

Preparing Students

For Vibrant Classical Sonatina Performances Using Rote Exercises

By Courtney Crappell, NCTM

Introducing students to the various technical and stylistic challenges of each period in music history is a complex and difficult task. To cultivate our students' appreciation and love for music, we must carefully and systematically prepare them for the performance practices of various historical periods and genres. In considering stylistic preparation, the classical sonatina deserves special attention. We begin assigning sonatinas at a pedagogically critical

moment; students must synthesize all of the technical skills acquired in their elementary-level training and use them in much larger and more complex works. Due to their length, teachers tend to spend less time introducing and exploring sonatinas in lessons before the student has “learned the notes” at home. However, once a student has practiced for even one week, the kinesthetic experience at the keyboard may overshadow any subsequent stylistic observations we make in lessons and altering details such as phrasing, articulation or even dynamics becomes an exercise in frustration. The key teachable moments are in the lessons before a student is sent home with the sonatina assignment. With that timetable in mind, incorporating rote exercises into the initial lessons will prepare them for stylistically informed practice at home.

Optimally, we want to engage in what Frances Clark described as “preventive rather than curative”¹ teaching. If properly prepared, sonatinas become quick-study pieces

Courtney Crappell, NCTM, serves as assistant professor of piano pedagogy at University of Texas San Antonio where he coordinates the class piano program and teaches piano and piano pedagogy. He holds a D.M.A. degree from the University of Oklahoma.



rather than exercises in error correction over several weeks of lessons. Clark’s preventive teaching began with aural impressions. She consistently recommended listening as the first and foremost learning activity. Shinichi Suzuki espoused a similar belief with his “mother-tongue” approach. His students learned music by ear in the same way they learned language. Since children learn to speak by imitating sounds, not by reading text, Suzuki taught that music learning should begin with imitation of sound rather than notation.

The concept of teaching to the ear should be fairly intuitive to musicians. After all, since a brilliant performance, a distinctly aural phenomenon, is often the main focus of music lessons, our approach should logically begin with impressions of sound. While many of us make the time to model at the piano for our students or to play recordings, we often leap from facilitating listening experiences to having our students actually learn from the score. Filling the gap left by these two experiences are activities developed through a teaching strategy with beginnings in the roots of music history—that is, the technique of teaching by rote.

Of course, the benefits of our notation system cannot be denied. The development of Western music and notation were interdependent—as music became easier to record, compositions became longer and more complex. Without notation, musicians today would have a nearly impossible task. As part of a busy society with enormous time constraints, we need fluent sight-reading skills to learn music quickly. Nevertheless, experiences in learning musical passages by rote, with an emphasis on listening, are beneficial. We actively engage in sound-based coaching every time we demonstrate passages for our students and say things like, “try it this way.” However, the key point in that statement is we *coach* that way, which is in itself a type of “curative” teaching. As proactive teachers we must incorporate this same type during the “preventive” phase when we are preparing students for new study pieces.

Developing Practical Rote Exercises

To illustrate how brief rote teaching exercises can be created, we will examine the opening of the first movement of Dussek’s Sonatina in G Major, Op. 20, No. 1 (see Example 1). It includes many typical stylistic features of the genre including scalar passages, Alberti accompaniment figures and detailed articulation indications.

Example 1: Dussek, Sonatina in G Major, Op. 20, No. 1, mm. 1–9.

The first consideration should be choosing the length of a workable passage. If it is too long, it is impossible to quickly demonstrate and teach. Contrastingly, shorter fragments do not accurately demonstrate how phrases flow or how the body, arms, hands and fingers have to move to accomplish a passage. Each work will be different, but an examination of a phrase’s rhythm, shape and articulations reveals useful dividing points for workable passages. In the case of the Dussek example, the beginning phrase lasts roughly four bars, but the articulation and rhythm shifts after the phrase reaches its peak in measure 3, which makes that spot an excellent stopping point for our first passage (see Example 2).

