

Naegeli von Bergen Metcalf

Teaching Tips

As I begin my 57th year of teaching piano I have many things to reflect on—one I certainly didn't expect and am thrilled by—Teacher of the Year! My remarks will seem rather homespun for such a prestigious title! I'll try real hard to be worthy!

I teach many different ages and levels of students. This is one of those years when I have many little ones. It is usually much more fun to teach the advanced ones, but it's a big challenge to get through to the younger ones, keep them happy, have them learn something, and pass on to them my great love for music.

I spend quite a bit of time during the first lesson acquainting the student with the keyboard. If a student can't find the notes on the keyboard, everything else will be difficult. After we have found all of the groups of two and three black notes and all of the note names, I ask them to close their eyes and find the groups of black notes. They always tell me they can't. I tell them that everyone says that and then show them how to feel for the groups. I have had only one student unable to complete the task. Others are excited they could do it! They get high praise for their efforts. They are also told that we must activate their "I CAN" button. This is in their right temple. A gentle little push turns it right on!

I also have a vinyl runner in the shape of a keyboard that I roll out on the floor and ask them to stand on middle C. We have talked about steps and skips and listened to them. I play middle C and ask them to stand on the note I play next. They all do it every time. I have some plastic castanets. I turn on the metronome and ask them to click the castanets every time the metronome clicks explaining that this is a quarter note. Then we talk about half notes and whole notes etc. I also ask them to say their pieces: quarter, quarter half note, half note dot and whole note three-four. After I had pulled one four-year-old out from under the piano for the fourth time, I looked real pathetic and told him I was having lots of trouble finding my fourth finger that day—could he PLEASE HELP me? He was right there. He then smiled at me and asked me if I was "fractious and grouchy" today! I had to look it up in the dictionary!

This same four-year-old was asked to get on his knees in front of the keyboard runner, put his left hand on middle C, his right hand on E, and his nose on D! He was laughing so hard he could hardly do it. He made it

and got two "high fives" for his efforts! I often ask this kind of a student to be the teacher for a few minutes. They get to sit in the teacher chair, hold my pointer stick and listen carefully. I of course mess up very badly. When I ask if I did it correctly they actually scream at me and tell me I was terrible. They are then told that if I am terrible they have to show me what to do to make it better. Some of them are very good and others don't have a clue. When I ask them if I become angry when they make mistakes, they usually answer: "It's too hard to be a teacher." Then they hand back the pointer stick and ask to trade places. I had three children in one family that came to their lessons with eyes red from weeping. When asked what was the matter, the answer was "Mother tortured me! She made me play it over 50 times!" When I responded, "Surely she told you how to play it to make it better," their answer was "No! I wanted to stop at 45, and she wouldn't let me!"

Most often I spend at least 25% of the lesson time showing students how to practice. Parents often ask how long their child should practice a day, and my answer is usually "until they are done!" I always go through everything new for the next lesson showing them how to practice and telling them what the rules are. "If you can come back next week with everything perfectly played the first time, notes, counting, fingering, and dynamics, then we get to cross it off and you don't have to do it any more." When we have finished going through it twice at the lesson I ask them to do it once more for insurance! Then I give them permission to go home and tell Mom that Mrs. Metcalf tortured them. And do they know why I asked them to do it so many times? "Yes, because you want me to get good!" I often ask older students to practice with their eyes closed. This makes for accurate aim and cuts out any outside distractions. I ask that groups of four 16th notes or groups of six notes be practiced in different rhythms. Students also need choices in literature. They practice better if they really like something and know they have chosen it for themselves. I have found that students respond better to images if they have experienced the feeling of the image or hand movement themselves.

I often ask them to put their hand on top of mine to feel hand position, shape wrist rotation, wrist relaxation, two and three note slurs. On one occasion, I had a second grade boy with dyslexia, trouble with note reading, and difficulty hanging four measures together. I sat on the bench with him, put my arms on either side of him, and asked him to put his hands on top of mine and told him we were going to play the piece together two times. I put in as much expression as I could and kept a perfectly steady tempo. He leaned back against me and got into the mood of the piece. When we finished I asked him to play it just like that by

himself, and he did! He was so excited and so was I! This child took dance lessons and was kinesthetically responsive. So knowing your student's interests and background can assist you. Very often now if I start to play something for a student, I will find two little hands on top of mine.

One of my students, a polished ballerina, was playing the Liszt Consolation in D Flat Major and when she started stumbling over some spots (i.e. twos against threes and threes against fours), I asked her how she would choreograph this spot. Her answer was "a pirouette." All of those places then sailed right off the keyboard for her. I often make reference to water slides to get smooth flowing descending scales. For two note slurs I ask them to bend their knees. For legato playing, I ask my "babies" to stand up and walk for me. "You always have one foot on the floor don't you? We can't have any hops or burps between notes." I also sing to them almost constantly, either with what they are playing or I ask them to find the note on the piano that I am humming.

Sometimes I have trouble getting students to count out loud. After one instance of terrible rhythm I was at my wits' end. I said, "What happens to you when your heart stops beating?" A frightened look appeared on his face and he said, "You die." My answer was, "Yes, and your piece just died. I could feel no pulse at all. Do you think if we called 911 and took it to the emergency room that there would be hope of saving it?" That's when counting began.

Beth Miller Harrod was my teacher from age 13 on. She had studied with Joseph Lhevinne. At the time he did not speak much English, but he did play for her to illustrate what he wanted her to do. I love Russian and romantic piano literature. Out of this came my desire for shape and direction of line. Each student who comes to me is told that they will hear the words SHAPE and DIRECTION many times. Everything we do comes from somewhere and goes somewhere. We all need to know where we are going and we all need to GET THERE! Along the way there are circles, hills and valleys known as nuances. There are also some words that get more emphasis than others when we speak. One summer at music camp Madame Rosina Lhevinne came to give us two lectures and to do a master class. The first lecture was entitled, THE HORIZONTAL APPROACH TO THE KEYBOARD. We all gleefully decided that this meant that we were to practice lying down on the piano bench! Let me tell you it doesn't work! But the bit about shape and direction certainly does.

Don't ever be afraid of trying new things. I love trying new music and new composers I've never heard of. You can count on your background in music and musical style to tell you what to do. I had fun this past year going

back in time using old favorites like Gillock, Glover, Jon George, and Roger Grove, and the kids really liked them. Some of the pieces are not so sophisticated but very tuneful. I also listen to lots of CD's. The students love listening too and really think they are big time if their composition has been recorded.

I also go to as many workshops as possible. There are still so many things to learn, and I still learn from my students every day. For example: Treble clef lines are now EMPTY GARBAGE BEFORE DAD FLIPS. Bass clef lines are GREAT BIG DOGS FIGHT ALLIGATORS. The first lesson after I have been to a workshop, my students get this frightened look on their faces and say, "Oh no! You've been to another workshop!" Even if I live to be 150 (which has been predicted) I'll never be finished learning! How boring life would be without music and wonderful people to share its wonders with.

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