

# *The Advancing Pianist*

## **A Parents' Guide**

*Crocus Hill Studios*  
*Dr. Joseph Zins/Dr. Jo Anne Link*  
*Artists/Teachers of Piano*

*“Of all the gifts with which individuals may be endowed, none emerges earlier than musical talent.”*

**Howard Gardner**  
Professor of Education - Harvard University

It has been our experience that the above statement by Dr. Gardner rings true. Musical talent must be recognized and emphasized early and approached with the same seriousness of purpose, discipline, and integrity as any of the academic subjects studied in school. This is why it is critical for children to begin their musical study at the earliest possible age -- usually at age five or six. As the child becomes older, emphasis may move from the musical to the academic with great success, but it does not work well the other way around. The training of the young pianist is much like the training of the gymnast or the classical dancer -- great development must occur before the age of twelve when the hands and the musical mind are at their most supple and conducive to masterful training.

This is why the Russians have had such phenomenal success in producing many of the greatest pianists in the world. In Russia, children from the age of five to six receive comprehensive training in music. At the end of fourth and seventh grades they take performance and written exams. Those who demonstrate exceptional musical gifts and talent are encouraged to pursue studies leading to major careers in performance. Those who are less oriented toward performance are encouraged to seek careers in music education, music theory, music history, accompanying, etc.. Those whose gifts tend toward mathematics, science, linguistics, etc., are encouraged to seek a more academic route. Meanwhile, Russian citizens have received a thorough background in music, developing a deep love and understanding of arguably the greatest art form known to mankind. Music remains of greatest importance to Russians throughout their lives. This is in stark contrast to our American culture of indifference and lack of support for music, the musician, the teacher, and the arts in general. We live in an era of enormous de-emphasis and “dumbing-down” of the art of music in our American culture -- a pop-culture dominated by the worship of sports, celebrity, and rampant materialism.

We believe in a superb (and early) musical education for all children -- and to study the piano is to study the world's greatest instrument. The piano is one of the easiest instruments on which to begin one's study of music, but it is the most difficult on which to achieve superb artistic results. Only on the piano does one deal with melody, harmony, and counterpoint (more than one melody sounding at a time), simultaneously. The piano is self-sufficient -- one can play much of the world's greatest and most beloved musical treasures without the assistance of any other instrument. On the other hand -- the piano is the most sympathetic partner for other instruments in the form of chamber music.

We believe that all children have musical talent. Talent presents itself as a continuum in which students range from the marginally talented to evidence of musical genius. Talent is a developmental process that unfolds over many years of hard, disciplined work. It is not a stagnant trait that one is born with and remains unchanged for the duration of one's life. Even modest talents can be developed to astonishing levels while great talents can remain latent and "die on the vine". All talent along this continuum must be treated with the greatest of care, respect, and devotion. We are devoted to developing all of our students (who willingly receive instruction and work with integrity and discipline) to the best of their ability, regardless of their position on this talent continuum. For those who are exceptionally talented -- it is simply "icing on the cake".

We believe that students want to be challenged and thrive when they fulfill the high expectations of their teachers and parents. Young piano students love the approval of performing well in public -- there is so much reward in the recognition of warm, enthusiastic applause from their peers, parents, family, friends, and teachers. Yet the truly talented have the need and desire to express themselves at the instrument with or without such recognition.

A piano student's development tends to fall into certain recognizable patterns. The first three years of study -- up to the age of eight or nine -- is marked by the young student traveling predominantly on sheer talent and energy. Although the first three years are of critical importance in establishing the total command of the fundamentals of playing (notes, rhythm, and fingering), the greatest thing a teacher can do is to nourish the most tender intuitive response a child has toward music. By the sheer love of the music and of the child, a masterful teacher can unleash the trust and joy a student must have in expressing his/her innermost feelings.

Grades four, five, and six represent a significant shift in a child's studies. This is a period that must be marked by incredible growth and development. This can be a difficult time in which a gifted child may be truly challenged for the first time. They may not know how to respond at all to having to actually work at something in order to master it. This is a time when practice time needs to increase dramatically. At this time a child's intuitive response to music must be more closely bound to a conceptual understanding of music. This is a period marked by the great challenge of taking a student from the pedagogical repertoire of the first three years of study to the concert level repertoire of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven sonatas and concertos.

Grades seven and eight -- the early adolescent years -- represent the great trough for the young student of the piano. This is a period when many physical, mental, and emotional changes occur that can be very distracting to the young pianist. This is a time when peer pressure reaches its greatest point of influence -- and it is generally not a positive influence with regard to the serious study of music. At this time the young student's academic requirements are significantly stepped up. Sports often become more important and time consuming and the desire to be with friends and to establish one's independence becomes pronounced. At the same time this must be a period of intense musical growth and development for the young pianist. The literature becomes very complex and challenging, requiring extended hours of practice here-to-fore unheard of. This is the period when underdeveloped and ill-prepared piano students give up their study of music. The prepared pianist, on the other hand, is better equipped to ward off and to cope with these distractions. ***It is essential to develop young talent as far and as fast as possible.*** There needs to be a sense of urgency in the development of a student's gifts.

