

MINI ESSAY 18: RECITALS

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Time and again, I have had parents come up to me time with shock and say, "I actually enjoyed that recital!" as if "children's piano recital" and "enjoyment" are mutually exclusive. They tell me horror stories of how they or someone they knew had a miserable recital experience and quit piano due to the trauma.

Recital Problems

In the less successful recitals I have attended, the main problems I have noticed are:

- The recital is too long.
- The students are not completely prepared, which makes it an anxious experience for the performers and for the audience.
- The students are playing pieces that are too hard. Although it may be an exciting accomplishment for the student to slog through a very hard piece, and the teacher may be proud of the student tackling such a challenge, it is not comfortable for the audience to listen to such a performance.
- Poor performance etiquette, in that the students have not been taught to bow properly or smile at the audience.
- There is wasted time as students walk to and from the stage.
- The order of performance in the recital is according to level of advancement. This means that the pieces get longer as the recital progresses, making the recital seem longer.

Enjoyable Recitals

Students can feel successful and confident at recitals. And the audience can enjoy it too! A well-planned recital has the following aspects:

- Students are **well prepared** to play their recital pieces at least two weeks in advance. If they do not have the piece ready by this deadline, in my opinion, they should not be allowed to play that piece on the recital. I also like to have a rehearsal on the recital piano if at all possible.
- Students each play **several pieces**. My students usually play between three and five pieces each. Therefore, if one piece is not ready to be played by the two-week deadline, the student still has other pieces he can play. Also, it is quite a commitment to ask a family to get themselves ready, drive a distance, and listen to everyone else's children play, all for the pleasure of hearing their own child's 20-second long recital piece. It is better worth their time if their child is performing several pieces.

- I like to have the student **play one piece**, sit and listen to others, then **play another piece**, sit and listen, etc. rather than having him play all his pieces in a row. This makes it more interesting for the audience, gives the student more than one opportunity to practice his performance etiquette (walking, bowing, etc.), allows the student to focus exclusively on one piece at a time, and keeps the parents from leaving early after their child finishes his part.
- The recital is not a place for each student to play his hardest piece. The purpose of a recital is to practice performing, which is a different skill entirely than being able to play a hard piece. I ask the student to choose pieces he feels very comfortable playing. This means that if a very young student wants to play “Hungry Herbie Hippo” on three consecutive recitals, I allow him to. After all, professional pianists play the same pieces again and again on various recitals. He will gain confidence and comfort in performing if allowed to play the same piece on more than one recital.
- Teach students to **bow** throughout the semester so that bowing becomes a comfortable part of playing the piano. A proper piano bow is:
 - The student puts his hands in his lap after playing, stands up tall, places his left hand on the piano, and his right arm at his side. The student bows from the waist and looks at his feet. He says to himself, “Hippopotamus” to time how long to stay in the bow, then stands up again. He does all this with a smile. I tell students that putting his hand on the piano keeps him from falling over, and it also shows the audience that the piano is his friend.
 - No curtsies.
 - Having hands clasped in front of him does not look very professional, in my opinion. I call it the “I Have to Go to the Bathroom Bow.”
 - Also avoid the arm across the stomach bow (“I Have a Stomach Ache Bow”) and the arm behind the back (“My Back Hurts Bow”).
 - Bowing is a sign of thanks to the audience and is required as part of a respectful performance.
- I have a “**Next Chair**” near the stage. The student sits in the “Next Chair” when the person before him goes to the piano to play. This streamlines the time it takes for the student to get to the stage.
- Incorporate a **variety** of music. Students play educational pieces, standard repertoire, popular music, duets with friends or family, ensembles, improvisations, their own compositions, and concertos. I also have a student play on the drum to accompany appropriate pieces. This is an easy way to incorporate various sounds in the recital.
- My job is to be stage manager for the recital. I move the **pedal extender** for the small students and check the **bench height** for each student. Paying careful attention to details of posture shows parents how important proper bench placement and height is, and it makes the students feel more comfortable at the piano.

- **Mix the levels.** When I design the program, I choose who would be a solid opening student and a good ending student, and I put the rest of the pieces between, putting ensembles and improvisations at intervals amongst the solos and mixing younger and older students. The recitals where the students play in order of age or level of advancement are boring for the audience, because they have to listen to many little pieces at the beginning, and just when they want the recital to be over and the little children are getting restless, then they have to listen to the high schoolers play really long pieces. Mixing the repertoire and levels keeps the audience interested.
- In my opinion, a children's recital should be **45 minutes** in length maximum. It is better to leave the audience wanting more than for them to wish the recital was shorter. I had two recitals to accommodate my studio of 22 students in Oklahoma. Each student played between three and five pieces or ensembles.

Mini Recitals

Last year I had each student play a Mini Recital for his family and friends when he had accumulated eight Review Pieces. It is a big accomplishment for a beginning student to play eight pieces in a row in his own solo recital. The Mini Recital usually lasted five minutes, followed by applause and cookies. This allowed the student's first solo recital experience, where he plays multiple pieces and has the spotlight solely on him, to be when he is in Kindergarten or elementary school rather than in high school or college, when it is more frightening. In fact, for several of my beginners, their Mini Recital was their first performance ever. When the time came for the regular Studio Recital, playing three or four pieces was easy, since they had already given their own Mini Recital of eight pieces.

Although this did take time out of my Saturdays to schedule and host these recitals, I believe it was well worth it. In the future I plan to designate several Saturdays as Mini Recital days and schedule the Mini Recitals back to back to streamline my scheduling.