early pieces artistically, and he allows the student sufficient time to develop all of the music skills before tackling that ever so important process of reading notes on the staff.

In short, rather than looking at pre-reading as something to rush through, the wise teacher considers pre-reading to be the most important period of a student's study. We should insist on the same standards of music with off-staff pieces as we do with staff pieces. If that means spending two or three weeks on the same pieces, we should be just as willing to do so even though the notes do not have lines running through them. And rather than having a begrudging attitude towards these pieces, we should consider them to be golden opportunities to be able to teach total musicianship and artistry without the added burden of deciphering a musical code. We should relish the brief time we get to work with our students in pre-reading mode, and we should prolong that period for as long as necessary to produce the artistry we seek.