

Information for parents on learning and practicing the piano

Lessons are not just about learning an instrument! Learning an instrument benefits memory, organisational skills, self-discipline, attentiveness, the ability to read others emotions and self-confidence to name but a few. My approach to teaching is to ensure that the student gets all of the educational, social, emotional and personal benefits of a quality music education. I encourage students to enjoy learning as much as possible. I explain the purpose of every exercise to them and want all of my students to have a desire to improve and become more skilled.

Parents are very welcome to attend weekly lessons with their young musicians.

Weekly lessons

What happens in a piano lesson? During weekly lessons the student learns about

- **Arms, hands and fingers:** It's important that these are as relaxed as possible while playing so as not to cause injury. We begin "five-finger exercises" on day one to start learning about the arm, hands and fingers' natural position and why it is important not to tense up while playing. This applies to shoulders too! "Dancing fingers" means tense fingers and these must be relaxed. We also learn that fingers must be curved and to press the keys with our fingertips so that later, when playing, fingers can tuck under and slip over each other with ease to reach other keys.
- **Reading musical notation:** From day one we learn to read musical notation – a whole new language! A music student must learn to read notation, translate it in the brain to an action and to carry out that action – no easy feat! From our first lesson we learn about musical notation and every week the student practices reading musical notation and playing short pieces of music on the piano. I place a strong emphasis on sight-reading – the ability to play through a piece of written music competently first time (the equivalent of reading these words aloud, without having to practice).
- **Musicality and articulation:** Playing music is not just about pressing certain keys in a certain order - during weekly lessons we learn that different ways of pressing the keys (and later including the pedals) produces different sounds: louder, softer, longer shorter and many more! We also learn, for example, about how pieces of music made up of sentences, just like a language, and how to make sure that the audience can hear them.
- **Composition** or "making up sounds" is one of the first things we do in our first lesson. Over time I set composition exercises with different rules to steadily introduce the student to composing and, eventually, different composing styles in the musical language.
- **Musical Theory:** Theory is the study of music notation as well as music as a language. Beginners study music theory within their lesson. Once they reach Grade 2 Theory or Primary Grade piano they join a theory class.

Practice:

Practice is essential when learning an instrument – just as it is when learning to read or to speak a new language. Students must practice several times a week – beginners should practice for 10-15 minutes three times per week. Parents of beginners will need to help out with practice at first. Weekly practice instructions are written in the student's practice journal. In my experience,

beginners delight in explaining their practice to their older siblings and parents (and this is a great way to be sure that they understand and have retained information)! My beginners are encouraged to take charge of their own practice from very early on, so after a few weeks the parent should only need to give reminders to practice!

Three is the magic number

A music student practices so that they can play a piece essentially from memory – looking at the musical notation as a cue but not actually reading it. Sight-reading utilises working (or short-term) memory, practice commits music to long-term memory.

Pieces of music from a beginners' book (*Tunes for Ten Fingers, Me and My Piano, Piano Time, Michael Aaron*) should be practiced three times in a row to commit it to memory. More difficult parts will be marked "special practice" – these small sections should be practiced three times by themselves before going on to practice larger sections/the whole piece. All of this will be clearly marked in the book or outlined in the practice journal.

See the "Practice Tips" section of my website if you would like to learn more about memory.

Weekly practice consists of:

- **Exercises**
 - Five-Finger and then Ladder exercises - to "take fingers to the gym",
 - *Dozen A Day* or *Let's Get Reading* exercises – for reading musical notation and playing short pieces of music,
- **Composing exercise,**
- **Pieces** from their book – two or three pieces we are currently working on. Some may take a few weeks so perfect, others just the one,
- **Theory** – theory homework may not be given every week.

Instruments

Piano students need to practice on a piano or electric piano. Touch sensitive keyboards are acceptable up to Grade 2. Non-touch sensitive keyboards are not ideal as they cannot produce changes in volume and articulation (short/long/detached/smooth). If you have any questions about buying a piano or electric keyboard I'd be happy to answer them.