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What does it mean to be a professional piano teacher? Is piano teaching even considered a profession? Some people think of piano teaching as a cottage industry. Many piano teachers teach in their homes—some charge small fees to supplement other family income, while others earn a living entirely from teaching. The educational background of teachers varies from those with little formal musical training to those with advanced degrees. This tradition has created a wide range in the quality of piano teaching. Anyone can teach piano since no minimal educational standards, no legal licensing and no mandatory certification processes exist. Consequently, some teaching is highly crafted, some marginally effective, with most falling in between. The lack of national- or state-mandated educational teaching standards often contributes to a public perception that piano teachers provide a service, but are not professionals.

Fortunately, with the growth of university music departments and piano pedagogy programs during the latter half of the twentieth century, talented young pianists majored in music and entered the teaching field with an extensive musical, pianistic and pedagogical education. This has not only provided guidance for teaching advanced or gifted students, but has helped prepare teachers to work with a wide range of ages, levels and abilities, particularly at elementary and intermediate levels. Furthermore, professional organizations, journals, workshops and conferences have increased awareness about this specialized body of knowledge. In the United States, Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) has a teacher certification program that encourages study, even for those without access to university programs. These trends have made piano teacher education more accessible and have increased respect for the profession.

Teaching a broad spectrum of students can be satisfying if the teacher has learned how to teach effectively. University pedagogy coursework addresses those needs, but is often limited and can only open the door for future teachers. It is each teacher's responsibility to refine the art of teaching through continuing education and thoughtful experience.

## **CHARACTERISTICS COMMON TO ALL PROFESSIONALS**

Professional piano teachers possess characteristics that are common to all professionals. They also have specialized skills that are unique to piano teaching. They recognize the purposes and values of music study and have developed a personal teaching philosophy.

Piano teachers should strive to achieve the following characteristics common to all professionals:

- ♦ an advanced education gained through a lengthy period of rigorous training
- ♦ training that involves the study of the theory and practice of a specialized body of knowledge
- ♦ a commitment to continuing education to upgrade skills
- ♦ a professional code of conduct

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### PROJECTS FOR NEW TEACHERS

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- 1) Think about the best teacher you have ever had, in any subject. List the characteristics that made that teacher outstanding and describe how those characteristics can be relevant to piano teaching.
- 2) Think about the least effective teacher you have had, in any subject. List the characteristics that made that teacher so unsatisfactory and describe how those characteristics can be relevant to piano teaching.
- 3) Using the questions on pages 11–15, conduct interviews with two or more independent piano teachers regarding their teaching philosophies and goals. Summarize their teaching philosophies.

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### PROJECTS FOR EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

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- 1) Answer the following questions to rate yourself as a professional. For the questions to which you answered “no,” summarize a plan that will help you improve in that area.
  - ◆ Do I have an education that included an extended period of training?
  - ◆ Do I upgrade my skills through continuing education?
  - ◆ Do I belong to, participate and volunteer in the activities of a professional organization?
  - ◆ Do I support the teacher certification program of professional organizations through my own certification?
  - ◆ Do I feel emotional satisfaction from my work?
  - ◆ Do I conduct the business aspects of teaching in an ethical, organized and businesslike manner?
  - ◆ Do I know my teaching goals and objectives?

**L**earning to play the piano involves understanding concepts and acquiring skills in a logical progression. Concepts are the principles students must understand and skills are what they physically execute at the keyboard. For example, students should understand that half notes last twice as long as quarter notes (the concept), and they should also have the physical ability to hold half notes for the proper duration (the skill). The teacher functions as a facilitator, using principles of learning to guide students toward the correct observations, answers and physical motions.

## FROM THE KNOWN TO THE UNKNOWN

Teachers must ascertain what students know before new information is introduced. Understanding musical sound and knowing how to produce it on the keyboard and discriminating between the right and left hands, high and low pitches, finger numbers, and black and white keys are all examples of some basic information that students may know before the first piano lesson. The information on a page of music that experienced musicians regard as routine—lines, spaces, clef signs, rhythm symbols, notes and finger numbers—is a confusing array of black marks to beginning students. Students might also be misinformed about basic musical concepts. For example, they may think that sharps and flats are only black keys, or that middle C is always played with the thumb.

