

Finding the Perfect Pace:

Tips for Teaching with Beginning Piano Methods

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PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Preparation-Presentation-Association

“The first stage in nature’s teaching is to place the new learning reasonably and naturally into the student’s environment . . . without any need for remembering, without any fear for forgetting. We continue guiding each step, allowing the student to do everything along with us. We take no chances on incorrect experiences. . . . If the student has had the correct experience once, he has begun to *learn*. As a result of several lessons, he will *know*. . . . He will know because he absorbed the learning naturally.” (Chronister, p. 33, p. 39)

Zone of Proximal Development (Kennell)

“The Zone of Proximal Development was conceived by Vygotsky as the area just beyond the student’s existing capabilities. It is a region that becomes accessible to the student only through the assistance of a more competent teacher.”

In-lesson experiences are designed to gradually build student independence through scaffolded steps, each followed by **assessment** to check understanding. The process begins with **highly guided instruction**, where the teacher leads and supports. As confidence grows, the guidance becomes **less structured**, allowing students to take more initiative. This continues with **even less guidance**, encouraging problem-solving and decision-making. Finally, students reach a stage of being **not guided at all**, where they demonstrate full independence. At this point, the student is ready to use the material at **home in practice**.

The **method book** serves as measured progress, offering structure and **extrinsic motivation** through visible milestones. At the same time, it’s essential to nurture **music making** as an enjoyable activity, fostering **intrinsic motivation** that sustains long-term engagement. In lessons, **guided “play”** creates a **rich environment** that prepares students to be **independent** by encouraging exploration and creativity. This foundation helps students feel **confident during home practice**, eliminating uncertainty and building **self-efficacy** as they grow into capable, self-directed musicians.

1. A CONTINUOUS SPIRAL

Create a **master list of a method** to serve as the foundation for structured learning. Student learning is fluid when presentation of a new piece is based upon **mastery** of concepts/techniques and when new concepts are introduced in a continuous cycle from the **known to the next unknown**. To reinforce learning, incorporate **mini-drills every week**. Use **personalized games and activities** to engage learners in a fun and meaningful way, catering to individual needs and tastes.

2. SOUND & FEEL FIRST

In **music lessons**, make musical expression the core experience. There is **no need to read** traditional notation at the outset. Instead, symbols are attached to **known sounds**, allowing learners to connect symbols with auditory experiences. The learning process is enriched through activities like **imitation and improvisation**, as well as **rote warm-ups and repertoire**, which build familiarity and fluency. This approach fosters a sense of **ease and confidence**.

3. ACTIVITIES FOR ASSESSING

Once a concept is assimilated, learners can explore **new contexts** without the teacher’s assistance, fostering independence and deeper understanding. This stage includes **self-study pieces, sight reading, and dictation**—activities that challenge students to apply their skills. If difficulties arise, return to more **teacher-guided preparation in the lesson** and more reinforcement in assigned repertoire.

4. TRANSFER LEARNING

As students progress, explore new pieces **through guided questioning** to foster critical thinking. Assign **alternative repertoire** with review concepts to broaden into new contexts. Move **beyond the method** curricula, and engage students in more advanced applications such as playing in **all keys for technique**, and exploring **harmonization, transposition**, and even **composition projects**. These experiences cultivate creativity, versatility, and a strong foundation for lifelong musicianship.

5. SKIP & SUPPLEMENT

In selecting repertoire, it's helpful to **skip and supplement** by defining method pieces in one of these **four categories**: **Essential** are core to the method; **Optional** offer reinforcement based on student needs; **Challenge** could be returned to later; and **Alternative Needed**, where a substitution might be needed. This framework supports a more personalized and responsive approach to repertoire selection.

6. BALANCED ASSIGNMENTS

A well-rounded practice routine includes a variety of activities to support musical growth. It begins with **warm-ups** to prepare the hands and mind, followed by **new music** for a first week of practice. **Review music** expands previously assigned pieces with new goals, while **performance pieces** are those kept for final polishing. **Writing and activities** list written work, apps, or flash cards to practice. A **practice check-off** system encourages accountability and progress tracking. Finally, assignments ideally have "**For Fun**" **elements**, those of student interest to keep motivation high.

7. INDIVIDUALIZED PRACTICE PROCESS

There are **two primary types of learners**: those who thrive through **trial-and-error**, diving into learning by experimenting, and those who prefer a **step-by-step** approach, waiting for structured guidance. Learners bring **various personalities** and **unique strengths** to the process, making it essential to adapt teaching methods to support the individual. Both types benefit from a structured **sequence of steps** taught in the lesson and documented for home practice.

