

## **CHAPTER ONE**

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### *Choose the Teacher and Lessons which are Right for You*

The piano is the most popular instrument in the world. More people take piano lessons than any other type of instrument training. Because of this, our society has evolved a sort of mythology regarding piano lessons, piano students, and piano teachers, made up in equal parts of things we hear from friends and relatives and what we read in books or see in movies and on TV. It probably won't surprise you that much of this mythology is exactly that – myth. New piano students are constantly surprised (and delighted) when they experience the realities of piano training.

In this initial chapter, I want to share with you the realities I've experienced during the last 32 years as a musician and 13 years as a full-time piano teacher, teaching 30-50 lessons per week. Here are my observations of how things really work in the real world with ordinary people who want to play the piano. I have no interest in academic theories, only with what works to make the dreams of my students become reality. I think you will find the truth encouraging and refreshing.

*Essays in this chapter:*

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- How to Succeed at the Piano
- How Much Practice is Enough
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- How to Enjoy Piano Lessons
- Keyboards vs. Pianos

#### **Do You Really Need a Piano Teacher to Learn to Play?**

Need? No. You could learn it all on your own.

And you could also design and build your next automobile in your basement.

You could, really! There are people who do and they derive great pleasure from their work.

However, it might just be more enjoyable to allow someone to guide you, motivate you through the inevitable rough spots, catch your mistakes before they become bad habits, and generally save you a huge amount of time and frustration.

Now, you've probably heard of or maybe even met pianists who play without ever having had a lesson. What they could do impressed you and made you think, "Hey, if THEY could do it, I can do it." I've heard such stories for years of magical people who supposedly could "play anything after hearing it once." Or, "my brother's cousin's sister plays beautifully and never had a lesson in her life."

Such stories always turn out to be a bit different once a trained musician examines them. First off, no one in the history of the world has ever, ever been able to play ANYTHING simply from having heard it once. Not Mozart, not idiot savants, no one. Such claims come from being uninformed on the actual reality of mastering the piano. Yes, prodigies learn at a remarkable pace at a remarkably early age but they, too, reach a level of difficulty where serious effort must be expended to continue. There's no "free lunch." And besides, are you Mozart? I sure ain't!

Actually, most of the self-trained pianists I've met during thirty years in the business can play only certain pieces well, pieces they took forever to learn and which they play over and over as the years roll by. Present them with a new task and you get to see the struggle they really have. This is not to belittle their efforts and successes, but to clear away the hype non-musicians build up around anyone who is self-taught so you can make a good decision about taking lessons.

The truth is that for the vast majority of people, finding and working with a piano teacher is the best thing to do. It's faster, it's more fun, it's less frustrating, and above all, considering the difficulty of the task and the confusion of daily life, it represents your best chance to succeed at your musical goals.

## **How to Choose a Piano Teacher**

Work backwards.

Start by visualizing the result you want.

Can you see yourself playing the piano? How well? What music are you playing? For whom? And how often?

Think this over carefully, until you have as clear an idea as possible. Now go find a teacher who:

- a. truly cares about YOU accomplishing YOUR goals, and
- b. has the experience, knowledge, and patience to help.

*Some critical things to do:*

1. Call around. Don't ask for prices first. Instead, say something like, "I'm an adult beginner and want to take lessons. What can you tell me?" The first thing the teacher should then ask is, "What do you want to accomplish?" People are not clones, and are not looking for exactly the same results. Some, most folks want to play simply for their own enjoyment. Other students have particular styles of music they would like to play, or even particular pieces of music. Private lessons are NOT like school, where everyone is cookie-cuttered through the assembly line. In private lessons, you pay someone to help you with the goals YOU set, goals they need to know about from the very start. Everything should be tailored to your desires. Any teacher who fails to inquire about these desires should be crossed off the list. Add to that any teacher who is curt, rude, or sounds pompous or overly serious.
2. Ask for an interview. Would you buy a car you've never seen? Would you attend a college you've never visited? Any teacher unwilling to grant an interview is a waste of time and money. Plus, a teacher is going to want to evaluate you as a prospective student and decide whether they are willing and able to help you.
3. Don't take the cheapest lessons. See the essay "How to Evaluate Lesson Fees" for the reasons why.
4. Music enriches lives. It's fun, even though you will have to work hard to get good. Any teacher who is "not fun" should be crossed off your list. There's a reason we call it "playing" the piano. Let's keep "play" part of our musical life!

