

Four Common Approaches To Learning Piano



Prepared by Allegro Multimedia

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Introduction

Music is a universal language, a God-given joy meant for all of humanity—but we already discussed the challenges in learning the “language” of music in order to create our own. Let us explore further.

Traditionally, music education for the majority starts with the piano. It is a relatively simple instrument for newcomers to learn. A student can go as deep as he or she may want in piano, or even jump to another instrument like the guitar, flute, or a myriad of other instruments if he or she has a strong base in piano.

Let’s take a look at the options for an aspiring new piano player.

1. Traditional lessons

Of course, the first thought that typically comes to mind when looking to teach our children piano (or learn ourselves) is, “Hey! Let’s get a piano teacher.” There are so many questions that arise when evaluating a potential teacher: (We will use ‘she’ because the majority of piano teachers are women, but men of course can and do teach.) Whatever the gender, a number of questions arise.

- ❑ “How do I know she is good at what she does?”
- ❑ “She may play well, but can she teach well?” ..Or...
- ❑ “Will my children even like her?”

You see, there are as many styles of teaching as there are teachers, and finding the right one for you and/or your children is not unlike finding the perfect mate. A friend may recommend a teacher who suited her perfectly, but who may not necessarily mesh well with your children. For example, a teacher may insist on perfecting a single song, spending months on it before letting your child move on to the next, all while your child gets bored with the whole idea of lessons. Or, he may be at the opposite spectrum, providing less structure than your children need to learn what is necessary.

You may have to try several different teachers until you find one that’s just right (maybe we should call this the “*Goldilocks Method*”). It is a problem that is similar to the traditional education system—the “one teacher fits all” approach. Even if you do find that special teacher, try getting her schedule to fit yours may be a new circus juggling trick for mom and dad, especially if it involves driving to and fro.

Unfortunately, most of us did not have that ideal teacher, or as nice and patient as she was, she was stuck in almost medieval approaches to teaching music. We’re all aware of the classic, almost caricature idea of the piano teacher that we grew up with: we’ll call her old Mrs. Williams, the lady who comes to your home once a week; or perhaps your children go to her in-home “studio” down the street for half an hour. We may have either heard or

experienced the “horror stories” from our childhood: She explains musical notation and your children try to read it. She corrects them, perhaps nicely or perhaps not, and then tells your children to practice. Even without telling your children how they will know they are practicing correctly or not, she says just practice, which they do because you nag them to ... (unless they forget, of course).

The next week she will try and undo what your children imprinted on themselves with bad practice. It can be confusing, uninspiring, and tedious; we know this is not at all why we actually wanted them to play music. But as we saw in our earlier report, it is not completely Mrs. Williams’ fault. She learned this way, and either she or her parents had the discipline or love of music to overcome the confusing tedium and actually learn. So, she follows the “tradition” and is proud of her pain, and now she wants to share that with your children. “It builds character!” some proclaim. Yet most children drop out or abandon the ordeal as soon as they have a chance, because there is no joy, only repetition and ineffectual learning of a confusing code.

This is definitely a stereotype, but all too familiar in part or whole to many of us. What defines this is the theory first, read second and play last approach to classical music that even the most dedicated, loving and brilliant teachers cannot overcome easily. Yet it cannot be denied that finding the “right” piano teacher can change lives, and inspire a life long love of music, and even allow people to overcome the “barbed wire” of traditional music notation without being stranded and giving up halfway. A great teacher can help people overcome even the most confusing landscape, or at least inspire them to never give up. If the traditional approach to master music notation first is used, they will need that inspiration to get through the first painful years.

Traditional Lessons Approach Conclusions

Pros: Human interaction, modeling of music, can fill the gaps between music notation and actual playing.

Cons: Difficult to find a qualified and positive teacher, tends to be very notation centric, high cost especially for more than one child, practice is outside of teacher’s quality control, can actually discourage interest in music if the kids have bad experiences. Can be expensive and inconvenient, especially in multi-kid households. Practice is the true challenge, and kids can either waste the lessons by not practicing, or worse, by practicing wrong.

(Piano Wizard: No need to find a qualified teacher, not notation centric, much less expensive than Piano lessons, however, can actually “encourage” future piano lessons. Practice is no challenge as practice is a subconscious act by simply playing the game.)

