

MINI ESSAY 14: SHAPING VERSUS SIMULTANEOUS PERFECTION

By Dr. Julie Knerr

There are two perspectives regarding how students should learn a new Reading piece.

Shaping

The first perspective is that students should concentrate on one aspect of playing or reading at a time, what educators call "**Shaping.**" This means that in a Reading Piece, the student first learns the notes without worrying too much about hand shape or phrasing. Once the notes are secure, the teacher corrects any problems with technique, and when that is secure, adds phrasing and dynamics. In this way, the student only needs to focus on one thing at a time.

Simultaneous Perfection

The second perspective is what I call **Simultaneous Perfection.** This perspective dictates that perfection should be expected in notes, rhythm, technique, and phrasing from the very first reading of a piece.

Which One?

In my teaching, I have come to believe that both perspectives are necessary, depending on the child's capacity for multi tasking. Students who do not become frustrated if asked to read the notes while playing with perfect hand shape and phrasing should be required to do so. If a student exhibits frustration or is a slow reader, using Shaping over the course of one lesson would be more beneficial than forcing Simultaneous Perfection. This means that in one lesson, a student reads the piece, and when he is confident, technical and musical aspects are refined.

However, I do not think it is helpful to extend this Shaping to multiple lessons by letting him play with a poor hand shape or with the wrong articulation for an entire week of practice so that he can just focus on reading the notation. Students encode the piece as it is introduced the first time. Therefore, if a teacher wants the final product to contain technical motions and musical phrasings, these need to be introduced as soon as possible in the presentation of a new piece.

If a student cannot focus on more than just the notes of a new Reading Piece in a lesson, the piece is likely too difficult for that student at that time. In **Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1**, and with the accompanying reading practice found in the **Piano Safari® Sightreading Flashcards for Book 1**, we have tried to make the Reading Pieces very simple so that a student can master the reading, technical and musical aspects of these pieces easily.

Simultaneous Perfection should be the goal when teaching a new Reading Piece, so that as the student progresses to the Elementary and Intermediate levels of piano study, the first encounter with a new piece will have as many of the aspects of a finished performance as possible. It is much easier to begin a piece correctly than to correct mistakes later. By the time a student reaches the Intermediate level, he should be able to read a new sonatina slowly with correct articulation and phrasing. This training begins at the beginning of study, so that by the time the student is at the late Elementary or Intermediate level, the lesson does not consist of correcting careless mistakes. Instead the lesson can be used to refine the piece musically.

In Rote Pieces, it may be necessary to introduce only a portion of the piece for the week in order for the student to encode all aspects of notes, technique, and musicality correctly.

In terms of piano hand shape and the animal Technical Exercises in **Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1**, Shaping will be necessary in the first months of lessons, as it may take some time for the child to develop the coordination necessary to play with a good hand shape and control the looseness of his arm at the same time. Most children, if left to their own devices, will not approach the piano with correct technique (tall bridge, gently curved fingers, firm fingertips, loose arm, weight transfer from finger to finger, using the forearm to play *non legato* and *legato*). So while playing the piano with correct technique is the most comfortable way to play the piano, it is not the most natural way for most children. Forming the piano hand and technique takes time and effort.

Conclusion

In summary, I believe that Simultaneous Perfection should be the goal when teaching Reading Pieces, that short sections of Rote Pieces should be assigned so that the student integrates the notes, rhythms, technique, and sound from each section of a Rote Piece from the start.

Forming the hand into a good piano hand shape and controlling the muscles in Technical Exercise will require Shaping.