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## THE PIANO ADVENTURES® TEACHER

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## From the Editor

BY MARIENNE USZLER

About this time of year, piano teachers begin to plan what, when, and how students will “perform.” Depending on where you teach, you’re prepping them either for recitals or juries. This involves a special kind of focus and energy. Bringing performance to a state of public readiness is different than merely “learning a piece.”

I’ve always found that timing was a big factor in helping a student do well when playing in a recital or jury—choosing the pieces early enough to give the student a chance to “play them in.” Depending on the student and the level, that usually means several weeks of particular concentration on the recital or jury repertoire. Students don’t generally know, as we do, that making a piece your own requires much more than playing it correctly once or twice.

Starting to work at recital or jury pieces in enough time, however, also often poses a balancing act—how to budget lesson and practice time. When students are young, or playing at beginning levels, the pieces are short and the pacing is rather rapid. If you begin too soon to work on pieces chosen for an upcoming public performance, playing these pieces can easily become mechanical, perhaps even boring. Bringing something new to the piece each time it’s played is challenging for less-experienced performers.

There’s also the matter of how to use lesson time to best advantage. You want to keep going in the method or lesson book because that’s what needs to happen in the early stages. This is the time to explore and develop skills in ever broader contexts. You don’t want to hold up progress in order to perfect just a few pieces.

At higher levels, mastering new skills or concepts is less of a factor. In this case, development may mean working at longer pieces, communicating the entire shape of a multi-part piece, refining articulations, touches, and pedaling, or differentiating among performance styles. The process is both more subtle and more intense. Lesson time is used to do finer work on fewer pieces.

And there is the matter of *what* to choose for

public performance. It’s always tempting (for both student and teacher) to show off the “hardest” or the “latest.” In my experience, that’s rarely a safe step. “Hard” pieces often demand physical stamina that has not yet been developed, and the “latest” pieces often reveal a student’s not-too-deep understanding of the new skill or concept. That’s true at any level. Better that a student performs comfortable and secure pieces. High-wire acts are best displayed under the Big Top.

Here are a few hints to meet these challenges.

For younger students, and for those who play easier-level music:

- ◆ Have each student play a group of pieces, perhaps six or more. This gives the student a chance to “settle down” at the piano, and to play pieces that are in different styles and tempos. Playing a group of graded pieces also gives a sense of the student’s progress. A “hard” or “latest” piece might then be included because it’s tucked in among those that are reliable. In order to do this, of course, the recital must include fewer students.

- ◆ Have the student record the pieces *before* the recital. This is a practical rehearsal for the real thing, and it can also be a gift to relatives and friends. In addition, it provides an aural record of the early stages of instruction.

For older students, and for those playing more difficult music:

- ◆ Discuss ways to vary repetition (pay special attention, in turn, to phrasing, pedaling, dynamics, articulations, continuity, tempo control)

- ◆ Have the student record the pieces. Listen for the same performance elements. Have the student write (or articulate) his or her own critique.

These are some of my teaching techniques. We’re always happy to hear yours!

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