

Sean Perlmutter

Piano Lesson Syllabus

So you've decided to sign up your child (or maybe yourself) for piano lessons? Welcome! I'd like to start by congratulating you on your decision to enrich your (or your child's) life through music. The following document has some information about playing/practicing/listening that will help you/your child get the most out of lessons. If your child is the one taking lessons, this document is mostly for you. That being said, go over it with your child anyway. A lot of it will probably go over their head, but it'll at least plant some seeds.

A Bit About Me

Hello! If you've made the decision to pay me to teach you or your child how to play music then you might be comforted to know a little bit about me and why I'm qualified to do this.

I graduated from Wayne State University with a Bachelor's of Music with a concentration in Jazz Studies. I've been playing professionally since age 16 and teaching professionally on a weekly basis since 18. In the intervening time, I've taught thousands of music lessons to students anywhere from 3 to 60-something years old. In my teaching, I emphasize the fundamentals: things that students can apply to anything they might want to work on. **I make sure students don't just learn the music, but truly understand it.** I see my role as a guide who can help the students realize their goals and develop their creative practice more effectively.

Curriculum

To be a great musician, all you have to do is find out what you like and learn how to play it. It sounds simple but you can devote your entire life to it and you'll still never be finished. This is a highly personal process and will differ for each person, but I find there are some basic things that will facilitate this process for everyone. Chief among them are **technique, rhythm, theory, ear training, and music literacy** (i.e. reading and writing musical notation).

Technique: How you sit at the piano, how you position your hands, how you move, etc. This is the “nuts and bolts” part of playing the instrument, breaking down the barriers between the mind and body; being able to execute your ideas. No matter what you want to play, you'll need to have some command of the instrument to bring it to life.

Rhythm: Music is a time-based art form and rhythm deals with dividing up time. We'll work on playing rhythms clearly and accurately in order to communicate the music more effectively. This includes coordinating our two hands to play in harmony with each other.

Theory: Music theory is about being able to understand and conceive of music and how it's constructed. Understanding how rhythms fit together, identifying patterns and having a framework for the overall structure of a piece of music are all things that will make the learning process much faster.

Ear Training: Ear training is the ability to hear something, understand it and (with enough technical skill) replicate it **without writing it down**. This is very helpful when copying things from recordings and learning to play them. Learning things by ear is the best way to *really* know and **retain** a musical

idea, adding it to your “vocabulary”. This is the same way that we learn new words and phrases; hearing others use them, copying them and adding it to our vocabulary. In lessons, I'll often play short musical phrases for students, have them play the phrases back and then change it in a way that makes it more personal to them.

Music Literacy: Learning things by ear is great, but it can be hard to learn and remember large amounts of music that way. That's where reading and writing come in. I want all my students to learn to read (and eventually write) music. This helps a lot with remembering what to practice and is a great avenue for learning theory as well.

Practice

As a teacher, my job is to guide the efforts of the student so they can be more effective but I can't do any of the work for them. **The student must do all the work.** Not most, not some, **100% of the work.** I can tell you what to practice, but I can't practice it for you. Lessons will be much more effective if you prepare in advance. Even if I didn't assign any specific practice material, still be sure to play your instrument every day. Your musical mind is like a muscle that needs to be exercised. If you didn't practice, that's OK, life gets in the way sometimes, still come to the lesson, there's always something we can work on.

Here are some practice tips/guidelines:

- **The most important part of practice is regularity.** Practicing every day prevents backsliding by making sure the material (or even just music generally) is fresh in your mind. I would rather have students practice 5 minutes a day every day than practice 1 hour a day once a week. Ideally you should shoot for daily practice of at least 15-20 minutes, but anything is better than nothing.
- **Only practice things that are hard for you.** The purpose of practice is to expand your abilities. If you only do things that come easily to you, you're not practicing. You're playing. There's nothing wrong with playing - it's a beautiful, joyful thing that you should absolutely do - but you won't expand your abilities much that way.
- **Don't always start at the beginning of a piece of music.** If you can already play the beginning well, that's great! Move on now. Work on things that you **can't** do.
- **You should sound bad when you're practicing.** That's how you know you're learning something new.
- **Don't practice until you get it right, practice until you can't get it wrong.** Repetition is key. Practice it until you could play it under any circumstances. Practice it until you could play it immediately after being woken up by a cold bucket of water at 4:00am.
- If you hear another idea or a new direction pop into your mind while practicing, don't be afraid to follow it, just remember where you started.
- Practice things slowly at first. Slower than you think you need to.
- Practice small chunks of music. Really isolate the things that need work.
- Practice with a metronome to work on your rhythm.
- **Every time something goes wrong, ask yourself how and why it went wrong.** The answers to those questions will direct your focus the next time you attempt it. I won't be there when you practice so you'll have to be your own teacher in this way.
- **Don't get bent out of shape if something doesn't seem immediately useful.** Things have a way of coming around again when you least expect them. Sometimes you might turn on a light

switch and think it's broken, but you just turned on a light in a different room.

