

## Teaching Young Children

*Fidgety Phil won't sit still long enough to learn a tune.*

*Josh is bored of practising the same thing over and over again.*

*Polly wants to be able to play a "real tune".*

*Jo doesn't want to be told what to play – he wants to show you his amazing sounds!*

*Al is confused as the piece he is playing is not in the thumbs on Middle C position so right hand 3<sup>rd</sup> finger is no longer on E!*

*Jess knows all the notes on her flashcards but doesn't recognise them in her music.*

*Ellie can only read the treble clef.*

*Tiny Tina struggles to reach 5 notes.*

*Jane says she plays with flat fingers because she isn't strong enough to use round fingers.*

*Jim can't play with both hands at the same time.*

*Dan can't read yet. He forgets what he is supposed to practice.*

*Alex can't play in 3 time*

*Mike wants to play in a band but doesn't feel confident playing without written notation.*

**If that sounds all too familiar, read on!....**

Playing the piano is a very complex process which places great demands on many areas of the brain. Indeed, if someone were wired up to an EEG while playing the piano, I suspect activity would register on every sensor. All experienced piano teachers recognise that the challenges faced by their students are significant. In addition, there are a number of problems specific to very young learners, including...

### **Short Attention Span.**

**Children need variety.** A half hour lesson concentrating on just one thing is hard work. As Paul Harris says in his books on Simultaneous Learning<sup>1</sup>, children need new concepts and skills broken down into small key elements.

**Children need short-term goals.** Children don't appreciate long term goals! If progress is slow in their eyes, they quickly lose motivation. They need milestones to pass to measure their progress, including playing a recognisable tune and star charts/certificates.

**Modern children expect to have some say in the direction of their learning.** They measure progress by their ability to play what they want to play rather than their development of technique, skills or understanding. Modern teaching includes learning by discovery and experimentation rather than rote learning.

### **Literal Learners**

**Young children often have a desire to please and to follow instructions.** They are easily confused by learning something which they later have to adapt or "unlearn" (eg thumb is always on Middle C and 3<sup>rd</sup> finger on E; crotchet tails always point up in the right hand/down in the left hand). Music theory/note reading must be integrated and consistent to avoid confusion.

### **Small hand size.**

**Children need pieces and exercises that are physically possible!** Exercises and pieces must be geared to a small span. Finding an octave requires a change of position, not just a learned stretch which, if not handled carefully, encourages students to look down, thereby establishing the bad habit of looking down unnecessarily. But even using a five-finger position (one finger per note) can be quite tiring for small hands and so this position must be established over a period of lessons and not demanded from the beginning.

### **Lack of physical strength.**

**Young children need to be shown how to sit correctly and use the correct key stroke.** This is true for all beginners, not just small children and in some ways lack of strength is an advantage since they have no other way of easily achieving power than playing correctly. Correct posture and key stroke must be established from the beginning and continually rehearsed.

### **Lack of Co-ordination and Fine Motor Skills.**

**Young children need help developing co-ordination and fine motor skills.** Young children often don't know their left from their right, let alone how to use the hands independently but simultaneously. Recognition and equal use of both left and right hands (and feet!) must be established from the beginning and practiced throughout.

### **Inability to read**

**Very young children have limited (or no) ability to read.** Indeed, the idea and habit of the eyes scanning from left to right (rather than looking randomly at the whole picture) has to be established before music can be read without help. This skill must be developed slowly.

Also, a reluctant or limited ability reader will be unwilling/unable to read technical instructions or lyrics. Therefore, clear explanations by their teacher combined with memorable, clear graphics are essential.

### **Untrained Ear**

**Very young children may have limited experience of music.** Most have not spent time formally training their ear. Some will have a natural sense of rhythm and be musically gifted; some will have been exposed to lots of music at home or in pre-school sessions; others will have neither of these advantages, so that even keeping the pulse, especially in 3 time, can be a challenge. They may not appreciate more complex harmonies and melodies and have a short aural memory. Young beginners benefit from pieces in 4 time which have a recognisable melody line which they can "sing in their head". Harmonies do not need to be complex yet.

**Lightning Piano** is a holistic approach which seeks to overcome these problems, focusing on three fundamental and interconnected areas:

- development of the musical ear;
- development of correct posture and technique; and
- reading music.

