



HOW TO PICK THE BEST TEACHER FOR YOU (or your child)!

When I was about 3 or 4 years old, my dad sat me down at our family upright piano and taught me the few chords that he knew. That sparked an interest in me because from the very beginning, I was able to view music in terms of chords and harmony. I played by ear until age 9, when my parents decided it was time for formal lessons. Luckily, the teacher they chose for me was not only a classical music player, but was a silent film accompanist and knew how to improvise. She insisted that I learn how to read music (and often I would ask her to play it for me, and she refused: something that modern teachers should also refuse to do).

Finally, by my teenage years my classical playing ability, sight reading ability, and improv skills were all equally developed. It has served me well in my profession - 45 years of making a living doing what I love - playing music to entertain people and sharing what I've learned with others.

This is why I believe that every professional piano instructor should know how to play classical music, and be able to play by ear and then pass these skills on to your students.

First, piano teachers in our country are not required to be licensed in any way. This means you may not know their qualifications unless you do some research and/or ask appropriate questions. **Beware of imposters!** A) Ask them for a resume. B) Inquire about where they got their training. C) Ask for a list of references. In other words, treat hiring a piano teacher just as you would when hiring anyone. Most anyone with basic skills can teach beginners, but you will soon discover that they are not qualified to teach at professional levels because they, themselves, would not be able to make a living playing music.

Second, in your quest to find a piano teacher, you might search online for methods to purchase. Perhaps that's why you are reading this right now. You will likely see ads for some new method that promises quick results with little work. These are like get-rich-quick schemes. They don't work. Learning piano takes proper instruction and years of practice and dedication. But I promise you it can be done. I am living proof. I will share with you the exact way I approach the instrument and what skills and knowledge you must have to be successful.

Below are questions you should ask yourself as well as the potential teacher:

1. Do you (or your child) want to study only classical music?

While studying classical is a necessary step in becoming a well-rounded musician, it should not be the only skill you study or develop. Many classical pianists play beautifully, as long as they are given sheet music and time to practice. But they cannot get a gig with a band or play jazz or any other style besides classical music. I know pianists who can play any style of music with just a lead sheet. But they don't do well when asked to accompany a classical vocalist or instrumentalist. It's important to be proficient at both, and it's vitally important to find a teacher who can also do both.

2. Is your teacher a working musician?

Many are not. We can compare the education experience at a 4-year university versus a 2-year junior college. University faculty typically have doctorate degrees in music and academically speaking, are experts in their field. But many have never played a gig. On the opposite side of the spectrum are adjunct faculty found at junior colleges. These are musically working professionals who teach on the side. They are often better qualified to teach real world skills. The same litmus test should be used to find a teacher.

3. What ages does the teacher specialize in?

Does he/she teach Certificate of Merit and give out stickers and stars? That's fine for young students who need lots of rewards and motivation. But that method will not prepare the young student for a career in music.

4. What style do you want to learn?

If you are an older student, do you want to learn jazz? Classical music? Rock 'n Roll? Find the teacher who actually plays these styles for a living. Now granted, performance skills do not equal teaching skills. But it's a great starting place.

5. Does your teacher have his/her own studio?

Independent teachers are typically better than those found in music stores. This is usually due to the amount of pay the teacher is receiving. No good teacher will work for \$30/hr. at a store when they could get \$75/hr. teaching privately.