8. INTEGRATE ARTISTRY ALWAYS

An **artistic sound** must be prioritized from the very beginning, with **frequent demonstration** (teacher modeling) serving as a model for technique and sound. It's important to present **musicality from lesson one** with every new piece. Clear artistic **goals for review and performance pieces** ensure that each lesson focuses on creating expressive sound at the piano.

RESOURCES

Richard Chronister, *A Piano Teacher's Legacy*, ed. by Edward Darling (Kingston, NJ: The Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, 2005): Ch. 2, "Stages of Learning"

Sara Ernst, course designer, *The Beginner Course: Establishing strong Foundations for Young Pianists*, pianoinspires.com/course/the-beginner-course-self-guided/

Sara Ernst, "Practicing Alongside Our Intermediate Students," *Piano Magazine* (Winter 2021), pianoinspires.com/article/practicing-alongside-our-intermediate-students/

Sara Ernst, "Practicing Piano from the Early Stages," Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, Webinar, December 8, 2021, pianoinspires.com/webinar/practicing-piano-through-the-early-stages/

Sara Ernst, "To Play and to Study: The Thrill of Discovery," *Piano Magazine* (Nov/Dec 2018), pianoinspires.com/article/to-play-and-to-study-the-thrill-of-discovery/

Richard Kennell, "Toward a Theory of Applied Music Instruction," *The Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 7-8. Reprinted in and retrieved from *Visions of Research in Music Education* 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 2010), www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/v16n1/volume3

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ENGAGING INTERMEDIATE PIANO REPERTOIRE BY MODERN AMERICAN COMPOSERS

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North Dakota MTA • State Conference • June 2025

Contemporary piano music can “expand [students’] interpretive capacity” and “confirm and reinforce the musical and technical concepts they are learning in their other repertoire.” Helen Marlais, editor of The FJH Contemporary Keyboard Editions

This curated list is arranged in increasing level, using Jane Magrath’s leveling system, and includes music from beginning to early advanced pianists. It contains a wide variety of styles, although all are accessible and contain expressive and palatable use of dissonance. All music is readily available for purchase through music retailers.

Weaving Sounds, various composers (The Frances Clark Center)

pîwan, Method 1, V. Jessica Sparvier-Wells
Mushroom Ballet, Method 2, Beverly McKiver
Beading Song, Level 1, Charles Shadle
See also Charles Shadle, *Choctaw Animals*, Levels 4–6

The 20th Century Upper Elementary, various composers, ed. Richard Walters (Hal Leonard Schirmer Performance Editions)

The Bad Mister, Level 2, by William Bolcolm (b. 1938), from *Monsterpieces (and Others)*, 1981
The Missing Beat!, Level 2, by Morton Gould (1913–1996), from *At the Piano*, 1964

Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987), *Little Piano Book*, Op. 60, 1954 (Theodore Presser)

Capriccio, Level 3
Dialogue, Level 3
Humoreske, Level 3
Also see *Poems for Piano*, Levels 8–10

The 20th Century Early Intermediate, various composers, ed. Richard Walters (Hal Leonard Schirmer Performance Editions)

Birthday Bells, Level 4, by Morton Gould (1913–1996), *At the Piano*, 1964
Also note: *Ten for Deborah*, Levels 3–4
Toy Dance, Level 4, by Paul Creston, *Five Little Dances*, Op. 24, No. 3
Also note: *Five Two-Part Inventions*, Op. 14, Level 9

Karen Tanaka (b. 1961), *Children of Light*, 1999 (Chester Music / Music Sales America)

Green Paradise, Level 3
Sea Turtle, Level 4
African Elephant, Level 4

Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961), *Album for the Young*, 1994 (Theodore Presser)

Ostinato, Level 4
Boogieman, Level 4–5

Hale Smith (1925–2009), *Faces of Jazz*, 1968 (Marks Music), also found in *Piano Music of Black Composers*, ed. Leah Claiborne (Hal Leonard)

An Asphodel for Marcel, Level 5
Blooz, Level 5

Juhi Bansal, *Travels*, 2021 (Theodore Presser)

Mirror the Stars, 5
Deep as the Sky, 5–6

Emma Lou Diemer (1927–2024), *Reaching Out*, 2004 (FJH)

