

INTRODUCTION

Why I Wrote this Book and How to Use It

This book consists of essays I've written for my piano students over the course of several years. All the essays have been rewritten for this publication. Additionally, many completely new essays appear here for the first time. Each essay deals with an aspect of piano study encountered by the ordinary piano student. Thus, the focus is definitely on the basics. I suspect the advanced player would find the material quite mundane. There exists a wealth of good books for the professional classical pianist but almost nothing for the rest of us who also love the piano but who only want to play at a modest level.

This book, then, is for the bulk of piano students, young and old. It is for anyone who wants to "play for their own enjoyment." Adults and teenagers will be able to understand any of the essays since they were all written with beginners in mind. Parents of younger pianists can and should read the book as a way assisting their children.

Because the essays were written one at a time, often months apart, they reflect different moods and different writing styles. Some essays are rather formal but many are... well, you'll see! Let's say I often write the way I teach. You will also find that I say the same things many, many times — just as I do with students. Fundamentals are seldom fully understood with a single exposure. Repetition is part of education in any subject.

Do I cover everything concerning the piano, lessons, performance? Is this material "the last word" on these subjects? Of course not! I fully expect to revise, update, and add to this book on a regular basis. The edition you hold in your hands contains, however, the best of my current skill and understanding, with ideas and techniques I know will help you.

You can read this book in a normal, page-by-page, fashion, but I think you'd probably enjoy first browsing the essay titles, reading those that most catch your interest. Do make sure you read the entire book eventually. I haven't wasted your time with anything of little importance.

Regarding my "lighthearted" style of writing, I strongly suggest you adopt such a style regarding piano study as a whole. Not to say that the piano isn't a "serious instrument." It is, and will require a long-term effort to master. However, we generally speak of "playing" the piano, not "working" the piano or "having-a-grim-faced-this-is-going-to-be-painful-but-I'm-an-adult-and-I-can-take-it" the piano. Lighten up and you'll do much, much better.

You'll probably find yourself agreeing with some of my ideas and disagreeing with others. I am fully aware that I am a bit of a maverick. My priorities seem to be different than many of my colleagues. Alas, I cannot list my degrees in this introduction because I have none. I never saw the need for any. Like the majority of great composers, I am privately taught. Not to compare my talent with theirs, but I certainly come from an outstanding tradition! Also, I believe a lack of formal indoctrination helps me to be a bit freer in my approach. I am more concerned with what works and the student's enjoyment of music, rather than enforcing my taste in music or winning competitions.

What I AM deeply concerned with is the scarcity of pianists. Think for a moment about your circle of friends. How many of them play the piano? How many would like to? How many had lessons as children but no longer play, even if they own a piano? Ask these questions around a bit and I think you'll see that there is a problem: too many music consumers and not enough music producers.

I see two reasons for this, the first being the introduction of consumer electronics, beginning with Edison's original phonograph, proceeding up through radio, to TV, to tape and CD players, and now the Internet. It's become ever easier to be a part of the audience. In fact, we are awash in music, so much music that we often do not even hear it.

The second, and uglier, reason is that music teachers themselves have come close to killing music study.

Now that's quite an accusation. Years ago, having had an excellent teacher, I wouldn't have believed that accusation for a minute. Then I became a teacher myself, and students begin to tell me about their previous teachers. They described quite a "rogue's gallery." First, there were the nuns who beat children with rulers. Then, there were old ladies who forced people to play the same miserable tunes for months on end. Then, grumpy professional musicians who insulted and yelled at their students, people with no patience at all, whose foremost desire seemed to be making music study as stressful and unpleasant as possible. I've grown sick of the hundreds of such tales I've heard over the years. These abuses continue in present time. Don't believe me? Ask ten people who have taken piano lessons. Have them describe their experience. Do they still play? I rest my case.

Now, of course, no stereotype is 100% valid. For every ruler-wielding nun nut case there is probably a wonderful Mr. Holland type who inspires and encourages and creates real musicians whose lives are permanently enriched by music-making. But stereotypes often rest on facts, unfortunately. It's a reality I deal with daily as I teach students whose previous "teachers" made piano lessons a thing of worry, stress, and fear, emotions which we must now try to change in order to succeed.

Most people would be thrilled to be able to play Christmas Carols, some light classical, and a popular melody from Broadway. Some piano teachers say, "Wonderful, let's begin!" and get on with helping that human being enrich their life with music. These teachers work patiently and diligently and with the cooperation of the student, help bring a new pianist into this world.

Unfortunately, too many piano teachers take their professional level of musical comprehension and a superior attitude and try to mold the student to their purposes and tastes. "The ignorant masses must be shown a higher truth." And having this sort of an attitude makes it okay to be impatient, verbally abusive, and sometimes even strike the student.

Why? Maybe such teachers can't admit the truth that, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Their taste in music (almost always the classics, what is called "the standard literature") should be everyone's taste, their opinion on what makes great music should be everyone's opinion. Possibly, they just don't like people all that much, certainly not enough to treat their own students with the respect they deserve. Or maybe their lessons aren't very effective because they want to keep the students coming back and paying for more lessons. Or...well, who knows?

