

AUTISM & PIANO STUDY

A Basic Teaching Vocabulary

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for Elizabeth, Sean, Ellen, and Wendy



TOMGEROUMUSIC • COM

TGM00040

ISBN-10: 1-7923-9981-2

ISBN-13 : 978-1-7923-9981-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023931246

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PREFACE

As I sit here writing these opening paragraphs, the United States of America Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about 1 in 44 children are identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder. If these numbers continue to hold true, we will be facing a national emergency in the next twenty years regarding education, long-term care, and quality-of-life experiences for these individuals.

Parents of children with autism are increasingly active in advocating for the inclusion of their children in activities enjoyed by all young people, and music study is no exception. During my first lectures on teaching students with autism given in the late 1990s, I used to ask piano teachers how many of them were teaching a student with special needs. I often had one or two teachers raise their hands, and the usual reason was that they were teaching a family member with autism, or that they were teaching the child of a friend. The audience at my lectures now consists of teachers who attend to obtain more information because roughly seventy-five percent or more of them are teaching students with autism or are on the cusp of accepting these students into their studios. This growth in service to our community of students with special needs is a wonderful testament to the golden hearts and grass roots activism of my piano teaching colleagues and their ceaseless work in providing the joy of music making to anyone who asks for it.

I have always believed that as a faculty member at a public State University, I have a responsibility to serve the public who contribute their tax dollars to support me. Some of those tax dollars represent food off of the tables, and clothes off of the backs, of people who can little afford to give. If they give to me their trust in the form of financial support, then I have the responsibility to return that trust to them with things that can improve their everyday lives and the lives of their children. The field of piano pedagogy is, at its root, about the trust parents place in piano teachers in nurturing and developing the intrinsic music aptitude in all children. At its very heart, piano pedagogy is about the responsibility teachers have in nurturing and supporting young people, providing opportunities for musical and personal growth, validation, and lifelong learning and enjoyment through music making. This holds true for every student regardless of age, race, background, or special need. My job is to help support and serve people in whatever way I can.

I received my first phone call from the parent of a child with autism in July of 1999, and what grew from that first phone call is the subject of this book. I could not have dreamed that a short phone conversation would lead to a twenty-plus-year journey that would radically change everything I thought I knew about music and its place and function in the world. That journey continues to radically alter everything I thought I knew about playing the piano, everything I thought I knew about teaching others to do the same, and everything I thought I knew about the training of other piano teachers. I did not know that my work with my students would result in a specialized teacher-training course for my university students, or in the Carolina LifeSong Initiative that is my piano program for students with autism and other special needs. I did not know that my students would challenge me in ways that would show me that my teaching practices were often meaningless, irrelevant, or counterproductive to what they needed in their day-to-day interaction with music and the piano. These realizations were at times maddening and frustrating. Most importantly, every interaction with my students continues to be humbling and awe-inspiring.

If you are reading this book, you are teaching students who have autism, you are thinking about expanding your teaching to include students with autism, or you are simply interested in the subject. Regardless of the reason, you are a hero in my mind and heart. Your work will open the door to music enjoyment for students who might otherwise be left behind, or who are considered to be unteachable and “less than.” You are taking a chance and moving into a new teaching practice that may often leave you feeling ignorant, uncomfortable, and frightened. Regardless of all of these feelings, you are committed to validating a child’s life, contributing to the quality of a child’s life, and showing the world that all people are deserving, gifted and capable. I know what you will encounter and the challenges that you will face, and I thank you for your courage and your commitment to this work. Your work will help to make all of us “part of” instead of “less than” and the world will be a better place because of you. What you do is important. You will make a difference in many lives. You are important. Remember this on the hardest days.

The title of this book is *Autism and Piano Study: A Basic Teaching Vocabulary*. It is the result of more than two decades of teaching and research into how students with autism learn to play the piano. I wish

CHAPTER 2

Autism

Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Delay Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS); these are conditions described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition Text Revision*. Other than PDD-NOS, most persons are familiar with Autistic Disorder and Asperger’s Syndrome. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V Text Revision* describes Autism Spectrum Disorder in three levels, each requiring differing levels of support. Asperger’s Syndrome and PDD-NOS are no longer described. Although the descriptions and labels have changed, adults and younger students may still present or identify with the labels of Asperger’s Syndrome or PDD-NOS and this information is valuable to use in crafting an educational experience that meets their needs.