Those students who survive the gauntlet of seventh and eighth grade usually emerge from the experience with a new-found maturity, a deeper love and pride in their playing, and a greater appreciation for their music, parents, and teachers. They are about to embark on the most thrilling period of development as young artists. Grades nine through twelve is the period of greatest technical and artistic development for any pianist. Girls and boys now have the capacity for astonishing physical power and strength at the keyboard. They are physically, mentally, emotionally, technically, and spiritually ready to undertake many of the great Romantic and Contemporary works for piano. A young pianist's technical equipment must be fully formed by the age of eighteen. At this point, if the young pianist decides to embark on a musical career by majoring in piano at the University/Conservatory level then he/she will be fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. For the students who decide that their future lies with a different discipline, they will be at a point where they will be able to express themselves at the piano at a very high level for the rest of their lives. They will also be able to experience the making of music by others in a deep and meaningful way.

Expose yourself and your child, early on, to classical music in the home and in the concert hall. This helps develop the child's ear and nourishes the student's appreciation and love of music. Under a master teacher it is not long before one can purchase recordings by some of the world's greatest artists of the very music your child will be playing.

Limit the number of activities your child is exposed to. We believe that depth and quality of experience are of much greater value than quantity of experience. Generally, a child can handle one other major extra-curricular activity in addition to piano studies. A student who is constantly on the run to too many different activities will have an extremely difficult time developing his/her musical talent.

Help your child develop good study habits. A pianist needs to practice a minimum of six days a week, consistently, week in and week out in a quiet space. Daily practice should be at a scheduled time. Because of the all-encompassing nature of piano practice (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual) it is best, whenever possible, to schedule practice time early in the evening *before* homework and strenuous physical activities. It is good to establish a different routine on weekends and vacation days. On these days, it is best for the student to practice first (early in the morning after breakfast) when mentally fresh and before other activities and fun intervene (work before pleasure!). It is very difficult to concentrate at the instrument after an extended period of recreational activities.

Remember that practice time and lesson time will need to increase as the demands of the music increase. Just as a student's schoolwork increases in amount and complexity over the years -- so will his/her piano studies. The following serves as a useful guide for *daily* practice:

The student's age x 10:

(e.g.) age 6:  $6 \times 10 = 60$  min.

age 9:  $9 \times 10 = 90$  min.

age 12:  $12 \times 10 = 120$  min.

age 16:  $16 \times 10 = 160$  min., etc.

***For those students who possess extraordinary gifts, commitment to practice time may be far greater than indicated by the above guide.***

*What does good practice sound like? \**

The student:

- works at short sections without stumbling.

- repeats with pauses in between to assess.
- maintains quiet concentration.
- begins new tasks slowly and carefully.
- works up speed gradually and with control.
- varies tasks and allots time to each.

*What does bad practice sound like? \**

The student:

- stops and starts in the same places.
- makes many repeats during which nothing changes.
- sighs and mutters.
- rushes through everything.
- plays items only once.
- remains silent, perhaps woolgathering.
- plays only favorites. Avoids the “hard stuff”.

*\*Taken from Marienne Uszler’s Sound Choices*

It is of greatest importance that the young pianist is provided with the finest acoustical instrument one can afford. As with any task (especially one as sophisticated as playing the piano), one needs an appropriate and responsive tool. The young student needs an instrument with a responsive action and a beautiful and dynamic tone quality. The finer the instrument the greater chance the student has of developing a sophisticated and facile technique capable of extracting a beautiful singing tone with a wide array of dynamics and colors. A fine instrument will always hold its value against inflation whereas one of poor quality will not. A fine instrument can be resold, traded up, or passed down to younger generations.

Just as it takes three (preferably four) legs to support a table, it takes the parent, child and teacher all working together to make this magical thing happen. All three must be of one mind in terms of expectations. The teacher-pupil relationship is one of the most important and valuable in our world, but it cannot succeed without parental support and involvement.

Finally - hang in there! Rome was not built in a day. There will be ups and downs and a natural ebb and flow to a student’s interest and dedication. In this era of instant knowledge, instant communication, and instant gratification, music study teaches us to set long-term, lofty goals and to nourish the patience, integrity, and devotion necessary to achieve something of great value and beauty.

Yours in music,

*Joe & Jo Anne*

Dr. Joseph Zins/Dr. Jo Anne Link  
Artists/Teachers of Piano