2. Non-Traditional Lessons

Another option is to learn from non-traditional piano teachers. These teachers and methods tend to take a non-literate or at least don't put music notation as the central approach to making music. They teach improvisation, perhaps in the style of "Play Piano in a Flash" which teaches songs like target keys to hit, to explore, with some basic chords and combinations that allow the student to mix and match, often rendering a great immediate sense of being able to play. Or, they teach rote learning of pieces, either through modeling, like the Suzuki method, or some form of alternate notation like colors, numbers, or letter names in some form.

Since these alternate methods are not widely disseminated, or are introductory, the songs available in that format are often limited (think Mel Bay). Depending again on the teacher (often highly motivated because she found "another way"), these methods can lead to real music making, but there are some serious limitations to this approach. While they share the concerns about music notation being a frustrating experience that can actually kill interest in music, we know that whatever its faults, it is the only path to full musical literacy. Leaving music literacy out of the equation ultimately is extremely limiting for the aspiring musician, and can be a source of embarrassment for their whole lives, no matter what their musical accomplishments.

Philosophically, the "**Suzuki**" approach is designed to get students playing **first**, then reading. In other words, the concentration initially is on listening and playing the music before learning to read. So there is eventually a need to learn how to read traditional music, just as we eventually learn how to read words in a book, but to get children started and interested in music, they first teach by ear.

The problem is the transition to reading notes is not so smooth for Suzuki, especially for piano, which contains harmony, as well as melody. (Violin is a single line, sequential like language, piano plays the harmonies as well, and so is parallel, and the reading does not come as easily, being more complex).

Students of these non-traditional methods may develop great technique and memory, or learn to play by ear and to improvise, but they are often helpless in front of sheet music, and ignorant of the musical workings of the great musical giants before them or around them. Still, the students tend to find some quicker path to initial success and real music, and may stay with it for life, even though their "musical vocabulary" and literacy limit them.

However, it is one thing to pick out a simple melody and some chords, but most could never learn a Chopin prelude by ear, or even a four-part hymn, and so they remain "stuck" in what they can hear. As impressive as playing by ear is to many of us, it is like the oral tradition of some African tribes that have a storyteller remember long histories of their people. But that can never compete with being able to read and write. It is the same with music. As talented as these people are, only the **rarest** of them ever approach real fluency and an ability to replicate moderate - let alone complex - music scores. For many years, in particular with the piano, this was a well-known challenge for Suzuki method students for example, though they have improved that somewhat (ironically by incorporating more "traditional" approaches to reading).

Non-Traditional Approaches Conclusions

Pros: Human interaction, less dogmatic, innovative or at least novel, focused on making music instead of deciphering code. Can (because music-making is more concrete) lead to lifelong love of music.

Cons: Difficult or even impossible to learn classical or written sheet music, limiting children's exposure to great musical minds and deeper musical study. Still expensive, especially for multiple children. Practice is again outside of the teacher's control and so no feedback until the next lesson. While "sensory learning"¹ is a valid method, learning to play by ear does nothing towards helping someone understand how to **read** music.

¹ Sensory Learning is essentially the ability to incorporate different senses either alone or in combination to heighten and reinforce the learning process.
Source: http://www.babyzone.com/toddler/toddler_development/early_education/article/help-sensory-learning

3. Video lessons

There are many options for video lessons, where you simply pop in a DVD and have the “lessons” whenever you feel it to be convenient. There is no need to schedule a time that’s convenient for a piano teacher, no need to leave the home and drive back and forth to lessons, and no need to spend extra gas money, all thanks to the wonders of technology. They are available night and day, and, if you forget some part of the lesson, there’s no extra charge to go back and do it again. The video doesn’t know who’s watching, so it cannot charge per child like a real teacher has to.

Here, you are almost guaranteed to have nice teachers, (they can’t reach your children with that ruler even if they had one), they almost assuredly know music, and if they have bad breath, your children can’t smell it. If a particular approach of teaching does not work, it is relatively easy to turn off the TV and perhaps try a different program.

Video lessons often can do a good job of “show and tell.” Since many are professionally produced, the teachers tend to be enthusiastic and cannot “forget” to cover a specific part of a lesson, which may occur in “real life” lessons.

Another benefit to this approach is that parents can also watch along with their children, learn with them, guide them, and generally get somewhat more engaged in the entire process with their children than in-person lessons.

They are often cost effective, but have some serious challenges.

First, they are not interactive, so they cannot tell your children if they are doing something wrong, or answer any questions, all of which are essential to the process of piano education.

