

Continuing professional development, part 2

VMT

Edward Maxwell

In part 1 of this two-part resource (*Music Teacher*, January 2021), I explored some fundamental questions about how and why we teach and how we respond to feedback, along with stressing the importance of establishing secure technical foundations from the very first lesson.

In part 2, I will look at further development of reading skills and musicianship, learning pieces with understanding, and amassing a bank of repertoire, rather than just learning exam pieces by rote and then forgetting them again as soon as the exam has been taken. I will also stress the importance of maintaining high professional standards, which will earn respect from colleagues, students and parents.

Developing musicianship

Learning by rote or from reading notation?

A friend who is a folk musician once belittled my musicianship because of my reliance on notation to play music: 'Musicians are far more creative if they don't read music,' she said. She illustrated this point with the fact that, reputedly, none of the Beatles could read music. That may be true, but it's unlikely that they would have become so successful without the guiding hand of George Martin, who helped them to organise their ideas and devised and notated their orchestrations.

I don't think anyone would claim that the inability to read would improve an actor's performance. Being able to read music and play by ear are not mutually exclusive. Music notation is a perfectly logical system and not difficult to master, yet many teachers resort to teaching pieces by rote.

Some years ago, I took over a piano student who had already passed Grade 1 and had made a start on Grade 2. In her first lesson with me, she played one of her Grade 2 pieces reasonably well, despite some idiosyncratic moments. However, she floundered on the second, and the alarm bells started ringing when she was completely unable to find any correct notes. I then gave her some simple one-handed sightreading, where the notes went up in a scale. She played some random notes which went roughly down in pitch. I suggested that we went back to basics and asked her to play a middle C. She played an F. The exam piece she had played had been learnt entirely by rote and she had not been taught any reading skills at all. I explained to the girl's mother that we needed to go back to basics and the response was: 'She's passed Grade 1 and that means she's ready for Grade 2. I'm paying good money for exam certificates, and if you're not able to go straight into Grade 2, I'll go elsewhere.' She did.

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There are a number of issues that this incident raises:

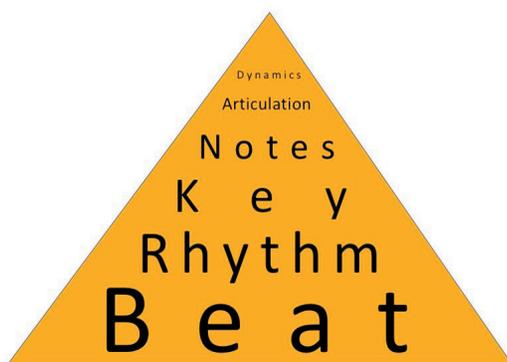
- ▶ If a student is going to take exams, they need to have an understanding of notation and develop a sense of how music should *sound* from the patterns of notes on the page. Learning pieces by rote is not laying secure foundations. The phrase ‘parrot fashion’ is apt: parrots can repeat things without any understanding of meaning.
- ▶ Although exams can be very positive, they can also be abused. It’s surprising how far through the grades you can get without being able to read music fluently. Even playing a bunch of random notes in your sightreading will pick up some marks for trying.
- ▶ Parents need to be on board, and if we’re unable to convince them that our approach is valid, it’s unlikely that the student will make meaningful progress.

Let’s draw a parallel with learning basic literacy and numeracy. Lesson time is far more productively spent teaching a child the skills to actually read, rather than just teaching them to recite a book. When they’re asked to play an old piece, I’ve heard students say, ‘I can’t remember how it goes.’ What would you conclude about the standard of teaching if a child was unable to read a book they’d read the previous year?

There can, however, be a place for learning by rote – learning scales is analogous with learning times tables or reciting the alphabet. Learning an instrument requires a lot of repetitive exercises that build up our technical and musical toolkit. This should not be confused, however, with learning a piece by rote without understanding its elements.

Building solid foundations

This is my ‘pyramid of priorities’, which I use with my students as a model to construct pieces.



