

Teaching Intermediate Piano Course

Sample Articles

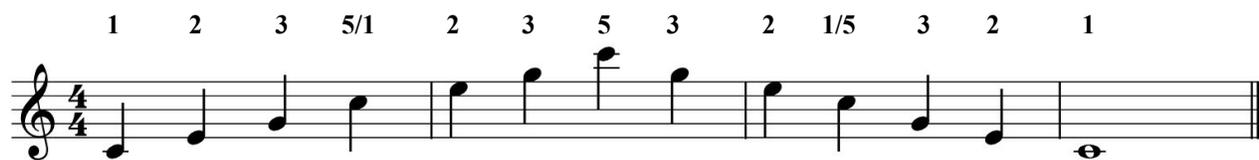
Each module has between five and ten comprehensive articles with images, sound clips, musical examples, and interactive graphics. Here are a few excerpts from the Intermediate course.

WEEK 3: Physical Approach and Technique

Sound Production

Arpeggios

The mastery of arpeggios is crucial to the development of a pianist's technical vocabulary—the ability to maneuver up and down the keyboard effortlessly facilitates a necessary ease at the instrument. An essential element of good arpeggio playing is the angle of the arm to the piano. At all times, the arm should remain more or less perpendicular to the keyboard. A technique that students often try is to connect at shifts of position—they do this by pivoting so that the arm moves toward a position that is almost parallel with the keyboard. Note that this sort of motion will not hold up with a quicker tempo, and will create awkward bumps in the physical approach. As a preparatory exercise to the study of arpeggios, you could try this:



WEEK 4: Music Literacy

The Modern Era

Cool Jazzy Rhythm

Chatman puts together a picture of sneakiness using musical techniques (or devices) that people associate with its meaning. One of those techniques is rhythm. With the use of rests and ties, the composer creates a syncopated rhythm that really moves! Consider the opening four measures:

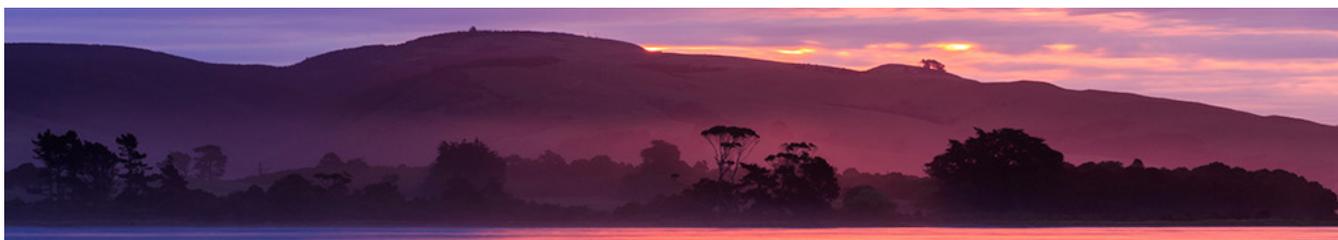


Begin by counting six beats in a measure, and listen for the surprise in m. 3. One of the definitions of “sneaky” is something done unexpectedly or without warning. The listener has no idea when the piece begins in unison, two octaves apart, that all of a sudden there will be chords, played with a pounce, in syncopated rhythm.

To feel the rhythm accurately, it is especially important to count every rest. Your students will feel the syncopation in a natural way, as soon as they add the left hand...

WEEK 8: Artistry and Expression

Visual Imagery to Inform and Describe Technique



Whenever composers write descriptive details on the score, students should explore the meaning within the context of that composition. Copland references a poem by Roethke at the beginning of *In Evening Air* (Level 8) with the words “I see, in evening air/ How slowly dark comes down on what we do.” Teachers should help students to discover how specific piano technique can help to create the sounds that might be associated with the delicate, yet clear, playing required in this piece.

Throughout the composition, Copland writes descriptors to assist the performer, such as “more open” in m. 6, “simply, tenderly” in m. 15, and “weighty, singing tone” in m. 38. Students could be encouraged to begin by playing some of their technical exercises in ways that evoke different sounds—such as delicate, majestic, powerful, firm, graceful, or playful—to name but a few words that they will encounter in their pieces.

Always, when having students complete exercises such as this, it is critical to have them listen carefully (often to the teaching model first), and then identify when they have emulated the correct sound.

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Discussion Forum Sample

Weekly discussion forums provide an opportunity for you to learn and share with like-minded colleagues in a moderated setting. In-depth conversations, aligned with each week's topic, allow you to exchange strategies and teaching tips with teachers from across North America.

Week 5: Integrating Improvisation into the Practical Lesson

How do you integrate improvisation into a traditional lesson? Based on what you've read and seen in this module, what approaches or techniques inspired you the most? Where would you start to integrate improvisation and why? What challenges do you think you will face? What strategies will you use to overcome these challenges? How much time will you allow in the lesson for improvisation? What type of instructions do you give for home practice?

