

No More Teachers, No More Books ... Piano Fun Over the Summer

By Rosemarie
Penner

School is (almost) out & everyone is looking forward to a break from the regular routine. Summer camps for the kids, vacations at the lake or mountains, lazy days of eating al fresco are some of the many of the things we enjoy about the summer months. But, how do we balance getting a much needed break from the school year & not losing the progress we (or our children) have made during the academic year? After all, any teacher can tell you that their students will lose between 2-4 months of information and skills over the summer months. Below are some tips for keeping your piano practice alive over the summer months without needing to keep a strict practice schedule.

Technique:

Technique refers to any exercises meant to increase the dexterity & control a pianist has over the piano. Some examples of these are scales, chords, & arpeggios though there are books which include specific exercises as well (i.e. Hanon). While these exercises are not the most exciting part of playing piano, they are valuable tools in learning & practicing the skills necessary for more advanced pieces.

- **Technique Jar (or Box):** Write each scale, chord, etc. that you have learnt or reviewed over the past year on a popsicle stick. For example, a minor harmonic scale. Every time you sit at the piano, grab a popsicle stick at random & play what is written. Don't remember how to play it? Not a problem. Check your practice book or look up the video in YouTube. YouTube has demo videos of almost all the technique you will be playing. The advantage to using the popsicle stick system is you are not practicing the scale for a week since it is meant as a quick refresher before you move onto the "fun" stuff.
- **Play With Volume:** Try playing your technique as loudly as possible, then play the same thing as quietly as possible. You are using different parts of your body & it has the added benefit of adding dynamics to your practice.
- **Play With Rhythms:** Change the note lengths using any pattern you would like.
 - Long, short, long, short.
 - Long, short, short.
 - Short, long, short, long
 - Liltng (think celtic music or some blues music)
- **Play Your Technique Like a Song:** A song has differing dynamics (volume), tempo (speed), note lengths (rhythm), & phrasing. Phrasing can be created using staccato (pretend the keys are really hot ... sounds detached), legato (pretend your hands are very heavy ... sounds smoothly connected), & combinations of the two. Create a story or decide on an emotion you would like to convey & play around until you find the right combination to express it.

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Repertoire:

Repertoire is the pieces (songs) that you learn & master. Summer is a great time to review the pieces you love & try new songs as well. Not sure what songs (or versions of those songs) are appropriate? Try to find music that is similar in difficulty to what you are already playing. Here are some basic things to look for:

- **Notes & Rests:** Choose a version that has notes & rests you already know. If you are a parent looking for your child(ren), match the types of notes & rests you see on the songs they have already learnt with the potential book or sheet music.
- **Rhythm:** Clap out the rhythm. Be sure to include any tied notes (notes joined together by a curved line) & rests. Again, YouTube is a great resource & has videos of many popular & classical songs for those of you who are more auditory. If you are able to clap the rhythm of the melody & harmony (or right and left hand in easier versions) separately then you should be able to learn the piece. If you are unable to clap the rhythm, the piece is probably too difficult & will probably be highly frustrating to learn.
- **Dynamics:** If you are unsure what a dynamic symbol means, check online for a definition. Many times the definition will give a great idea of how to play that section.
- **Articulations:** Articulation is how the note is played & its movement to other notes. For example, is the note played smoothly (slur line - legato), detached (dot above the note - staccato), or hold the note longer than its value (line above the note - tenuto). If you are unsure of a marking, check online. Included in the appendix of this article is a listing of some of the more common markings you may see & their definitions.

If you are still unsure if a piece is the right level for you, emailing your teacher for extra help is one option. Or, if you prefer, choose another version of the same piece (or another piece altogether). Challenging yourself is encouraged, but an all-out headache & huge frustration does no one any good. Trying to learn a piece well above your ability level may lead to burn out & take away the joy of playing piano.

So, remember to have fun & take it easy this summer! And, if you happen to be walking by the piano why not stop & play for a few minutes? Your fingers (& piano teacher) will thank you in the fall.

Rosemarie Penner is the owner of Must Love Music. She loves teaching, relaxing with her husband, as well as dancing and playing piano with her twins. Over the summer, she will be taking her own advice & playing around on the piano (with her two "helpers" making it a trio). For more information, please visit www.mustlovemusic.ca