

THE FIRST PIANO LESSON

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*“Music is so naturally united with us that we cannot be free
from it even if we so desired”*

Boethius

INTRODUCTION

When I first began teaching piano, I was surprised at the lack of reading material available to study. It was only on the CT (Certificate of Teaching) course was I presented with a reading list. There were the usual well known pedagogues like Joan Last and Fanny Waterman but most books centered on general music teaching and not specifically the piano.

When you first start teaching any instrument privately it can feel like an incredibly isolating job. Other teachers in your area may well regard you as competition and not give you the time of day.

Nowadays with the internet in almost every home, there are useful forums and groups that one can join and at least feel part of something and learn some helpful tips along the way.

I intend to look at THE FIRST LESSON from several different perspectives. The structure of a lesson will vary according to the age and previous circumstances so I shall consider this from the point of view of a very young beginner, an older child having a first lesson, an older child transferring from another teacher and an adult beginner.

THE FIRST LESSON

The first lesson is very important, whether the student is young or old, it can pave the way to a lifelong enjoyment of music and every effort should be made by the teacher to make sure the first lesson is a success.

I find it very useful to give an introduction as to how the piano works - I

have an added advantage over most teachers in that I am also a professional piano tuner and can show the pupil the mechanics of piano actions. Even for the very youngest pupil this can be a good “hands on” experience during the first lesson.

A simple demonstration of how to sit at the piano and in particular impressing on the pupil the correct hand position and posture is a good way to begin. Knowledge of the layout of the piano keyboard is also introduced.

I always ask that the pupil brings a notebook so that both they (and the parents) have some form of reference.

THE VERY YOUNG BEGINNER

I teach in a very relaxed and informal manner. I used to wear a business suite but toned my appearance down to looking casual but smart and therefore not too overpowering.

I begin with a friendly welcome to both pupil and parent, then I'll show them my studio and ask if they are happy to continue. This way the parent knows the environment which the child is being taught in. Rarely do I have the parent sitting in. However, if it is a very young beginner then I may have a parent sitting in until the child feels comfortable. I don't like the parent to stay for the whole lesson as this can be distracting for both the pupil and teacher as they often end up asking questions that distract from the lesson plan. I will also explain that this lesson is different from a school lesson and tell the pupil that at any time they can ask questions and if they feel the pace of lesson is moving too fast, then just asking me to slow down.

Following on from the introduction, I generally start with some kind of warm-up exercise. Listening to some popular music with a ‘follow my leader’ routine often proves very effective as it relaxes both teacher and student. I will ask the pupil to either find the black notes (groups of twos and threes) at random, and then find middle C and C's throughout the treble and bass of the piano - a form of guessing game.

I am quite in agreement with Joan Last in her book 'The Young Pianist' when she suggests that it is important not to spend all the time at the piano. I try to incorporate a little theory and will ask what school they attend, favourite subjects, if they like sport - favourite football team etc.etc.

Young children usually enjoy drawing, so we draw a pattern of their hands to depict finger numbering and I will also show them how the treble and bass clefs are drawn, as well as showing them how to draw notes on some manuscript paper - it is interesting to see some of the shapes and sizes which appear, but as Joan Last also notes - the enthusiasm is there and they very quickly learn how to reproduce them correctly.

I have found that young children really enjoy clapping back rhythms played by me, either on a recorder or the drum pads of a keyboard. This can be very useful in demonstrating the sounds of other instruments as well, i.e. violin, trumpet, guitars, etc.

John Schaum's pre-A tutor book has proved to be a good choice for young pupils and the first two exercises are usually sufficient to absorb in the first lesson.

I usually finish the lesson with some kind of singing exercise, getting the pupil to sing back short phrases of not much more than three notes.

Joan Last briefly sums up the material for the first lesson:-

1. Talk and introduction to the piano.
2. Sitting posture, position of hands and introductory exercise.
3. Note finding on the keyboard.
4. Three little technical exercises.
5. Aural work.
6. Sight-reading.
7. A piece.

I find Joan Last's tutor book 'Keyboard Games For The Very Young Pianist' most useful - it contains fun duets and easy rote learning exercises. (Due to copyright reasons I am unable to include a sample of this book - its was published by Oxford University Press).

I always impress on the child and parent that we will go over the same routine several times, so not to worry them if they forget anything, as there is such a lot of new information. Although I do try to pace the child as to their ability, so as not to overwhelm them initially.

I suggest that twenty minutes practice daily, but split into two sessions of ten minutes each, should be adequate.

A useful tip from my own teacher to encourage finger strength development was to use a small foam ball and squeeze each finger (which should be rounded), several times each day. Of course this exercise should be done without help from fingers crossing over each other.

I am firmly in favour of awarding younger children with either stars or certificates to increase their enthusiasm.

I will spend the final five minutes (sometimes more) explaining what we have done to a parent and what I expect in the way of practise. It is useful to demonstrate to the parent what has been achieved in the lesson, especially if the parent is going to oversea and be involved with the child's practice.

AN OLDER CHILD BEGINNER

An older beginner can often be starting piano lessons after quite a while learning another instrument. Some knowledge of musical notation may exist or there may not be any musical knowledge at all.

