

MINI ESSAY 20: THINGS WE HAVE LEARNED FROM TEACHING PIANO SAFARI

By Dr. Julie Knerr

As we have developed and taught Piano Safari® Levels 1 and 2, we have discovered a pattern in reading development that is common to most students.

Piano Safari® Level 1 Reading Approach

Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1

Piano Safari® Sightreading & Rhythm Flashcards for Book 1

- Students learn Rote Pieces by imitating the teacher.
- Students learn to read on the staff in single line, one-handed pieces, in intervals of 2^{nds} and 3^{rds}. Because we have designed the reading process to move slowly (a unit of 2^{nds}, a unit of 3^{rds}, and finally a combination of 2^{nds} and 3^{rds}) and to be complemented by learning Rote Pieces (by which their hands, brains, and ears understand patterns easily), students become very confident in their reading skills.
- Students read some pieces by finger number (Folk Songs), which reinforces the importance of paying attention to finger numbers.

What We Have Learned from Teaching Piano Safari Level 1

- When students are taught by Rote from the beginning, their brains increase in their capacity to understand and remember increasingly difficult patterns with ease. Therefore, as the Rote Pieces become more complex, the students find it easier to learn and remember the patterns. This was surprising to us, because we thought it would be more difficult for students to learn the harder pieces. The opposite was the case. It seems like their brains adjust to this way of learning and grasp patterns in the music more and more easily. Their memories also become able to absorb longer pieces.
- Teaching students by Rote actually aids their ability to read music notation, because more advanced patterns are in their hands and ears, which frees the student to read notation without having to concentrate on physical motions.
- Students need an extended period of time to focus on reading one interval before moving on to others.
- When students focus on 2^{nds} for an entire unit, or 3^{rds} for an entire unit, they recognize the sound of a 2nd as distinct from a 3rd. Therefore, this type of reading progression aids ear training.
- When students focus on 2^{nds} for an entire unit, or 3^{rds} for an entire unit, their hands automatically play that interval. This grounds the feeling of 2^{nds} in their hands during the 2^{nds} unit (Unit 3), the feeling of 3^{rds} in their hands in the 3^{rds} unit (Unit 4), making it easier to mix the intervals when 2^{nds} and 3^{rds} are finally combined in Unit 5.

Piano Safari® Level 2 Reading Approach

Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 2

Piano Safari® Technique Book 2

Piano Safari® Sightreading & Rhythm Flashcards for Book 2

- Students learn note names on the staff at the beginning of Repertoire Book 2.
- Students learn their Reading Pieces by reading the notation. In this book, the order of introduction of intervals is:
 - **Unit 1.** Review of 2^{nds} and 3^{rds}, beginning on Landmark Notes
 - **Unit 2.** 2^{nds} and 3^{rds} beginning on various notes on the staff
 - **Unit 3.** 3^{rds} and 5^{ths}
 - **Unit 4.** 2^{nds}, 3^{rds}, and 5^{ths}
 - **Unit 5.** 2^{nds} and 4^{ths}
 - **Unit 6.** 2^{nds}, 3^{rds}, 4^{ths}, and 5^{ths}

By the end of the book, students are playing Reading Pieces of in various textures, including blocked 5th accompaniments, parallel motion at the octave, simple two-voice counterpoint, and melodies divided between hands. Some pieces stay in one five-finger pattern, and others shift to various places on the keyboard.

- Because students are reading various textures in their Reading Pieces, their Rote Pieces, which are taught by imitation with limited reference to the score, become what we call “Quasi Rote Pieces.” This means that students are taught partly by imitating the teacher, but they are also able to start seeing the patterns and intervals and rhythms in the score and are able to read the notation on their own. Therefore, at this point the teacher can use the score to teach these Rote Pieces by marking the form of the piece and drawing the student's attention to position changes, patterns, and dynamics in the score.

What We Learned from Teaching Piano Safari Level 2

- There comes a point when a student's reading level catches up to his playing level. When the student starts to read his Rote Pieces, they become Quasi Rote Pieces, learned partly by rote and partly by reading.
- The distinction between the difficulty level of Rote Pieces and Reading Pieces can be minimized, so that by **Piano Safari Level 3**, students will be reading all their pieces.
- When students learn Rote Pieces from the beginning, they learn that music is made of patterns. Therefore, when they approach a score, they look for patterns rather than thinking of reading as a note-by-note endeavor. Advanced musicians read music in patterns, not note by note. Therefore, teaching by rote actually aids students in their reading, because they have the idea from the beginning that music is made of patterns rather than of individual notes they have to read.

- Students who are taught by rote combined with reading do not have a fear of an intimidating looking score. In teaching Piano Safari, I have never had a student look fearfully at a new piece and say, "That looks too hard." Their attitude instead is, "A new piece! I can play this!"
- Many early level solo piano books consist mostly of one line melodies divided between the hands (a texture we call "dovetailing melodies"). These types of pieces are actually harder for students to read than those that have more complicated looking textures that include harmonic intervals or hands together playing. We believe this is for the following reasons:
 - Dovetailing melodies often feel technically awkward to play, because the ear wants to play the melody with one hand. Usually these pieces are arranged as dovetailing melodies between the hands to keep them in one position. A teacher playing the same melody would no doubt play it with one hand and change positions where necessary. Children are capable of position changes as well.
 - Many of these types of pieces are in a middle C position, which is not technically comfortable.
 - Patterns of intervals are easier to see in harmonic intervals than in melodic intervals. This is why most advanced pianists find it easier to sightread Schubert (chordal) than Bach (melodic lines).

Therefore, those pieces that look harder may actually be easier to read than the easy looking dovetailing melodies. Because of this phenomenon, I have found that when looking at a series of books by one of my favorite educational composers, I find that Book 2 in a series (with more pianistic and complicated textures) will actually be easier for my students to read than Book 1 (with all dovetailing melodies).

We included many dovetailing pieces in **Repertoire Book 2** because we wanted the students to play these beautiful folk songs. However, we have included many other textures as well in order to balance the difficulty of reading and playing and to provide variety in the reading experience.