

THE ADMIRABLE ADULT MUSIC STUDENT  
(Presented to a music teachers' association in 1996, and revised in 2021)  
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The adult who begins or returns to a musical instrument is one of the most special of people. It takes tremendous courage to be an adult music student. Of course, it takes humility for a successful adult to begin any new journey. However, it is especially courageous to undertake or return to the musical journey, since music study is a long-term endeavor.

All who study music must accept the fact that many of the goals they desire to reach may never be fully reached. However, the fulfillment, which can be very deep, lies in making the journey, being on the mountain and climbing ever higher, even though the summit lies far above. Music is for those who seek to be surrounded by something vastly greater than themselves--something spiritual and metaphysical. Adults would not be knocking on our doors seeking lessons if they did not have a yearning for self-expression, creativity, and beauty.

Teaching adults is about helping them to feel fulfillment in their musical and personal journey. Providing encouragement and building confidence are the teacher's main priorities. The constant challenge is to help the students to be patient with themselves, and to help them to overcome their perceived limitations. Doing this is one of the great joys of a teaching career.

It is never too late for ANY adult to commence music study, if he/she is capable of exercising continuous patience. There is no reason why technical challenges must limit an adult student from fully expressing him/herself at the piano. Many adult students may never play the hardest pieces. However, even early level adult students are highly capable of making the piano sing with a warm tone and expressive shaping and enabling the piano to sing is what playing the piano is about.

Professional concert artists have, since childhood, built their entire lives around the one endeavor, sacrificing everything else in life. The amateur music student is even more worthy of admiration. The beautiful word "amateur", which is derived from the Latin word to love, describes those who are pursuing music simply for the love of it. It can be as fulfilling for a teacher to witness the growth of an adult student at an early level as the achievements of students who have gone on to achieve high acclaim.

Adults are a joy to teach partly because they always give their best. They are also a joy to teach because they are capable of, and see the importance of, absorbing the entire world of music, including music theory and music history. We as teachers must view their lessons as lessons in music, and not merely in the playing of an instrument. Many adults are true sponges as they imbibe the totality of music.

Another pleasure of teaching adults is that each and every one is a distinct individual and no two adults can be taught the same way. It is very rewarding to get to know the adult students as people, and the friendships which can evolve from teaching adults are among the most treasured relationships that a person can have.

Teachers of adult students must be willing to roll with unpredictable events which frequently occur in an adult's life. It is impossible to draw up a lesson plan and know where a student will be a year hence. Instead, we must always accept that despite whatever transpires in their lives, we will do our best to facilitate the continuation of their lessons. Teachers of adults need to be flexible and accommodating of the adult student's needs to adjust lesson times on occasion. Some adults with significant piano background may not desire lessons on a weekly basis, and teachers should be open to offering them bi-weekly lessons .

Adult students should be encouraged to share their music with others. Our adult students have been extremely enthusiastic about our monthly or bi-monthly informal get-togethers, which we have held for the last 40 plus years, where the students play for each other and share a social time. (We do not believe that adult students should be placed on recitals with children.) It is a very humbling endeavor to play music for others, even when done by people who have been playing for many decades. However, those who are willing to share their pieces with others usually make more progress than those who do not choose to do so, and students gain confidence the more times they have played for others .(For more on performing, see the companion essay "On Study and Performance." [Essays & Educational Resources \(dersnah-fee.com\)](http://dersnah-fee.com))

Performing music is far more difficult than it looks to those who have never played in front of other people. A performer frequently feels as if he/she is the subject of Theodore Roosevelt's famous "Man in the Arena" speech from 1910: "whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds." However, the students who use these performance opportunities feel a sense of accomplishment in having had the goal and striven to reach it. Some adult students have gained satisfaction by making recordings of themselves and sending them to relatives .

We have tremendous admiration for every adult student with whom we have been privileged to work. Everyone in the world responds to how beautiful a child is, and the young are loved for their innocence and naiveté .However, they have not yet been tested. Adults are worthy of admiration for having been tested in life and never having lost their creative spirit and determination to achieve .They have been in the arena of life--sometimes struggling--but always doing their best as parents, children, friends, and workers. They carry within themselves the scars and achievements of their pasts and the challenges of the present. It is a deep joy to share the musical journey with adults--to see the fulfillment which music can bring them, and how music can enrich each of their lives.

Following are some books which adult music students may enjoy reading:

Adams, Noah. Piano Lessons: Music, Love and True Adventures. Delacorte Press, 1996.

Cooke, Charles. Playing the Piano for Pleasure. Greenwood Press, 1941, 1970.

Holt, John. Never Too Late: My Musical Life Story. Merloyd Lawrence, 1978.

Wilson, Frank R. Tone Deaf and All Thumbs?—An Invitation to Music-Making for Late Bloomers and Non-Prodigies. Viking, 1986.

