

MINI ESSAY 4: ASSIGNING PIECES

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Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1 takes approximately one school year for most students to complete, although we have had students who practice consistently with parental help complete the book in as little as five months.

How Many Pieces Per Week?

At the very beginning, in the Introductory Unit and Unit 1, students will not be able to have as many pieces on their assignment as they will later in their study because of the steep learning curve inherent at the beginning of piano study. Therefore, it is ideal for beginning students to have more than one lesson per week. (Someday I hope to have a situation where students come for lessons and practice every day!)

We have found that it is better to assign very few pieces in the first month of lessons so that the student develops confidence when approaching the piano. If a student has one or two pieces on his assignment that he feels confident that can play well in daily practice, he develops an, "I can do this!" attitude toward practicing and will enjoy playing at home. If the assignment is overwhelming in the beginning months of lessons, he will develop the attitude, "This is hard. I don't want to practice," which spells disaster for future practicing habits. Therefore, it is more important to make the student feel confident in the beginning stages than to move through many pieces.

An assignment in the first few weeks of piano study might include:

- Charlie Chipmunk (Rote Piece)
- Hungry Herbie Hippo (Rote Piece)
- Finding all the groups of 2 and 3 black keys (Musicianship)

In contrast to the beginning months, as the student increases in skill, generally around Unit 3, the assignment strategy should change to one of having as many pieces on the student's assignment as he can successfully handle.

Therefore, by **Unit 3**, a typical weekly assignment might include:

- 2 new **Reading Pieces**
- 1 New **Rote Piece** or **Folk Song**
- 1 New or Review **Technique Exercise**
- 2-4 New **Sightreading Flashcards**
- 4-6 **Review Pieces** that the student has already completed

At this stage, the more pieces a child has on his assignment, the longer he will practice at home. It is wishful thinking to expect that a 7-year-old student with only three pieces on his assignment will say, "Yay. I have 30 whole minutes to work on these three pieces and really perfect them technically and musically." Instead, he will say to himself, "Wow. I only have three pieces and I played them all three times each, so I guess I'm done with practice!"

In my opinion, it is also unrealistic to expect that a child, left to his own devices and without parental oversight (a category too many students belong to), will use sophisticated practice strategies. Abstract thinking, problem solving skills, and a longer attention span will be required for substantive practice. Therefore, realistically, it is the quantity, rather than quality, of time spent at the piano that will help a young child improve at piano. Quality practice will take years and maturity to develop.

Regardless of the number of pieces assigned, a normal young child will usually practice each piece for a minute or two. Therefore, if 3 songs are assigned, the student will practice for 6 minutes. If 13 songs are assigned, the student will practice for 26 minutes. Therefore, the teacher should assign as many songs as the student can realistically handle (New Pieces, In Progress Pieces, and Review Pieces) to keep the child at the piano as long as possible, since time playing the piano is directly related to the rate of progress. It takes skill on the teacher's part to gauge how much each child can handle. The assignment should challenge the student adequately while not being overwhelming. To gauge the length of assignment for a certain student, I use the following strategies:

- Ask the child. "Is this enough on your assignment, or do you want more pieces?"
- If the child is always well prepared at lessons, the child may be ready for a longer assignment.
- If the child is regularly unprepared, it may be because the assignment is overwhelming.
- Ask the parent.
- Ask the student to record how long he practices for the next week. I was shocked to discover that for one of my students, what I thought was a hefty assignment took the student 8 minutes per day to get finish at home. The parent never said a word to me about the assignment taking so little time! I am sure this was not great practice, but with young children, quantity versus quality is, I believe, a more realistic goal. The quality will come later.

Two for One

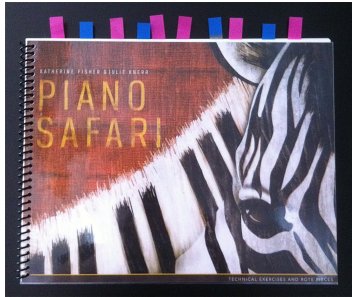
If you feel sure a student can handle more pieces on his assignment, but the student is reluctant, the **Two for One Teaching Strategy** is helpful (See **Mini Essay 7: Teaching Strategies** for more teaching tips). **Two for One** means that you assign four to eight measures of two (or more) new pieces rather than the whole of one piece. In this way, the student is learning two pieces simultaneously, and chances are that he will learn more than the measures you assigned.

This allows him to move more quickly through repertoire rather than just working on one new piece at a time. When introducing a new piece, I often stop after a portion of the piece and ask the student, "Is that enough of this piece, or do you want to keep going?" This allows me to gauge how the student feels about the learning process and gives him some **Shared Control** over his assignment so he does not feel overwhelmed.

Repertoire Management

Managing repertoire for students is an important skill for teachers, and it can be daunting to balance the many pieces required for the student to maintain forward momentum in terms of progress and motivation.

I use page marking tabs (available at any office supply store) to mark the pieces that are to be practiced each week.



This allows young children who have trouble reading an assignment sheet or finding the correct page number in a book to easily know what to practice. The process of repertoire assignment I use is as follows:

- The student chooses two colors of page tabs, one for **In Progress Pieces** (for example, blue), and one for **Review Pieces** (pink).
- I have the student put a blue page tab on each **In Progress Piece**, which is a new piece or a “not yet completed” piece. Having the student put the tab on himself gives him a sense of ownership of the piece.
- As we work on each piece in subsequent lessons, if I deem the piece “Completed,” the student puts a sticker on the page. Then I ask, “Do you want to keep this piece as a **Review Piece**?” If the child likes the piece and says, “Yes,” the child takes off the blue page tab and replaces it with a pink page tab. If the child says, “No,” the piece is complete. We take the blue tab off, and that is the end of that piece. Not every child likes every piece, and that is fine. The concepts reappear in various pieces to provide plenty of reinforcement.
- At the next lesson, I can easily see which pieces we are working on, the **In Progress Pieces** (blue tabs), and place the **Review Pieces** (pink tabs) at strategic places to pace the lesson appropriately. After playing each **Review Piece**, I ask, “Do you still want to keep this as a **Review Piece**?” If the answer is, “Yes,” then the pink tab stays on. If the answer is, “No,” then I take the tab off, and that piece is done.

Since I was the type of child that always longed for new music and did not like to keep old pieces, I assumed most children would be like me. However, I have found that the reverse is true. Only two of the 22 students I taught in Oklahoma did not like to keep **Review Pieces**. The rest amassed a pile of upwards of twenty **Review Pieces** that they wanted to keep playing. As a result, they were staying at the piano a long time each day, and they were happy when practicing because they were playing pieces they had already mastered. Children like to do what they do well. If they play pieces well, they will like to play those pieces.

Keeping pieces as **Review Pieces** allows the student to build a repertoire and allows the teacher to continue to refine the student's technique and musicality. This builds the student's confidence, because he can play a group of pieces he knows really well.

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 two or three pieces was easy, since they had already given their own Mini Recital of eight pieces.