

## **Music In Every Child: Strategies for Success**

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### **Webinar Questions with Answers:**

#### **Would you please give some examples of your assignment sheets?**

We have included several examples of recent assignment sheets at the bottom of our handout.

#### **What is the goodbye song? Teaching a group of 3-5 years old tomorrow and also 5-8 years old**

We believe that there are many versions of goodbye song. I sang mine at the end of the webinar, but I know there are many out there that are wonderful!

#### **I have a student who gets excited about a piece for 1-2 weeks but then wants to start the new one with the other unfinished. Any tips?**

We find that we have the most success with this if students are working at three different levels simultaneously. The easiest pieces would be at a level that they can read fluently. They move through these pieces quickly--hopefully every week or two. The next would be right at their level. This is a piece that they capable polishing within 3-4 weeks. And finally, a more challenging piece that they could polish in 4-8 weeks. If there is a consistent issue with a student polishing pieces, we might consider if the pieces are too hard or if the student does not have a concept of the finished piece in their head. Our students have a repertoire list of polished pieces. It can be motivating for students to add to this list pieces that are truly polished and "performance-ready."

#### **What was the name of the book you mentioned?**

"The Success Factor: Making Practice Perfect" by Elvina Truman Pearce, available on Amazon

#### **How would you apply the magic box idea to a talkative high school student with attention challenges?**

Many high school student enjoy imaginative scenarios and might think the box idea is fun. Otherwise, they could write down something that is important and share it that way. Or they might make a note to tell you about as you walk out of the lesson at the end. We have found, on occasion, that even adult students can become talkative when they have not prepared for the lesson, as a perhaps unconscious diversionary technique. As teachers, we can respond in this way: "That's SO interesting! Now let's get right to it! Lots to do today!" (Alternative phrase: "I can't wait to hear you play your piece, etc.)

#### **What do you do with students who will not read at all? They want to play by ear.**

Oftentimes, these students are looking at their fingers or not tracking in the music, so that is something to diagnose. These students often don't read that their playing level, so it may be necessary to separate the

repertoire from the reading. Teach some pieces by rote and others for sight-reading purposes. Really, the only way to improve sight-reading is to do a lot of it. We find duet playing to be very helpful for improving sight-reading. It is especially important that students who struggle with reading feel successful in other areas of their study and are affirmed for their strengths. Lots of composition, playing by ear, etc. will balance out the reading parts of the assignment.

### **Can you give more specifics on sight reading issues?**

Sight reading issues vary significantly between students. The problem may have to do with how the student is looking at things on the page, how it feels in the hand, or a whole host of issues. We try to break down steps (look only at landmarks, then working on intervals, then feeling intervals in the hand, etc). This can help in diagnosing the particular problem for a student. Sometimes the problem even stems from not being secure with key names, mixing up RH/LH, or confusing two keys on the piano.

### **What would you do with a student who clings to their parent?**

If the parent is comfortable and depending on the age of the student, we might encourage the parent to not sit in on the lesson, however, it can be helpful for the parent to accompany the student into the room to get settled. If the student is very young, clinginess may be a sign that they are not yet ready to begin lessons and should wait a year. If the teacher prefers to have the parent present, another idea would be to involve the parent in off bench activities such as marching, swinging, and singing. A child cannot sit on a parent's lap if they are standing.

### **Do you teach your students to play by ear?**

Yes, we do some ear songs with children both in private lessons and group classes. The type of activity depends on age. In addition to ear songs, we do ear training activities such as identifying intervals, clapbacks, and playbacks.

### **About how long does your lesson planning take? For a student you've had awhile.**

We use a rule of thumb that we expect lesson planning to take about 30 minutes per hour of teaching. We realize that there may be students and classes that require more than 30 minutes of planning, but others will require less. Sometimes the same student will require more or less planning depending on the week or the year. A six-week planning chart can ultimately be a big time-saver. If we find ourselves with a solid block of uninterrupted time to plan and focus, making six-week plans speed up the lesson planning process for the weekly lessons considerably.

### **Do you encourage your student to sing the melody in solfege?**

We encourage all of our students to SING. This may take different forms. Our young students may sing and enjoy the words to their songs, while older students may sing solfege, rhythms, or something else.

**I have a very pessimistic student who thinks I am "Too Nice". He moves along at an average speed, but has an older sister that moves along at a quicker pace. How do I encourage him and convince him I am genuine and that he is doing fine for his level?**

Maybe give him a taste of what he is asking for? Sometimes we have to be different people with different students. Some students need us to put on our “kid gloves” and delicately work our feedback. Others need for us to push them and demand more in a direct manner. Perhaps expect more of him, ask more directly, and see if he rises to the occasion?

**What would you do with a student that is really picky with picking new pieces?**

Rebecca: I always tell students that it is my job to give them a “balanced diet” of repertoire and if I didn’t do that, I wouldn’t be a good piano teacher to them! But I tell them that it is also important to me that they enjoy the pieces that they are playing. If I give them a piece of music that isn’t their favorite I probably have a very good reason for doing so. If I know a student doesn’t like a piece but there is something they need to learn from it, we move through it more quickly. For students who are pickier, I will play three pieces for them and have them choose their favorite.