Example 2: Dussek, Sonatina in G Major, Op. 20, No. 1, mm. 1–3

Rote exercises must be easily accomplished to facilitate quick study in the lesson. We have a limited amount of time and a lot of ground to cover, so we must move quickly through each step of the process. The key is simplification. If we can take the core elements of a passage and reduce the overall difficulty, our students will experience the essence of the music and gradually build a feeling of ease.

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In the interest of simplifying the selected passage above, our first inclination might be to work hands separately. However, this technique may slow the learning process. Even if a student practices until the hands are perfectly performed separately, the experience of combining the hands will disrupt the coordination initially learned. Once hands are played together, the learning process must practically start over. Students often think of working hands separately as part of the equation: $A + B = C$, where A = practicing right hand, B = practicing left hand and C = playing hands together. In actual practice, our symmetrically balanced bodies learn somewhat differently. Imagine learning to ride a bicycle feet separately, or to use a closer analogy, learning to type hands separately. These ideas seem somewhat comical, but the overall concept of achieving balance and coordination between the two sides of our body is similar to what we experience at the piano. To some degree, the equation above might be rewritten this way: $A + B + C = C$. For that to be completely true, the value of A and B must equal zero, and I will not claim that working hands separately does not have a place in our list of useful practice techniques. It is invaluable in certain situations. Nevertheless, in the case of rote exercises during the lesson, working hands together will be the fastest route to achieving perfect coordination and a musical phrase.

Considering obstacles in coordination between the hands, we should develop exercises that combine various simplified passages, allowing hands to work together from the beginning. The following patterns are simplifications of the left hand from Example 2:

Example 3: Left-Hand Simplified Patterns for mm. 1–3

Pattern A



Pattern B



The rote exercises below represent a series of graded difficulties, each of which could be combined with left-hand pattern A or B. The goal is to facilitate stylistic performances from the beginning with exercises that may be introduced without the use of notation. The simplified left-hand patterns allow the student to concentrate on the articulation and shaping of the right-hand melody, while simultaneously experiencing the coordination between the hands. The detached eighth notes in pattern B continue only for the

first half of the measure. The student can then focus on the crucial detail, the first two-note slur in the right hand. The letters below the rote exercises, A–D, are spoken aloud to help shape the phrase. Each spoken letter should intensify to reach the peak of the phrase at letter D. A four-syllable spoken or sung phrase would also facilitate this shape (for example, “and-then-to-there.”) Additionally, the student should be guided to focus on the stylistic lightness and buoyancy of the melodic figure and the balance between the hands.

Example 4: Rote Exercises for mm. 1–3

Rote Exercise 1



Rote Exercise 2



Rote Exercise 3



Rote Exercise 4



Dividing the first 2 1/2 measures of this substantial sonatina into possibly eight steps might seem excessive. However, each exercise is simple enough to facilitate quick imitation by the student in a stylistically appropriate manner. This entire process consumes about three minutes of preventive teaching time in the initial lesson and will possibly save 10 times that amount of curative teaching time in subsequent lessons.

Rote exercises should usually introduce the most problematic sections of a sonatina movement. The exercises above that focus on the opening of the first phrase will be especial-

ly useful because of the substantial difficulties that passage presents: two-note slurs, syncopation (accents on beats two and four), and double sixths and thirds. Revisiting the score in Example 1, we see that the conclusion of that phrase is more easily accomplished and likely does not require specific preparation in the lesson. The second four-bar phrase contains two measures that do require attention, specifically measure 5 and measure 7 (see Example 5).

Example 5: Dussek, Sonatina in G Major, Op. 20, No. 1, m. 4–9.

In developing rote exercises for these two measures, and indeed any other sonatina excerpt, we can emulate the approach previously demonstrated. Simplification and working hands together as soon as possible are the most important concepts to consider. We must also ensure that difficulty and complexities are gradually added so each step in the process seems as easily played as the first. If properly prepared, the student will be able to play the full passage while retaining the sense of ease he or she experienced while playing the simplest version of these rote exercises.

Example 6 introduces a passage that is simplified in the rote exercises that follow. The left hand is simplified as repeating blocked or Alberti triads. In Rote Exercise 1, the simplified melody fits a G major 5-finger pattern (see Example 7). Left-hand pattern A and then B should be combined with each rote exercise.

