

Piano for Beginners

—*Gregory Lewis*

leatham.com.au/teach/

Listen, listen, listen.

Use CDs, AMEB downloads, Spotify, Apple Music, or YouTube to hear a performance before you begin a new piece. Listen again each day before practising until you are sure of the rhythms and musical style.

Rhythmic errors are particularly hard to remedy. Knowing how the music should sound before you learn it will make everything easier.

This habit of listening to new music before you learn it is fundamental to studying any instrument. Unless you can hear the next few notes in your mind before you play then you have no idea whether you are correct.

Learn the note names!

All too often I am disappointed when students try, month after month, to figure out the note name by counting up and down the staff (or just guess) rather than simply saying E-G-B-D-F in treble clef, or G-B-D-F-A in bass clef. How hard can it be to memorise two sets of five letter names?

Please do not fall into the trap of making up nonsense poems where each word begins with the letters above. Although many well meaning teachers encourage this, my view is that this just slows you down.

Reciting letter names alone, not words, is how children learn the alphabet. I doubt if anyone ever taught Apple-Banana-Carrot all the way to Zipper instead of letter names. That would be cumbersome and hopelessly inefficient. Please, no pointless poems about boys and fruit...

Reciting the letters on the five lines of each staff is only a minimal first step. To read music fluently children need to recognise, for example, that the middle line of the treble clef is B. There is actually no time to say five letter names, or worse, recite little poems while you are playing.

Modern technology can speed up this process. A few minutes a day with these apps can help children get past reciting letter names to instantly recognising the correct keys to press, which after all is the ultimate goal.

I use this Apple program during lessons.

apps.apple.com/us/app-bundle/learn-to-read-music/id921754048

Online Music

Students may request particular pieces they enjoy hearing, such as movie or TV themes or popular songs. After completing Faber 2B they will have the skills to try the Easy Piano versions on the Music Notes website.

Music Notes provides “just for fun” music. A search for *Hedwig* produced the following result. You can see the first page and hear a low-quality computerised version of the music before you buy.

The site provides instant downloads – have your printer ready before you complete your purchase. You also have the option, at additional cost, of downloading a pdf file as a backup copy.

musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtd.asp?ppn=MN0041809

For this piece you also have the option of downloading a file for *JoyTunes*, an app that listens to you play and helps you learn the notes and rhythms.

Plus More!

Students who have trouble remembering note names or making quick progress through the Faber books are generally those who only do the bare minimum of home study. They rarely try new music on their own.

If children only play pieces given in lessons they will never learn the piano. It is vital they turn the page in their book, or download a song from Music Notes, or play from other books they have in the home.

The greatest joy I have in teaching is when, on regrettably few occasions, a student says “I have learned a new piece you didn’t teach me. Would you like to hear it?”.

Faber books often provide tunes where no new knowledge is required. Notes, hand positions and rhythms are the same as the previous piece.

Students should check for new notes or rhythms at the top of the page, find where they are used in the music then listen to a recording. They ought to be able to then figure out how to play the music on their own.

Simply revising a previously played piece is valuable. Piano music relies on repeated finger patterns, mostly in the left hand. Quick recognition of these patterns can only come with playing them in a variety of pieces.

Starting a piece on the correct finger is always necessary. If a finger number is circled (by the editor or by myself in lessons) then you need to move your hand to a new set of notes.

Good sight-reading is a learned skill, not a natural gift. The AMEB publish sight-reading books that can help.

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano/piano-sight-reading.html

Faber Piano Adventures

pianoadventures.com

This series has an excellent range of resources such as backing tracks and additional repertoire books at each level. These cover different styles of music such as pop songs, movies themes and Christmas carols.

Backing tracks are available for the books listed on this page at:

cloud.pianoadventures.com

The following books provide a good introduction for beginner pianists. These links include sample pages. Prices are in USA dollars. Australian sources for sheet music are listed later in this document.

Primer – Lesson Book

pianoadventures.com/publications/piano-adventures-primer-level-lesson-book-2nd-edition/

Level 1 – Lesson Book

pianoadventures.com/publications/piano-adventures-level-1-lesson-book-2nd-edition/

Level 2B – Lesson Book

pianoadventures.com/publications/piano-adventures-level-2b-lesson-book-2nd-edition/

What Comes Next?

After completing Faber 2B there are several choices available. Younger children may certainly stay with Faber through to level 3A and 3B plus Music Notes downloads before venturing into one of the options below.

These piano courses, plus the Anna Magdalena Notebook, have a wide range of repertoire styles with professional demonstration performances.

I have had various students who have started on different books but all progressed easily to Grade 8 and beyond. Where you start your studies is not as important as how much careful home practice you do!

