

Backstroke AND Beethoven

Learning piano is a bit like learning to swim, says **Samantha Coates**, although the keys to success are somewhat different.



Illustrations by Penny Lovelock

I am a piano teacher, and in my quest to discover the best answer to the Most Commonly Asked Question of piano teachers – ‘When should my child start piano lessons?’ – I stumbled across an excellent analogy. I realised that it’s just the same as asking, ‘When should my child start swimming lessons?’.

Swimming is an activity that can be taken up as early as before one is born. There are literally prenatal swimming classes (and I mean ones you pay for, not just hanging around in the amniotic fluid). There are swimming classes for newborns, babies, toddlers and preschoolers, although for the very young child this is more about water confidence than actually learning a stroke. There are also classes for kindergarten, primary and secondary-school-age children, including those that cater for the older beginner. For the advanced swimmer, there is squad training, stroke correction, private coaching... the list goes on. There is no age too early to start swimming,

and never a time when you can say you’ve ‘finished’ swimming lessons, because there is always some refinement that can be done.

It is the same with piano, and with music in general. There are music classes for babies. There are more music classes for toddlers that develop listening, singing, rhythm and coordination skills. It’s too early to actually be playing a piano at this stage – just like it’s too early for a toddler to learn freestyle or backstroke – but it’s all about exposure to music (or water), and developing confidence.

Studies have shown that at about the age of four years, a child has developed the necessary finger coordination to actually sit at the piano and learn to play. In swimming terms, this is equivalent to learning how to coordinate arms and legs in a stroke. All of the lessons leading up to this point have played a crucial part. If a child has had a lifetime (say about four years) of being in the water, and is extremely comfortable

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and confident, swimming skills will come much more easily.

Likewise, following a 'lifetime' of exposure to music, learning to play the piano is a breeze. This is why it is often so much harder for the older beginner, especially adult beginners. There is little or no confidence, and a huge amount of self-consciousness to overcome. The point is to have fun with whatever you're doing and whatever you're learning, and if you feel confident before you even start, having developed some essential rhythmic and aural skills, you have a huge advantage.

As we move through the beginner stages of piano, there are more coordination challenges to overcome. We learn to play with one hand, then the other, then both at the same time; then faster, then staccato, then with pedal; we learn to play with others, and to listen and sing as well as play. We can never say that piano is 'finished' (yes that's right, Grade 8 is not The End), because there is always more we can learn, refine and develop. Just as some swimmers keep up their training and turn professional, some pianists do the same with music.

But here is where the analogy stops. With swimming, you don't have to be competitive, you don't have to have long-term lessons or coaching; once you know how to swim you can enjoy recreational swimming for the rest of your life. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this were the same with piano? Learn for a couple of years until you



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know how, and then just play for pleasure when you feel like it? Sadly, this does not happen. Children can learn for years, diligently practising their Beethoven sonatas, mastering their scales and arpeggios, and receiving wonderful A+ results in their exams over the years. Then as soon as they stop practising, they can't play anything. The fine motor skills required to play all those pieces need constant reinforcement.

Almost every parent I know likes the idea of their child continuing to play and enjoy the piano (or any other instrument) long after lessons have stopped. After all, it's a big investment, and we'd like to think that it has long-term benefit. So how can we make this happen?

There are two musical skills that are absolutely essential to teach in order to achieve this goal: improvisation (that is, composing, playing by ear,

listening and responding – basically making stuff up) and sight-reading (looking at notes on a page and immediately being able to convert them to sound on an instrument, with a sense of rhythm and fluency).

The ability to improvise is a wonderful asset – we can play in a band without any music, work out a song we have heard on the radio or express ourselves through our own composition. The ability to sight-read well gives musicians access to any music, any time, regardless of whether they've heard it before or practised much recently. The combination of these two skills is the recipe for long-term musical enjoyment.

So the real answer to the Most Commonly Asked Question is this: it is never too early to start music, but once lessons have begun, make sure your child learns from a teacher who values and will nurture these two important and fundamental musical skills. Not only do we want our children to play now while they're having lessons, we want them to have music for life, for recreation, for relaxation, forever. Just like swimming. ●

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