At the base of our pyramid is the **beat** – the foundation of music. Music needs to have a pulse, which is grouped into beats in a bar. We can’t have a correct **rhythm** if we don’t have a steady pulse.

Many students will think that the right notes are more important than the correct rhythms. To give an example of how rhythm and beat are actually more important than pitch, consider a group of people singing ‘Happy Birthday’. They will frequently be singing at

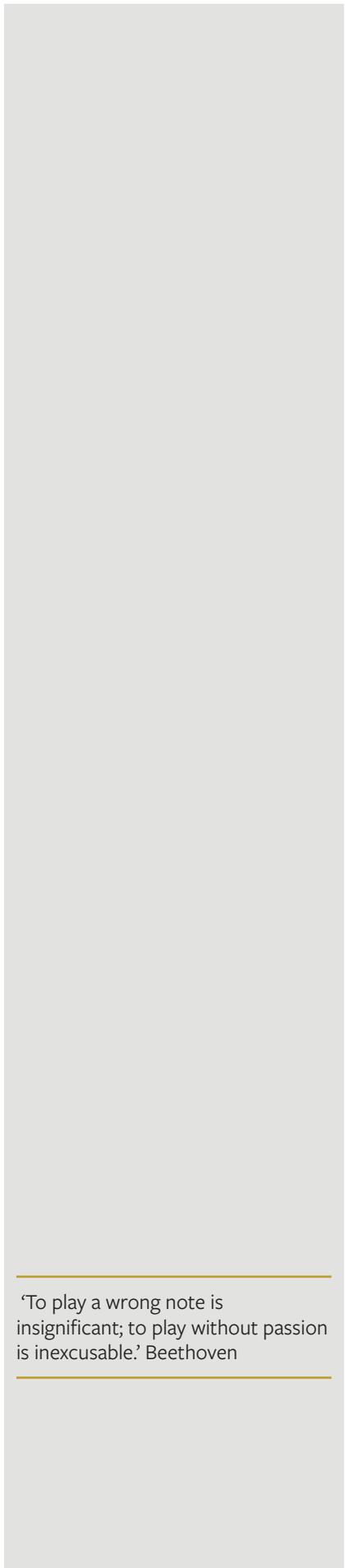
different pitches, yet it is recognisable because everyone is maintaining the same rhythm. Now imagine the much greater cacophony if everyone was singing in the same key, but at different speeds. In the same way, ensemble players are far more effective if they focus on the rhythms and keep their place. A wrong rhythm usually leads to them getting lost.

The next most important thing is **key** (assuming, of course, that the student is playing tonal music). This is closely related to correct notes, but it’s unlikely that you’ll be playing the right notes if you don’t have a sense of the key you’re playing in, which is why key comes before notes in the pyramid. Music is usually made up of patterns of notes that follow fragments of scales and arpeggios, so it’s important to learn scales and arpeggios. These are the building blocks of music, and it’s always useful to learn the scale and arpeggio in the key of a piece you are learning, regardless of whether it’s on an exam syllabus.

The next step up the pyramid is **notes**. Hopefully if the rhythm is secure, over a regular pulse, and the key well known, the right notes will instinctively slot into place, by following the shapes and patterns of the notes on the page.

Finally, an expressive performance will feature **articulation** and **dynamics**, which will outline the phrasing and add colour to a performance. But a performance that has beautiful dynamics but no discernible beat is putting the cherry on a very mouldy cake.

My own rustic but functional piano playing illustrates how this pyramid can work very effectively. With my brass students, I frequently sightread through piano accompaniments that are slightly beyond my mediocre piano capabilities. I always make a spirited and rhythmic attempt, and I try to follow note-shapes and textures in the correct key. Actual right notes are the least of my worries, but if I’m following the patterns of notes on the page, they often fortuitously slot into place. If they don’t, at least the correct rhythms give a solid foundation for the students to latch onto and inject some vitality into the performance.



