



Teaching the Adult Pianist: Insights from Music Therapy Practice

by Caroline Swinburne

I run an adults-only teaching practice in SE London; I am also a qualified music therapist (although not currently practising). This article is a reflection on how my experience in this field has informed my teaching.

My Teaching Practice

My pupils are aged anything from eighteen to eighty or over and range from beginners to advanced. A few are professional musicians, but most have demanding day jobs in other fields. Some played as children and are returning after a long break; others always wanted to play but never had the chance. A few are self-taught (sometimes disastrously, but occasionally with impressive success). My pupils pay for their own lessons and, unlike when working with children, there are no parents watching from the sidelines (or, as on occasion, running on to the pitch and trying to seize the ball!). They come because they want to, and the one thing they have in common is that, in some way or other, they feel the need for music in their lives.

Music Therapy

In the UK, music therapy, unlike instrumental teaching, is a highly regulated profession. Practitioners are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and supported by the British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT). All undergo a rigorous, masters-level training involving practical musicianship as well as psychological study, personal therapy and workplace placements.

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Whether it's a child on the autistic spectrum, an adult with a brain injury, or someone with dementia, therapists use their professional musical skills to help clients who may have problems expressing themselves verbally, to find a new means of communication through music. Therapists use a variety of techniques, but very often, sessions revolve around the use of free improvisation. The work is normally led by the client – both musically and emotionally – and nearly all of the time, it is they, rather than the therapist, who dictate the direction, content and pace.

Music therapy puts the emphasis on the *process of making music*, rather than the musical product, while traditionally, teaching is about the *product* – by which, we normally mean some sort of a “performance”.

The two professions are very different, but there is an overlap, especially when working with adult amateurs. Most of my pupils want to produce the best “product” (i.e., performance) of which they are capable, be it an exam achievement, a performance to a teacher, peer group or partner, or just playing a piece they love beautifully, in private. Although many of them are high achievers in other walks of life, they (like most of us) have had to accept that however hard they practise, they are not going to become concert pianists. There is no occupation so humbling as playing the piano! So, it's vitally important that they learn to enjoy the “process” as well as celebrating the “product”.

“Pupil-led”, Therapeutically-Informed Teaching

When working with children, especially in a school setting, there are often expectations from parents and other teachers that lessons will follow some sort of curriculum (normally based around exams). But with adults, I draw on my therapy background to encourage *them* to take the lead and decide their own “aims and objectives” for the work.

When I meet a prospective new pupil, I take a full “case history”. If the person is a complete beginner, I ask: Why do they want to learn the piano? What part do they see it playing in their lives? Have they ever played any other instruments? What music do they like and listen to? (Whether it's Chopin, Bach, Einaudi or ABBA, it tells me a lot about their musical personality.) What music would they like to learn to play? (Sometimes complete beginners say they want to learn a Rachmaninov *Prelude*, or a Chopin *Ballade*. I tell them that everything is possible, given enough time and dedication!) If the prospective pupil has learnt previously, I ask what prompted them to change teachers. And if they are returning to playing after a break of many years, then why now?

I also ask (not necessarily in a taster lesson but quite soon) whether the pupil is interested in taking exams. There is obviously no pressure on anyone to do this, but a surprising number of my students regard it as a useful mark of achievement. Some may have unfulfilled childhood ambitions (I have had several pupils who have always wanted to gain their Grade 8); others, including beginners, are used to milestones in their professional life, and feel happier having a similar framework to measure progression in music.

Some Fundamentals

It's not all completely touchy-feely in my studio! If pupils tell me that they want to learn conventional classical repertoire, I tell them they will need to establish a proper practice routine; this will necessitate a suitable instrument, and a reasonably private space in which to work.

I also strongly encourage study of theory. Children tend to see this as a chore, but adults are normally far more receptive. I explain that it's like learning a language; you will do far better if you have some understanding of grammar. We use theory manuals as the basis for practical exercises; they are a great way to practise anything from sight-reading to aural skills, rhythms, and awareness of keys and scales.

