

Theory in 7 minutes

A workshop by Samantha Coates

Theory has a bad name

The vicious cycle of theory study goes like this:



Student dislikes theory – student avoids theory – student does not do well at theory – student dislikes theory

How did this happen?

Mostly, because we rush through it. Very often, as soon as the practical exam is over, the piano books are put away and it's THEORY TIME! The whole lesson is devoted to that sorely neglected theory workbook, which hasn't seen the light of day for 4 or 5 months, in a frenzied effort to acquire the bare essentials needed to pass the all-important prerequisite exam. Let's face it, students usually only do theory because they have to. Apart from the odd mature-age student who takes up theory just for the fun of it, completely divorced from any practical instrument study, it's usually a race against the clock to get everything done and it's hardly ever much fun.

How do we break the cycle?

Breaking the cycle means finding a way to teach so that students don't feel completely abandoned when it comes to theory. There are three issues here:

1. How to get the most understanding from the lesson time available;
2. How to instil a sensible 'practise' routine when it comes to theory;
3. How to love it and have fun!

The only answer is to create an approach in the lesson that draws everything from the music the student is playing, and to engage their interest and understanding through the use of their instrument. You not just their piano teacher, you are their music teacher.

The Holistic Approach

There are many students who claim they never want to do any exams, which of course is fine; then there are those who have opted for the wonderful Piano for Leisure syllabus, which does not have any theory or musicianship prerequisites. Does this mean that these students should not understand the structure of scales, or the tonality of chords, or even how to draw clefs properly? NO! Whilst theory exams take place with pen and paper, Theory itself should not be seen as purely a written subject: it is the understanding of the rudiments of music, which is based on SOUND. As music educators, we want to take a **holistic approach** which will help mould our piano students into well rounded musicians.

A holistic approach means one in which your piano student emerges with a wide range of music skills. These consist of performance, aural development, sight reading, improvisational and analytical skills. All of these skills are an essential part of being a good musician, and teaching these skills should not be limited solely to students doing piano or theory exams.

Ideally, every lesson every week will contain at least three of these elements. The analytical side of things is harder to cover as the students don't feel it relates to 'playing' the piano. It's our job to work around this in a creative and musical way and today we're going to talk about exactly how to achieve that.

Why 7 minutes?

7 minutes represents one quarter of a typical half hour piano lesson, once you have allowed one minute for hello and another minute for goodbye! Today we will talk about how you can devote one quarter of your lesson to 'theory' every week without the student even sensing that they are straying off the subject of 'piano'. The workbook need not make an appearance during lesson time. Worksheets are great for reinforcement, but children understand concepts best by interaction, movement and games. If you structure your lesson in such a way that you know you're spending about a quarter of the lesson each week on theoretical concepts, using interaction, movement and games, this will help achieve the best balance between understanding and retention in the lesson and reinforcement at home.

Theory is a subject in itself

Imagine you have a little piano student named Sally who gets dropped off for her lesson one day by her Mum. As you greet them at the door the mum hands you a trumpet and says "We've decided we'd like Sally do start doing trumpet exams too, but we can't afford to pay for any extra lessons, so can you please just cover it in this lesson time?"

Let's assume for a moment you just happened to also be a trumpet teacher. How would you approach trying to prepare Sally for a trumpet exam as well as her piano exam? You would have minimal time to spend on trumpet in the lesson, so the first thing you would do is explain to Sally's mum that you expect a lot of practise to be done at home, and that you'll need a lot of support from both herself and Sally in making sure this is done. In the event that Sally's mum is a little pushy and insists that the exam be done that year, you would probably explain that you would be reluctant to enter Sally for a trumpet exam until you were very confident that she was progressing well and had a regular practise routine at home.

This is essentially what we as piano teachers are asked to do all the time. We are preparing for two exams – two subjects – in one lesson time. In order to do this successfully, you need support from the parents, a student who understands the difficulty of what you're trying to achieve, and a well structured lesson to ensure that no particular aspect of their musical education is ignored for long periods of time.

What is something every teacher wishes they had more of???

Time

Structuring the lesson is always about how to use that most precious of commodities: time. Since time is something we never have enough of, it's so important to have an overall plan of how we're going to get through the year.

T- for Timer; whether it be a stopwatch, a little 3 minute egg timer or the clock on the microwave, everyone teacher needs to keep track of how much time is being used so as to not get bogged down.

Spending 7 minutes on theory does not have to be done all in one block. For instance:

(demo piece, explanation and 1-2 minute game)

Timing these games (and even timing some explanations!) is just part of the fun for the student.

