

The Whole Truth About Piano Study

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Article:

For many piano teachers and students, success is measured by a purely technical (and sometimes musical) yardstick. Piano lessons are judged worthwhile if students become better performers; conversely, a lag in performance skills is usually interpreted as failure by most parents, students, and teachers. Such a narrow view of the purpose of piano study does not acknowledge the array of extra-musical concepts that can be taught by the enlightened pedagogue. Either private or group instruction provides a forum wherein such critical and invaluable life-enrichment skills can be imparted.

For instance, students most always need to be taught how to practice, a skill that, once learned, can be translated into "how to learn" any subject in an efficient manner. The learning process can be streamlined and enhanced via proper techniques, none of which appear to be self-evident. Teachers who have a revelatory command of learning strategies can be of immense assistance to their students. Guidelines that teachers might consider include structuring practice into periods divided into sessions lasting no longer than thirty to forty minutes. Short breaks should consist of some stretching exercises, perhaps a walk around the room, and a drink of water. These fairly brief work units, punctuated by intervals of rest, maximize alertness. A full day's practice should begin with the piece or pieces that require the freshest concentration and conclude with the playing of the most secure, encouraging piece(s). Passages should never be repeated more than six consecutive times, but the same section may have more repetitions interspersed throughout the entire practice period, a regimen that guards against "comatose" practicing. General and specific practice goals must be established for each piece, and students must develop the loving patience to work on even the smallest details, often at a tempo far below performance standards. How infinitely more valuable that the student learn these lessons than to play a hundred mediocre recitals!

Intimately allied with practice skills is the concept of concentration. Especially in the 1980s, when a plethora of distractions fragment attention, students have to be taught how to concentrate. Concentration is the ability to focus on a subject with rapt interest, a vital component in any accomplishment, music or otherwise. Concentration requires a quiet mind that permits a singleness of thought. Students can improve their powers of concentration through the regular practice of meditation, permitting the duration and intensity of concentration to increase gradually. Teachers must encourage this nurturing and maturing of concentration skills in their students, who will in turn cherish the benefits far beyond the confines of music.

Another related skill is an understanding of what some writers have called Self I and Self II, the former being the verbal, judgmental self, while the latter is the nonverbal, relaxed self. Anyone who has broken the stranglehold of judgmental evaluation is free to rely upon natural ability without interference from internal or external competition. Potential becomes respected for its developmental possibilities, and frustration is rendered impotent. For a complete and eloquent discussion of this topic, see Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Students and teachers who play the Inner Game are richly blessed indeed.

Physical relaxation and coordination techniques are also vitally important extra-musical skills that can be taught in the piano studio. These transcend piano technique and involve breathing exercises, awareness of posture and

muscular tension, and even healthy dietary practices. Further, use of the small muscles of the body--as required in piano study—benefits the body in several adjunctive ways. As the eminent physician/musician Frank Wilson has pointed out, a positive correlation exists between music study and muscular development, physical coordination, a sense of timing, and vocal, visual, and aural development. With such a holistic slate of benefits, who could resist the lure and attraction of piano study?

Still another related, but not exclusively music skill, is a methodology for memorization. Throughout life people are required to make use of their ability to memorize, and an enhanced fluency to do so would be a valuable asset. Training and practice in any generalized mnemonic tactics would be helpful, and a highly recommended one is "map-ping," a technique aptly described by Rebecca Shockley ("A New Approach to Memorization," *Clavier*, July-August 1986, 20-23). Mapping can quickly become a carry-over skill into other disciplines.

Perhaps the single most important extra-musical benefit that can be derived from piano study, given the right circumstances, is a heightened sense of self-esteem. Especially for students who have not tasted success elsewhere or maybe have a difficult personal life, their self-esteem quotient may be at a low ebb. Teachers sometimes serve best when they just listen to students and express a genuine interest in their personal welfare. Though many in the music profession feel uncomfortable in the role of amateur psychologist—and some resent the "waste" of time—students in need of extra attention may feel that for the first time someone really cares. Another way to promote self-esteem is to take the greatest possible care in ensuring for each student an unbroken string of successful performances. To do so first requires an explanation to students that "successful" does not mean "perfection" but, rather, "best effort." Second, students must be given repertoire that, while challenging, is well within their command, and performances should proceed only when all reasonable doubt as to individual success has been removed. The take-home message here is that one public failure burns far more brightly in one's memory than a score of successes, so zealously guard against the possibility of public humiliation, however remote. If the worst should happen, though, get the student back on the stage at the earliest possible moment with a piece clothed in security, even if that means pulling an old piece out of retirement and playing with the music. A healthy self-esteem is worth its weight in gold, and students who can give their piano teacher credit for it have paid the profession a superlative compliment.

Further, piano teachers can help instill in their students a sense of responsibility, a respect for hard work and learning, discipline, reliability, and a need for achievement. Two recent studies, both by Alan L. Ginsburg of the Department of Education and Sandra L. Hanson of Decision Resources Corp. (*Gaining Ground: Values and High School Success and Values and Educational Success Among Disadvantaged Students*), have persuasively demonstrated that students who believe in such values excel in school. The authors have concluded that, "Encouragement of positive values is essential for higher achievement. Remediation alone does not foster high aspirations to achieve educational excellence." The bad news is that public schools are reluctant to get involved in values education. Piano lessons provide an ideal forum for such instruction via word and deed. Teachers ought to help students set short- and long-range goals that are stimulating yet attainable, provide students with immediate and objective feedback that evaluates effort and not personality, and set a personal example of enthusiasm, commitment, and industriousness. By learning that these and related values can bring fulfillment in one endeavor, students will be more likely to embrace similar attitudes as they are confronted with a lifetime of challenges.

Another extramusical skill that can be taught in piano lessons is a heightened sense of imagination and drama. Without aesthetic training, students are typically emotionally reactive rather than proactive. Many people never "stop to smell the roses" or savor the beauty all around them. A sensitive piano teacher can help correct that myopic vision and teach students to exercise their imagination. Such an awakening of dormant intellectual capacity will surely be an enrichment not only in the studio. Once a person has been made privy to the wonderment of creativity, he or she is likely to find greater pleasure in all activities and experiences.

The above discussion is not exhaustive in its listing of far-ranging benefits that can be derived from piano study. For instance, in studios that use a computer, students might have their first significant encounter with this

manifestly important, and increasingly indispensable, technology. Piano study might also lead to an increased capacity to deal with stress, a new-found freedom of expression, etc., etc., etc. Most importantly, piano teachers must realize that their professional responsibility extends far beyond instruction in musical matters. A commitment to the total developmental needs of the student has to be made. In essence, the piano pedagogue must be a humanist first and always. Less is neither morally nor ethically acceptable or justifiable. Piano teachers must indeed become all things to all people. And that's the whole truth about piano study.