Improvisation

Like most people of my generation, improvisation played no part in my childhood piano lessons. Before training as a therapist, I had hardly ever played a note without a score and was initially way out of my comfort zone. However, it was reassuring to discover that there were techniques I could learn to help.

“You can't just say ‘go on, play how you feel,’” explains music therapist Tony Wigram. “Improvisation doesn't come as a natural gift, except to a few.... Most of us work hard at it, building up our skills and abilities.” (Wigram, 2004, *Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students*, p. 29)

After training as a therapist, I completed the Piano Teacher's Course and was pleased to discover that improvisation is also finding a place in mainstream teaching. These pages have featured several articles on the subject, including the recent excellent series by Suzanne Munro.

Improvisation with Beginners

Complete beginners are often nervous at entering what they fear will be a scary and elite world of classical music; improvisation is a great way of helping them relax and find their way around the keyboard. In the first lesson, I often start by showing the pupil middle C, then ask them to find all the other Cs on the piano. I give them a pulse, and encourage them to play different Cs in time, while I improvise simple chords around a I-IV-VI pattern. After that, we might progress to the “grand arpeggio” exercise created by Lucinda Mackworth-Young (Mackworth-Young, L. 2015 *Piano by Ear* p. 16), which involves putting the pedal down and moving up the piano playing C major triads with alternate hands; again, I can improvise against this background. Already, we are making music.

Improvisation with More Advanced Pupils

Later in a pupil's piano journey, I often include more sophisticated exercises. We might use pictures as inspiration, or develop improvisations around an interval pattern (for instance, just using thirds, all over the piano). One common technique is the development of an improvisation around a simple repeated chord sequence. As well as being a good "stand alone" exercise, this is also a great way of introducing new repertoire.

Recently I introduced a pupil to Schubert's *Waltz in B minor* d145. I first asked him to identify the LH chords; he successfully recognised a repeated progression: B min – F#7 (already making sense of chords which had initially looked rather scarily full of sharps). He then noted that at the end of the first section, the piece modulated to an A – D progression to cadence in the relative major. In the final section, the F#7 chord returns, but this time resolves to B major (a *Tierce de Picardie*, my well-read pupil was delighted to identify!).

Before learning the piece from the score, we used this chord progression as the basis for improvisation. First, my pupil played the chords while I added a waltz theme; we then swapped over and he added a tune. By the time we came to study the piece as written, he had felt his way into the style and understood the harmonies; his learning was therefore quicker, and more musically attuned.

Talking

My pupils normally want to make the most of every minute of the lesson by making music – but occasionally, they also want to talk. They might voice worries as to whether they are making good progress, or what repertoire they want to play, or whether or not they want to take an exam. Sometimes they apologise for having missed practice. When a child does this, it's tempting to suspect laziness, but my adult pupils normally have demanding day jobs and sometimes complicated personal lives. For this reason, in this case, I might suggest that we wait until the following week to focus on their repertoire, and instead spend the session improvising, or playing duets.

On occasion, the conversation takes a more personal turn; this is "me time" and sometimes

they want to offload on non-musical matters. My attitude is that the pupil has paid for the lesson, and if they want – on occasion – to treat me as a "therapist" (I use the word loosely), then that's OK – from time to time. However, if it becomes a habit, it's probably an avoidance mechanism; in this case it's important to move focus back to the music and try to understand the real reason behind their reluctance to play.

Working with Diversity and Disability

Most of my piano pupils are high-functioning and neurotypical; however (sometimes because they have discovered my background as a therapist) I have also taught people with physical or mental disabilities. One new pupil told me early on that he

had had a diagnosis of severe cognitive impairment, and had come for piano lessons on the recommendation of his neurologist; six months later he was delighted to show me a report from the doctor, noting definite recent improvement in brain function since we'd begun work.

But it is rare for my adult pupils to volunteer information in this way. When I was working as a therapist, I would have had access to case notes stipulating diagnoses; even when teaching children, a parent or fellow teacher will often fill you in. But when working with adults, suspicions of disability and neurodiversity are rarely officially confirmed, and have to be handled with tact.