5. Does the teacher teach because they love teaching? Anyone teaching "for a little money on the side" or "until something better comes along" will not ensure your success. Plus, it happens all too often that such teachers just quit teaching, move, get married, or start failing to show up for your lessons.
6. Studio policies should be written down, understandable, and acceptable to you. Be sure you follow them if you agree to them in the first place.
7. The teacher may or may not have a degree. This "credentials" business has been promoted by degreed teachers as a key qualification, often the main qualification. It's not very hard to figure out why, is it? The only credential that has any meaning is this one: will the teacher succeed in helping me get what I want out of music? A degree says nothing about this at all. Review the points I have already made. Ask the teacher if you can talk to any students and do so. Make a decision based on your ability to evaluate the results of your investigation. Think for yourself.
8. Both the teacher and you the student are "on probation" for a few weeks. Even though everything may seem okay, you both need proof that the other person will hold up their end of the bargain. The teacher may not be as patient as they let on. The student may somehow never get around to practicing. Thus, don't sign a long term contract. Do it for at least a couple months and then decide to stay or go. After all, you will be working together for at least a year and maybe several.

### **Adult Students: It's Not Too Late!**

Many adults would like to play the piano. I am thankful for this fact every time I go to the bank, for most of my income comes from adult students! These are folks who ignored the "conventional wisdom" that says you must start piano as a child if you want to succeed. They are adults who are successful enough at their piano training that they pay me good money, week after week. This leads one to wonder how much truth there is in the "conventional wisdom" and how it originated.

The origins of this "earlier is better" concept are obvious. I am convinced that a survey of concert pianists would reveal that 100% began their studies at very young ages. The complexity and difficulty of performing the world's most advanced piano music allows nothing less than a life lived for the piano right from the start.

More recently, findings in brain research point to a window of opportunity in preschool children when music is most easily learned. Lending credence to this is the Japanese Suzuki Method of violin instruction in which 3 years olds play cut-down violins at an astonishing level of skill. Piano companies have been very diligent in promoting these findings for reasons that should be obvious.

Thus, history and modern research come together and create in the mind of the average person that it is necessary to start piano at a very early age... AND that those who miss their chance are unlikely to be successful at later ages.

Luckily, this is not the case. Adults can, and should, take up the piano. Plus, there is such a thing as beginning piano too young. Let me explain.

The first thing to consider is that the vast majority of the humans who take piano are NOT prodigies, nor will they become professional pianists, let alone concert pianists. Thus, observations made and conclusions reached concerning the extremely small group who do follow "The Life of the Piano" have little bearing for the rest of us.

Secondly, research into early life music learning and appreciation is NOT research into how well various age groups do in learning the piano. Despite the impression the piano manufacturers give, studies about music learning and appreciation are NOT studies about success at learning to play a particular instrument. It's hardly scientific to state that they are. It is, however, good for business!

I have conducted my own study over the course of 18 years of teaching piano. Included in this study are approximately 1000 children, the youngest 5, plus an equal number of adults, the oldest 83. Although a scientist would

want to design the study a bit more strictly by teaching every student exactly the same materials, I doubt that their results would differ hugely from mine.

My study tells me that most children learn piano much more slowly than most adults. It also tells me that the older child generally learns faster than the younger child. Why? Well, stop and think about it for a moment. Think about a child's mind and body, especially that of a very young child. What is their attention span? What is their familiarity with the learning process? How big are their hands? How well do their eyes track over a line of printed symbols? How easily discouraged are they? How well do they conceptualize? How much music have they been exposed to? How well can they control their bodies?

Now there are, indeed, "gifted children" who pick things up rapidly. The gifts they have often consist of a better emotional state, better control of their bodies, and higher intelligence that allows them to apply themselves more successfully to whatever they do, not just the piano. They may also come from a musical home where exposure to music and its delights is part of life. And there is most definitely a "musical intelligence" in each person which helps determine success and learning rate. These things are a real recipe for success in piano.

The average child, however, will always lag behind the average adult. Adults bring many skills to the table, mental, emotional, and physical, not the least of which is the knowledge that perseverance will be rewarded. This is a piece of knowledge no 6 year old has lived long enough to gain.

What, then, are the special problems faced by adults, if any?

The main problem, that problem most likely to defeat an adult, is nothing more than TIME. Time to practice each day, despite a 1000 other things to do, time to continue lessons long enough to get somewhere. If that problem is solved, the vast majority of adults will succeed in learning to play.