A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is made by a team of professionals. However, a quick search online and on social media or video sharing platforms will result in listings of information and numerous videos about autism, quizzes or lists of facts indicating that someone may have autism, and also social media groups and chats where members will offer a diagnosis without having ever seen or interacted with the individual in question. In each case, this information may be questionable at best and dangerous at worst. The veracity of the source and all information should be evaluated in detail. Ultimately, the team of professionals should be the group of individuals who studies the case of the patient, observes that patient, consults, and arrives at a final determination and diagnosis of autism.

Autism is characterized as a spectrum disorder and will appear differently in each child. Each child will need a differing level of support and a different adaptation in the instructional process. Autism is a developmental disorder and there are many labels associated with it in the literature and language: high functioning or low functioning, spectrum disorder, developmental delays, etc. While this information is part of the medical language and service systems, it is easy to begin to allow the diagnosis and associated information and labels to obscure the presence of the individual. The person is of the utmost importance, and the diagnosis and labels provide us with valuable information about the needs of that person and how we need to adjust and adapt to help them achieve their potential.

The description, information, and diagnostic criteria concerning autism in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is extensive and these sources are included in the supplemental readings at the end of this chapter. To approach this

information in a way that is useful to us as piano teachers, I have condensed this information into three categories that I use to effectively reframe and guide the creation of my instructional process for students with autism. Those three categories are:

- 1 Social Behavior
- 2 Social Communication
- 3 Imaginative Thought

While the medical literature necessarily describes persons with autism as having “deficits” in these three areas, I prefer to approach my students who present with Autism Spectrum Disorder as people who may exhibit “differences” in social behavior, “differences” in social communication, and “differences” in imaginative thought. In the instructional process, “deficit” may indicate “inability” while “difference” indicates ability and also a need for adaptation. This change in verbiage harkens back to a discussion of our students with autism needing to be made to feel that they are “part of” and not “less than.”

Social Behavior

The first area of discussion is a “difference” in social behavior. When a traditional student approaches a piano lesson, we assume that they will have learned a set of social behaviors and that they will be able to exhibit those behaviors in different settings. For example, we assume that a student will be prompt for their lesson, wait quietly until their lesson time, will knock on the door, wait for a greeting and to be invited into the lesson environment, will know where to put their books and possessions, and will know how to sit quietly, wait for instructions, and achieve readiness to learn. Most of those behaviors will have been observed, practiced through trial and error, and transferred to different social situations. Students will also have received instruction from their parents and will have received validation of their learning and their behavioral successes, or correction where appropriate.

A student with autism may not be able to observe behaviors, understand the role of those behaviors in social situations, or be able to transfer them to other social situations. They may need to be taught to wait patiently until it is their lesson time, to knock quietly on the door, to wait for a greeting, to return that greeting, to wait to be invited into the lesson environment, where to put their belongings and where to put their instructional materials, how to sit and wait quietly and patiently, and how to get ready for instruction. These behaviors need to be part of the instructional process in the piano lesson as they are part of getting ready to learn. Education in these behaviors may also avoid confusion or frustration in the learning process and

CHAPTER 5

Studio Environment

Preparations for Jason's piano lesson included much more than a detailed lesson plan. Jason was a wonderful and very bright young man who happened to have autism, fine motor skill delays, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). His ADHD was very prominent in his behavior during his piano lessons and required for me to think about new and different ways in how to plan and unfold the lesson process for him. The first thing that I needed to adjust was Jason's lesson environment. Creating a nurturing and comfortable lesson environment for him involved two things. The first thing that I needed to adjust was to remove distractions. I removed all books and pencils, erasers, and other learning tools from the piano. I quickly learned that it was important for me to close the lid of the grand piano and to place the music desk on top of the lid. Jason was fascinated by the movements of the hammers and dampers and if he saw and focused on them, it was difficult to keep redirecting his attention. If the piano lid was left open, he would even slouch down on the bench so that he could look into the small gap between the wood of the piano and the music desk to see the hammer and damper movements. I also closed the fallboards of both instruments to remove the distraction of the piano keys and sounds until we were ready to commence the lesson.

