

THE SIXTY IN THIRTY PIANO CHALLENGE

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As piano teachers, we are painfully aware of balancing the sometimes competing needs of preparing students for examinations and of developing their repertoire and love of music. Another issue we face is the lack of internal motivation for many of our students, especially where home practice is concerned. This paper presents the Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge, a pedagogical and motivational framework which aims to address these issues. It reflects on the author's experience of using this framework over the course of a year.

The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge

Several years ago Samantha Coates introduced us to the *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge* (2011), the aim of which is to encourage students to play more repertoire than just their six exam pieces in any given year. Ideally, it is a framework aimed at students who have advanced beyond the beginner stage and are working on the climb up through the examination system. Typically, these students are in Primary and Secondary school, aged between 8 and 18 years. Students are essentially given permission to play many easy pieces to enhance their enjoyment of piano and broaden their knowledge and experience of repertoire. The *Challenge* encourages sight-reading and may reinforce previously learned concepts. It allows time and space to explore music from any sphere, not just from the examination lists.

This paper is an account of my experience of implementing the *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge* with my piano students during 2012 and 2013 and how this led me to develop a significant adaptation of Coates' inspiration. I used the system with both my home studio students and those at school.

2012 - The *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge*

The first year I used a wall chart, as suggested by Coates (2011), with each student's accomplishments being acknowledged by a shiny, star sticker for each completed piece. This promoted a healthy competition for the top few students who were spurred on to race each other to the finish line. Other students, who for various reasons were less successful, expressed some feelings of discouragement by their apparent lesser achievements, and the few who languished behind did not feel inclined to bother with the *Challenge* after a while, but were nonetheless happy to continue working as in the past. Many of the students who were among the top ten were boys who had not been particularly diligent in the past; and so, from a pedagogical view, for them the *Fifty*

Pieces in a Year Challenge was successful. For the other students, progress was more or less what I would have expected anyway from past experience. Some of the students who had not come close to achieving even twenty pieces still did well in their piano examinations.

2013 - The *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge*: A Team Approach

In the second year, 2013, I made two adjustments to the *Challenge*. First, I did not use a public wall chart; instead, I maintained a private tally list in my Teacher's Chronicle while the students kept a sheet of their own progress. This helped to avoid some of the negative effects associated with a student's score languishing behind others' scores. Students who enjoyed a strong sense of competition were still able to see how they compared with others, as the private tally sheet was made available to view at any time. Students were able to compete with themselves by aiming to improve on their previous year's score.

The second adjustment added an extra dimension to the challenge by dividing the students into four teams, each of which had a musically-themed name. This in itself offered a beautifully-integrated educational opportunity. In Term 1, the teams were named after Italian speed indications: *Presto*, *Vivace*, *Allegro* and *Allegretto*. As each student randomly selected their team, the meaning of the teams' names gave rise to discussion. Later these Italian terms and their meanings were displayed on a poster in the studio as a regular reminder. In Term 2, the teams were Musical Periods: Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Twentieth Century. Term 3's teams were named after iconic keyboard composers: J.S. Bach, W.A. Mozart, L. van Beethoven and F. Chopin. These teams continued into Term 4 until the end of the 2013 *Challenge*. Each term's theme was accompanied by appropriate pictures, information and posters.

As students accumulated points for themselves, they also added to their team's total. At the end of the term a small prize was awarded to the members of the winning team, and also to the individual top-scorer in each team. The process was repeated the next term, with new teams, again randomly chosen. This meant that students had an opportunity (albeit through good luck) to be on a team with possibly more fruitful team members.

The teams proved to be a great success with the students, who were eager to know who their team-mates were and to help their team win. The languishers enjoyed the rewards of being on a winning side for a change, and the competitive students who may have been in a less-productive team knew they could look forward to a hopefully better team next time. Most students showed an improvement when compared to the previous year's

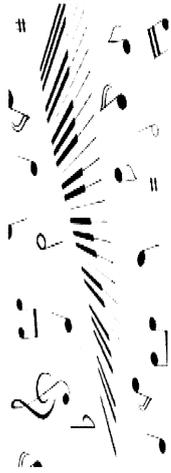
tally, but overall, the results were relatively similar, with some achieving well over fifty pieces and others barely getting to twenty.

Reflecting upon the *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge*, I concluded that on the whole it certainly helped students to play more pieces and reduced the staleness which can easily creep into exam preparation. However, it was somewhat discouraging for some students and created a focus on expanding repertoire at the possible expense of other facets of learning piano. A modification was needed. Enter *The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge*.