Working on improvisation with my students is a rare occurrence for me. However, I have a few middle school students who would rather improvise than practice their assignment. We've explored the basics like scale passing tones, chord inversions, zig zags, etc., in jazz style pieces and one student has worked through the entire first book in the Beale *Complete Jazz* series, which is a structured program for learning to improvise to classic jazz tunes. And some of my students come to a lesson and start noodling around with a song they've made up, which I let them do for a minute or two to unwind before we start (I call them "Noodlemeisters," which they love!). I have a Clavinova with a rhythm band, numerous instruments, recording and sequencing features built. I set up a folder for each student and save their recordings.

I've never really focused on integrating improvisation into my lesson plans, which is why I was THRILLED to discover the material in *Pattern Play*. I bought a copy last fall, but put it away and forgot to look at it. The videos in this module clearly demonstrate how it offers a simple (and fun!) way for teachers to incorporate general improv into lessons while building musicianship and confidence. I'm definitely working *Pattern Play* (and *Chord Play*) into my lessons for the "Noodlemeisters" this summer. They'll enjoy it and it will give me a chance to test the materials for wider use in the fall.

There will certainly be some challenges I will face incorporating more improv into my lessons. The first will be ensuring that the "Noodlemeisters" continue to practice all components of their lessons and not just improv. My solution in this case will be to let them focus entirely on improvisation for a few weeks and then gradually start to reintroduce technique, repertoire, and *Four Star* into their lessons. Another challenge will be encouraging students who are uncomfortable with something so free form to develop a sense of ease with improvisation. One approach here would be to go very slowly, discuss their reservations, and be supportive of every effort (no corrections!). I will also have to ensure that I assure parents that this isn't a frivolous use of lesson time (which they might assume since it's not externally goal-oriented in the same way as exams, recitals, etc.).

Time spent on improvisation in lessons will depend on the student. While ten minutes a week may be appropriate for some, 10 minutes every two weeks might be a better fit for others. Some practice instructions could include a 2-3 minute daily warm-up or wind down, or simply 10 minutes a couple times a week. I look forward to exploring where this new approach will lead and hearing wonderful creations from my students!



Kayla

Thursday, September 15, 2:52 PM

I agree with Kayla's comment about assuring parents of the benefits of improvisation. I think the reason is because, nowadays, the thought of improving and exercising musicianship through improvisation has been diluted. It's easy to forget that Bach, Mozart, Clementi, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt (just to name a few) were each renowned improvisers in addition to being top-notch composers. Best of all, improvisers today can shift between conventions of musical eras. What better way to learn and understand a particular genre of music than to improvise on it? I think reminding parents of this would be incredibly helpful in getting them on board.

Eric

Friday, September 16, 1:36 AM



Something rather nice happened in my studio today. I went through Forrest Kinney's "World Piece" with several of my intermediate-level students, and after some initial concerns, I had them improvising on the G flat major scale! After this exciting start, they played what they had originally prepared for their lesson and it sounded noticeably fresher. I think my students could sense the energy that improvisation adds to their playing. Because of this, our lessons will now include 10-minute improvisation moments, with easy-to-play patterns, and I can't wait for 6 books of *Pattern Play* to show up in my mailbox!

Adding to Kayla's comment, it's definitely important to set parameters for the "Noodlemeisters." I think having regular performance opportunities and/or exams is a great way to help keep them on track with their repertoire and technical studies. Is your "Beale" student still working with you? What an accomplishment making it through the first book. It's not all easy!

Alegha

Friday, September 16, 10:04 AM



What a wonderful story about your *Pattern Play* adventure at lessons, Stacey! Improvisation on the G flat scale is often tricky for students—I can certainly see how this would infuse a sense of excitement and new energy into their repertoire! Starting the lesson with a few minutes of improvisation sounds like a good way to warm up and help students transition into the lesson mindset.

Thanks for the reminder to set limits for the "Noodlemeisters." You are quite right, and I think I can be too amorphous when dealing with them (I'm learning in this course the importance of clarifying expectations at this level, and perhaps not being overly zealous at the same time!). I'm going to have to order the whole set of *Pattern Play* too, in order to keep up with them!

Here's the story on my Beale student. He did really well learning the pieces in the book, so I felt like he needed to get a "real" jazz teacher (i.e. one who has actually performed jazz). It's hard at that level, because some of the jazz teachers here only want advanced players (this was a college student who was an intermediate level pianist, really nice kid and good musician). We found someone who worked with him for awhile, but I recently found out that he's moved on. I just sent him a message the other day to find out what's going on. Maybe I shouldn't have jumped the gun on the referral.....Thanks for asking!



Kayla

Saturday, September 17, 6:19 PM

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