I taught "Anna" (not her real name) for around three years; she was in her mid-forties and intelligent, funny and likeable. However, although Anna loved music and had previously studied with another teacher, she could still only play very simple pieces. She played extremely slowly, looking at every note or chord on the page, and gave the impression of working it out anew each time, before daring to strike the keys. She grappled with any notion of pulse and found it hard to create something that could be defined as "music". Often, she wrote the names of the notes on the score, telling me that she was too stupid to remember them. I would make a joke about it and rub them out, but then a week or two later the markings would re-appear.

I started to consider the possibility that Anna might be dyslexic. The British Dyslexia Association

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(BDA) notes: "One feature of dyslexia often, but not always noticed, is a disparity or mismatch between a person's intellectual ability and that person's perceived or actual ability when performing tasks, particularly those to do with the written or spoken word, music or manipulation of numbers." (BDA *Music and inclusive teaching: information from B.D.A.* 2016, p.2) This seemed an exact description of my pupil.

I decided to try a new approach. For some time, Anna had been grappling with *Sérénade Espagnole* by José Ferrer; she loved the piece but struggled to play it convincingly, no matter how much I broke it down. So, one day I took the music away. I reminded her that the first note in the right hand was an E, a tenth above middle C and asked Anna to play the tune; she played perfectly, at a speed appropriate to the music, and with a regular pulse.

I then turned attention to her left hand. Anna had a good grasp of chord structures (she understood this well as long as we worked on the keyboard rather than using written notation) and correctly identified the chords as a tonic triad on A minor and a dominant 7th on E.

Again, she happily played the chords by ear, and eventually managed to play the piece hands together, now making it into real music, rather than a series of disconnected notes.

I said nothing to Anna about my "diagnosis" (it would not have been appropriate) but later confirmed my theory when I printed out a new piece for her, one line at a time, increasing the size of the font, and using a highlighter pen to show the notes of the tonic chord. I told Anna – truthfully – that some people found it easier to read music this way. Although I doubt she will ever be a great sight-reader, using this system Anna was able to make a tentative connection between notes on the page and the music she loved to play.

Playing in Public



Adults have more baggage than children when it comes to playing in public (including playing in front of a teacher). In the words of pianist, pedagogue and writer William Westney: -

"The honest-mistake approach isn't so easy to accept for most adults, or for older children: we're driven too much by our emotional need to control events and avoid embarrassment." (Westney, W. (2003) *The Perfect Wrong Note* p. 63)

Every teacher has heard the frustrated cry "but I can play it at home". (Some of us may on occasion have even uttered the words ourselves!). I assure my pupils that I believe them, but explain that much as I do my best to be friendly, my presence inevitably introduces an element of stress, and it is this which causes small, silly new mistakes. I reassure them that I do still see progress, and an overall trajectory in the right direction.

The piano can be a solitary animal; I encourage my students to meet and share experiences with their peers. We have an active WhatsApp group, and three times a year I organise a pupils' concert (I call it a "social" and follow the playing with drinks and a chat). A few are reluctant to attend, but most regard the events as an invaluable chance to showcase their work, and a highlight of their piano journey. The social aspect is as important as the playing; it's lovely to see my pupils sharing learning experiences and making new friends.

Transferable Music Therapy Skills

- Listen. Be "pupil-led". Explain what you can offer as a teacher, and what the work will involve on their part, then let them decide what they want to get out of lessons.
- Don't be afraid to try improvising – both for beginners, and for more advanced pupils (but don't push it, if they say it's not for them).
- Introduce theory from the beginning – adults are far more receptive, and understand the rationale far better than children.
- Bring pupils together regularly, to play to each other, and to offer peer support.
- Be sensitive to their performance anxiety, which will inevitably be more severe than in children.
- Be sensitive to the fact that adult pupils will be juggling complicated lives, and that, sadly, playing the piano is unlikely to ever pay their mortgage.



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