

My primary goal is to teach students to love classical piano music. Even better if they become excellent performers – but I know those will be relatively few. What I want most is for them to grasp enough of classical music’s beauty, structure, and mystery to love this unique and expressive language. If I am fortunate enough to have some students who continue playing throughout their life, so much the better.

I had the privilege for several years of teaching college-level music courses for non-majors. I was shocked at how many told me they wished their parents had not allowed them to quit piano lessons when, as children, they put up a fuss. Of course, I know that if the parents had forced them to continue, perhaps they would not have retained *any* interest. How do we escape this paradox? The dilemma may not be totally avoidable, but a few things come to mind:

First, I believe the greatest thing is to show how much *I* love classical piano music. I must be willing to display my own enthusiasm to my students. The pupil might be self-conscious, but I must not be self-conscious! For example, if I feel like clapping or singing, I can clap or sing. Participating in excellent music should be fun and freeing, and this ideal is mostly caught, not taught.

Second, I wish to communicate a variety of sub-goals (as age appropriate), all important components of pianistic artistry. These include:

- Varied repertoire – showing that each piece expresses itself in its own special way;
- Technical proficiency – developing the physical skills to play a variety of repertoire;
- Range of expression – appreciating that tragedy or happiness can be conveyed with a shout or a sigh, a grand essay or a simple phrase;
- Listening well – becoming attuned to subtleties of dynamics, voicing, rhythm, and phrasing;
- Theory and genre – teaching how great music is intricately constructed, both small scale and large scale;
- Imagination – grasping the wide range of interpretive possibilities within a single piece;
- Sight reading – enabling a student to access new pieces even when the instructor is not present;
- History – catching a glimpse of the relationship between context and interpretation while providing a window into the human soul throughout the ages; and
- Exposure to non-solo piano music such as chamber, concerto, and vocal forms.

Third, I hope to find the right balance between freedom and discipline. When teaching non-major college classes, I was struck by how often “free thinkers” had

difficulty grasping the interpretive force of musical structure, and how often “disciplined thinkers” had difficulty feeling the beauty of what was happening at a particular moment. For fullest enjoyment, these dimensions must be merged. My hope is that I can capitalize on a student’s natural strengths while cultivating those dimensions that seem more elusive in order to develop their fullest potential.

Of course, for good or for ill, notes must be learned and practicing cannot be avoided! Time at the piano is a critical part of learning, and some amount of discipline must be maintained in order to achieve progress. Practicing has always brought me joy, so practice-time was like breathing for me. Yet I have gradually come to see that what worked for me is not every student’s path to success. I now understand that for some, short amounts of properly guided practice may yield more fruit than hours of drudgery. Thus, as my fourth principle, I will seek to be appropriately adaptable to each student’s unique personality and talents. This approach is more consistent with my overall philosophy, which emphasizes mental and emotional understanding of music more than mere virtuosity.

From time to time, I think back on my many years of piano study, and realize how fortunate I was to be blessed with teachers who were patient, inspiring, and challenging. Thus, my closing principle – perhaps more accurately, my fervent hope – is that I can emulate these wonderful instructors and demonstrate the same qualities in my own teaching.