



Sound bases for success: Technique Theory

The dictionary's explanation of technique is "systematic procedure by which a complex task is accomplished..."

A plan of procedure is clearly needed and may be the first essential, but if we don't have the tools, the best possible equipment, the process will be slow and uneven, producing more problems than solutions.

We're often asked "Why do we need technical work? Why not just go straight to the much more enjoyable compositions left to us by great composers?"

Scales and arpeggios are not just a fitness regime for the fingers; they teach us practical fingering patterns, keys, a sense of harmonic colour – we must remember that technique is not only to do with manual dexterity; it involves listening and learning to judge tonal and speed gradation. Without these we can't interpret or communicate 'musical' gestures.

Most piano tutor books show pictures of the ideal hand position and posture at the keyboard – the position acknowledged as the healthiest and most practical. Students who have naturally relaxed hands don't need discussion about it, but if they have thumbs pointing away from the hand, or wrists held tightly too high or low, then certainly these are problems to be addressed. A smooth flow of finger movement in scales and arpeggios leads to ease of arm movement and eventual speed across the keyboard.

In the course of examining, I see many students struggle through technical work, often well under the stipulated minimum speeds, hampered by poor positioning which predictably results in uncontrolled tone and coordination. In the early grades there is hope that this will improve; in grades four and five such issues would warrant a comment from the examiner; by grade six an obvious lack of 'easy evenness' can become a serious handicap to musical presentation. Grade 8 presents the final challenge in the testing of technical development – scales in octaves, thirds and sixths, which demand well disciplined and responsive fingers.

In recent years, due to unfortunate time constraints, syllabus technique requirement has become smaller with only a sampling being heard in exams. **Don't be tricked into thinking that preparing only this minimum is enough – it should NOT preclude our teaching all keys and exercises as necessary!**

Certificate and Diploma levels are examined as relatively mature performances. Technical facility/ability is expected as the result of years of the careful training which enables us to express musical ideals unhampered by technical weaknesses. The greatest performers have spent many hours developing their technical skills, before being able to fully 'make music'!

Monika Laczofy,
AMEB Federal Examiner and State Piano Examiner

Some years ago I had a very gifted piano student who progressed with ease to sixth grade.

She had a natural feeling for balance and played with feeling for direction and shape. She was technically advanced. But she had a mind of her own, and refused to take any interest in the study of theory, saying that our system of notation was archaic and unnecessarily unwieldy.

She enharmonically changed black note flats in her scores to sharps (what is the point of having two different names for the one note?), the B sharps to C (B sharp is a white note, and therefore a natural) and of course F double sharps to G, and so on.

She took no theory exams, and therefore could not receive full certificates. This did not concern her. But after receiving an Honours grading for her sixth grade exam she stopped learning because music "no longer made much sense to her". With a thorough grounding in theory I have no doubt that she would have had the motivation to proceed to a much higher level.

The understanding of how music is designed deepens an awareness of composers' intentions and enriches the student's understanding and capacity to interpret. I have always believed that the written component of music should never be shelved when practical music is being studied, and I support the AMEB's conviction that theory exams should be taken in conjunction with practical exams. The ability to read and write music fluently is as valuable for those who simply enjoy playing for leisure as it is for those who aspire to higher qualifications.

Ashleigh Tobin OAM,
AMEB Theory Advisor and Piano Examiner



Sight reading

Candidates continue to struggle with sight reading, yet it is so important for their future enjoyment of making music.

It may help them to know that perfection in sight reading is a rarity and they shouldn't be upset at not being able to "have another go" to get it right. What is important though, is the continuous rhythmic flow and an even reading.

Rhythm is the most important part of sight reading. Candidates should aim to set up and maintain a stable pulse throughout and if they play a few incorrect notes on the way, this is much less an issue than a laboured and stagnant reading with correct notation.

In order to sight read with greater confidence, and hopefully enjoyment, they should be reading a short piece from sight as often as possible (a daily dose would be ideal!).