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From the Editor

BY MARIENNE USZLER

For teachers there are two New Years—the one that begins in late August or early September, and the January celebration. At each of these times, I suspect that we all make resolutions. It's good to know we can begin again, with a burst of renewed energy to do things differently, better, or more creatively. We like looking forward, anticipating a future, rather than mulling over the past. The past is reality, not always as shining as we'd hoped. The future holds promise. It can be stimulating *not* to know exactly what lies ahead, trusting that we do have the power to make or respond to change.

The August/September "new year" revolves around studio and professional concerns—making a schedule, auditioning students, choosing materials, or perhaps trying out new teaching techniques or equipment. The January "new year" resolutions are apt to be more personal—redoubling efforts to stay organized, revising eating habits, or being serious about the budget. We often do not re-examine our professional behaviors and attitudes as we sing Auld Lang Syne. The teaching plans for the year are already underway, and it's harder to assess something in motion, whether it's working well or not.

Yet it might be interesting to consider some possibilities.

- Check if you need to go on a "teacher talk" diet—talk less, play more.
- Budget time as well as money. Re-assess how you use lesson time.
- Make sure that the practice advice you give really helps students organize what they should do at home.

• Whatever happened to those good intentions to include ear training or sight reading? There's still plenty of time to cycle in these activities before the teaching year ends

- Set aside some—even just a small—time each week to practice. Remind yourself what it feels like to *play* the piano.

There are multiple ways in which you can help yourself, either to solve problems that have arisen, or to ratchet up the quality of your teaching. In my article on Alice and the Cheshire Cat, I offer some heads-up, practical suggestions. Perhaps one of these might "hit home" for you.

Smiles from the Studio

This happened several years ago when I was new to teaching. I was having a dress rehearsal for our recital at a Steinway Hall location. Rachel, one of my students, was playing a duet with me as part of the recital.

As we were rehearsing, she slid completely off the bench and landed "boom" on the floor. I stopped, stunned, and asked if she was OK. She stood up, brushed herself off, looked right at the audience and said, "I'm sorry. I can't work under these conditions." She proceeded to sit back down at the piano and say, "from measure 20, please" with a very straight and deadpan face. The entire room just rolled with laughter. To this day we still laugh together over this incident.

Rachel went on to play in an honors band and as part of a jazz ensemble at her school.

Courtesy of Kelly Penn
Via E-Mail

As we pop the champagne corks, the old refrain is "Where did the last year go?" So much seems to have whizzed past. Although at times we love the sensation of speed (getting through traffic, reaching someone on the phone right away, finding an answer or solution, or cleaning up a physical mess), we often wish we could linger (over coffee, a beautiful sunset, a photo album, in a museum, or on a walk with a loved one). The balance always seems to be tipped in favor of rush-and-hurry.

As Randall Faber notes in his discussion of the pedagogy underlying the *Piano Adventures®* Level 3B books, speed is an attractive component of virtuosity. That is the message of the cover photograph. The blur captures the excitement of flying fingers. Learning to "play fast" is what every student wants to do. But, as Randall points out, there are dangers involved if adequate care is not taken to prepare muscles and neurons to make natural, healthy gestures. His excellent discussion casts light on the importance of balancing quick specific moves with parallel moments of relaxation.

Is there a life lesson in all this? I think so. Life "gestures" can sometimes be as impetuous and ill prepared as a flurry of notes played with locked wrists and tight forearms. We push through the daily agenda, dashing here and there to accomplish duties and errands without ever taking even a tiny time-out to check our psychic temperature. The analogy to the extension-contraction movement needed in speed playing is pertinent. It's equivalent to ensuring a moment of inner relaxation that keeps the next "spring into action" from becoming tension building or frustrating.

Let's all resolve to become "life virtuosos", then, aware that reserving at least small moments of personal focus can countercheck our hurry-scurry activities. Come to think of it, it's rather like "playing" life *tempo rubato*. Happy New Year!

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