

Reading Rehab - presented by Susan Deas

Most piano teachers have experienced the problem of the new student who has been learning for a few years, but somehow can't read music. While this is not always the fault of the previous teacher (we've all had students for whom our methods just haven't worked), the new teacher has to find a way of teaching a student who is expecting to do a 5th grade exam, but has been playing everything by ear, memory, copying, or even from YouTube videos. And it has to be done without demoralising the student or disappointing the parents. The workshop will explore methods to help students whose reading ability needs desperate help.

Some thoughts at the beginning

- It can't be done in a hurry
- The secret of improving reading: Start where you are
- You have to get the student and the parents and student on board
- Don't blame the previous teacher

An overview of the process

- Have a good talk with both student and parents
- Have two separate streams:
 - (1) Work on one reward piece at their current level
 - (2) Work on their reading, using landmarks, intervals, and working through a graded book
- Keeping it going
- Resources

Talking them into it: Discussion with student and parents

- Postpone or skip the next exam
- "We're working on your reading skills, not going backwards"
- Describe the benefits of having good reading skills – paint a picture
- You can do this with the students – ask them to imagine what it would be like to have good reading skills
- Help them believe it's possible!
- Make them believe it will be relatively painless! (though it might take a while)
- Listen to their fears and concerns, find a way to show how this process addresses those fears
- Listen to the parents – find a way to show how this process fits with what they want for their child
- Remember, you're the one who knows how to teach music

The Reward Piece

The Reward Piece

(the bribery)

- Only one piece, if time is limited
- Let them choose
- It has to be something they really like
- It doesn't really matter how long it takes
- It doesn't really matter how they learn it
- It just has to be something to keep them playing and keep them happy!

The Reward Piece:

Some suggestions

- Something they're already playing?
- Something in a book they already have?
- Something famous?
- Easy arrangements of popular songs?
- Could be a grade piece, so that they feel like they're still progressing
- The "Getting to Grade ..." series (with CD, let them choose)
- Online sites: Sheet Music Direct; Music Notes; Mutopia

Methods of improving reading

Working at a variety of difficulty levels

- Three levels of reading:
 - (1) sight reading – pieces that take one or two plays through
 - (2) reading through a method book – pieces that take two or three weeks
 - (3) exam or project pieces – pieces that take three or four months

Basic reading skills: Landmarks and intervals

- The old ways: Middle C method, memorising each note, using the words
- New ways: landmarks and intervals
- Landmarks: just a few notes that the student learns very thoroughly
- Then they use intervals to figure out the other notes nearby
- As they read along, they are noticing intervals more than individual notes
- Their reading and playing will be much more fluent and flowing

Work through a graded book:

Easier pieces that can be learned more quickly

- Start very easy for them to build confidence
- Method books are great for this
- ‘Performance’ or ‘Recital’ books that accompany method books are great too
- Play every piece
- Work on 2 or 3 pieces at a time
- Don’t polish too much – keep moving on, keep reading new things

Some suggestions

- Alfred’s Basic Piano Library Chord Approach Solo Book Level 1
- Performance books of various methods (especially Alfred Premier Performance Books 2A and 2B)
- Repertoire books of previous grades (e.g. the ‘Getting to’ series)

Keeping it going: How to keep up good reading skills

- Be encouraging: keep reinforcing their good progress
- It has to be kept up (like fitness)
- Reading at multiple levels of difficulty
- Three levels of reading:
 - (1) sight reading – pieces that take one or two plays through
 - (2) reading through a method book – pieces that take two or three weeks
 - (3) exam or project pieces – pieces that take three or four months
- This builds independence, helps them to learn how practise, how to learn a piece

Sight reading each lesson

- It will save you lesson time in the long term
- Teachers will need library of graded examples
- Every single lesson – make a commitment
- Make it easy – the books should be within arm’s reach
- It helps teachers – misconceptions will often show up during sight reading
- It can be used to reinforce theory – e.g. what key is this in? where does it modulate?
- The first time ‘exam style’ – not stopping, keeping the beat – this also helps with performance anxiety, learning to push on through disaster
- The second time stop-and-start, check everything

Homework reading: A sight reading lending library

- Sight reading to do at home – build up a lending library
- Some suggestions:
- AMEB, ANZCA, Trinity, ABRSM Sight reading books
- Miriam Hyde Wirripang
- Dulcie Holland: Sight Reading Step by Step
- Paul Harris: “Improve Your Sight-Reading” and “Perfect Your Sight Reading”
- Solo/Performance/Recital books from piano methods
- Hal Leonard ‘Getting to Preliminary’ series – use lower grades

Keep the method books going

- The student mostly learns the pieces on their own at home
- One or two pieces at a time
- Check each week, only a short amount of lesson time
- Should be easy enough to learn a piece in about 2 weeks
- *The advantages:*
- The student plays a lot of music, not just exam pieces
- The student plays a variety of repertoire in different styles
- The student builds independence, learning music on their own
- You don’t miss any part of their education without realising it

Building your student’s library

- Choose books carefully for your students that have other good pieces in them
- Not necessarily the next Grade book
- Find exam pieces in other books
- Albums, e.g. Tchaikovsky’s *Album for the Young*
- Collections, e.g. *Chopin: An Introduction to his Works* (Alfred)

Available resources

Free Resources on www.susandear.com.au

- Landmark chart
- Landmark cards, set of 8 with answers
- Sight Reading Intervals
- History pictures – for each period of music history