

MINI ESSAY 6: THE BENEFITS OF ROTE TEACHING

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As a result of our examination and use of various piano methods, we have come to believe that the primary goal of some of the early level methods is not necessarily to teach children to *play* the piano. Instead, the goal of these methods is to teach children to *read* music notation at the piano. Because of this intense focus on reading, these methods can be compared to a grammar book intended to teach a student an ancient language.

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Although a person may learn to read and write in ancient Greek through a grammar book, it will not be useful for learning to speak the language the way it sounded in the time of Alexander the Great. In order to speak the language correctly and become fluent, one would need to hear the language spoken and practice speaking it.

In the same way, a piano method that is focused on reading music notation may guide the teacher in teaching students to read music notation, but it may not teach them to understand music aurally or to express it artistically.

Also, students may become disillusioned and uninspired when all the pieces in the book are at the same reading level with the same texture of single line melodies and simple rhythms. Most children have been exposed to complicated music since birth, and they are capable of playing more difficult music than they can read.

Teaching students by rote (i.e. by imitation without extensive reference to the score) allows students to develop their ears, technique, and memory without the added complication of reading the notation. Music is an aural art, so students must learn music with their ears as well as with their eyes. A balance between pieces taught by notation (eye) and those taught by rote (ear) will help students deeply understand and fully express music.

Teaching pieces by rote provides the following benefits:

- **Motivation:** Students are able to play aurally satisfying music from the beginning of study.
- **Musical Understanding:** Students who are taught by rote come to an early realization that music is composed of patterns and a logical structure. They learn Rote Pieces in larger groupings of notes rather than one note at a time. They notice repeating ideas and variations of these ideas more easily when the distraction of reading the score is removed. Later on, having grasped patterns and structures by rote, students' ability to see notation in patterns enhances their sight reading skill.
- **Memory:** Students are comfortable with playing pieces by memory because this is the way they learn their Rote Pieces. When students begin reading, they use their ears and memories in combination with their eyes to a much greater extent than students who are taught only by reading the notation.
- **Concentration:** Students can learn pieces that are much longer than they would have the stamina or ability to play if they were required to read the notation. These pieces increase the ability of students to concentrate for longer periods of time. Rather than playing pieces that are only ten seconds long, they can play pieces that last nearly a minute, like, "I Love Coffee," which Carolyn Shaak has graciously allowed us to reprint in *Piano Safari Repertoire Book 1*. For a young child, one minute is a long time to concentrate without a break.
- **Creativity:** Students are creative while improvising and composing because they have been exposed to a variety of sounds and patterns presented in Rote Pieces. The wide array of musical ideas in their ears, minds, and hands provide tools with which to invent their own music. Because beginning students often create at the piano by building on sounds and patterns to which they have already been exposed, the student who uses limited positions during his early lessons may not have the foresight to improvise and create in more sophisticated ways.
- **Technique:** Students are free to focus on playing with proper technique when they are not simultaneously reading notation. For example, the teacher who is working with a student on a two-note slur can instruct him to watch his hand for the down-up motion of the wrist. It is often difficult for an early level student to multi-task, so the chance for success in mastering certain technical skills increases when the distraction of the score is removed.

- **Reading:** Although it may seem counterintuitive, we have found that playing Rote Pieces actually aids in the development of reading notation. *Teaching by rote and by reading do not need to be at odds.* A combination of the two approaches gives students a well-rounded approach to achieve success in the many facets of playing the piano. When students play pieces learned by rote, they gain a repertoire of intervals, patterns, and technical motions in their muscle memory. When learning to read notation, this repertoire of patterns allows students to focus on what their eyes see rather than simultaneously having to acquire new motions for their hands.

An interesting comparison to the rote vs. reading debate is the controversy in schools over teaching children to read phonetically or through the whole language method. Those who support phonics teach the sounds that make up words, and believe in a “parts to whole” approach. Those who support whole language immerse the children in books and literature and hope they will learn to read in a more organic manner. In short, they believe in more of a “whole to parts” philosophy. We can compare this to the way children learn the language of music. Students who learn by reading notes exclusively represent more of the “parts to whole” approach, as opposed to those who learn by rote first. We contend that the best method is a blending of the two approaches: *rote and reading presented simultaneously.*

Conclusion

Our goal in creating *Piano Safari* was to integrate the best features of all the piano methods we have used in our teaching. Combining aspects of rote teaching (Suzuki) with intervallic reading (Clark, Chronister, Blickenstaff) provides, in our opinion, the most solid foundation for beginning piano students to become musical and literate pianists.