

March 2017 - March at the-piano-studio, dealing with ebbs and flows in practice, the art of constructive criticism, getting kids to practice update, good better best, 40 piece challenge mini-vacation



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March at the-piano-studio.com

Spring break! Actually, spring break didn't happen for me so much as it happened for my students. I continued teaching while several went away happily on vacation to 30+ (Celsius) degree weather and came back home to MINUS 30 degree weather. Quite the temperature change!

Many of my students came into their lessons announcing, (some ruefully, some with a glint in their eye) "**I didn't get *any* practising done this week. At all.**"

I've been in this business long enough to know there are **peaks and ebbs** just like any other business. So when the "*Spring Break Ebb*" happens, **I no longer get stressed out.**

QUESTION PERIOD

I find these moments to be **great times to reconnect with my students.** We

talk about what they did with their time off. Did they do or see anything fun?

When we look at their music, I ask them how it feels to play their music when they haven't practiced for a week. Do new things jump out at them? Do they find things difficult that used to be really easy? Why do they think that happened? (I usually **shamelessly insert a plug for daily practice** at this point!!)

We look ahead. Are we still on track for the recital, or exam, or whatever goal we set at the beginning of the year? Is there any new music that you want to learn? Are you ready to tackle a new project?

We learn some new things. If they don't feel like jumping right back into playing we do theory, or we try some improvising, ear training, sight reading, or playing with lead sheets or by ear. Sometimes I might throw in a mini-history lesson or we might do some listening or I may play through some repertoire they might find interesting so we can choose new pieces to learn.

You have to be careful that they don't have *too* much fun though, I've caught some of my students telling me: "I didn't get any practising done this week. At all." with an expectant sparkle in their eyes because they want to do the above activities instead of their regular lesson!!



The Art of Constructive Criticism

I remember working really, really hard on a Shostakovich Concerto. We're

talking *months* of work, playing, listening, and memorizing. I entered a concerto competition in our local area and remember being really excited to play it. And I was a little nervous. It being the first concerto I had ever learned and competed with, I was thinking of the pages stretching before me and praying that I would get through it all without a dreaded memory lapse.

I was doubly nervous because the adjudicator wasn't an individual who smiled easily. In fact, she frowned a lot, scribbled aggressively while taking notes, barked impatiently if you took too long to start and was a whole big bundle of *intimidating!*

When I finished, I was excited to hear the results. She singled out each student with comments. "Who played the Shostakovich?" she asked. When I timidly put up my hand, she pounced. "Your playing was frankly quite boring." Appalled, I started to cry. And I didn't hear anything after that.

Afterwards, a kindly and well-respected musical professor from the local University approached me and said, "My dear, I *never* would have said that to you."

Since that hugely embarrassing incident, I have been *supremely* careful in **how I provide feedback to my students.**

One of the highly effective ways of giving constructive criticism is by creating a "sandwich". The technique involves **putting the "meat" of a criticism between two positive comments.** So instead of saying, "Your playing was quite boring", you might say: "You did a great job working on this Shostakovich concerto. His piece needs to convey excitement and energy. With a bit more work, perhaps by studying the dynamics and increasing the tempo, you will have developed a solid performance."

Sure it takes a bit more time to say, but at least it won't destroy someone's self-esteem. And it might make a student a little more motivated to keep practising and perform again!

Getting kids to practise -- the magic of checking boxes

UPDATE

Last month I wrote about my experiment with some of my younger students who were having trouble practising.

I am happy to report that one of my former "non-practisers" has put in a solid MONTH of practising daily. He and I plan our week by breaking down the songs that he wants to learn into manageable chunks and scattering them throughout

the week with a two-day optional vacation built in. I give him two options for the number of repetitions he has to do for his daily practice and he chooses the number based on how long the "chunk" is and what he thinks he can get done.

So far, he's learned 4 RCM Prep A songs (they are about a page each)! I've seen an **improvement in the ability to find starting notes on the piano, more attention to rhythm, proper fingerings, and a huge leap in confidence.** And his parents are super happy too!

Success!!



Have you noticed how in most quotes, talent is not given as much weight as say practice or work? I like this quote by Frank Lloyd Wright because he put into words how the equation of success is actually balanced. **I would definitely prefer to work with students that are passionate about what they do.** And he is correct in that those that practice will *always* outstrip those who rely solely on their talent. What do you think?

40 piece challenge (2016-2017)

So I took a mini-vacation. I didn't do it on purpose. I just took a "break" from recording and then suddenly it was three months later! My only excuse is that I got heavily involved in several different musical projects and next thing I knew I wasn't practising... I need to clarify... I wasn't practising 40 piece challenge songs!

By the way, learning a new piece every week for a 10 month period is a lot of

work. But so is putting every one of those into audio/video recordings. And uploading them to YouTube and our piano teacher forum. But I digress...

I had a lightbulb moment when I realized that I was working so hard on making sure my students were motivated to practice that I was neglecting my *own* practising. So back to work!

The 40-piece challenge keeps my skills sharp. It exposes me to repertoire that I may not have learned myself. It helps me to teach what I've learned to my students. When I am tackling challenges on my own, I often will learn skills or tools that my students are also struggling with.

So I've gotten back into practising and [have posted video #14 and #15 on the website](#). (Astor Piazzolla's haunting El viaje and JS Bach's Little Prelude in E Major). Excited to explore more repertoire!!!



Until next time!

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