2014 - *The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge*

The aim of *The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge* is to provide a framework for students (and teachers) to achieve a broad range of piano-related tasks in a fun, challenging and individual manner over the course of the teaching year. The challenge involves performing a range of pieces in a variety of ways, as well as scales, arpeggios and exercises. It also gives opportunities for composition, improvisation, research and playing with others. The title derives from the fact that students are challenged to earn sixty points in thirty weeks of lessons.

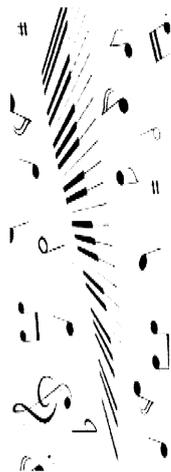
The *Challenge* is presented to students as a grid on an A4 sheet, a copy of which is given below. Eleven categories are listed in the left-hand column, with a number of boxes on the right. The boxes are used to record the name of the item presented and the date. Each small box is worth one point and the two larger boxes are worth five points each. Further explanation of each category follows.



2014 PIANO CHALLENGE

THE SIXTY IN THIRTY PIANO CHALLENGE

Can you earn 60 points in 30 Weeks?



Name: _____ Level: _____

CATEGORIES	1	1	1	1	1
Pieces (or 16 bars)					
Play From Memory (or 16 bars)					
Play Blind (or 16 bars)					
Sight Reading Score 8+					
Song from a Lead Sheet	Folk Song	Footy Song	Christmas Song	Pop Song	Aussie Song
Multi-Player	Duet - primo	Duet - secondo	Accompany - live	Play with recording	Play with 2 or more others
Technical Exercises (4 minutes)					
Scales	All Majors	All Harmonic Minors	All Melodic Minors	All Chromatic	Random
Arpeggios/Chords	All Majors	All Minors	Chord Pattern 1	Chord Pattern 2	Chord Pattern 3
Mini Project = 5 points	Research - Piano/Composer/Music Period/Musician Composition				
10 Minute Recital = 5 points					

Pieces

The first category, 'Pieces' (16 bars), requires the students to play a piece or section of a piece equivalent to around 16 bars. Essentially this category follows the same criteria used in Samantha Coates' *Fifty Pieces in a Year Challenge* but with one modification applied to longer pieces. The list pieces required for piano exams are typically long and difficult for students. By dividing these into shorter pieces of around 16 bars, making the divisions at natural, structural points, the student has a more achievable goal to aim for in order to gain a point. This encourages students to consider the overall form and structure of their pieces as they are learning them. It also helps to create a more level playing field between students working at different levels. The opportunity exists to gain ten points in this category.

Play From Memory

The second category requires a piece or section to be played from memory. Playing from memory is a desirable skill which needs to be learned and practised and thus it can prove to be a useful challenge for students. The pieces counted in this category should be different from those included in the 'Pieces'. This requires a student to decide whether s/he wants to work more on a piece in order to memorise it or s/he is happy to gain a more immediate point from the 'Piece' category.

It may prove useful to extend the student by requiring a memorised piece to be repeated on another occasion in the future, without warning, to test if memorisation has truly taken place.

Play Blind

'Playing Blind' or playing with the eyes closed is something that many students (or teachers) have never considered. It is an extension of memory and also enhances the ability to listen to the sound and tests muscle memory. Most students enjoy this challenge, particularly when reminded that there is no obligation to play something difficult. It is quite within the rules to revisit earlier tutor books and present easy pieces, which don't require awkward hand movements.

Sight Reading

The category of 'Sight Reading' offers students five opportunities to present sight reading from the student's appropriate grade level, either from a sight reading practice book or any suitable music. Each item requires a grading of at least 80% before it is counted.

Songs from a Lead Sheet

'Songs from a Lead Sheet' encourages students to explore the world of improvisation and accompaniment. This is a skill I believe all piano players should acquire to some degree, but is not addressed by most traditional examination syllabi. Lead sheets, which are common place in Pop and Jazz music, present the melody in the treble clef, with the lyrics below and the underlying harmony shown as chord symbols above the staff. Lead sheets are readily available online, often in the public domain. The *ABC Songbooks Let's Sing* are a wonderful source of music suitable for children and adults alike. The *E-Z Play* keyboard books published by Hal Leonard are also excellent resources. In these collections the note heads denote the pitch name of the note to assist students' sight-reading.

