

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 them to performance 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 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 A....(prearranged)...who is it....?
- Scales games – with a missing wrong or changed notes
- Sight reading
- Improvisation – beginning
- Aural development-recognition of triads and intervals leading to 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!

The one-to-one teaching we do can be very powerfully 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.

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