I do occasionally encounter adults who retain some childish character traits and these do not help. Also, age sometimes brings arthritis and difficulty hearing. These can be so bad that playing is just not possible.

Also, adults must be willing to re-experience having parts of their body not follow their orders. Playing piano requires some very complex motions, many of which are made with fingers not normally used for anything complex. The wrist, elbows, arms, and actually the entire body must be carefully trained. Adults are sometimes dismayed to find their bodies disobeying and being clumsy, something children live with each day. Adults must be tolerant of this factor and all will work out.

So take heart you adult piano students! You should do fine if you will only make the time in your life for piano.

### **How to Evaluate Lesson Fees**

The best way to make sure you get your money's worth when purchasing piano lessons is to understand the exchange being made:

YOU...

pay the teacher money and then spend a large amount of time and energy in daily practice.

THE TEACHER...

provides the necessary information and then guides your expenditure of time and energy so that it produces the skills you desire.

The majority of the learning occurs during your personal, private practice. The teacher can teach you how to read the music, but then YOU must practice reading music. The teacher can teach you how to practice correctly and successfully, but then YOU must actually do the practicing. The teacher can tell you what music to learn and in what order, but then YOU must do the learning.

Notice how much of the job is yours. No teacher can hold a gun to your head and force you to do your part. This is the "discipline" so often spoken of regarding piano lessons.

Thus the first thing to realize is that the more you follow the instructions, the harder and smarter you work, the shorter the amount of time needed to succeed – and the less money you will pay in the long run to get the skills you desire. Assuming reasonably good teaching, YOU have the ability to save yourself lots of time and money.

The next thing to consider is the idea of "getting the skills you desire." Piano is a complicated subject and not all its parts apply to any one person. The individual playing for their own enjoyment does not need all the skills the concert pianist must master. The classical music student doesn't need to know about the blues. Playing Christmas carols does not require a jazz technique. So money spent on acquiring skills which do not relate to your personal goals is money wasted. An ethical teacher will first determine what you, the customer, want from piano study and then create a program to guide you in that direction, including everything you need and nothing you don't. Of course there are basic skills all pianists must master, but there is also a very long list of specialized activities which must be personalized.

Additionally, judging value on a "per lesson" basis is deceptive. When the final total is computed, you will have spent a certain amount of money and achieved a certain amount of skill over a certain amount of time. Adult programs usually run about 2 to 3 years, at the end of which the person plays to their own satisfaction. I recall a man in his 5th year of lessons with a little old lady teacher who knitted while he played the same piece over and over and over... I discovered he lacked basic skills my students get in their first three months. That little old lady cost quite a bit less per lesson than I do. But who got the better value?

Maybe the most important point is this: the real purpose behind your desire to play is the knowledge that your life will be better and happier when you can play the piano. Happiness, through music, is the real goal. Thus, the tone and attitude of the lessons are very important. Unfortunately, some teachers are "user-friendly" and some aren't. "User-friendly" means being patient, polite, and positive so the student can find happiness in music study. Arrogance, unreal expectations, frowns, scowls, and negativity certainly make student happiness difficult and thus are not worth anything at all. Such a teacher is worthless to the person hoping to enjoy the presence of music in their lives. Personally, I want to enjoy my teaching experience and this is only possible when students are smiling and winning – and that means they are achieving their musical goals. I insist they do succeed, but I insist with a smile, gobs of patience, and good feelings all around.

These ideas should guide you as you interview teachers. Request a visit to their studios and a half-hour of their time. They should offer you ample opportunity to see how your money will be spent. They should be pleasant. And they should be professional – that is, someone who teaches for a living, not as a way "to make a little money on the side." A professional teacher is not necessarily the one with lots of degrees either. Instead, they are someone who teaches for the pleasure of helping people enjoy music and has both personal and financial reasons to make sure they are successful.

### **Real Time to Mastery**

The other day one of my best students made me think hard. He told me, "Dan, I love your essays but there's one point on which I completely disagree with you. You say that adults need 1 to 3 years to fulfill their goals. After one year of lessons I realize that I know nothing!"

Well, he had me. Although he is a fine player already, he is correct in stating that there is more road ahead than he has traveled – by far! For that matter, there is a whole continent of highway in front of ME, his teacher! And I think any honest pianist, at any level, would say the same. You are always aware of your own shortcomings, no matter how good you are. The mind can always conceive more than the hands can achieve.

I had to examine this time matter. Should I change the figures I usually give out? And where had my estimates come from in the first place?