The songs that everyone knows or wants to know can usually be found in this simple format. This includes the most up-to-date pop songs, old pop songs, traditional folk songs, favourites from musicals, sporting theme songs and festive songs, or in other words, the music of the 'Common Man'. Lead sheets thus may provide more socially meaningful music to a student, their family and friends than the more traditional and sometimes esoteric material required by the examination syllabi.

During 2014, my students were challenged to play a folk song, a footy song, a Christmas song, a pop song and an Australian song from lead sheets. The corresponding boxes were marked accordingly. My beginner students were not required to play any left hand accompaniment; for them it was enough of a challenge to play melodies outside the usual five-finger positions.

Multi-Player

The category of 'Multi-Player' requires the student to perform simultaneously with others: as part of a duet, as an accompanist and as part of an ensemble. Students have the opportunity to include one example of each aspect:(1) duet – *primo*, (2) duet – *secondo*, (3) accompany – live (4) play with a recording and (5) play with two or more others. The duets (*primo* and *secondo*) may be performed with the help of the teacher or another student. I used the opportunity to introduce my students to traditional 'parlour' duets like *Chopsticks* and *Heart and Soul*.

'Accompany live' (Item 3) requires the student to provide an accompaniment to a non-piano part, performed by another musician or sung by the student. Parents, siblings and friends were invited to provide the other part, and where one could not be found, I sang while the student accompanied.

'Playing along with a recording' (Item 4) is a fun and easy way to emulate the concert pianist. Most educational piano books come with an accompanying CD of backing tracks enabling the student to meet this requirement. Some examination syllabi also allow a backing track to be included with a list piece.

The final item (5) in the Multi-player Category, 'Play with two or more others' is the most difficult to complete because it requires co-ordinating with at least two other people. Students are allowed to present a video recording or may include a band or orchestral performance where they play the piano part.

Technical Exercises

Technical exercises such as those found in Burnam's *A Dozen a Day*, Hanon's *The Virtuoso Pianist*, Max Cooke's *Tone, Touch and Technique* or Ernst Dohnyani's *Essential Finger Exercises* are expected to be presented in this category. Around four minutes of well-executed playing counts as one point. This equates to a full set of twelve exercises from *A Dozen a Day* or several Hanon exercises.

Scales

The 'Scales' category is divided into (1) Major, (2) Harmonic Minor, (3) Melodic Minor, (4) Chromatic and (5) Random. Students are required to present the set of scales described in the exam syllabus for their grade or level. Each item includes a combination of separate hands, similar motion, contrary motion, staccato, crescendo-diminuendo, sixths, octaves or whatever manner is listed.

This category was omitted for my beginners who had not yet advanced to scales. In its place, I allowed an extra five pieces to be included.

Arpeggios/Chords

The 'Arpeggio/Chords' category is divided into five items: (1) Major, (2) Minor, (3) Chord Pattern 1, (4) Chord Pattern 2 and (5) Chord Pattern 3. The first two items require students to perform arpeggios or broken chords as required for their examination or level. The other three items are either standard chord patterns or formations such as I – IV – V – I, the 50s progression or the 12-bar blues progression. It may also be used for higher graded students to present dominant and diminished seventh arpeggios.

Mini Project

The 'Mini Project' is worth 5 points and hence is shown on the A4 grid as a long box. Students may present a research project in any format (poster, booklet, power point) on any piano-related topic: the development of the piano, a musical period, a composer or a performer, for example. A mini project may also consist of a composition of around 16 bars in length.

Ten Minute Recital

The 'Ten Minute Recital' requires the student to present a number of pieces in 'recital mode'. They must provide a written program and are required to present it in the manner of a stage performance: the student should commence with a bow; verbally introduce each piece, saying something interesting about it to engage the listener; manage any errors during the actual playing; and take a bow at the conclusion of the recital. The teacher remains in 'audience mode' throughout. The entire recital should take no more than ten minutes, which ultimately requires around five to six minutes of actual piano time.

Implementation

I began *The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge* at the start of Term 1 by giving each student a copy of the *Challenge* grid and giving a brief verbal explanation. Being printed on bright green A4 paper, it became known as the 'green sheet'. The students were each allocated a team in the same randomised manner I had used previously. Their names were written on a prepared tally sheet, one per team, to record the weekly points.

When a student completed an item from the sheet, the name of the piece or other identifying feature was entered into the appropriate square along with the date. Each student's total points for that lesson were recorded on the tally sheet and a running total for each team was kept. All students were quite keen to see how their team was going each week. As term progressed and student scores were added to the tally, the competition spurred many students on to practice more than usual. At each lesson, I was usually greeted by the question: 'Which team is winning?'