The second thing that I adjusted was my teaching persona. I took time to remind myself to always speak in a positive tone of voice, to use specific vocabulary and a detailed explanation of the lesson segment in which we were engaged, and to carefully and kindly validate each and every success that Jason achieved in his study. As Jason's attention would quickly lag and stray, I began to use simple positively voiced redirecting words and phrases such as "up here," "look here," "try again," and "great!" I also began to use more body language prompting by using my fingers to point to specific notes or fingerings in the score, covering up with my hand parts of the score that Jason had already played, tapping my fingers on the music to gain his attention, and judiciously pointing to his fingers and hands as necessary.

These changes in my teaching persona helped to keep the process moving for Jason. He was so bright and capable that I began to develop a theory as to why these changes and adaptations worked for him. My theory remains unproven and unsupported, but I began to believe that Jason often understood

and was able to do a new task very quickly. I also began to notice that a slower pacing in my teaching or numerous repetitions of a skill often led to shifts in Jason's attention away from the instruction. I began to accept that Jason would often comprehend a new skill and be able to execute it very quickly, and that I needed to simply move on and not belabor his education with unnecessary repetitions. If he needed review of a concept, it would suffice to review it in the next piece that he would learn. This led to a happier young man who increasingly enjoyed his music making and began to make very good progress. The need for a faster process and kind and positive validation was driven home to me during a short conversation at the beginning of one of Jason's lessons. His mother told me that she didn't know how well Jason would do that day because he had experienced a bad day at school. I asked him if he had a rough day at school and he answered in the affirmative. I also asked if he wanted to talk about what had happened, and he said "no." He continued by telling me that he would never give up because tomorrow was another day and that he would try to do better. I swallowed the lump in my throat and assured him that I was glad to see him, and that his piano lesson was a time to have fun and to learn, and that I was his friend and that I would help him as much as possible in his music study.

My story about this young man is about how the piano lesson is as much, or even more, about the person who is sitting on the piano bench as it is about the music study. The need for support, validation, and adaptation is crucial in nurturing and validating that person. The story is also about creating an appropriate studio environment for each student, including the need to eliminate potential distractions, or to welcome distractions that serve a purpose during the lesson. It is also about how the student's parents hold a crucial role in the process. This chapter will include a discussion of unwelcomed and welcomed distractions in the studio environment and during the instructional process, and how parents may be actively involved in supporting their child's music study.

CHAPTER 6

Studio Communication

“With Bethany, tone is everything.” This sentence is one of the most important lessons I have ever received from a student’s parent. Bethany’s lessons had been progressing very well, and she was making terrific progress in learning to use all of her fingers while playing her own arrangements of her favorite songs. Although she was blind, autistic, and had profound developmental delays, she possessed unusually high music aptitude. During our work together I had learned that my teaching process should consist of a teacher model, hand-over-hand instruction, and a limited use of vocabulary. I had also learned that a slow, calm, and warm tone of voice was needed to help Bethany remain calm and engaged in the instructional process. On one particular day and for any number of possible reasons, I lapsed in my teacher demeanor and spoke to Bethany with a louder and sharper tone of voice. Bethany stopped playing the piano, and she disappeared into her own world and stopped interacting with me and the piano. I asked her mother what had happened and if I had done something to frighten or upset Bethany. She gave me a kind smile and said, “With Bethany, tone is everything.” The change in the tone of my voice had caused Bethany to shut down interaction with me and to withdraw into her own thoughts. Her mother was very kind and told me that we would not be able to continue until Bethany had come back out of her inner world. The lesson was over for that day. I apologized to Bethany and to her mother and I made a commitment to being more mindful of my tone of voice in future lessons. I tried my best to be sure that this was an isolated incident, but it was one that I would unfortunately repeat during the Covid-19 pandemic.

On a Monday afternoon, I was in the midst of an online lesson with Joshua. Joshua was a very gifted young man who had progressed from the beginning book of the Premier Piano Course to level eight of the Royal Conservatory of Music Celebration Series. He had autism and other developmental delays including fine motor skill challenges. These physical challenges seemed to have limited effect on his piano playing, and in some cases, he managed to find ways to work around the challenges. Joshua was creating elementary music compositions and he was very gifted in his improvisation skills. We had been engaging in online lessons via Zoom for some time, and we had been able to facilitate a lesson set-up that worked well for Joshua. I had created instructions for how online lessons would commence and he understood that we would need more time to talk with each other, and to gain joint attention through our computer

