

## MINI ESSAY 15: MUSICALITY FOR BEGINNERS

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Working for maximum musical effect is a lifelong pursuit for that starts at a child's first lessons at the piano. A child who is just gaining control over his playing mechanism, aural discrimination, and focus of attention will at first have a more limited ability to make fine gradations of sound and phrasing. However, the first steps toward the refinement and subtlety of shading that mark a well-trained, advanced pianist should begin early in study. Following is a general order I use to teach basic musicality that will allow a student make his first steps toward sounding like a professional pianist.

1. **Control over a singing tone.** Students should play all their pieces with solid, rich, *mezzo forte* tone that comes from playing with the arm (not just fingers). Introducing *forte* too soon leads to banging on the piano or hitting the piano with tension. Introducing *piano* too soon gives students the impression that playing quietly means playing without good tone. ("*piano* does not mean wimpy!") To show the student the difference between a loud, hitting sound and a full, rich tone, have him drop a finger in some putty (I prefer glacier putty or noise putty) and then drop on the key with the same cushioned feeling. Then have him hit the key harshly to discover the difference in sound.



2. **Control over *non legato* articulation.** Introducing *legato* too soon make it difficult for the student to maintain a good piano hand shape. The student should play all his pieces with a *non legato* articulation in the first several months of study . He plays from the forearm with an arm bounce on each note. This allows the student to gain control over his arm and fingers while maintaining a good piano hand shape. Delaying *legato* also has the added benefit of heightening the contrast between the *non legato* sound he is used to hearing and the very different connected sound of the *legato*, which makes the *legato* more special when it is finally introduced.
3. **Tapered phrase endings.** A student can phrase musically even when playing *non legato* if he has gentle phrase endings. Concentrating on phrase endings is the first step in developing a discriminating ear and in training the student to focus his attention on sound. I use humor when introducing phrase endings by saying, "When you played that last note of the phrase really loudly, it sounded like you stepped on a dog's tail! Ouch! Can you play it gently instead?"
4. **Phrase beginnings.** After mastering phrase endings, students can direct his attention to beginning each phrase with solid tone and without unwanted accents.

5. **Phrase Lifts.** The student should lift between phrases slightly. Breathe between phrases and lift the student's hand to help him feel the lifts. Demonstrate the difference in sound between phrases running together without lifts, and how lifting between phrases allows the phrases to breathe. Mark breath marks if necessary. Be sure the student does not lift too soon. The lift is a breath right before the beginning of the next phrase, to set the hand for the next phrase.
6. **Piano, mezzo piano, mezzo forte, forte dynamics.** As these dynamic markings are introduced, be sure that the tone is always rich (not wimpy or bangy) and that the technique stays relaxed.
7. **Mood.** Various moods relating to tempo, dynamics, pedal, and range are explored: sad, happy, excited, spooky. Use analogies and stories to develop the student's capacity to relate to the mood of the music.
8. **Legato.** Students can shape the phrases with more variety by adding *legato* with an arm bounce on each note. Speed into the key controls the dynamic level while allowing the student to maintain the tone, hand shape, and freedom that the arm bounce brings.
9. **Syncopated pedal.** Children can master syncopated pedal relatively early in their study, and the addition of the pedal opens a whole new sound palette. To achieve syncopated pedal, I use the following steps:
  - **Step 1.** Demonstrate the sound of connected pedal versus no pedal, and explore the inner workings of the piano by looking at the damper mechanism.
  - **Step 2.** I demonstrate syncopated pedal. I change the pedal slightly after I play the chord. Teaching students to change the pedal simultaneous with the chord change can lead to gaps in the sound when first practicing this coordination. This is why I prefer a slight delay in the pedal change.
    - o I play a chord (or blocked 5<sup>th</sup>).
    - o I play another chord, and while holding the chord down with my hand, I move my foot "up down." For young students, instead of saying, "Up down," I say "Ribbit, like a frog. Students like this, and it makes it easier for them to differentiate my directions for their hands and foot. The foot becomes a frog.
    - o Play and hold the next chord. The foot goes "Ribbit."
    - o Continue in this manner.
  - **Step 3.** I have the student practice "Ribbit" with his foot (heel always on the floor) without playing.
  - **Step 4.** I help the student find the coordination while he plays.
    - o Student plays a chord or 5<sup>th</sup>.
    - o I tell the student to play the next chord. I hold his hand down and say, "Ribbit."
    - o He changes the pedal.
    - o He plays the next chord. I hold his hand down and say, "Ribbit,"
    - o He changes the pedal.
    - o "Play. Ribbit." "Play. Ribbit."
    - o Continue in this manner.

- **Step 5.** He plays the same exercise without me holding his hand down. "Play. Ribbit. Play. Ribbit." If he lets his hand and foot up at the same time, he will lose the connection of the chords. The hand must hold the notes down while the foot changes pedal.
- **Step 6.** As he becomes adept at the coordination of hand and pedal, he gradually moves the change of the pedal from after he plays the chord to right as he plays the chord, listening to be sure the sounds connect.

10. **Mixed articulation.** *Legato* and *staccato* and *non legato* articulations are mixed in one piece, with choreography of motions producing these varied articulations.

11. **Balance.** Balance between the two hands should not be relegated to the intermediate level, but should be introduced as soon as a piece calls for it. The easiest way to teach balance is to introducing the three steps of "Ghosting."

- **Step 1.** The student plays the melody hand *forte* while the accompaniment hand plays silently on the surface of the keys.
- **Step 2.** The accompaniment hand is allowed to play *pianissimo* while the melody hand continues to play *forte*.
- **Step 3.** The balance is adjusted to the desired levels.

12. **Voicing chords in one hand.** Students learn to bring out one note of a chord above the others.

- First the student breaks the chord, dropping into the note to be voiced loudly, holding it, and then playing the other notes of the chord quietly.



- Next, the student reduces the amount of time between the voiced note and the addition of the other notes of the chord.



- The student imagines the sound of the chord, then plays the chord, dropping with a relaxed arm and hand and balancing the weight of the hand toward the voiced note. Forcing one note to be louder than the others through stiffness is not the way to voice. Voicing comes imagining the sound, relaxing the arm, making the voiced finger slightly stronger, and putting weight behind that finger.

13. The **lifelong quest** for maximum musical effect continues.