Most students averaged one point per week. The most points any student completed in one lesson was eight, when a student presented his 'Ten Minute Recital', some 'Technical Exercises' and two new pieces. Although no student attained a full score of 60 in the challenge, every item was completed by at least one student. All students surpassed the 10 points allocated to the 'Pieces' category, and most completed the technical work and sight reading categories. The highest score of 45 came from a diligent and competitive

boy who was learning from Faber's *Piano Adventures Book 2A* and Burnam's *A Dozen A Day Book 1*. The next few students hovered in the high 30s while most students were bunched around 28 to 30. The lowest scored around 20.

2014 Teams

The teams were established on the first day of the challenge. In Term 1, the teams were named: Organs, Harpsichords, Clavichords and Spinets, giving rise to discussion about the piano's predecessors.

In Term 2, I introduced 'parlour' duets as the names of the teams: Heart and Soul, Chopsticks, Russian Chopsticks and The Knuckle Song. Each student had to learn both parts, the top (*primo*) and the bottom (*secondo*), in the traditional way by rote. This proved a novel experience for some. Quite a number of students did not know how to play any of these hackneyed duets.

The teams in Term 3 and Term 4 were named after the four common triads: Major, Minor, Augmented and Diminished. As the team was introduced, the students were given a quick lesson in triad types. The concept was reinforced regularly thereafter, either through a request that the team's triad be played, or noted when we came across a particular triad in one of the pieces.

Being part of a team was a strong motivator for many students. Great interest was taken in their team name, who the other team members were, and how they contributed to the team's score. It is rare that students taking lessons in my studio see each other from one concert to the next but the bonding developed through the teams was a delight to see. There is no doubt that students were motivated to gain points for their team as well as themselves.

Reflections

My home studio operates within a forty week calendar, so limiting the challenge to thirty teaching weeks afforded some flexibility. It was introduced during the first two weeks of Term 1 and concluded part way through Term 4. This allowed a couple of weeks to prepare a tally of the final scores which were then announced at the annual concert and awards given out. The studio at Caulfield Grammar operates on a thirty week calendar so I simply re-named it as *The Fifty in Twenty-Five Piano Challenge* and modified the rules accordingly. The challenge was concluded by the third last week of lessons and the students were informed about the final results at their last lesson.

As a pedagogical tool, the challenge helped to stimulate new ideas and approaches in the day-to-day lessons. It continually reminded my students and me that there is more to

piano than just preparing pieces for an examination. The need to divide those longer pieces into sections promoted discussion and better understanding of structure and form early in the learning process. Students were more inclined to concentrate on a smaller section instead of trying to perfect the larger piece. Similarly, students were more inclined to begin work on a section which began partway through a piece.

It provided clear focal points that both the teacher and the student were privy to, which could be aimed at for the following week. For example, a set of exercises could be assigned with the added sweetener of contributing to the points tally. Similarly, a set of scales in preparation for an examination could form the focus of a goal.

The 'Ten Minute Recital' opened my eyes to many deficiencies in students' performance abilities. We discovered that there was much more involved in preparing for a recital than met the eye. Playing the piano turned out to be only a small portion of what is actually required. Showmanship and background research were discovered to be skills that also need to be learned and practiced.

The Sixty in Thirty Piano Challenge proved to be a highly successful teaching tool. The students appeared more motivated and perhaps more willing to try new ideas such as playing with their eyes closed, performing from a lead sheet or accompanying another performer. Some were inspired to compose or research. I believe that all enjoyed participating.

References

Coates, S 2011, *Fifty Pieces in a Year - The Repertoire Conveyor Belt*, Blitzbooks.com.au, viewed 23 January 2015 <<http://www.blitzbooks.com.au/Blog/EntryId/24/Fifty-Pieces-in-a-Year-The-Repertoire-Conveyer-Belt.aspx>>

About the Author:

Dr Tracey Edgar is a piano teacher of over 30 years' experience and a qualified classroom teacher, currently with her own home studio and also teaching piano at Caulfield Grammar School. She attained her B.A. (Hons) and Dip. Ed. qualifications from Monash University, from where she also completed her Ph.D. (Musicology) in 1996, the subject of her thesis being *The History and Development of the English Catch*. Tracey is passionate about developing her students' musical craft and seeks innovative ways to motivate them to achieve their best.