screens. Even with variances in internet connections, Joshua was doing very well. I was never sure how he was hearing my audio on his computer or how my piano sounded, and how the volume worked for him. Things must have been workable as we were studying Haydn’s D Major Piano Concerto. Joshua was able to play along with my accompaniment and seemed to be enjoying himself. He never balked when asked to complete a new task, and always answered “yes” when I asked him if we could do something new or different. During one lesson the audio connection may not have been as secure as usual, or there was something else happening with our internet connection, and Joshua kept playing while I was trying to talk with him. I raised my voice to say, “Can you please stop so that we can talk?” Joshua immediately stopped playing, pulled his hands away from his keyboard, put his hands up to his face and started becoming very agitated. I told him that everything was okay, and that we couldn’t hear well sometimes when using the internet and that I needed to talk with him about his playing. He calmed down somewhat and resumed the lesson, but it was clear to me that he was still upset. At the close of his lesson, I smiled and told him that he had done a good job and that everything was okay. We both said our goodbyes and I told him that I would be excited to see him again next week. The following day I received an email from his mother. She related how she had needed to talk with Joshua for a long time about the incident that had occurred in his lesson and to help allay his agitation and emotional upset over what had happened. He had eventually calmed down after he understood that he had done nothing wrong and that I was not upset with him in any way. The sharp change in the tone and volume of my voice had been so different from what Joshua normally experienced during his lessons that he had become very upset for many reasons. I had never seen him that upset and was very glad that his mother had written to me about the incident. She told me that mindfulness of voice tone and volume were very important in communicating with Joshua and that the sharp change in my teaching demeanor had been misunderstood. I thanked her for her email, said that I understood, that I would make the necessary changes and that I would be sure to address this with Joshua at our next lesson. I also wrote an email to Joshua to apologize and explain that he was doing very well in his music study, that the internet was sometimes difficult to facilitate as a teaching medium, and that I had only talked

CHAPTER 7

Routines

Resistance, frustration, anxiety, and behavioral outbursts or shutdowns. These are things that many of you have experienced from your students during piano lessons. I experienced the same at the outset of getting to know my students who are on the autism spectrum. I knew that my students were very bright and capable and that many of them displayed above average music aptitude. What was the cause of the problems? I learned long ago to keep a metaphorical mirror for my teaching self, and to first look into it when I experienced difficulty or failure in a lesson. My students were brilliant so there had to be something about the instructional process that was not adequate for their needs. There also had to be something about me as a teacher that was not meeting their needs. Constant self-examination and self-critique became a part of my lesson planning, and a reflective habit at the close of every day. The process continues to be painful at times but is ultimately how I have made progress and growth in my teaching and as a person.

“Let’s do a new piece.” This sentence is full of problems for a student with autism, especially if it is a surprise and the child has not been prepared for the introduction of a new activity. The first problem with the sentence is that it is autocratic and does not involve student-centered engagement. It does not involve consent from the student. The sentence is also full of unknown possibilities. “Which book?” “What page number?” The page in question may include a jumble of text and images in addition to a possibly overwhelming number of notes, fingerings, counting indications, and other score markings. In short, I am surprising my student and forcing that student to engage with not only a new piece, but possibly new concepts. I have asked my student to engage with a large number of unknowns that may result in resistance, frustration, anxiety, and behavioral outbursts or shutdowns. My insistence on conforming to my own process has been the cause of an increasingly dense layer of things for which I have not prepared my student. I have not created a learning environment or instructional process appropriate for my student’s needs, hence resistance, frustration, anxiety, and behavioral outbursts or shutdowns.

After a few failures on my part as a teacher, I knew that I needed assistance. I turned to the people who were best equipped to help me discover more about how their child learned. I had to relearn how to learn from the perspective of my student. I humbled

myself, relinquished my authority, and asked for help. My students and their parents gently educated me about the need for a different kind of organization and routine when engaging with them. They also educated me about the need for very specific choices in vocabulary and for a very detailed and step-by-step breakdown in the teaching process for any skill their children needed to learn. This level of detail was much different from that used in my traditional pedagogical practices and required a complete rethinking and retooling of my teaching process and my own understanding of the important concepts in piano playing and music making. Helping my students required me to undergo a complete re-evaluation of everything I thought that I knew about piano teaching. It also required a nearly complete re-education in the ways of addressing the needs of my students and to help them achieve their potential. What I learned came down to one simple word, “routine.”