The figures of 1 to 3 years are the result of my experience in the length of time most adults actually take lessons. "Most" means 90%. This figure begs for the question, "why do most adults quit lessons?" The answers fall into just a few categories:

1. Financial problems,
2. Work problems,
3. Family problems,
4. Health problems, or
5. They got what they came for.

1-4 amount to 90% of the adults who only take 1-3 years. Yep, that's right; only 1 out of 10 adult students go the distance and become the players they want to be.

This used to worry me. Then I wised up. Exactly what can I do to solve the person's problems with their boss, their kids, or their checkbook? Sure, I can make the lessons interesting and fun and successful, but in the final analysis, piano lessons are a luxury item and the rest of life largely is not. When money is tight, food counts for more than music.

My handling of these unfortunate facts is to make the lessons focus tightly on exactly what helps the student enjoy music. I stress fundamentals such as reading and knowing how to practice correctly because these skills will allow the student to go on learning without a teacher. I figure I don't have a long time to help the person so I had better get as much done in as short a time as possible.

You might think that a certain number of failed students just have no talent. That number, the number of adults so "non-musical" that they can't learn the most basic piano pieces is extremely tiny. I can recall no more than five out of 2000. Chances are that you personally are NOT number six!

Now let's return to my original estimate. Yes, 2-3 years of lessons is both true and false. It's true, in that the few who get through the 2-3 years generally have met enough of their goals to let the lessons go. And their playing is good enough for non-pianists to hear them and marvel!

But mastery? No, not a chance. Any dreams of achieving real ability on the piano are the dreams of 5-10 years of solid effort. I hope my very talented student, the one who brought this point up, will give me at least 4 years of his time. In that period I can teach him to become his own teacher and turn him loose, knowing that he WILL continue the learning process and could even go professional if he wished.

How long should you take lessons, then? As long as it improves your life to do so, taking into account your family, friends, finances, and enjoyment of the lessons.

### **How to Succeed at the Piano**

It is easy to state the main ingredients to success at the piano:

- Intention,
- Intention,
- Intention,
- ...and Practice!

So what is "intention"? It is your drive, your strength of purpose, your inner desire to become a pianist. Why is intention so important? Intention is like the gas in your car: no gas = no go, poor gas = poor performance.

You can be sure that you'll face barriers: not enough time, the needs of family and friends, the stress of work, and the demands of just keeping everything going. Add to this the frustration experienced while learning any new skill and you have a situation which only a strong, unrelenting intention will see you through.

Modern life is complex for adults and priorities must be set. It is not true, however, that a student is a victim of time and circumstance. A student will MAKE time and ALTER circumstance if their intention is strong enough.

Thus, we see that your intention is the most precious resource you have. It must be guarded at all costs and increased in every way possible. The instructor can provide the materials and training, but YOU must handle the day-to-day threats. You must set aside enough practice time despite everything. Examine your intention carefully. Is it strong enough to do this? Is the reward of being a pianist enough? Your answer will determine the result of your lessons.

### **How Much Practice is Enough?**

There are two things at work in piano study:

1. That mix of physical and mental skills we call "talent," and
2. Plain old effort.

Simply put, the more talent, the less effort needed (except that the truly talented often work like dogs anyway because they get such good results from that work!), and the less talent, the more effort needed (except that, unless there is lots and lots of correct practice, not much happens and the person does less and less work anyway and fails miserably.)

My years dealing with ordinary people (including myself, certainly NOT a prodigy) shows me that 20-30 minutes of correct practice, 4-5 days per week, is the minimum that will produce satisfactory results. I hate to say it, but if that is just not possible, don't bother getting started, unless you want to take lessons for MANY years rather than 2-3, the norm to produce reasonable skill for adults.

### **Skills Every Pianist Must Have**

Surprise! There are only two skills every pianist must have:

1. Fingers and the ability to press down the piano keys, and
2. The sense of hearing.

It's true! These are the only universal needs, and I could make a convincing debate that someone, sometime in history has played with their toes or after having become deaf.

However, I need to expand on this before all my students quit! Individual pianists need many, many other skills, but not necessarily the same ones. It all depends on what you wish to accomplish musically.

You could compare creating your own personal skill list to designing and building your dream house. First you get a general concept of the size, shape, and design of this house. Next is consultation with experts to determine the house's exact plan. Then there is the creation of a schedule of actions. If the plan is realistic and well drawn, if the actions are properly scheduled and then competently executed, you will have your dream house. That house will have been built with the exact materials needed and the exact actions required to put these materials together. You certainly don't want your builder using excess materials or wrong materials or performing unnecessary actions and charging you for them!