I start from scratch whether or not the pupil plays another instrument so that I can ascertain just how much the pupil knows and whether there are any gaps. Even the complete beginner can have absorbed some basics of music via school lessons, tv, etc. I use the same routine regarding posture, hand position, keyboard layout, etc, as previously described.

I mostly use the Red Schaum (A) piano book - it has some excellent tunes including Brahms's Lullaby and Bells are Ringing which is adapted from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Also at the beginning is a sight-reading drill with notes printed in both treble and bass clefs. The pupil can be given

one of fourteen drills and when completed the drill card can be turned upside down and the drills repeated. The use of finger numbering is discussed and hand position in relation to the piano keys and notes on the music staff is explained in preparation for achieving two simple tunes by the end of the first lesson.

I like the basic idea of Fanny Waterman's 'Ten Musical Commandments' but I am not in agreement with item seven. If a pupil constantly corrects errors the second they have happened, this may well develop into a continuous habit and lead to a lack of fluency in playing - the pupil should remember the error and correct it later.

1. Keep your back straight and your fingers rounded.
2. Practise regularly everyday.
3. Before you start playing any unfamiliar music, clap the rhythm, counting the beats aloud.
4. Choose the fingering most suited to your hand, write it on the music and keep to it.*
5. Hands separate before hands together.**
6. Practise slowly before playing up to speed.
7. When practising, correct any mistakes immediately and play the passage several times correctly before going on or back.
8. Play any piece with precise rhythm throughout, before introducing any rubato or rhythmic freedom.
9. Follow all the composer's markings.
- 10 Listen to every sound you make on the piano.

* Beginners may find this difficult and need help from their teacher.

** Not always a good idea as it can upset the rhythm.

Fanny Waterman, when sometimes asked how she chooses her pupils, comments "ideally I don't choose the pupils, I choose the parents".

I think she is referring to the fact that musically minded parents can help with a pupil's progress, whereas parents who are not so committed may hinder or not be so encouraging to the pupil's progress.

A PUPIL FROM ANOTHER TEACHER HAVING THEIR FIRST LESSON WITH ME

This can be quite a different kettle of fish. I sometimes find that in the transgression from one teacher to another, the counting seems to have gone astray and much work is needed to correct this, either by counting aloud or with use of the metronome. Other problems can be found in the pupil saying “My other teacher always used to tell me to do it this way!”

During the first lesson I always like to read thoroughly what (if anything) the previous teacher has written in the pupil’s notebook and this gives me a good idea of what the pupil is capable. I then suggest that they play some of their favourite pieces and some that they are currently learning.

I generally find that scales are a good basis to work from, especially B major which not only gets the pupil playing on the black keys but also develops thumb technique. Also some Hanon or Czerny exercises help to develop fluency and accuracy. We also put some emphasis on learning both major or minor chords. I also like to introduce a new piece so that I have a “fresh” start, so to speak.

It can take some time to correct any bad habits that may have arisen, in particular fingering. I have on a number of occasions had to retrace steps with both the fingering and the counting, which can be a little disheartening for the pupil, but I make some very positive comments about other aspects to counteract this.

I have been able to make it more enjoyable correcting these errors with rhythmic clapping games and playing along at the top or getting the pupil to count aloud whilst I demonstrate the piece or section of music.

For the above reasons where bad habits have occurred, I prefer not to take pupils who have started lessons with another teacher, but as I live in an RAF community this has become a regular feature over the last few years. It does however, provide an interesting challenge from the teacher’s point of view.

AN ADULT BEGINNER

I know of many teachers who prefer not to teach adults, presumably because they can ask difficult questions. They can also be in quite a hurry to achieve more in less time and think that it is going to be much easier than they imagine.

Hadassah Sahr in Denes Agays Teaching Piano (Vol I) suggests that an adult can be any one of several people: the eighteen-year old high school graduate/college student who “likes” music and wants to take some piano lessons; the young woman whose children are now in school and who wishes to resume lessons after a hiatus of many years; the individual in a field other than music who wishes to embark on some sort of artistic study, has decided that the piano is the instrument he/she has always wanted to learn to play and is now ready to begin; a person whose children are grown, who is looking for new interests to develop and who thinks learning to play the piano would be rewarding; the retired individual who now has the time to pursue his/her musical interests and wants to learn to play the piano.

The first lesson with adult can be also be a “get to know you time”. They may wish to talk about family and other interests. It is a good time to gauge how busy an adult is and their level of commitment, they can often come from one week to another without having done any practise. Adults may be more apprehensive than a younger beginner especially if they have had lessons as a child and are starting from scratch. Often I find adults can recall some basic theory from their music lessons at school and this can be a good beginning.

With adults I often find that they also like to spend some lesson time chatting about their worries or problems and they look at their piano lesson as a form of therapy, a chance to escape from day-to-day chores.

The Michael Aaron Adult piano course is an ideal starter book. It starts with simple left and right hand tunes and then quickly moves on to both hands together. Popular tunes help to form the basis of a good repertoire.

Conclusion

To conclude it is often not possible to accomplish everything one sets out to do in a first lesson. We must remember that we are there as a guide - a mentor, as the pupil whatever their age will largely be working on their own during the week. This has been an interesting article to write.

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