‘To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable.’ Beethoven



Phrasing

How would you define a 'phrase'? I refer to it as a 'musical sentence'. When linking these together into a 'musical paragraph', we need punctuation to give it shape and meaning. I've heard many wind students breathe in random places, which is equivalent to taking all the punctuation out of a paragraph and dumping it back in completely arbitrarily. For non-wind players, encouraging them to breathe in phrases can still help – they should be phrasing as if they were singing. We should give students ownership of how they interpret a piece – there are always different, but perfectly valid, ways to play something. Get them to try things out in different ways, or demonstrate different ways of phrasing and see which the student prefers.

'Top-down' learning

As I noted in part 1 of this resource (*Music Teacher*, January 2021), every student is different, and teaching strategies need to be tailor-made. Not all students will respond to the pragmatic and methodical approach of my pyramid method. They may not engage with rational explanations. They may just want to see the bigger picture straight away.

- ▶ Try just 'having a go' without breaking it down first.
- ▶ Play something up to speed without working it out slowly.
- ▶ Pianists: try hands together from the start, rather than hands separately.
- ▶ Try playing complex rhythms by ear, rather than working them out mathematically. Some pieces, such as familiar pop songs, can look very complicated when notated, yet are usually quite easy to play by ear if you already know the tune. You may think that this contradicts my advice not to learn by rote, but playing by ear is a great way to improve aural awareness and build up an ability to play 'instinctively' on an instrument.

Teaching music is a multifaceted and endlessly fascinating discipline that simultaneously requires many different approaches. The key is to be adaptable and not too dogmatic.

Playing with others

Making music with others is fun and rewarding, and it develops musicianship far more effectively than practising on your own. Encourage students to take all opportunities play with others: school orchestras, bands and ensembles; jamming informally with friends; playing with parents or siblings at home. Practising with backing tracks should also be encouraged at every opportunity: it builds up the discipline required to play with others, helping to establish a sense of ensemble and intonation.

Listening

A hugely important part of learning music is listening. Share YouTube videos with students: this can be a two-way process, with students also sharing music that they like with you. Just as we hope they'll listen to our preferences with an open mind, so we should try to appreciate theirs. Encourage students to critique world-class performers and ask them how they'd play it differently if they possessed such a formidable technique.

Using and abusing exams

Parents, students and teachers are often obsessed with exams. 'What grade are you on?' is the common refrain. Exams can provide a fantastic framework for your teaching. They can motivate students and give them goals. They encourage students to develop technique and repertoire, and introduce a structured approach to develop aural awareness and musicianship. They give students a sense of pride in their achievements.

However, an exam certificate is a very crude way of judging a student, and if misused it can distort a student's progress. We've all heard school concerts where one student might give a beautiful performance of a Grade 3 piece, so expressive that it brings tears to your eyes and a lump in your throat. Next, you're wincing at a scratchy and out-of-tune performance of a Grade 6 piece. Which student is better?

The example of the piano student I gave at the beginning is an all-too-frequent scenario. Sometimes there's a very wide disparity between the exam they've passed and their actual standard. I've taken on students who have a certificate saying that they've passed Grade 5, yet my own assessment would put them at Grade 2 standard. What do you do? The student and parents think they should be embarking on Grade 6, so there needs to be much explaining (and usually implicit criticism of the previous teacher) about how much consolidation needs to be done – it may be several years before they can realistically take Grade 6 with confidence and assurance.



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Some questions to consider:

- ▶ How long should it take to learn an exam piece?
- ▶ What do you like and dislike about current exam syllabuses? If you were devising an exam syllabus from scratch, what would you include?
- ▶ If the structure of an exam syllabus changed drastically (for the sake of argument, imagine sightreading suddenly made up 50% of the overall mark), would you have to make substantial changes to your teaching style?
- ▶ Are you only setting pieces because they're on the syllabus, or is it because you think they're appropriate for a particular student?
- ▶ Do you always choose the same piece from each list, or do you give students a choice? Do they learn several pieces from each list and then subsequently choose which to play in the exam?
- ▶ Do you consider that different boards may be more suitable for different students?
- ▶ When an exam has been passed, do you go straight on to the next one, or do you have a period of consolidation?
- ▶ When you reflect on your own musical development, how important were exams to you? Do you have fonder memories of exams than, say, performing in concerts or playing in a youth orchestra?