We begin music lessons with an interview. I question the prospective student regarding their musical interests and background. I find out what music they wish to play and what level of professionalism is desired. From this, I organize materials along an educational curve of increasing difficulty. The lesson plan must contain all the information and training needed to build each student's musical "dream house." If I do my job of creating the path and the program and if the student follows these despite all distractions, then that student will be playing what he wants with the proficiency he wants to play it.

In short, your needs are determined by your goals. There are no lists of "thou must study" that are valid for every music student, although quite a number of my fellow teachers keep trying to create them. You can dip into the well of music as deeply or as shallowly as you desire. It is my job to help you achieve YOUR goals in music, not to set them for you, or to try to convince you to change them. That is why you pay me and it is a perfectly honest and fair exchange for both of us.

Do not listen to experts who have their own agendas and ego trips. You are welcome to do whatever you please with music. You will simply have to master the skills that relate to your own goals. Other skills are simply irrelevant, a waste of time and money and energy.

Go for your goals.

### **How to Enjoy Piano Lessons**

There is only one purpose for taking piano lessons and that is to improve the quality of your life by making music a part of it. The details of exactly how this happens may differ. A very few students feel called to become professional musicians. Another few would like to exercise their creativity and write music. Most folks, however, are tremendously happy if they can learn to adequately perform the songs they know and love for themselves, family, and friends. This is certainly a worthy goal – there should be more such live music in this world.

It is extremely important to your enjoyment of piano lessons that you keep your goal in mind.

Your purpose is NOT, repeat NOT, to play without error. Few and far between are perfect, error-free performances. Ask any honest professional musician how many times they have played with complete perfection!

Your purpose is to enjoy the presence of music in your life. Lessons simply help you do this.

*If you become fixated on such things as:*

- how rapidly you are progressing,
- how many notes you are missing, or
- whether you are progressing "normally,"

...you have lost sight of your overall purpose and set the stage for frustration and failure.

A fixation on mistakes has the effect of increasing the quantity of mistakes. Worry over errors breeds more errors, which increases worry which... well, you get the idea!

Learning, teachers, instruction, lessons, students, assignments – these things seem to be matters of stress to 99.99% of the people I have taught. I believe this says something extremely negative about the way our society has approached education. That may be true but try to rise above it by keeping your overall purpose in mind as you progress, day by day, week by week, month by month.

Incidentally, progress in a single practice session can be measured by the question, "Am I playing this better now than when I played it yesterday?" If the answer is, "Yes!" you have progressed, even if only a little. It is truly surprising how rapidly a series of little improvements can add up to major ability!

Create music as you would put together a jigsaw puzzle – find a little burst of pleasure with each new piece you discover. Enjoy yourself!

### **Keyboards vs. Pianos**

It's a funny thing. If you were thinking of learning a band or orchestra instrument you would know what your choices are – trumpet, tuba, flute, violin, cello, etc, whichever instrument you thought you would enjoy. Once you made your choice you would know exactly what instrument to acquire in order to learn and practice.

Not so with the piano, however. There are lots of instruments with keys. There are regular pianos, uprights and grands, portable keyboards, things called synthesizers, workstations, and digital pianos. Each is different in cost, controls, what it will and won't do, and, most importantly, whether or not it is right for you.

Your choice is made additionally complex by needing to factor in things like budget, type of music you'd like to play, space available, and whether the instrument looks good as a piece of furniture. It's a complex choice, and not one that can be made for you by salespeople. Your best bet is to talk with someone who can sort through your options based on your needs and wants – someone who doesn't have a preset prejudice in favor of one choice or another.

Unfortunately for the music world, too many music teachers DO have such a prejudice and will steer you toward THEIR choice of instrument regardless of your needs. They will use their “experience” and “superior knowledge” to push their personal agenda and you, recognizing your own lack of knowledge, may well just buy into it. Don't.

YOU will be the one purchasing the instrument and then spending the minutes of your life learning to play the thing. You have every right to spend that money and time as you see fit. As a comparison, if you needed a van for your big family, you wouldn't let some car salesman convince you to purchase a sports car. So don't let some stuck-up music teacher convince you that you must own a grand piano when what would really work for you right now is a portable keyboard.

Do your homework. Learn all your options.

Make your choice based on your needs, not someone else's fixed attitude.