Amy: In addition to Rebecca’s very solid advice, I’ll add that while finding pieces that the student connects with is so very important, there are times that a student may be “testing” us by indicating that none of the choices are appealing. In these cases, it might be worthwhile to try launching into a piece that suits the student with bold enthusiasm and gusto. “I can’t wait to teach you this piece!” “Ever since you started lessons, I’ve thought to myself: ‘I can’t wait until John gets to the level when he can play this... and you ARE at that level. This is a happy day!’”

**What would you do with college or adult students who consistently choose not to complete assignments in specific areas?**

We would have a discussion about why they are consistently leaving out part of the assignment. A tactful inquiry might be worded this way: “I notice that you’ve been running out of time to practice \_\_\_\_\_. I want to make sure your assignment is workable for your schedule. How can we structure your practice so that you are able to get to everything?” In many cases for this age of student, it may be worth reworking the assignment to make sure it is something they will be willing to practice. Sometimes paring down the assignment might be desirable.

**How do you avoid talking too much when you're introducing a theory concept to an older beginner student who is capable of grasping concepts quicker? I am much better at incorporating games with kids, but I don't want my teen student to feel like it's too childish.**

Theory may be an area where there does need to be some explanation. Asking the student what they know about a concept first may be helpful. Many times older students have already had some theory experience in their school music program. In addition, if it is possible to connect a piece they are currently studying with a music theory concept the lesson will take shape in a more engaging way. Students can also be lead to theory discoveries: “Do you notice how if you start on G and play all white keys, it sounds very similar to when you start on G and play all white keys? (Student plays). But if you start on D and play all white keys, the sound is different? Let’s explore this. If visual aids are helpful (i.e. little stones on the keyboard to indicate half steps, etc.) one can simply say: “This is the easiest way to explain so that you can see it easily.”

**When you have a plan and the student doesn't come prepared throws a wrench in the plans and one must regroup to plan - I tend to not plan very much ahead for this reason - what do you do?**

We have a plan but leave it flexible. We find that lessons go more smoothly with a plan and would rather have one and not use it, than not have a plan at all! When a student hasn't prepared, we can still use our plan for the following week.

**What do you do with a parent who won't leave a lesson and insists on interjecting comments/excuses/questions/explanations?**

"I think Mary is old enough that she should be taking ownership of her practice routines. The best way for us to begin this process is if you wait outside and check back in for the last ten minutes of the lesson. She is so responsible, I think this will be a great opportunity to take initiative!"

**I have a student who is VERY rigid. She has only taken about 8 lessons so far, but I've never had a student who was this "tight". I know there are exercises I can do with her, but when we get to the piano, that rigidity is still there. Any suggestions?**

We believe that stretches and breathing exercises can be very helpful. It can be fun to play the game: The teacher hangs her arm by her side, the student tries to move it or pick it up from the hand. It's very hard to do because the arm is so relaxed. Then reverse roles. On the other hand, the insidious problem is that sometimes by mentioning the need for relaxation, the student becomes more tense! Slow, patient attention is what is needed here. When the student learns to shape the sound through physical gestures, we have found that there is far less rigidity. Rote pieces are essential with this kind of student; they enable the student to be unencumbered by the notation and to focus on the technical approach.

**How do you address students who are under practiced?**

We consider why they have not practiced and use that. Very often we end up paring down the assignment and making sure we send the student home already successful with what is needed to practice. In addition, partnering with the student and parent to establish a practice routine is essential. It is important to address the problem early and be friendly, but persistent. Never give up!

**At what point do you have to "let go" of a student?**

Rebecca: I am always reluctant to "let go" of a student. I would certainly do it if the behavior caused a safety concern to either the student or myself, but otherwise I do try to work with the student until they decide the lessons are not the right fit for them.

Amy: I, too, am reluctant to "let go" of a student. Having said that, I believe that every teacher brings to their work a unique perspective, and what is intolerable for one teacher might not be so for another. I recognize that perhaps I have been fortunate that I have not found the need to consider dismissing a student and that there are other teachers who are facing very difficult teaching situations. I suppose that if there were a problem with an outrageously high level of disrespect from the parent, that might tip the scales for me.

**What did you mean "accurate first performance" as mentioned in the Mindset section?**

We want to set up the student for success by doing what we can to facilitate an accurate first performance, which means correct notes and rhythm. If the first performance is accurate, there is nothing to undo, and the student is essentially repeating "perfection" in home practice. Prevention is key - in other words, ideal practice does not consist of correcting errors, ideal practice is about preventing errors. An

established practice routine might include the following practice steps: 1) Rhythm (tap and count, clap and count, march and count, etc.). 2) Practice any moves silently on the tops of the keys. 3) (in some cases) point to each note and say the direction and interval. Obviously, a slow, thinking tempo is essential for accuracy.