The “Getting to...” series, by Elissa Milne

elissamilne.com

Australian piano teacher Elissa Milne publishes a wide range of music styles for young performers at different levels. She also composes music for beginners. This is an introductory series for Preliminary to Grade 5. Students can study either of the AMEB courses at the same time.

This quote from her web site describes the series.

The second series, titled “The New Mix”, is a collection of the best of contemporary and 20th century pedagogical writing, and of stunning arrangements of film music, orchestral themes, pop songs, folk tunes, jazz standards, themes from opera and ballet, songs from musical theatre, as well as classic tv themes. This innovative series matches the Australian Music Examination Board Piano For Leisure syllabus, and as such the music in these volumes is at least half a grade more difficult than the corresponding grade in the “classical” Getting to series. Currently available from Preliminary through to Grade 3 standard.

Getting to Preliminary – The New Mix

print.halleonard.com.au/products/ap1002/hlspl-getting-to-preliminary-new-mix-bk-ola-2nd-edition

Getting to Grade 1 – The New Mix

print.halleonard.com.au/products/ap1004/hlspl-getting-to-grade-one-new-mix-bk-ola

Bach is Best

The main obstacle to fluent playing is coordinating the hands. The best music to develop this skill was collected by Anna Magdalena Bach in her famous notebooks. Study of this music is highly recommended for all students from Grades 1 to 3.

Many editions are available, such as this selection.

print.halleonard.com.au/products/e52227/childrens-bach-easy-piano

This is an indexed performance of the complete set of pieces.

youtube.com/watch?v=1zh5QHnGYRs

AMEB Piano For Leisure

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano-for-leisure.html

There are four book sets (Series 1, Series 2 etc). Each provides music from Preliminary level to the Certificate of Performance. More important is the wide range of musical styles included.

Whether the goal is to complete the exams or just play the piano for fun, these books provide excellent material for study. Classical favourites, movie themes, arrangements of popular songs and jazz standards plus original piano solos are presented in a carefully graded order.

Recordings are available as AMEB downloads or on Spotify. For example:

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano-for-leisure/piano-for-leisure-series-4-recording-handbook-preliminary-to-grade-2.html

open.spotify.com/album/2taUJpH9Fkjvy60HnBKA4P

All *Piano For Leisure* books contain a good variety of well arranged music. Here are some example books from Series 4.

Preliminary

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano-for-leisure/piano-for-leisure-series-4-grade-book-preliminary.html

Grade 1

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano-for-leisure/piano-for-leisure-series-4-grade-book-grade-2.html

AMEB Comprehensive Piano Course

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano.html

In 2018 the AMEB published a major update of its traditional classical piano course. It is the most carefully considered and well-resourced course ever developed in Australia. Stretching over 12 grades from Preliminary to Licentiate this is the course for children who wish to build to the highest levels of technical and musical piano skills. Students who complete this course can move directly into University classical music studies.

Series 18 (white covers) provides repertoire from European music of the 1700s right up to modern Australian music.

Recordings are available as AMEB downloads or on Spotify. For example:

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano/download-piano-series-18-recordings-grade-1.html

open.spotify.com/album/0eihcCqNg4yAc4NVDzNCYR

Video performances by Australian pianist Brenda Jones, Preliminary to Grade 5, are linked from my website: leatham.com.au/teach/

AMEB technical work books contain finger coordination and musicianship exercises in addition to selected scales and arpeggios at each level. The material is tightly focussed and relevant to the repertoire at each grade.

My view is that all students should cover this work regardless of the piano course they are studying, or whether they later decide to enter for the optional exams.

ameb.edu.au/shop/keyboard-and-piano/piano/piano-technical-work-2008-level-1.html

Buy Sheet Music Online

dymocks.com.au

booktopia.com.au

amazon.com.au

mooloolabamusic.com.au

bettermusic.com.au

For AMEB publications: ameb.edu.au/shop.html

Home Practice Tips

Listen to the music first

In addition to hearing me play during lessons, students should listen to recordings of their new pieces at home before they begin to practice.

Simply play the recording twice, allowing your mind to start recognising the rhythms and intervals in the music. Listen as many times as needed until you can predict what comes next.

1. Hum along, or sing the words if provided. Engaging the voice is a powerful way to learn. You can quickly identify errors if the tune in your mind does not match the notes you are playing.
2. Clap along to the right hand part, then the left hand part. Beginners always learn new rhythm patterns more quickly and accurately if they do something physical. Clapping along with a recording then tapping your left foot to the beat as you play are recommended.

Divide your music into easy sections

Four to six bars is usually enough, marked by a letter or bar number in a box. This is important for all students, at all levels. For the first few days, try this simple plan for each section.

