Overcoming the Loneliness of Learning

Learning an instrument can be a relatively lonely task while the students we teach in our contemporary society are very “social” beings. To overcome some of that loneliness and develop ensemble skills we may refer to different opportunities with groups such as AUSTA, MTA, State Music Camp or other performance days including those of DECS.

Many though may not be ready for these and I have found that gathering studio practice students together for “Group Lessons” is an effective alternative. Even though their standards may range across several grades and technical abilities, even from Preliminary to Grade 5. The more advanced students “peer teach” the younger ones who watch, listen, ask questions and become inspired.

Some of the technical aspects can be demonstrated in “embryonic” form such as, in violin for example, spiccato and position changing. It can also help to have multiple copies of the lower grade pieces. This allows advanced students to adjust them and play an octave higher for example.

Other ideas for group lessons include:

• Tuning games – eyes shut, someone has a flat or sharp note. Remember who is who?...
• Scales games – with a missing warning or changed notes
• Sight reading
• Improvisation – beginning
• Aural development-recognition of intervals and leads involving preparation for exams
• Rhythm only pages – fun!
• Teaching problem solving through small group ensemble – simple duets, sight reading or discussing how players will all start together
• Spot the mistake games
• Listening to new recording – broader repertoire experience – listening to Piazzolla, alternative quartets – e.g. Soweto String Quartet
• Develop phrasing through unison playing
• Soundscapes – making sounds to match a story
• Introduction to analysis – spot the patterns-palindromes, turn this nursery tune upside down.
• Reinforcement of regular teaching routines – good posture, good bow hold, tension free hands, good tone.

In a group setting students provide you with fun ideas and images to support your teaching – e.g. mine suggested hungry dogs and electric shocks as images to support a good left hand shape. I’d be happy to explain that another time!

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The one-to-one teaching we do can be very powerful reinforced in group teaching and I have found that the resulting confidence and stimulation opens the learning doors allowing teachers to develop students even further!

My students often appreciate the relevance of their learning more readily, allowing teachers to teach to the objective of life-long learning. I have also found that retention rates rise and students begin to consider pathways into community orchestras and other longer term performances.

Ian Russell
AMEB Violin Examiner
DECS representative on AMEB Advisory Board

Strictly Speaking…

For young pianists who have difficulties with rhythm, most teachers recommend the use of a metronome, but few students actually take their advice.

They find it difficult to make friends with the metronome, or to use it on any regular basis, because they can always hear it ticking away mentally in the background and… this can be very distracting! Students readily realise that if they were able to play exactly in time with the metronome they would hardly hear it at all, because the initial percussion sound of the hammer hitting the string can actually cover the ticking sound, rendering it almost inaudible.

While it is probably untrue to practise playing whole pieces with the metronome, it is always useful for checking speeds, bearing in mind that any metronome marks printed in grey type are only editorial suggestions. It can also be used for controlling the tempo in various sections of a longer work, and it is especially helpful in the preparation of classical works – particularly slow movements – where students can succeed in the temptation of playing the simpler passages more quickly. That is, bars with 32 demisemi-quavers will often last longer than bars with simple quavers and crotchets!

Two simple exercises provide an excellent opportunity to introduce students to metronome work without having to experience unnecessary musical frustration.

(1) Set the metronome on a slow tempo and play a slow scale over one or two octaves, one note per beat, begin by using an even tone, and then progress gradually to extreme forms of crescendo and diminuendo. The aim should be to “cover” (hide) the ticking sound, and the exercise literally hammers home the point that when playing loudly, there is much more time for the hand to relax between one note and the next.

(2) With the metronome on its slowest speed, learn to subdivide the long beat by clapping or tapping 2’s, 3’s, 4’s, 5’s, 6’s and 7’s, eventually changing regularly from one to another, begin with simple 2’s and 4’s before you progress to 3’s, as this exercise is much harder than you might think!

Diana Weekes, AMEB Piano Advisor

Confident Scales

There is one segment of the AMEB exam that manages to invoke fear and trepidation in some candidates – SCALES! However, with thoughtful preparation early in the year, and with some regular encouragement and imagination on the part of the teachers, this apprehension can be avoided. It is possible to be confident with technical work!

Young students seem to be innately wired to be competitive. Who was the fastest? “How long did I last?” “What was the best time?” – this type of question is quite common for a younger age group. If this natural competitiveness can be harnessed in a useful way, without any negative connotations (eg. I was the slowest, I achieved the lowest time, etc) then it can be a useful teaching tool. The use of charts to plot an individual student’s progress can be a motivating practice tool. By measuring a student’s individual metronome markings with specific scales, progress can easily be seen on a weekly basis. This type of chart can also include specific such as variations in touch and volume. The student could tick off each aspect when achieved comfortably. When viewed over an entire term, students will feel a tangible sense of achievement in this area – particularly when rewarded with stickers or prizes!

With slightly older students, this form of mini-competition is a simple way of ensuring the students really are putting in a lot of hard work! Even so, a simple tick chart to complete in each practice session may provide an extra boost as to what needs to be covered. Often reminders are useful! As the range of scales increases, with some instruments the difficulties of the extremes of range are encountered. Encouraging students to spend the majority of their time practising the ‘tip of the iceberg’ rather than mindlessly playing through passages they have already mastered, with help them avoid ‘scale fatigue’. Spending 80% of the time practising the difficult 20% of the scale makes sense, and can help to build some good habits that will hopefully overflow into their preparation of repertoire.

Linda Peir
AMEB Flute Examiner

Modes in Music

A lot of contemporary popular music and jazz repertoire utilises scale forms other than traditional major or minor tonalities. Identifying the various modes is often problematic for classically trained musicians, as modes other than major minor tend not to form part of the technical work requirements for examination syllabuses (apart from CPM).

There are seven forms of modes in common usage, each having a distinct flavor (each mode also has a chromatic alteration; this is beyond the scope of this article). Each mode is constructed as follows:

Ionian: The pianist major scale. Semitones between steps 3 & 4, 7 & 8.
Dorian: A minor-sounding mode, commonly used throughout all genres of music. Semitones found between steps 2 & 3, and 5 & 6. Scarborough Fair is written in the Dorian mode, as is Eleanor Rigby by The Beatles.
Phrygian: Has a Spanish/Middle Eastern sound. Semitones occur between steps 1 & 2, and 5 & 6. The closing ariph of Philip Glass’ opera Satyagraha is in Phrygian mode.
Lydian: A major scale with the 4th degree raised. See Maria from West Side Story.
Mixolydian: A major scale with the 7th degree flattened. The Beatles’ ‘Your Winged pic’ is an example of a Mixolydian scale.
Aeolian: Otherwise known as a Natural Minor scale.
Locrian: The least commonly used mode, although found in jazz solos and occasional rock riffs, as led Zeppelin’s Four Sticks. Semitones are found between steps 1 & 2, 4 & 5.

One year’s encouraging students to experiment with these various ‘altered’ scale forms, as the study of modes will increase the student’s awareness of both tonality and style. Bartok’s Mikrokosmos presents short piano pieces written in the various modes, and the CPM keyboard syllabus introduces modes as part of technical work from 5th grade.

Finally, the order of the various modes may be remembered by use of this acronym: I Don’t Play Low Music After Lunch.

Ionian Dorian Phrygian Lydian Mixolydian Aeolian Locrian

Stuart Storer, AMEB Piano Examiner