A first lesson or interview should include activities that help the teacher find out what the student knows. Asking the student to “play three high pitches on the piano” will show whether the student understands high and low on the piano. If it is obvious there is confusion, the teacher can play a series of high pitches and ask the young student if they sound like a bird or a tiger. Once the student has identified that the sounds are “birdlike,” the teacher can ask the student whether a bird spends most of its time high in the air or low on the ground. The student is then asked to determine whether the pitches were played on the right or left side of the keyboard. The student knows the sounds related to birds and tigers, knows that birds generally fly in the air and that tigers generally move on the ground, and knows that the bird sound was made on the right side of the keyboard. From known information, the student learns what was previously unknown—that high sounds are to the right on the keyboard.

Known information can also assist students in learning about the musical elements that help pieces become more than just notes and rhythm. For example, playing loud and soft can be related to marching and tiptoeing; staccato and legato can be compared to popcorn popping versus rolling on the floor.

A student’s knowledge of various subjects can facilitate learning pieces that have imaginative titles. Students can be led to play a piece in a more expressive way by using articulation, dynamics and a tempo appropriate to the piece’s title. For example, a title that includes the word “soldier,” “marching” or “parade” might suggest an accented articulation, a louder dynamic (reflecting the action of marching) and a moderate tempo. Knowing that drums and trumpets are frequently used in parades can signal the use of crisp rhythmic figures and articulation.

Choosing appropriate materials is one of the most important considerations when starting a new student. Some experienced teachers, and some who have extensive pedagogical training, devise methods based on their own background and education; they write exercises and pieces or supplement with books of pieces that follow the progression of concepts and skills compatible with their teaching philosophy. Most teachers, however, rely on a body of materials that has been designed to instruct beginning students. These materials are commonly called *beginning methods*.

The function of a method book is to provide a logical progression for learning concepts and skills, and music for the practice of these elements. Choosing the appropriate method will help students move through the beginning stages with relative ease, while laying a strong foundation for future study. The student's learning style, experience with music, understanding of the keyboard, aural and physical development, reading capabilities, and rhythmic maturity are all factors to be considered when choosing a beginning method. Teachers should consider individual needs to choose a method that meets the requirements of each student. The variety of beginning methods available today provides teachers with many choices.

In recent years, methods have been written for specific ages and types of students. There are methods for pre-school, average age (seven to nine years old), gifted, older and adult beginners. There are methods that emphasize the early development of strong reading skills and others that delay reading until later. Methods that delay reading place emphasis on such skills as aural development or technique and often start with singing or listening to recordings of the pieces. Methods that delay reading instruction are beyond the scope of this chapter and will not be discussed.

## NOTE-READING APPROACHES

Methods that emphasize reading skills generally fall into three categories—middle C, multi-key and intervallic. Some methods are purely one of these types, while others are more eclectic, combining principles from the three approaches. Many modern note-reading methods begin with pre-staff (off-staff) reading before introducing reading on lines and spaces. (See chapter 4, page 76 for a description of pre-staff reading.)

### Middle C Reading Approach

In the middle C reading approach, middle C is the first pitch taught, with the thumb of both hands sharing that key. Students find middle C easy to recognize since it is a ledger-line note between the two staves and looks different from the other notes that are written on long staff lines. Subsequent notes are learned one at a time and are visually memorized by their placement on the staff so that students feel secure about what notes to play. Mnemonic devices, such as “Every Good Boy Does Fine” for the treble clef lines, often are utilized to help students learn the placement of notes.

With middle C methods, note-reading is dependent upon individual note recognition, rather than on patterns and groupings of notes. Eye/hand coordination can be difficult since the adding of one note at a time delays recognition of patterns and groups. Keyboard topography

## SPECIFIC CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING A BEGINNING METHOD

After the three primary criteria have been evaluated, teachers can further explore methods for other specific characteristics. The following series of questions can be investigated. Each question is followed by some additional considerations that will aid in evaluating a method.