(say: **Piece – Explanation – Play a game**)

I – for Instrument; use your instrument! A piano is more effective than a pen and paper. Use the music to point out any musical fact. It needs to go PIECE – EXPLANATION- GAME. Play things as much as possible, use the piano in games (sound effects), relate everything back to sound and music.

Recently I took a survey of teachers asking them to write down what they believe to be the ‘staple diet’ of pianists as they work through repertoire from Preliminary upwards. I was hoping to find that most teachers teach the same old pieces that we all did when we were young – but this is actually not the case. The AMEB Series books dominate the market and this is understandable since it is financially more manageable to buy all the pieces for the year in one publication. As a result, today I will defer to the majority and use AMEB Series examples, while throwing in the odd ‘war horse’ that does not appear on any exam manual but that we all know and love.)

(demo piece, explanation and scale degree/transposition games, demo sound effects)

(say: **Piece – Explanation – Play a game**)

M – for Movement; play games, get your students off their chairs whenever possible. swap places, go somewhere different in the room like the floor, use games that require some sort of movement so that they feel they are doing something different. Movement also applies to movement away from the mundane and ordinary; get some excitement into the lesson!

(demo piece, explanation and game with movement e.g. rush)

(say: **Piece – Explanation – Play a game**)

E – for Expectation; you must have an expectation of the student that they will do the work at home so that you can mark it either in the lesson or outside it. Do your piano students practise? And if not as much as you’d like, do they understand that they SHOULD practise? Of course they do. Every week in the piano lesson you sit and, ideally, listen to and comment on all the practise that went on that week at home. How often do your students come to a lesson and admit they have not practised that week? Often! What do you do if they have not practised (apart from rouse on them!)? Usually try to tackle something new. How often do you sit with them the entire lesson and listen to them practise? Almost never. There is a basic expectation that the practise will be done at home, and that on the (hopefully) rare occasion it is not, the lesson will be spent drilling other areas such as sight reading, aural skills and general knowledge.

Theory needs to be approached as a subject in itself. Doing theory worksheets inside lesson time is just like listening to practise that should be done at home. Lesson time is the time for interaction – sound, games, movement, talking – and continuing with worksheets *at home* is the best way to maximise the time available.

The flip side of this is that many teachers give out worksheets or allocate pages of a book to be done at home without any clue as to how to complete them. This is usually done in a panicked manner as the theory exam approaches. Can you imagine giving your piano students 4 pieces to learn from scratch 12 weeks before the piano exam? And not only that, telling them to do it *on their own*? Of course not!

Piece – Explanation – Play a game = PEP

We're using a few acronyms today but here is another very useful way to remember that structure we've used in every aspect of T-I-M-E today. Keep 'PEP' in your head: Piece – Explanation – Play a game. This will pep us the lessons, you can give your students a pep talk about it, use it however you want, but this is the most important step in structuring your lesson in a musical way.

Don't limit your students' learning

Let's take a famous piece such as Minuet by Bach. At the time of playing such a piece a student would most likely not be studying towards a theory exam (more discussion on prerequisites). There are many interesting things to point out, such as the sequences, which will not be covered in an examination until 3rd grade. Should we wait three more years before introducing this student to the concept of sequences? Of course not! Use the correct terminology from the beginning, expose your students to all elements of music regardless of their progress in theory examinations. This sets them up well for later, and if and when they do finally study sequences in the formal Grade 3 environment, they will be quite relaxed and familiar with the concept.

The Higher Grades

In the higher grades, spending only 7 minutes in total on theory or musicianship becomes less achievable. It is extremely difficult to cover Grade 4 and above within the piano lesson, even given the fact that your student might be up to a 45 minute or 1 hour lesson as he/she might be doing 7th grade piano. Concepts such as harmony and melody writing need special attention, and it's pretty tricky to cover them in 7 minutes! Let's have a go though...

(demo piece, explanation and melody writing)

If you time how long you spend *explaining* these concepts, however, it can help to give your students some idea of how long they should spend *reinforcing* the concept at home, which should be pretty much a ratio of 1:2 to be successful.

Things no piano studio should be without

Some of the 'props' I've used today are things I feel are an absolutely essential part of any piano lesson.

The first prop of course is the timer. Any timer will do. (show)

A whiteboard is fantastic because it's so easy to rub things out, and you can get very small ones (show). If you can get one with magnets that's even better, it's just more fun for the student.

Flashcards – I believe that just about any problem can be solved with a set of flashcards. (show memory, other suggestions)

It doesn't have to be 7 minutes

The concept of 'Theory in 7 minutes' simply means that we need to point out theoretical concepts musically and regularly. 7 minutes represents a fraction of a practical lesson, the idea being that if this is done every week from the early stages it relieves the stress leading up to an exam.

'Time' is of the essence

Revise T-I-M-E concept

Revise PEP concept