1. Left hand alone
2. Right hand alone
3. Left hand alone again
4. Hands together twice, slowly, no errors!

Always use the correct fingers

Play slowly and accurately with the same fingers each time, otherwise your mind is continually learning new versions of the music. Using random fingers will significantly slow down your progress.

Playing *non-legato* can help you learn the notes more quickly. Use your arm to lift your wrist off the keyboard between notes. Play hands separately until you are at full speed, with dynamics, articulations and phrasing.

Take time to understand the music in each hand before you play hands together. If the rhythms and finger patterns are not secure with one hand then there is no chance of being correct with two.

Take a **much slower tempo** when you begin with both hands, no more than half the speed. This allows you to think clearly ahead of pressing the keys. Use exactly the same fingerings as you did when playing hands separately.

Wrong notes always mean you are playing too fast. Always...

Learn the last part first

It is depressing to hear students begin confidently, with a great sense of style, only to end with many wrong notes and unscheduled gaps. Beginning your journey into a new piece with bar 1, then bar 2, then bar 3 and so on is a spectacularly inefficient and error-prone learning method.

If you begin every practice session at bar 1 then ultimately the opening pages of your music will be more secure than the final pages. This is surely counterproductive—the entire piece needs to be confident!

Spend time on the end of the piece when you start learning it. Classical pieces often increase in complexity towards the end. Learning the final page first is a powerful idea. Work towards building a “big finish”.

Backward Chaining is a technique to try early in your study of new music. For example, play from your final rehearsal mark to the end of the music. Then play from the second last rehearsal mark to the end, and so on. This simple idea really will speed up your progress.

If some music is difficult then try backward chaining bar by bar for that section only. This can often clear up a few tricky bars in a single session.

Work in short sessions

Practice sessions of 10 to 15 minutes for six days a week are recommended for beginners. In the early stages of learning a new piece, a gap of more than two days will seriously slow your progress.

There is little chance of improvement with less than 90 minutes of practice a week. That is, 90 minutes of actually making music, not sitting at the piano and daydreaming. As the saying goes “*Wishing is not enough.*”

As you advance, multiple sessions of 15 to 20 minutes each day will be required to play each piece correctly five times a day. At least two hours per week of careful, thoughtful practice is needed at Grade 2.

A key concept is **mindful repetition**. Improvement comes from repeating sequences of correct fingers on the right keys with accurate rhythm. Five perfect repetitions of each piece is enough in one sitting. If you have more time then work on a different piece during the same practice session.

Never correct a wrong note then continue without working out what went wrong. This only teaches your ears and fingers to insert the error into the music. Reflect on why the note was wrong, go back a bar then slowly repeat. Remember, “*Practice makes permanent*”. The correct notes and rhythms must be permanent, not the mistakes!

Memorise each section, even if only hands separately, as you are learning the notes. Don't wait until you can play the entire piece before trying to memorise it. Hear each phrase in your mind before playing. Imagining the music an instant before you press the keys is vital.

Practise performing

In learning mode be alert to errors, think of solutions then rework those bars. In performance mode try to keep the rhythmic flow of the music alive. Never stop—this takes precedence over accuracy. A few dodgy notes here and there will be a part of every concert you play. It is not possible for anyone to play without occasional errors.

Learn to cope with unexpected mistakes by performing often. As recital time approaches ask friends and family to listen to you. Try to keep the rhythm going even if there are a few wrong notes.

It is never OK to ask “*Can I start again?*” during a performance. Always try to keep at least one hand going. If you really get lost and are forced to stop then go back to the nearest rehearsal mark and pick it up immediately.

Give recitals, for yourself and others

Record or video yourself regularly. Hearing and watching yourself play is character building! Observe how others see you and listen closely to what they hear, not what you thought you played.

Use these recordings to assess your playing. Think about tempo, phrasing, rhythm, dynamics and articulations. Plan to improve these aspects of good music making at your next practice session.

Take your music along when you visit someone who has a piano. Better still, memorise simple tunes to play in public at any time. Music is written to share. Please share what you know with your family and friends.

Use FaceTime or Zoom to present short recitals, maybe just a few simple pieces at first. Setting dates for these mini-concerts will provide clear goals for you to work towards.

Take the optional exams

You can enrol and submit a video of your best pieces from the *Series 18* or *Piano for Leisure* books whenever you wish, without waiting for the twice-yearly exam sessions.

Scales, broken chords and arpeggios are not required for video exams but I will ask you to play these during lessons. Students with strong technical skills always learn new music much more quickly.

You may record your exams at home if you have a well-tuned piano or a digital keyboard. Make as many videos as you wish, then send your best. All pieces must be played in one sitting and submitted to the AMEB via YouTube as a single video file.

More information, including a sample exam is here:

ameb.vic.edu.au/video-repertoire-exams/