



1

What makes a good piano teacher?

Few of us will have started off with ambitions to become a piano teacher. It is sadly not an aspiration actively encouraged or openly respected at universities or conservatoires, though huge numbers of talented musicians have become teachers through these institutions. Many fall into teaching due to a personal contact, perhaps a neighbour who 'found out' they played the piano. Others will have studied as a performer and initially turned to teaching as a means of supplementing their income. Some, having discovered teaching the piano as a profession will have, like me, become as passionate about the art of teaching as they are about the piano and performing.

There is a widely held perception that teaching is a career that musicians 'fall into' if they don't make it as performers, and this devalues the profession. It's rather galling for those of us who, having experienced performing at the highest level, discover we get even more pleasure in sharing and promoting the joys of music performance to a young, receptive generation.

You don't have to be a top performer to make a good teacher; the best piano teachers are rarely the best performers too. Playing the piano to a high level will however help you understand what is possible and to appreciate the psychological pressures and demands of a top performer, but this is also something others can provide along the way if the pupil is well taught from the start.

In an ideal world, tertiary institutions would run degree courses that specifically focus on training talented young instrumentalists to be qualified professional teachers (and good luck doing this in a four year course). Until then we owe it to our profession to enlighten parents and fellow professionals as to the complexity and subtlety of our work and the broader context of the education we provide.

What do we do?

We mentor, inspire, motivate, train (mentally and physically) and cultivate the crucial skills that form a communicative musician. We also develop the musical imagination, aural foundation skills, technical awareness and communication skills of players. Our gift to our pupils, though, is more profound even than this. The transferable skills of communication, empathy, organisation, self-discipline, self-assessment, self-awareness, self-knowledge and pride in high standards, to mention a few, are worth more than gold. We are training them to be successful in life and bring these skills to any profession they choose.

What skills do we need?

A piano teacher needs the insight to understand the soul of the individual, to draw out their personality and emotions and help them forge strong personal links with the sound, their own performances and the compositions and music of others.

As well as having the personality and verbal skills to communicate, a teacher needs the ability to evaluate, understand and develop a pupil's strengths and to



3

First lessons

Never underestimate the significance of one-to-one time with a teacher. The value pupils place on this time is often only expressed later in life or in a passing comment, yet we jeopardise this special relationship if we dismiss the context of each lesson. We need to remember what happened last week, what work we set, what we promised we might do and what the joint long-term goals are.

It is extremely helpful to say what you hope they will learn in the lesson before you start and at the end of the lesson, plan the next lesson with them. The care and continuity this signifies to the pupil is worth hours of practice and motivation, and establishes good habits and focus.

Before the first lesson

Crucial to a good first lesson is an understanding of the pupil, their interests and personality. An initial 'get together' beforehand is therefore deeply valuable. Finding out their passions for animals, sport, art, etc. is an instant way into their creative minds. It is also important to know their concentration span to guide the structure of the lesson.

Questions to ask

The pupil

- What sort of personality do they have?
- What concentration span do they have?
- What reading skills do they already have?
- How academic are they?
- What other musical experiences have they had?
- Do they enjoy singing?
- What are their interests and passions?

The instrument

- Why are they learning the piano?
- Is it the right instrument for them?
- Is it their first choice instrument?
- Do they have ambitions to play certain music?
- Do they really want to learn the piano?

Home environment

- Do they have a piano at home?
- What sort of piano is it (digital or acoustic)?
- What condition is it in?
- Where is it?
- Can they practise undisturbed?
- Do they have a way of varying the height of their stool/chair?
- Is there enough space behind the stool for them to sit correctly?
- Can parents afford the supplementary costs of music etc.?
- What parental support and time is available?



Musical context and practical example

Handel: *Gavotte in G*, bars 1–8

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows bars 1-4. The right hand starts with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, and C5. The left hand starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. The second system shows bars 5-8. The right hand continues the melody with a dotted quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, and C5. The left hand continues with quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Consider the piece above and assume you are sending a pupil away to practise the first phrase of the right hand without help. You are naturally hoping they will come back having learnt the notes and rhythms, with a confident sense of performance and a growing awareness of character.

A worst-case scenario would be:

- look at the note on the score and work out the letter name
- find the note on the piano
- assume the pitch is correct
- guess the rhythm and learn the physical patterns
- repeat until this is learnt, making 'permanent' all mistakes.

Sadly this is seen in many a practice room around the world. Instead, before we give pupils a piano piece to learn, it is crucial that the musical sophistication and challenge presented by the notes does not exceed their aural skills and knowledge. These need developing ahead of the score-based work they do.

Within the piece above, therefore, they should be able to:

Notes

- read and then hear the pitches and intervals in their head (test they can do this by asking them to sing/whistle/hum a few notes from the score before they have played/heard it)
- memorise this sequence of pitches

- hear and assess the pitches they then actually play
- remember the sequence of pitches heard
- match these with the internalised and memorised melody
- spot any discrepancy and adjust.

Rhythm

- establish a reliable and confident pulse
- read and internalise the rhythmic patterns against this pulse (test they can do this by using clapping rhythms from the score, rhythm cards or clapping games)
- memorise the rhythmic outline
- hear and assess the rhythm actually played
- remember the rhythm heard
- match this with the internalised and memorised rhythm
- spot any discrepancy and adjust.

Detail

- understand the sounds and articulation implied by the markings
- internalise the dynamic shape, sounds and articulation suggested (test they can do this by asking them to do a free improvisation on any notes, but including the expressive detail on the page)
- memorise the intended outcome
- hear and assess the actual performance
- remember the musical result heard
- match this with the internalised performance
- spot any undesired difference or preferred outcome.