I see a great many students who exclusively learn exam pieces. Three pieces are painstakingly learnt over an academic year, the exam is taken, then they move straight on to three pieces from the next grade syllabus. Usually, the teacher has chosen the same pieces for each student. Have a thought for the examiner, having to listen to the same pieces played in the same way over and over again. And what about the teacher's sanity? Don't they want some variety too?

I would suggest that a term is more than sufficient to learn three exam pieces. Indeed, if a student is at a particular grade standard, they should be able to have a decent stab at sightreading an exam piece. If they can't, they're not ready to embark on the exam, and time would be far better spent consolidating weak areas. In my experience, as I alluded to earlier, the less time students spend on exam pieces, the quicker they learn them. If, for example, an exam piece features syncopated rhythms, why not learn a variety of non-exam pieces that use these rhythms? Then, when the exam piece is introduced, it can be played with much greater understanding and, of course, the student will have other pieces under their belt too. I frequently don't introduce a piece until the term of the exam. If you truly have confidence in your own teaching, try waiting until *after* you've put in the entry before you give your student the exam pieces.

Have the confidence to develop your own curriculum beyond the syllabus, which includes varied technical exercises and a broad repertoire. The exam syllabus will be only a part of this – an exam is merely a two-dimensional snapshot, and teachers should be building a 3D model. It's perfectly possible to 'play the system' and get through the grades by focusing exclusively on exam pieces. A student who passes Grade 8 without having experienced a wider curriculum is unlikely to have the skills to enjoy a fruitful musical life after leaving school or stopping lessons.

Repertoire development

Some years ago, I started a new school teaching job. I took on 12 students and not a single one had bought a published music book. They had just been given photocopies of exam pieces and played nothing else. Trying to save students' parents money by photocopying music is not only illegal, but it's false economy – it deprives students of resources and will slow down progress.

We should be continuously expanding our repertoire of performable pieces, preferably on a weekly basis, not tortuously learning one thing and simultaneously forgetting something else. Do your students always have a piece up their sleeve that they can perform? Or are they only halfway through learning an exam piece, but have 'forgotten' the pieces they learnt for the previous grade?

An exam syllabus is **not** the same as a curriculum.





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- ▶ Students should always have things they can play fluently, regardless of how easy they might be. If they are called upon to play a solo in a school assembly at short notice, what would they play? Remember that as well as the benefits students gain from performing, this also showcases your teaching and can be a useful way to recruit new students.
- ▶ Use different books for different students – that will make your teaching more varied, expand your knowledge of student music books, and enable you to tailor repertoire to suit each individual.
- ▶ Encourage students to browse through their books. I'm always delighted if they've not played what I've set, but have tried something else: they've taken ownership of the repertoire they want to play and have shown initiative in exploring new material – something that should always be encouraged.
- ▶ Mix the familiar and unfamiliar.
- ▶ Keep the repertoire circulating and don't get into a rut of doing the same thing week after week. Set something new *every lesson*, regardless of whether they've practised the previous week's new item. If they haven't, it clearly didn't inspire them, so even more reason to try something new.
- ▶ Browse in music shops, keep up to date with new releases and take advice about good books from colleagues.