- **If you're getting frustrated or stuck on an idea, take a short break.** It's amazing how helpful getting up and clearing your head can be.
- **Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!** If something is too difficult to grasp right away, try simplifying it to something more within your reach. For example, instead of playing something with both hands, work on one hand at a time before putting them together.

You will make **a lot** of mistakes while practicing and even in lessons. That's part of the process and there's no way to escape it. Here's some wisdom on mistakes:

“We ordinarily use mistakes to fuel self-denial, as a proof of our incompetence, but since mistakes are inevitable, try turning them instead to your best advantage. Embrace your mistakes; accept the self who makes them. This is the creative response, one that allows music to find its true shape inside you.

Mistake are your best friends. They bring a message. They tell you what to do next and light the way. They come about because you have not understood something, or have learned something incompletely. They tell you that you are moving too fast, or looking in the wrong direction.

Mistakes might be detailed instructions on how to take apart and rewire physical motions, muscle by muscle. Or they might show you where you have not heard clearly, where you have to open up the music and listen again in a new way. Examine a mistake as if you had found a rare stone... Peer inside the cracks of it. Hold it up to the sun, turning it a little this way and that. When you have learned what you can from it, toss it away casually, as if you didn't expect to see it again. If it shows up later, be patient and polite, and make a new accommodation. A mistake knows when it isn't needed, and eventually will leave for good.

The goal is not to make music free of mistakes. The goal is to be complete in learning, and to grow well.”

– W. A. Matthieu, *The Listening Book*

Listening

Listening is a crucial part of the music-making process. Learning to play music without listening would be like learning to speak a language without hearing anybody else do it. Surround yourself with music, think about why you like what you like. Use that information to seek out more music. Find out what the people who made your favorite music like to listen to and listen to that. Repeat the process.

Once again, here's some advice from W.A. Matthieu's *The Listening Book*:

“Here is a good practice for listening to recorded music. Get a clean copy of a short piece (three to six minutes) of instrumental music that you can listen to wholeheartedly – classical, jazz, country, rock, anything you love – and play it twice in a row every day for about five days. Don't do anything else when you listen to it: no read, no look, no sing, no think, no dance, no memory, no nuthin'. Get into a daily rhythm of pure clear-channel listening.

This sounds like a sales pitch, and it is. As a culture we have forgotten how to listen to music. Music has become ubiquitous and banal. I'm glad that music is everywhere. I'm not glad that the

purpose of its being everywhere is to sell you something, like records for instance, or more food at the store. In [other, non-western] cultures, music is everywhere because all the people make it. Singing, dancing, clapping, drumming, and playing instruments are ways of being together, or of being alone. But most of what we hear in our culture is recorded. Music has become a specialty given over to professionals. Even though it seems like music is close to us because it is everywhere, it is actually farther away.

So your personal discipline of listening to music is not only a step up for your own consciousness. It is another way of refusing to be an indiscriminating consumer. If you know what it is to really hear music, it will be that much tougher on the next guy who tries to sell you a microwave with a rude jingle. Being a conscious consumer of music elevates the quality of music everywhere.”

If you want some things to listen to, but don't know where to start (there is a *lot* of music out there) here's a smattering of albums I enjoy. It's mostly jazz, and mostly reflective of my personal tastes. You don't have to like any of them, but it could be a good starting point for you.

- Ahmad Jamal – Live at the Pershing
- Paul Bley – Open, To Love
- Wynton Kelly – Kelly at Midnight
- Herbie Hancock – Thrust
- Thelonious Monk – Monk's Dream
- Nat “King” Cole Trio – The Complete Capitol Sessions
- Erroll Garner – Concert by the Sea
- Brad Mehldau – Art of the Trio Vol. 4

I encourage students to constantly search for new music and do their own investigations beyond what I have here. Students should use things they hear in the music as inspiration for developing their own playing. I'm always most excited when a student comes to me with something they discovered on a recording or in their playing and would like to investigate further.

Final Notes

- The student is responsible for doing **all of the work**. I can't practice for you.
- Students are **highly encouraged** to do their own investigation and develop their own opinions outside of what we do in lessons. Those investigations and opinions can be incorporated back into the lessons for a more meaningful experience.
- **Repetition** is key to practicing.
- **We won't get to everything you want to do right away**. Sometimes there are certain prerequisites we need to figure out before you learn something highly complex.

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out.

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