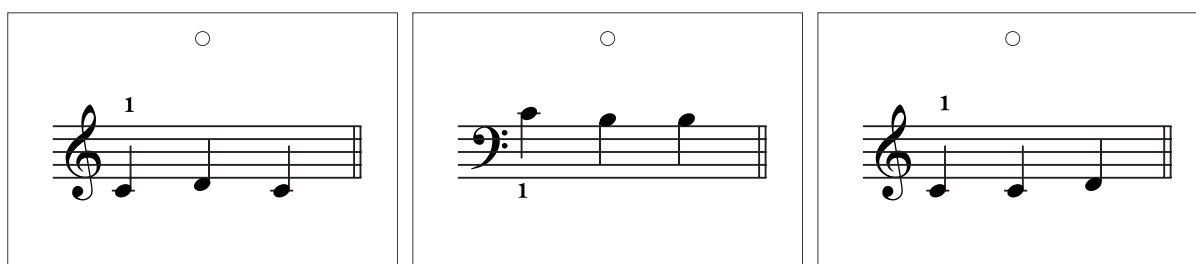
### Scope and Format

Is the book long enough, but not too long?	A method book must be long enough to be practical, but not so long that the student will feel discouraged from not finishing it in a timely manner.
Is the method designed for individual or group study?	Ensemble pieces, unit organization and a variety of activities in one book are characteristics of a group method.
What will the student have learned upon completion of the method?	A beginning method should include all elementary concepts and skills (see chapter 4).
Do the pages seem cluttered with superfluous material?	Method books should have more music to play than words to read. Text addressed to the parent or teacher should be limited.
Is the material presented in a clear and attractive manner?	The printing should be clear and easy to read. Any illustrations should be tasteful, colorful, simple and age-appropriate for the student.
Are the illustrations overly prominent?	Illustrations should not obscure or take precedence over the music.
What is the purpose of the illustrations?	Illustrations should match the title and sound of the pieces and appeal to the student's imagination to encourage musical playing. Some illustrations may be useful in conveying new concepts.
Is the printing the appropriate size for the targeted age level?	Methods for very young children, or those with limited sight, should have large print. As children get older, print size can become smaller.
Is the material presented in units or in a continuous format?	Units allow the teacher to organize a lesson around a small body of new information. Continuous presentation allows teachers to choose more or less material for individual students for each lesson.

up a 3rd,” etc. The students write the notes on staff paper or a dry-erase board, or place notes on the staff of a magnetic board. Students then read back the instructions that the teacher gave, using their own notation as a guide. Finally, students can play what has been written. Some of these patterns can be from pieces the student will be learning. While giving the instructions, teachers may also play the notes to add an aural component to the learning. This activity is especially effective for students who are aural learners. Hearing and speaking instructions activates their strongest learning mode.

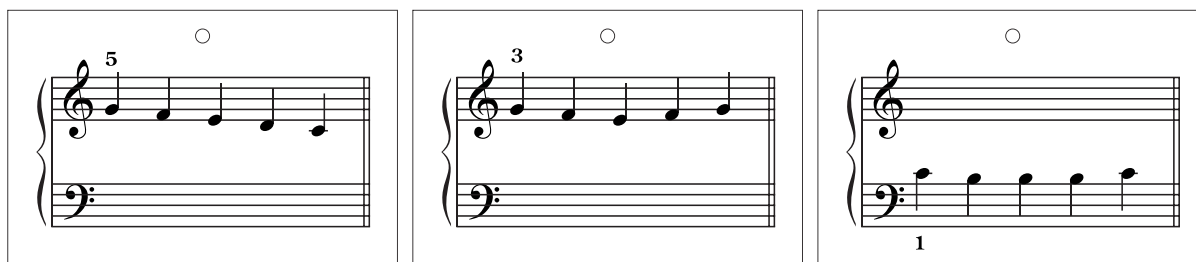
Contour reading can also be facilitated with sight-reading flashcards (see example 4.5). Students will be able to focus precisely if these cards are notated using only one clef, rather than the grand staff. Having to observe which clef is used adds to the learning.

**Example 4.5** Sample flashcards



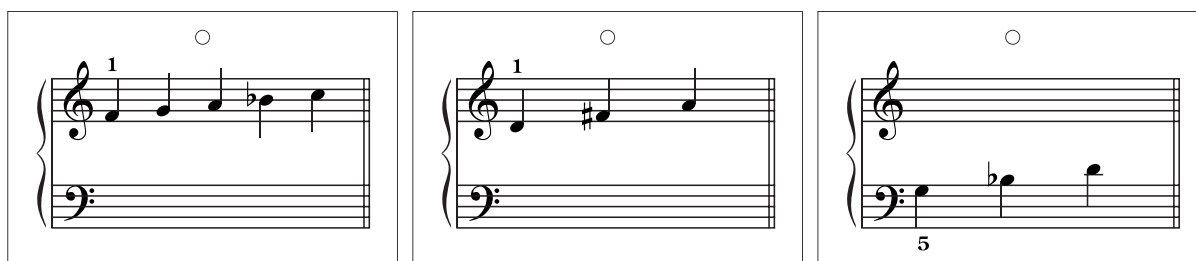
After a few weeks, the grand staff can be used and patterns from study pieces can be included. Students can play these slow, fast, counting aloud and not counting. Several can be played in any order for quick recognition and response (see example 4.6).