Enough ranting. Perhaps this book will help more people enjoy the piano, despite their responsibilities, hectic schedules, and the deficiencies of some of their teachers. There has never been a shortage of interested students, just piano lessons which make it easier for people to simply press the "play button" on a CD player. Let's see what we can do to change that. Let's make some musicians around here!

—Dan Starr, February, 2001

About the Revision of September 2006

I have extensively revised, edited, and added much new material to this online edition of my 2001 book. Additionally, I have made good on my promise from the earlier edition to refine and improve on the methods I recommended. Frankly, it has been quite a validation of my earlier ideas to undertake revising them. After five years and some 500 more students, I'm pleased to find that my original ideas were correct. What you find in this revision are better ways of explaining these ideas, plus new understandings I've reached in their application.

In reading over my original introduction, I find that I'd like to say a word about the "anti-piano- teacher teachers" who have been cropping up lately. These are the folks that promise the sun, moon, and stars (in the piano sense) with almost no investment in time and effort. This is wonderfully illustrated by this exact quote from one of their promotional flyers, "...Learn all the chords needed to play any pop song in this one session, any song, any style, any key." Anyone over the age of 11 should be able to figure out that this is essentially impossible. But hope springs eternal within the human breast and people keep looking for something for nothing so these guys flourish. Plus, there's enough truth to their claim that traditional lessons are not very effective to lend their alternative some credibility. But, c'mon - one session consisting of one workshop? How believable is that?

Sorry, friends, but reasonable effort over a reasonable period of time is needed. There are no "Instant Piano Secrets Used by Professional Pianists" which will give you instant ability. I'm a professional, almost certainly as good as these "teachers," and I can tell you such things don't exist. That's because there is no substitute for correct and adequate effort. Please, having avoided the standard classical stick-in-the-mud teacher, please don't fall victim to the fast talking, "Here's the total and instant cure for all your piano ills" snake oil salesman teacher.

Correct and adequate effort. THAT'S what my book is about.

You can always reach me!

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the finest teacher I've ever met: Linda Swartz, classroom teacher, artist, my editor, and my friend. Linda, you have helped catalyze every significant improvement I've made in my teaching approach for the last several years. Without you, this book would never have been finished, nor many of its strategies made successful. Thank you for being my teaching mentor and my friend.

How to WIN at Piano Lessons

Successful Piano Instruction Strategies for Non-Mozarts

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Choose the Teacher and Lessons which are Right for You	1
Do You Really Need a Teacher to Learn How to Play?	1
How to Choose a Piano Teacher	2
Adult Students - It's Not Too Late!	3
How to Evaluate Lesson Fees	4
Real Time to Mastery	5
How to Succeed at the Piano	6
How Much Practice is Enough	7
Skills Every Pianist Must Have	7
How to Enjoy Piano Lessons	8
Keyboards vs. Pianos	8
Chapter Two: How to Develop and Maintain an Attitude which Succeeds	10
How to Succeed at the Piano	10
How Do I Judge My Degree of Success?	11
What is Good Piano Playing?	11
Three Steps to Good Playing	11
The Truth about Patience and Discipline	12
Attitudes That Promote Success and Attitudes That Don't	13
"I Play So Much Better at Home"	15
More about "Playing So Much Better at Home"	15
Don't Be a "Victim of Time"	17
"I Have to Take a Short Break from Lessons"	17
Chapter Three: How to Read Music More Efficiently	19
When is "Reading" NOT Reading?	19
The Three Parts of Reading	20
Workable Methods of Improving Your Reading	21
Written Music: Its Main Points and Its Fine Points	22
Reading Ahead	23
The Basics of Fingering	24
Beware the Fingering Trap!	25
The Sustain Pedal: Helping Out the Fingers	25
Getting the Timing Correct	26
What is "Counting?"	27
Make Sure Your Counting Works	27
Proper and Improper Counting	28
Do You Hate to Count? Read This!	29
Dealing with Dotted Notes	29

Chapter Four: How to Practice Joyfully and Successfully	30
THE Fundamental of Successful Practice	30
Assume the Position – at the Piano!	31
Hands, Fingers, Fingernails: Their Pros and Cons	32
How Much Time Should You Practice?.....	32
How to Practice: Six Principles	33
Your Friend, the Mistake	35
“Let’s Do That Again, Shall We?” (How to Create Good Habits)	37
Still Making Mistakes? Read This!.....	38
Programming Your Auto-Pilot and “Flying Blind”	38
The Rewards of “Flying Blind”	39
Concentration, How to Use It	40
Numbers You Must Know	42
Practice vs. Performance: BIG Difference	42
Worship of Technique	43
Day by Day Decay	44
Chapter Five: How to Express Yourself When Playing	45
Music vs. Mechanics.	45
Memorizing Music: Natural and Necessary.	47
Making Music to Make Others Happy.	47
Playing Expressively: The Fundamentals of Feeling	50
Playing Expressively: Tempo and Volume	50
How Loud Should I Play?	52
Phrasing a Melody	53
Keeping the Audience Interested.	54
Repertoire.	55
Chapter Six: How to Succeed at Other Piano Skills	56
Let’s Go Shopping! How to Choose and Buy the Right Piano Music.	56
What Good is Sight Reading and how is it Done?	58
Improvisation How-to’s	60
What is “Music Theory?”	63
You Can Write Music.	64
Chapter Seven: How to Rapidly Learn New Music	67