Staying professional

Playing in lessons

I recently spoke with someone who was on the interview panel for a high-profile teaching job. The candidates were all established professional musicians and respected teachers. Yet half of them instantly ruled themselves out of contention by failing to get their instrument out in the ten-minute demonstration lesson they had to give. Though it may seem obvious, you should be constantly playing in lessons. As I've discussed, this is not necessarily just playing something and saying, 'It goes like this.' Always let the student try first, then maybe play what they played and see if they can spot their mistakes. Students need to hear music being played in order to emulate sound and phrasing. Play duets and piano accompaniments as much as you can: this will help to develop a sense of musical flow, rather than the assemblage of seemingly unrelated and disconnected notes one often hears.

Maintaining our own playing standards

We should all maintain a professional standard of playing. Many of us perform regularly as well as teaching, but for those who don't, we should, literally, practise what we preach. Sometimes we may need to record a duet part for a student to play along with, or we may be called upon to play in a school concert. It would be humiliating if it was revealed that we couldn't actually play the instrument we teach. How can we possibly justify charging good money when we can't even do it ourselves?

If a student is absent, rather than having an extended coffee break, why not do some personal practice? Some teachers are called upon to teach instruments that they can't actually play very well. As a trumpet player, I occasionally need to teach other brass instruments, and have even embarrassed myself by playing the trombone rather badly to help out a school orchestra. The basic principles are the same throughout the brass family, and I will demonstrate things on the trumpet, so students can hear a clear sound, a range of articulation and, above all, well-phrased musical lines. Don't be afraid to ask colleagues for advice or even a lesson.

Communication

I wrote a separate resource on dealing with parents (*Music Teacher*, November 2020), so, just to reiterate, maintain open lines of communication with parents. Keep lesson records that you can refer to if there are any disputes (numbers of lessons taught; whether or not you've asked a student to learn a particular scale). I used to write prolifically in students' notebooks, which provided an accurate record of every lesson. Since coronavirus struck, I have been posting lesson notes online, which has proved very convenient – parents, students and I can all access lesson notes and other online resources.

If you have to take time off from teaching to fulfil performing work, be open about this – there is no need to make excuses or pretend to be sick. Parents are invariably impressed and delighted that their child's teacher is a working musician. If they do question your commitment to teaching, you can point out that generally instrumental teachers only get paid for around 30 weeks of lessons given in an academic year. In order to earn money in the other 22 weeks of the year, we need to take on other work. Performing work does not always fit neatly into the school holidays.

In order to gain the respect we deserve as qualified professionals, we should be able to demonstrate our skills on a practical level.



Resources

Before the days of electronic devices, I used to struggle into schools with a very heavy bag of books, and sometimes a portable CD player. Now, I would not be without my iPad, which contains thousands of pieces of scanned music – copies of students' music (in case they forget their books), aural books, sightreading materials, duets, piano accompaniments, orchestral excerpts and more. I can also instantly access thousands of backing tracks that I can play through a Bluetooth speaker. I can change the speed of playback by running it through an app – there are many available including the ABRSM's Speedshifter (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/speedshifter/>). There's also a wealth of aural and theory apps that I can use, not to mention being able to access YouTube videos.

A word of warning: if you teach in schools, you may be breaching their safeguarding policies if you use a personal electronic device. Make sure you fully explain why you need to use this and get permission.

Summary of the essentials

Technique:

- ▶ Must be able to play with a clear sound.
- ▶ Must be able to articulate notes legato and staccato (and the spectrum in between).

Musical development:

- ▶ Must play with a sense of beat.
- ▶ Must be able to read rhythms and recognise notes on the staff.
- ▶ Must play with a musical line and sense of character.
- ▶ Cover much more non-exam repertoire than exam pieces. An exam piece should not take more than one term to learn. Address specific problems (eg dotted rhythms or playing in a particular key) in different contexts rather than teaching it by rote.

Every lesson:

- ▶ Play at least one scale and arpeggio.
- ▶ Revisit something old and set something new.
- ▶ Sightread something.
- ▶ Play something with the student, eg a duet or accompaniment.

Professionalism:

- ▶ Keep lines of communication open with parents.
- ▶ Keep lesson records.
- ▶ Maintain high standards in your own playing.