

**Georgia Music Teachers Association  
Teacher of the Year, 2023  
Joe Chapman's Teaching Tips**

**Three R's**

“What do I need to do to get my student ready for college?”

Having taught piano at the University of North Georgia for forty years now, I have developed an appreciation for this earnest question arising from the heart of a dedicated studio teacher. And having been the recipient of a plethora of new students with wildly varying backgrounds over the years, I can truly say – as far as I am concerned – that there is no such thing as a “typical” entering freshman pianist. Occasionally I find a well-rounded student but more often than not, that eager face gracing my door is one-dimensional:

“The entire focus of my piano lessons was prepping for that next competition.”

“I don't read notes very well, but I'm perfectly happy if you put me in front of a chord chart.”

And more recently . . . “Hey dude, I'm just like totally into video-game music, you know.”

Whether the student is looking for a music career as a teacher or performer or whether the academic goal is elsewhere and music is intended only to provide an expressive outlet for lifelong enrichment, my Christmas wish as an instructor would be to find a stocking filled with a variety of small goodies, rather than one beautifully wrapped package, no matter how big it may be. With that in mind, here are my “teacher tips” for pre-college teachers of piano and - by extension - teachers of any medium. For rememberability, I borrow from the age-old academic principle of covering all of the Three R's of education.

**Reading** – Help me avoid that disheartening audition moment after listening to a well-played sonata, only to discover that my new student can't sightread his way out of a paper bag. Please, please, please teach your students to sightread. For best results, do not allow them to look at their hands while sightreading. Cover the keys with a foam board or poster paper lodged between the keyboard lid and the music rack. Give students lots of material to digest by having them read through an entire method book (a grade or two lower than the student's level) in one week. Tell them to play each song only once, no matter how good (or bad) it is and then turn the page and move on. Encourage them with whatever incentives you have available.

**wRiting** – In addition to encouraging students to try their hand at writing their own compositions, this category could include music theory training of any kind. Entering students in GMTA theory events, preparing scales, arpeggios and chord progressions (musicianship phases) for Guild, and including discussion of form and analysis in weekly lessons are all great ways to expand musical horizons. You would be surprised to learn how many college freshmen don't fully understand how musical expression is affected by things like non-chord tones, chromaticism, and cadences. Further, learning the art of improvisation can provide a great complement to theory and composition study. Encourage your students to go beyond the printed page – unless of course you're working on Mozart at the moment.

**Repertoire** – Yes, I am perfectly aware that ‘Rithmetic is the third R, and yes, I acknowledge that a certain amount of mathematical acuity is necessary for musicians to be able to negotiate rhythms and meter, but it seems more appropriate here to end with a discipline-specific finale. A richly-rounded repertoire consisting of a broad mix of popular music (perhaps including the aforementioned video-game soundtrack), church music, classical selections from different periods, and student compositions and improvisations provides a wonderful preparation for an aspiring collegiate musician in my opinion. Spreading the love around to a variety of genres probably means that the student arrives at my door having learned sonatinas rather than sonatas and mazurkas rather than a ballade, but I (for one) am never disappointed when I inherit a learner with a diverse background of intermediate literature experiences who is ripe and ready to roll.