Second, a DVD doesn’t know if your children practice (or if they even watch the DVDs), so it cannot hold your children accountable or check their progress. Finally, DVDs almost all rely on music notation, and have lots of explanations of the code before the children can begin to play anything interesting, just as in traditional piano lessons. These require great discipline, either with the parents, or children or both. Still, if one is highly motivated, this is an affordable way, though few excel or persist because it is a musical room without mirrors; feedback is totally absent.

Third, if they don’t understand an explanation or idea, they have no resource to ask or consult, just repeat the lesson and try and guess. These gaps are often subconscious from the video professor, they think they are speaking English or their native language, but they often introduce musical jargon without realizing it, confusing the child and perhaps even the parent. This lack of interactivity and feedback put the burden very heavily on the person watching to get perfectly the lesson.

Finally, there is no engagement on the part of your children, so they may very quickly tire of watching a teacher talk “at” them, instead of to them, and the old issue of getting children to practice tends to remain a problem. A teacher can tell if they have practiced, this now falls to the parent to check, and then to see if the practiced “correctly” can be a real problem.

Video Lessons Approach Conclusions

Pros: Expert guidance, ready when you are, often affordable.

Cons: No feedback; requires lots of self-discipline and still requires pain of decoding traditional music notation to go very far. Can be boring for children as the person is talking “at” them.

4. Computer lessons

Over twenty years ago a computer protocol called MIDI (Music Instrument Digital Interface) was developed to translate music notation and music playing into a format that computers could understand. This was heralded by many teachers, musicians, and composers alike as a revolution. In many ways it was, and some music instruction programs were devised to let the computer handle many of the rote and repetitive aspects of learning piano, but with interactivity.

This technology has several advantages.

First, unlike videos, it is interactive. It can possibly provide a feedback loop that could arguably be an improvement on real human feedback, both in accuracy and consistency (with no bad breath). Furthermore, with the proper program, practice can actually turn into a fun “game,” where children want to play because they enjoy the challenge. Children could practice for hours and not incur large costs, while still getting accurate, if not particularly musical, feedback.

This option, like the videos, tends to be fairly inexpensive, though it does require a MIDI or digital keyboard. Fortunately, these keyboards are a commodity, widely available in Apple, Radio Shack, Best Buy and of course music stores, or online. Try and get something smaller, that can be put in front of the computer and taken away easily for the first few years, so that the computer space is not monopolized by a big hard to move keyboard. Many are connected and powered by a simple printer cable type USB connector, requiring one less cord and outlet, even allowing you to play the game with the laptop batteries away from any outlet. That being said, one can also upgrade to a full size weighted digital keyboard as the child progresses, and wants to play more complex songs or upgrade their musical range.

Additionally, children can practice any time, day or night, with headphones to avoid disturbing others, sparing both the student and peers from the embarrassment of wrong notes.

Some of these programs allow you to import almost any MIDI file, of which there are tens of thousands online, though these are like a “box of chocolates”, you will have to sift through to find suitable arrangements, and there is an issue of legal vs. pirated content. Unfortunately, many of these computer programs have their own “proprietary” formats, greatly limiting the song selection to a few dozen or perhaps hundred songs available in that format, restricting the kind of music a person can learn to that selected by the designer of that program.

The challenges with most of these programs are two-fold. One, they are computer programs, and many people may not be comfortable with computer interfaces and procedures. Nothing worse than wading through a text based help system to decode how to hook up and use the computer, then only to find that the program spends hours of initial instruction drilling on abstract repetition to learn music notation before they can actually play. Two obscure confusing interfaces for the price of one!

Second, although the method of delivery is unique, most programs still use musical notation as the vehicle of choice for people to learn to play musical pieces. Check to see when music

notation is introduced, if it is the end goal or the beginning phase. Starting with music notation basically puts the user in a kind of interactive pop quiz from hell, with painfully exact feedback, and can just feel like a drill sergeant with no real teaching involved.

So, now you have to deal with two obscure confusing interfaces for the price of one! Two strange interfaces in order to play music — computers and music notation to learn. It may feel like taking a test but with a computer instead of a teacher. Despite all the advanced technology, historically, this approach alone has basically failed to break through the traditional challenges and get people to play real music quickly, in spite of its obvious potential.

Video Lessons Approach Conclusions

Pros: Interactive, deals well with repetition, good for drilling, can be sequential and good for self study if motivated.

Cons: Interactivity is often just a variation of normal boring drills, but with a relentless and uncaring master. Cannot teach or model important skills outside of what can be measured by pressing a key at a particular time. This often starts with drills on music notation and so inherits those shortcomings, confusion and challenges.