Surprises, Level 6
Minor Serenade, Level 6
Chatter, Level 6
Also see *Travels Through Sound*, Level 3–7

Dianne Golkasian Rahbee (b. 1938), *Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo Volume 2*, 2005 (FJH)

Five Toccatinas, No. 1 and No. 3, Levels 6–7

Robert Starer (1924–2001), *Sketches in Color, Sets One and Two*, 1964 and 1973, ed. **Carolyn True**, 2010 (Hal Leonard)

Aquamarine, Level 7
Purple, Level 7
Crimson, Level 7

Valerie Capers (b. 1935), *Portraits in Jazz*, 2012 (Oxford)

Bossa Brasilia, Level 7–8
Billie's Song, Level 7
Blue-Bird, Level 7–8

Wallace McClain Cheatham (1945–2021) from *Piano Music of Africa and the African Diaspora Volume 2: Intermediate*, ed. **William Chapman Nyaho** (Oxford)

Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Level 8
Poor Mourner's Got a Home, Level 8

Connor Chee (b. 1987), *Sandpaintings* (Alfred)

No. 8, Southern Mountain, Level 9
No. 10, Western Clouds, Level 9

William Bolcom (b. 1938), from *Three Popular Rags*, 1971, in *Complete Rags for Piano* (Edward B. Marks Music Company)

Seabiscuits Rag, Level 9–10

Alexina Louie (b. 1949), *Music for Piano*, 1993 (Alfred)

Changes, Level 10
Once Upon a Time, Level 10
Also see *Star Light Star Bright*, Level 7–8

"There is no better way to keep the art of music alive and refreshed—for ourselves as teachers and artists and for our students—than by embracing the newest notes, and thereby celebrating the music of our own time." Judith Lang Zaimont, "Embracing New Music," American Music Teacher (Aug/Sept 2008).

RESOURCE

Jane Magrath, *Piano Literature for Teaching and Performance* (Piano Education Press, The Frances Clark Center, 2021)

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Deep Learning: Strategies to Engage and Empower Music Students

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1. Expression at the Heart
2. Principle-Rich Instruction
3. Broaden the Skill Set
4. Expanded, Student-Led Repertoire
5. Wellness as Guiding Force
6. Of and In Community

Resources (in the order discussed)

- Blickenstaff, Marvin. *Inspired Piano Teaching*. Piano Education Press, 2024.
- Duke, Bob. "Sequencing" and "Assessment" in *Intelligent Music Teaching: Essays on the Core Principles of Effective Instruction*. Learning and Behavior Resources, 2009.
- Klose, Carol. *Piano Teacher's Guide to Creative Composition*. Hal Leonard, 2011.
- Fisher, Katherine, and Julie Knerr Hague. *Composition*. Piano Safari, 2023.
- Kinney, Forest. *Pattern Play*, Levels 1-6. RCM Publishing, 2010.
- Dorrough, Davis, and Oliva Ellis. *Easy Piano Lead Sheets and Chord Charts*. Available on Amazon, 2024.
- Beauchamp, Laura. *Four Star Sight-Reading and Ear Tests*. RCM Publishing, 2019.
- Chordify (app), chordify.net.
- BandLab (app), www.bandlab.com.
- Ernst, Sara, and Andrea McAlister, co-editors-in-chief. *Piano Inspires Kids* (magazine). Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, 2024+. kids.pianoinspires.com and www.youtube.com/@pianoinspireskids
- Jeng, Annie. A Seat at the Piano, www.aseatatthepiano.com.
- Mogensen, Sandra, and Erica Sipes. Piano Music She Wrote, www.pianomusicshewrote.com/pmsw-directory.
- Claiborne, Leah. Ebony Music, *Piano Music by Black Composers*, ebonymusic.org/portfolio.
- Lind, Vicki, and Constance McKoy. *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education: From Understanding to Application*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2023.
- Cornett, Vanessa. "Mental Skills and Music Performance: The Teacher's Role." *American Music Teacher* 64, no. 4 (2015): 28–30.
- Savvidou, Paola. *Teaching the Whole Musician: A Guide to Wellness in the Applied Studio*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Cornett, Vanessa. *The Mindful Musician: Mental Skills for Peak Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Salas-Ruiz, Carla. "My Journey to Healthy Musicianship: Practical Ideas for Exploration and Self-Reflection in the Piano Studio," *Piano Magazine* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 34-40.