"Limitations Are Your Best Friend"

BY SUZANNE W. GUY

The Itsy Bitsy Spider deserves more pedagogical credit than one would expect of a little critter. Itsy Bitsy was nothing if not resilient. And its dogged determination remains quite a fight song for those who practice the piano, not to mention all the other members of the human race. Most of us recall the words. (Go ahead, make the accompanying gestures.)

The itsy bitsy spider
climbed up the
water spout,
Down came the rain and
washed the spider out,
Out came the sun and
dried up all the rain,
So the itsy bitsy spider
climbed up the
spout again.

Over and over the spider goes through its paces, braving the dark and creating its web, only to start all over again after the rain destroys it. The spider never gets tired of endless repetition, but people do. Why is this? Human beings have brains that are open to stimulus, but vulnerable to boredom. The more specific and creative the directions, the more excited our brain waves become. The crux of the problem lies in the necessary repetition of practice habits. Only in spiderland is over and over an acceptable learning style.

Photograph of Fallingwater courtesy of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

Fallingwater, Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

At best, many young pianists have vague ideas about the general nature of practicing the piano. In fact, I am living proof that it is possible to practice the piano and get worse. I spent many of my best childhood years perfecting the two steps backward for every step forward approach. I realize now that I was as busy as a spider and just as mindless, running my fingers over the keys and having a picnic at the piano.

Yo-Yo Ma's advice is "Never play a note until you have heard it first." Ma, of course, was a child prodigy on the cello and grew up to be a world famous champion of the performing arts, as well as a humanitarian *par excellence*. Mistakes are bound to happen. The best practicing is the kind that increases the repertoire of ways to recover from them. Thomas Edison put it this way: "I have never failed. I've just found 10,000 different ways that do not work."

But there are limits to the lessons we can learn from Itsy Bitsy. The term "limits" is fascinating as a teaching and practicing tool. Consider the words of Frank Lloyd Wright, the most brilliant American architect since Thomas Jefferson. "Limitations are your best friend." Whenever he was asked to design a building, he could allow himself infinite freedom if he knew advance boundaries (how big, how much, what site, when are the plans needed). "Give me some limits and I'll be creative." His most famous building is Fallingwater (the weekend residence of family friends), the key to which is the setting atop a waterfall. The owners envisioned a house that faced the falls, but Wright felt the dwelling should rise above the water and be part of the falls. Within the limits he set, the architect created a masterpiece.

Teachers can use Wright's definition of limitations to their pedagogical advantage when they provide boundaries for their students' practicing, both in time and task. Many students practice too much of a piece, for too long a session, and much too fast—three all-too-common signs of malpractice! Camille Saint-Saëns advised his students about practice tempos in no uncertain terms. "First, practice slowly. Then go slower. Finally, even slower." Fast pieces benefit from a variety of practice tempos, especially the slower and moder-

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Adele Marcus

ate ones. Notice how often sporting events on television use replays in slow motion to pinpoint the detail of a fastball, a passing shot, or a shoestring catch. "There is a lot of Slow in Grow," as Lynn Freeman Olson was fond of saying.

Apply specific limitations to the Minuet in G Major (the famous one) in *Piano Adventures*® Performance Book Level 3B. Divide this 32-measure dance into four eight-measure groups. (It helps to know that a minuet is a neat eight-measure phrasing package in binary form). Within these eight measures, it is even more productive to make the groups as small as two measures. Experiment with sound and balance, seeking a singing tone and a kick-up-your-heels lilt that comes from the composer's choice of triple meter. (I often write H L L—heavy, light, light—under beats 1, 2, and 3 in the score). Bach is two-handed music, meaning that the left hand often has melodic content and plays a different rhythm from the right hand. First play the RH an octave higher; next play the LH an octave lower. This will open up the student's ears to hear the ensemble of both hands.

For those students who are particularly brave (remember the spider's bravery), it is a fascinating experiment to practice Baroque music with the hands crossed. One must listen attentively to the left hand, which is brought into sharper focus since the right hand now sounds an octave lower. It's useful to set limits of dynamics (how many shades of soft are possible, for instance), pedal, articulation, texture, and rhythm in all pieces for greater variety in practice techniques.

All too often teachers dismiss a student at the end of the lesson with a catchall phrase—"Go home and practice this piece or that scale"—without being specific enough about the problems to be solved. It is much more effective to practice parts of a piece in detail than to run through it several times, oblivious to sound, structure, fingering, phrasing, and so on. One of the best ways to practice any new piece is to play the beat units only, so that the rhythmic structure is absolutely solid with regard to pulse. Underneath each of us is a skeleton that serves as a framework for everything that covers it. Similarly, rhythm is the skeleton of music.

Photo: Alan Fischer

From the studio of Suzanne Guy, Norfolk, Virginia

Limitations apply to teachers as well as students. I set limits on my teaching schedule with enough flexibility for recurring professional travel and writing projects. It works well for me to teach three hours Monday-Wednesday mornings (from 6:00-9:00) and five hours in the afternoons 3.5 days a week. Thursday is an afternoon-only teaching day, while weekends are set aside for professional engagements. Adult students are scheduled on Fridays whenever they and I are in town.

An outstanding student from my Northern Virginia studio, Jennifer Hayghe (now on the faculty at Louisiana State University), was Adele Marcus's last student. Jenny often credits Miss Marcus with these two valuable lessons, among many: "Know yourself, and know your limitations." This may seem blasphemous when from childhood so many youngsters are told "to be all you can be," and that "the sky is the limit." The piano repertoire is so vast that no one can play it all, even in a lifetime of practicing. Not every pianist is technically equipped to handle the Tchaikovsky Concerto in B♭ Minor and could risk injury by playing it. Nor is every pianist temperamentally suited to play Schubert's Posthumous Sonata in B♭, which may put an audience to sleep instead of producing the intended effect of awe.

Alas, visiting hours are over for the spider and the architect, but their lessons continue. Recent research shows that college admissions boards are more impressed with depth than breadth. The 21st century is already stocked with overcommitted young people whose slates are full of activities. By choosing everything, they are also choosing mediocrity. Being good at something is good enough, the irony of which is the limitation of one's own greatness.

Suzanne Guy is a master teacher of piano who motivates students and teachers with her enthusiasm and love for music through studio lessons, lectures, and books, including music literature and children's picture books (coauthored with Donna Lacy). For FJH, she has compiled and edited *Expressive Etudes* and, with Victoria McArthur, *Focus on Melody*. She serves on the Advisory Board of *The Piano Adventures® Teacher.*