5. Addendum

The struggle to find (and pay) a good teacher

Of course, there is no substitute for personal contact with a gifted teacher who patiently guides her students along the blissful musical journey, whether traditional or non-traditional. Ideally, she teaches, your children learn to play beautifully, falling in love with piano, and go on to lead a life full of musical joy. She loves music, gently moves them to try, rewards their every success, and makes them feel safe. She nurtures in your children a love of learning, gives them a gentle path to success, and most importantly, teaches them to enjoy the process and the practice. She is there, and can show them hand position, how the piece should be played (modeling is one of the primary ways we learn), and can help bridge the gap between notation and music. She encourages your children, gives them context, history, and different ways of looking at music, and if she is truly unique, she actually shows them ways to improvise and create their own music. As we explored in our first report, there are those lucky ones who are able to find an excellent teacher who loves piano, loves to teach children, and is great at what she does, awakening a hidden talent within the kids she comes in contact with.

Reality, unfortunately, is not always so lovely. While it is definitely possible, is it still improbable to find “the perfect teacher.” And, if she is that good, perhaps her time slots are full or she charges three times what the others do, per child.

But as wonderful as this ideal teacher may be, even if you can find her and afford her, all her work is for naught if your children do not practice, and practice properly. She cannot be there when they practice, so they will inevitably forget or improperly learn habits that have to be undone.

Another limiting factor, of course, is cost. If you do happen to come across the perfect piano instructor, and she actually has room in her schedule (if the whole world hasn’t discovered her just yet), it is not likely going to be inexpensive. The price will vary from teacher to teacher, and from area to area, but one can expect to pay anywhere from \$40-\$80 an hour for lessons, especially in an urban environment where there is more competition. If you have at least one lesson a week, this can very quickly become significant. And finally, this is only for just one child. If you’re like most families, you want to give this opportunity to all your children.

Additionally, these type of lessons involve a great deal of planning ... driving to your child or children’s lessons, waiting for them to finish, then driving back to pick them up, week in and week out. Coordinating an already busy schedule may not sound very appealing, but it’s the price that many are willing to pay, and one may question, “Is it really worth it”?

Ultimately, there are many pros and cons to working with a piano teacher—this path has worked for some, but definitely not most aspiring students, judging from their high dropout rates.

Stepping away from the practical challenges, another issue that arises with any type of in-person lessons, whether traditional or non-traditional, or whether group or private lessons, is

parental involvement. Because of the nature of piano lessons, most teachers will not allow parents to sit in on lessons. This is not necessarily because they have something to hide, but it is simply not how they are used to working. In such a situation, how can we as parents get and stay involved in our children's musical journey? Is it possible for us to learn in the process of teaching our children like we do while reading literature together, for example?

Yes, we may get "involved" by reminding them to practice at home, but often, our own limited knowledge of music would prevent us from getting engaged into the actual instruction as much as we'd like. Simply put, with lessons, we as parents cannot learn along with our children in the same way we do with their other homework.

6. About Allegro Multimedia

Allegro Multimedia, Inc. (dba Music Wizard Group) is a leading provider of non-violent music gaming software and musical educational tools that teaches both young and old alike how to play the piano and read music.

Piano Wizard is an exciting video game that integrates computer-based piano tutorial software with a fun, interactive gaming environment. It has the unique ability to transform tedious and repetitive practice sessions into an exciting and deeply rewarding video game experience for people of all ages and musical abilities. Because Piano Wizard is primarily a video game, but with a deeply appealing educational aspect, it will be the first video game suitable for home shopping and infomercial marketing. The product will provide consumers with a non-violent alternative to traditional video games that is fun, compelling, and challenging. Simultaneously, it will teach musical literacy.

Our Mission

The mission of Allegro Multimedia is to:

- ❑ First: increase music literacy and the ability to play and read music among all classes of people;
- ❑ Second: to provide an answer for parents and educators as well as religious groups and government agencies to combat the onslaught of mind-numbing violence and destruction that has traditionally dominated the video game industry; and
- ❑ Third: to build long-term relationships with our customers by providing quality products, training, support and additional exciting gaming products that continue to move our mission forward in a fun, safe and non-violent and yet exciting way for their children.

Our Vision

We at Allegro Multimedia want to create a tidal wave of interest in music making. To achieve universal musical literacy among all people regardless of age, national origin, or economic status through fun and exciting non-violent, music training video games.

For more information, please visit www.MusicWizard.com