## **1 Developing the musical ear**

From the first lesson pupils are encouraged to be creative, to improvise and play by ear and to listen carefully to the sounds produced. Exploration of the expressiveness of music through pitch and melody, rhythm, quality of tone, texture, phrasing and balance of sound is integral to the method.

Lightning piano books provide ideas and games which encourage constructive experimentation. The games on the website can be played at home to further develop the musical ear.

Developing pulse and rhythm are given equal emphasis to pitch. The first chapter of book 1 is dedicated to pulse and this idea is central throughout the subsequent chapters and books. Teachers' parts are printed in the books for many of the songs; playing together emphasises the importance of keeping time!

As Zoltan Kodaly<sup>2</sup> said, "Everyone who learns an instrument should sing first." Many of the tunes in the Lightning Piano books are well known children's songs/nursery rhymes. Pupils are encouraged to sing while they play to aid fluency and musicality. Relative pitch and scale degrees are further developed through improvising and aural games. Alongside relative pitch, students develop a recognition of melodic intervals, harmonic intervals and chords (major, minor, 7<sup>th</sup> etc) which can later be translated into different keys. Transposing becomes a natural part of the course from early on.

## **2 Developing Correct Posture & Technique**

Since creating tone, phrasing and balance of sound go hand in hand with posture and technique, these are introduced from the beginning and revised and reinforced throughout the course, to establish good habits from the beginning and prevent formation of bad habits. Posture and technique are introduced through games, many of which can be practiced away from the piano eg in the car or while waiting for tea.

## **3 Reading Music**

The skill of reading music is developed alongside and directly related to the sounds being understood aurally. Inspired by Paul Harris' Simultaneous Learning theory<sup>1</sup>, reading notation is developed using a variety of channels including flash cards, Puzzle Time and Balloon Games.

The skill of reading from left to right is established first – This is not always obvious to young children who cannot yet read. Rhythm notation is introduced next.

Finally, pupils discover how pitch is represented on the whole staff from low to high using the Balloon Staff. They explore concepts of pitch direction, reading from bottom space A up the whole staff using lines and spaces. This intervallic reading is used to find 3 C's and using these four notes as starting points, real tunes can be played. Flash cards and Puzzles assist in learning these 4 reference notes. Intervallic reading using pitch direction/shape and patterns allows rapid progress, thereby avoiding boredom/feeling of lack of progress. Moreover, transposing becomes a natural extension to reading music.

From the beginning, students are encouraged to learn to play without looking at their hands as far as possible to avoid reliance on visual keyboard clues. Exercises to develop the ability to play different intervals and to move the hand to different positions without looking at the hands are incorporated at all stages. By developing aural and improvisation skills, mistakes can be heard and rectified without looking down during sight reading and during a performance.

However, not looking down should be seen as the ideal to work towards rather than a law set in stone. Beginners can benefit from seeing patterns on the keyboard which they can then memorise and then use during Mental Play. Sometimes beginners need to look down to check hand position when they can hear a problem but can't quickly or easily correct by ear.

Sight reading rhythm and pitch is developed throughout the course, along with an understanding of the differences between *sight reading* and using a score to prepare/learn a *performance piece*.

As in the Suzuki<sup>3</sup> method, children are encouraged to perform from **memory** so that they can be played with eyes closed, allowing the student to focus on creating music during a performance rather than reading notes. This has the additional benefit of encouraging Mental Play<sup>4</sup> which can dramatically increase the speed at which a piece can be learnt.

Lightning Piano is a very different approach from other methods. Although the benefits can be seen from the start as the children demonstrate such enthusiasm, progress can seem slow to begin with. However, as students progress, the advantages become more obvious in terms of both skill levels and understanding. My hope is that using Lightning Piano more and more children will develop both the motivation and the skills needed to enjoy making music and become the best pianist that they possibly can be.

## Reference:

### **1 *Simultaneous Learning***

[www.paulharristeaching.co.uk/simultaneous\\_learning.php](http://www.paulharristeaching.co.uk/simultaneous_learning.php)

### **2 *Kodaly Method***

[www. http://www.britishkodalyacademy.org/](http://www.britishkodalyacademy.org/)

### **3 *Suzuki Method***

[www.britishsuzuki.org.uk/](http://www.britishsuzuki.org.uk/)

### **4 *Mental Play***

[www.pianopractice.org/](http://www.pianopractice.org/)