**Example 4.6** Sample flashcards



As students progress through the elementary levels, flashcard drills can be modified to include sharps, flats and naturals. Students begin to recognize and fluently play complete five-finger patterns and broken triads (see example 4.7).


**Example 4.7** Sample flashcards





Students may be impatient and shorten the rests. In “Leaky Faucet” (see example 5.7), the erratic dripping of a leaky faucet is simulated. If students do not observe the rests accurately, the suspense created while waiting for the faucet to drip is minimized.

**Example 5.7** “Leaky Faucet,” p. 59 from *The Music Tree*, Part 1,  
by Clark, Goss and Holland

**Leaky Faucet**  David Kraehenbuehl

**Monotonously** 4



*mf* Wa-ter, drip-ping. All night long I can't sleep, can't sleep.

Wa-ter drip-ping all night long. Bloop! Bleep! Blop!

(Teacher)  
*p staccato*

## Learning About Ties

Ties elongate a sound. Students sometimes find it difficult to observe ties that cross bar lines since no key is struck on the following downbeat. It seems unnatural not to play a key on a strong beat; therefore, students may instinctively play a note instead of observing the tie. Since the second note of the tie is notated, students are also visually stimulated to play it. Students must be able to readily identify the tie notation and feel the full duration.

Students can be prepared to observe ties in a number of ways:

- ♦ listening to the duration of both notes of the tie
- ♦ whisper-counting the beat of the second note of the tie
- ♦ shouting “hold” on the beat of the second note of the tie
- ♦ clapping the rhythm and make a silent motion for the tied note
- ♦ walking to the beats as the teacher improvises, and moving only the upper part of the body (without taking a step) to the beat of the second tied note

Each of these techniques can also be modified and applied to teaching rests.

a staccato note is played, the body retains unnecessary tension. The arm and hand are far from the key surface and must travel farther to play the next key. The motion for staccato should be a downward, into-the-key motion—just like all other playing motions. This downward motion is followed by a quick release, with no tightening during the release.

Two-note slurs have a specific articulation, physical motion and sound. The correct sound is produced by the following:

- ♦ the physical motion of dropping and lifting
- ♦ the sound image of slightly louder to softer
- ♦ the slight shortening of the second note

Two-note slurs are played by dropping onto the first note, shifting the arm weight or rolling onto the second note, and gracefully lifting the arm off the second note. This is one continuous motion rather than two separate motions—drop, then lift. Teachers can draw down and up arrows on the score to remind students of the proper motion for achieving two-note slurs (see example 6.2).

**Example 6.2** “Footprints” (Excerpt) by Robert Vandall  
Down-up arrows to show motion of the arm for two-note slurs

The musical score is for a piece titled "Footprints" by Robert D. Vandall, in 4/4 time. It features two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff begins with a *mf* dynamic and a *Slowly* marking. The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (F4, G4, A4) with a slur over them. Above this slur are three arrows: a downward arrow, an upward arrow, and a downward arrow. The second measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (B4, C5, D5) with a slur over them. Above this slur are three arrows: a downward arrow, an upward arrow, and a downward arrow. The third measure contains a pair of eighth notes (E5, F5) with a slur over them. Above this slur are two arrows: a downward arrow and an upward arrow. The fourth measure contains a pair of eighth notes (G5, A5) with a slur over them. Above this slur are two arrows: a downward arrow and an upward arrow. The bass staff contains a series of chords and single notes, including a triplet of eighth notes (F3, G3, A3) in the first measure, a pair of eighth notes (B3, C4) in the second measure, and a pair of eighth notes (D4, E4) in the third measure. The score is signed "ROBERT D. VANDALL" in the upper right corner.

## APPROPRIATE HAND AND FINGER POSITIONS

Correct hand position can be observed by looking at the position of the hand when the arms and hands are hanging naturally by the side of the body. The fingers are slightly curved and slightly contracted. The large knuckle joints, where the fingers join the hand (commonly referred to as “the bridge”), slightly protrude from the hand. When this natural hand position is raised and placed on the keyboard, the bridge will be slightly higher than the wrist. An imaginary line from the third finger to the elbow should be straight. The wrist should be level and feel completely loose and flexible.

There are several other ways to help beginning students achieve a desired hand position. Students can place their hands on their knees, raising the hands without changing the position at all. Students can also place their hands flat on a table top and slowly gather the fingers up to the correct position like a spider. This exercise, when done without tension, also strengthens the finger joints so they will not collapse. Using imagery by asking students to pretend they are holding a large bubble also creates a hand position without tension.