Example 6: Dussek, Sonatina in G Major, Op. 20, No. 1, m. 7

Example 7: Rote Exercises for m. 7

Left Hand Pattern A

Left Hand Pattern B

Rote Exercise 1

Rote Exercise 2

Implementation

These activities may be incorporated into lessons in several ways. The simplest approach is imitation in a call-and-response fashion—the teacher demonstrates, then the student plays. Any level of detail in vocalized instructions could accompany demonstrations. You might choose to give detailed descriptions about what you will play (regarding hand position, articulation, phrase shaping and character) or contrastingly, simply play the passage and require the student to aurally perceive the passage and then imitate at the piano. This latter approach will lead to the most intense listening experiences and heighten the student's aural sensitivity.

Since the series of exercises above conclude with simplified versions of the original passages (see Examples 4 and 7), we must carefully consider the practice assignment with which the student will go home. If the student is at ease with the most complex of these simplified versions, we should take the next step by working with the full passage in the lesson. In that case the student is ready to practice the music as written at home. If he or she is still struggling with the complexities of the full passage, we should assign a simplified version for practice at home that will supplement, or even replace, the original passage.

To gain the maximum benefits from any preparatory exercises, we must also incorporate activities that cater to different learning styles. If the student is an aural learner, this type of rote learning will readily appeal to his or her

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primary learning modality. For the kinesthetically geared student, you might incorporate movement activities created from the rhythm and articulation of a passage. Articulations may easily be imitated through walking, toe-tapping or hand-clapping exercises. Visual learners may benefit from listening to the teacher perform an exercise (perhaps right hand alone) and then creating a sketch or map of what they have just heard.³ Below is a possible visual representation of Rote Exercise 1 from Example 4:

Figure 1: Sketch of Rote Exercise 1 from Example 4



With such busy lives, we might initially think we do not have the time to prepare for each individual piece in such a detailed manner. Consider though that after we prepare these exercises, we will have them to use the next time we teach the piece, and some experienced teachers will undoubtedly feel confident creating rote exercises directly from the full score during lessons. Existing materials also aid us in quickly identifying significant difficulties in repertoire and zeroing in on issues that should be prepared in the lesson. Teaching manuals like Jane Magrath's *Practice and*

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Performance guides⁴ (correlated with the *Masterwork Classics* series) and the teacher's handbook accompanying the *Celebration* series by Frederick Harris⁵ offer a wealth of specific advice on preparing students for standard classical repertoire. Student and teacher workbooks similar to Ingrid Clarfield and Suzanne Guy's *From Mystery to Mastery* series⁶ that includes series of guided exercises are also quite helpful in planning rote activities.

Rote teaching is an invaluable tool and worth our attention as teachers. While we cannot undervalue the benefits of fluent sight-reading skills, we must recognize the advantages of teaching to the ear. A common goal often outlined in philosophical teaching statements is to foster within students a lasting love of music and music making. That love sustains us as teachers and musicians, and we understand its importance for our students. When teaching sonatinas, rote exercises facilitate a heightened sense of aural awareness that leads to stylistically vibrant performances. In the process of developing this awareness and stylistic proficiency, we will achieve one of our primary teaching goals, fostering a lasting love of music and music making. ♪

Notes

1. Frances Clark, *Questions and Answers: Practical Advice for Piano Teachers* (The Instrumentalist Company, Northfield, IL, 1992.) 7.

2. Score excerpts are taken from the Schirmer edition (1894) available in the public domain. Measure numbers have been added for reference.

3. For more ideas on mapping techniques, see Rebecca Shockley's book, *Mapping Music: For Faster Learning and Secure Memory* (Middleton, Wisconsin: A–R Editions, 2001).

4. Jane Magrath, *Practice and Performance, Levels 1–2 through 6* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., 1988).

5. Cathy Albergo, Reid Alexander, and Marvin Blickenstaff, *Handbook for Teachers* (Ontario: Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, 2008).

6. Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield and Suzanne West Guy, *From Mystery to Mastery, Books 1–2* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., 2006).

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