“Next we are going to do...” This was a phrase spoken by one of my students that has become the basis for most of the lessons that I teach to children who are on the autism spectrum. Many children with autism have a gift for remembering details, lists, and schedules. They are better able to navigate their world if they know what is going to occur at different times in their day, or from moment to moment in the piano lesson. They can thrive in their music study if they know the list or schedule of things they will encounter in the lesson, and how they will encounter them. We can refer to these lists and schedules as macro routines and micro routines.

Macro and micro routines have become essential tools in planning for my students’ education, in organizing my thinking and communication of concepts, and in facilitating the learning process for my students. A macro routine refers to the daily schedule or lesson event schedule used to help the student manage their week and day. The micro routine refers to the detailed and specific step-by-step instructional process for each learning segment of the lesson that the student will encounter. The use of these routines can provide organization in the lesson, provide the student with needed structure, avoid anxiety or behavioral triggers, and behavioral outbursts or shutdowns.

CHAPTER 13

Recitals and Adjudicated Events

“Are you ready to go up and play your pieces?” “NO!” This was the interesting conversation I had with one of my students during his first recital. I assured my student that he was ready to perform, that he would do a good job, and then I gently insisted that he accompany me to the stage. He played very well as expected, took his bow, and happily returned to his seat. At a subsequent recital, it was time for another young man to play and before I could walk over to him to escort him onto the stage, he bolted out of his chair and jumped up onto the stage. A different student at another recital got up to bow before I could help him, turned his back to the audience and bowed. Another young man bowed to the side of the stage before I could help position him. In the middle of another recital, one of my students stood up and told the audience that they had to wait because he needed to use the bathroom. Other students get excited and clap for themselves after performing each of their pieces. All of these stories are amusing and endearing but are also examples of unexpected things that can happen during a family friendly and sensory friendly performance event. These stories also speak to the need to teach students not only the music, but the appropriate behaviors for performance events, and the need to break down the entire experience into detailed and step-by-step instructions complete with rehearsals.

The work and success of my students has proven time and again that music study and experiences in music making should be available to everyone regardless of their race, age, gender, level of aptitude, or special need. I firmly believe that the ability to have music study in one’s life is a human right, and it is the responsibility of the community to make sure that all children may have this experience. Involvement in music and the arts can begin to address many ills in society, and the effect of music study on child development is becoming more well-known through the work of our medical professionals, researchers, and music education specialists.

Many of our students with autism have not had the opportunity to perform in public concert events, or to participate in festivals or adjudicated performance events. This is not due to any discrimination on the part of our music teachers or professional organizations. These teachers and group members are some of the most dedicated, committed, and welcoming people who go out of their way to include any child who may benefit from music study. We are just now

reaching the point where social awareness recognizes students with autism, that they need opportunities, and that we can find ways to make the full experience of music making available to them. Major portions of this book are devoted to helping these students navigate the music learning process, and this chapter is about preparing them for the recital experience, and how to make festival or adjudicated performance events open to and inclusive of all persons. The content will address the subjects that make the inclusion of all students who are special learners in music events possible and provide guidelines and lists of concerns and solutions to allow organizations and event coordinators to make their events more inclusive. Instruction for adjudicators who may be hearing students who are special learners for the first time is included, as well as suggestions for writing appropriate comments for this population of students.

I must express my deepest gratitude to the students and parents of the Carolina LifeSong Initiative at The University of South Carolina for trusting me with their students’ music education, for being powerful advocates for their children, and for being so supportive and helpful as we built our community and our performance events together. One of the most important lessons that I have learned from this experience is the power of community, and that all students can fulfill their music aptitude and potential in these events. I have also been humbled by the realization that some of these parents may be seeing their child perform in public for the first time, and perhaps they are seeing their child do something for the first time that every other child can do.

TRADITIONAL PIANO EVENTS

Traditional events are generally designed to include neurotypical children and young adults who are studying at the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. Traditional events include traditional requirements such as memorized performance of music from differing style periods, music theory, technique, and sightreading, etc. Traditional adjudication criteria generally include examination and critique of correct notes, fingering, counting, stage presence/bowing, technique, pedal, hand position, dynamics, articulation, phrasing, tempo and tempo indications, memory, tone, and other subjects as appropriate. Traditional outcomes include an event winner(s) or