Students reinforce musical concepts, master skills, learn to play musically and have enjoyable experiences through playing pieces. Because music is central to learning, teachers can combine repertoire and other materials in a way that provides a complete learning experience. There is a wealth of available teaching material to add variety to assignments, recitals, competitions, festivals and auditions. With such diversity, it is not necessary to always assign a music book page by page or use the same material for all students. In addition, teachers are responsible for determining difficulties in pieces, teaching those pieces in ways that minimize the difficulties, devising lesson plans, and crafting assignments to promote optimal learning.

## KNOWING THE TEACHING LITERATURE

In many studios, students learn and practice new concepts and skills using pieces in their method books. However, most students also need additional music for reinforcement and motivation. Teachers should be acquainted with the standard literature and other supplementary materials, and be able to choose the very best pieces from what is available.

### Standard Literature

Standard literature can be found in collections of pieces by one composer and in anthologies of several different composers from one style period or from several time periods. At the elementary level, there is only a minimal amount of standard literature from past centuries. Therefore, collections of pieces by one composer often include more than one level of difficulty. Pieces in anthologies are more likely to be graded to include music by different composers at the same level of difficulty.

### Baroque Period

There are only a few pieces by composers from the Baroque period that can be taught to elementary students. Even the easier pieces from the *Notebook* (Clavier-Büchlein) for Anna Magdalena Bach and the *Notebook for Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* may be too difficult for some students. The easiest pieces from these notebooks include the following:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Applicatio in C Major</i> (BWV 994) <i>Notebook for Wilhelm Friedemann Bach</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Chorale "Joy and Peace"</i> (BWV 512) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>March in D Major</i> (BWV Anh. 122) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>March in E-flat Major</i> (BWV Anh. 127) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Menuet in G Minor</i> (BWV Anh. 115) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Menuet in G Major</i> (BWV Anh. 114) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Musette in D Major</i> (BWV Anh. 126) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Polonaise in F Major</i> (BWV Anh. 117a) <i>Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach</i></li> </ul>

erroneously thinking that musical playing will result. When students listen, precision and perfection are positive by-products. Other advantages include the ability to create beautiful sounds, artistic playing, and the ability to learn music quickly and accurately.

Therefore, beginning a lesson with activities that “tune-up the ears” seems as logical as beginning the lesson with technical exercises or hearing a practiced piece. Such ear-training activities direct the student to hear accurately what is being learned. Systematic and regular aural experiences ensure that this skill develops in a continuous fashion.

### Playing by Ear

When students play familiar songs by ear, they are learning to develop the ear in the most natural way. Students must know the melody for songs they will play by ear. When teachers assign familiar songs for student to play by ear, students need to be told the following:

- ♦ where to begin
- ♦ the first interval
- ♦ which keys they will use to play the song

At first, the easiest songs are those that can be played entirely on black keys. Later, these songs can be transposed to the white keys. Such pieces (and their starting pitches) include “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” (F-sharp), “Hot Cross Buns” (B-flat), “Mary Had a Little Lamb” (B-flat) and “The Farmer in the Dell” (C-sharp).

Next, familiar songs that stay within the five-finger position can be played by ear. These would include “When the Saints Go Marching In,” “Ode to Joy” (from Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*) and “Jingle Bells” (chorus). After students have learned the entire scale, they can play songs with a wider melodic range. Some students may not be able to play the complete song at first. These students can be asked to play only missing measures rather than the entire melody. For example, a student could be given the following as a practice assignment and asked to play the missing measures by ear (see example 8.3).

**Example 8.3** An early exercise in playing by ear

**Away in a Manger**

James R. Murray

*Moderately slow*

The musical score for "Away in a Manger" is presented in three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat major), and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo marking "Moderately slow" is placed above the first staff. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. A question mark (?) is placed above the second measure of the first staff. The second staff continues the melody, with question marks (?) above the first, fourth, and seventh measures. The third staff concludes the melody, with question marks (?) above the first, fourth, and seventh measures. The piece ends with a double bar line.



## EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS FOR PRESCHOOL GENERAL MUSICIANSHIP INSTRUCTION

In general, teaching preschoolers requires special equipment and a large open space that is visually appealing to students. Learning is enhanced when various materials and equipment are used. In addition to the materials available from commercial preschool music programs, teachers can make and/or purchase other equipment from toy, music, or educational supply stores. In typical preschool music classes where a keyboard is not used, such equipment includes the following:

- ♦ rhythm instruments
- ♦ recordings and recording equipment
- ♦ art and craft materials—construction paper, newsprint, scissors, markers, crayons, pipe cleaners
- ♦ balls of various types and sizes
- ♦ bean bags
- ♦ stuffed animals and puppets
- ♦ pictures of instruments and pictures to accompany stories or music
- ♦ hula hoops
- ♦ resonator bells
- ♦ storybooks
- ♦ dramatic play props, such as colored scarves, flags or banners, balloons, bubbles, feathers
- ♦ blocks with musical symbols on them
- ♦ floor mats
- ♦ mirrors on studio walls
- ♦ rhythm charts
- ♦ flashcards
- ♦ large, laminated staff cards
- ♦ magnetic and dry-erase boards marked with a music staff and keyboard
- ♦ velcro® music boards with a music staff and supporting musical symbols.
- ♦ large table and/or floor charts of the music staff and keyboard
- ♦ round stickers, checkers, metal or rubber washers, to represent note heads for placing on staff charts and cards
- ♦ ink stamps or stickers with musical notation
- ♦ note templates for tracing
- ♦ large-sized manuscript paper

## TEACHING PIANO TO PRESCHOOL STUDENTS

Since most piano teachers are interested in developing students' keyboard skills, they are more likely to favor teaching piano to preschoolers than teaching a program of general-musicianship. The curricula can focus solely on playing the piano, or the teacher can combine piano teaching with aspects of a general-musicianship approach. A preschool curriculum that focuses on learning the piano can use either a listening (playing by ear) approach or a

reach a specific technical goal, write a composition, sight-read a specified number of pieces, or learn and play a number of ensemble pieces. Even though lessons may not be as intense as during the school year, students will be enriched and will retain much more than if they did not have summer lessons.

### Introductory Classes

Summer is also a good time to offer special introductory classes for beginning students. By offering introductory lessons at reduced rates, teachers can attract more clients, many of whom will continue instruction after the introductory lessons are over. Furthermore, any beginners who have been interviewed and are starting lessons in the fall will benefit from a week of intense introduction to music fundamentals prior to the start of fall study. They get a head start without the additional pressures of school. Introductory classes also give the teacher (and parents) an opportunity to see whether the student is serious about lessons before parents make a large investment in lessons and an instrument. Eye-catching and provocative brochures or ads, like the one in example 11.10, will intrigue potential students.

**Example 11.10** Sample summer lesson brochure

## Thinking About Piano Lessons?

## *Why Not Try?*

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## Observation of Effective Teaching

Much can be learned from observing a variety of teachers—piano teachers, other music teachers, and classroom teachers. While teachers can learn by watching teachers who are less skilled, observation of effective teaching offers the best source for building knowledge and skills. Observation is essential for new teachers, but it can also enhance the skills of experienced teachers.

Observation is only effective if the observer knows specifically what to observe and follows a systematic plan. The first step in successful observation is to outline what takes place during the lesson. Those notes would include items such as the following:

- ♦ what the teacher says and does
- ♦ what the student says and does
- ♦ what materials and activities are used
- ♦ the order in which the materials and activities are presented

### *Notating Teaching Practices and Objectives*

In a shorthand form, observers can take brief notes that detail what takes place in the lesson. It is sometimes important to notate the exact words used by the teacher, but it is not always possible to do this with extended explanations on particular topics. The first column of example 12.2 provides sample notes of a five-minute portion of a lesson. They are probably more extensive than an observing teacher would be able to write, but they provide ideas about what to observe and write. Following the lesson, the observer determines the teaching objectives for all segments of the lesson. The written objectives for the lesson segment on half and whole steps would look something like those in the second column.

**Example 12.2** Sample lesson observation

Notes from an observed lesson	Objectives and strategies of the teacher as discerned by the observer
Teacher: "What is a half step?" Student: "From one key to the very next key." Teacher: "Excellent!"	When the student is expected to give precise definitions, accurate learning is ensured.
The teacher drills half steps on the keyboard using RH or LH separately—"RH finger 2 play G, up a half step, down a half step," etc. The student plays and says the names of the keys. Teacher: "You did the half steps perfectly."	The student <i>experiences</i> the half steps by playing them. The teacher is assured that the student understands. The student says the key names while playing them to reinforce the understanding of half steps and note names (e.g., G-sharp, E-flat, etc.). Reinforcement, encouragement and motivation—varied and specific to the task—are effective.