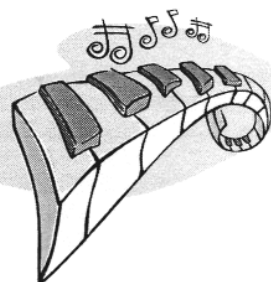




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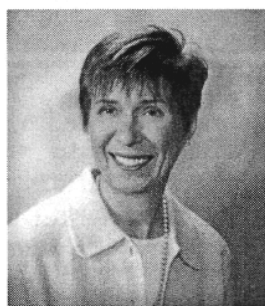
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How an Audiation-Based Approach to Piano Instruction Compares with the Traditional Approach: 15 Years of Practical Experience, Success and Discovery

by Marilyn Lowe



During my attendance at a series of lectures given by Edwin E. Gordon in the summer of 1992, I became very aware that music literacy means more than reading music notation. A musically

literate student who audiates can do all of the following: play by ear, improvise, compose, arrange music, perform successfully in both solo and ensemble settings, listen to music with understanding, discuss music intelligently, and read and write music notation.

If one accepts this definition of music literacy, it is apparent that most piano students fail to achieve it at a high level. I believe that Gordon's research and theories of audiation provide the missing link. Therefore, my students and I have worked

extensively, since 1992, on how to apply Gordon's theories to piano instruction; these efforts have culminated in the publication of *Music Moves for Piano*, a revolutionary new teaching approach.

Traditional Methods Do Not Foster Audiation

Traditional piano method techniques for teaching beginning students have remained the same for more than 80 years. No matter how hard I have tried, I have found it to be impossible to teach an audiation-based approach using the standard piano curricula. It just does not work. Gordon's theories indicate that the pedagogical techniques used in traditional books and lessons actually present stumbling blocks for developing music literacy. Here are some of the reasons why:

- Rhythm and pitch aspects are not presented in the context of meter or tonality. Without context, students become

confused and find it difficult to make a personal connection to music.

- Pattern instruction, if included, is not organized to teach the functional, categorized music vocabulary that is the cornerstone of audiation.
- Music theory is taught before it is practiced. Instead, music theory should explain the familiar.
- Traditional piano methods do not follow the educational principle that a student can learn only one new thing at a time. Instead, students are frequently asked to think about many different new concepts at once, such as: how to physically play the piano, including the coordination of two hands; how to learn from notation; how to understand the aspects of pitch and rhythm; how to use dynamics and articulations; and so on. The student's awareness of the actual sound of music is lost when there is so much to attend to.



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- Singing, chanting, movement and improvisation activities are either not part of lessons or are not purposefully planned to help students learn how to audiate. Why, when and how these activities are used actually has significant impact on musical development.
- Music learned from notation stifles audiation. Students rely on the eyes and do not use the ears.

Changing the Way Piano is Taught

To align their teaching with the new music learning theory research, piano teachers need to rethink not only what to teach, but why and when to teach it. They need to learn teaching techniques which will help students learn how to audiate, the first step of which involves imitation and rote learning.

Teaching strategies such as those outlined in *Music Moves for Piano* provide opportunities for developing audiation skills through the process used to teach rote pieces. Since contextual tonal and rhythm patterns are fundamental to learning how to audiate, patterns are applied when learning new music. Through tonal and rhythm pattern instruction, students acquire an extensive functional music pattern vocabulary that is analogous to a word vocabulary.

The music learning process is similar to the language learning sequence: listen, think, perform, read and write. CD recordings should be available, and used, to help students study at home, and should include tonal, rhythm, and melody patterns, as well as performances of the songs and pieces.

Homework and Practice Objectives

Writing assignments in traditional piano lessons are based on teaching notation to beginners, and include such activities as naming and writing notes, intervals, and triads, as well as counting. Traditional home practice assignments focus on notation-reading, technical exercises, and practicing repertoire, and, hopefully, correcting mistakes. Harriet Ayer Seymour, one of the founders of music therapy, found fault with this structure even in 1920. "The old way of studying music by practicing interminable scales and exercises has been a failure. The philosophic way is to first awaken music from within. . . the every-day man and woman. . . need, as do we all in one way or another, musical re-education. . . that is, they must change their idea about it and learn a different process" (Seymour, 1920).

Student homework assignments for an audiation-based approach include: listening to recordings of patterns and folk songs, singing and chanting patterns, learning labels for patterns and musical context,

playing songs and performance pieces learned by rote, learning keyboard skills from the viewpoint of keyality and tonality, applying patterns to familiar and unfamiliar music, and improvising and problem solving.

Building the Student's Playing Mechanism

Traditional piano method books expect students to learn how to use the playing mechanism while looking at notation. The psychomotor skills used in playing 88 keys with two hands, a virtual orchestra at the fingertips, are complex.

With an audiation-based approach, students do not look at notation in the early years of study. This is a more successful route towards teaching coordinated playing skills. Students simply cannot learn how to use the playing mechanism efficiently while they are looking at notation and needing to think about many different things at the same time.

Repertoire

Traditional piano methods expect beginning students to learn pieces from notation that are written specifically to teach reading of music notation, music theory and keyboard skills. It is far better to use short beginning pieces that have been written to acculturate students to the many possibilities of keyboard playing. For example, in the very beginning lessons, students learn: to use the whole keyboard, to explore different keyboard sounds and registers, to recognize duple and triple meters, to use contrasting dynamics and articulations, and to perform both alone and with a duet partner.

Folk songs constitute the core repertoire of the *Music Moves* curriculum. To develop tonal audiation, students sing and perform folk songs. Because improvisation is fundamental for learning how to audiate, and is the foundation for reading and writing music notation, folk songs are also used for many improvisation activities. Students continue to learn supplementary piano solos by rote as well as how to apply their audiation and keyboard skills to new music.

The "Audiation" Lesson

The practical steps used with this audiation approach can make the lesson look quite different from a "traditional" one, which is why I have included elaborate teaching guides with each level of my method. Because it is important to remember that students learn most from physical experience, off-the-bench activities are part of each lesson. The advantage of this approach is that students actually sing, chant, move and improvise as well as perform solo

and ensemble music. These activities all unite to internalize and personalize music instruction.

The structure and length of the lesson should provide the optimal environment for students' retention of music skills. Most piano teachers offer from 40 to 45 lessons a year, usually 30 minutes in length. With the audiation approach, students need more teacher time. The only way this can happen is with longer lessons. Group lessons or paired lessons are the answer. Students learn from each other and are inspired by group activities. This approach actually allows the teacher to better individualize instruction. For this reason, heterogeneous groupings work very well. For example: students can overlap for a common activity time; or two, three or four students of different levels or ages can work together – a perfect arrangement sometimes for siblings. Regardless of the number of students in the group, it is always crucial that the teacher tailor tasks and questions to each student's music aptitude and level of achievement.

Regarding the studio arrangement, it isn't necessary to have access to a large piano lab with numerous instruments. The way these lessons are structured allows a group of students to use one piano, and only a small amount of floor space is needed for activities away from the keyboard.

Music Note Reading

A common discussion in piano-teaching chat rooms is about how to teach music note-reading: What is best? Landmarks, intervals, middle C, multi-key? In traditional methods, teaching note reading to beginners is a priority. Therefore, it is easy to see why the audiation approach seems counter to "common" practice. As in language learning, students should first learn a functional music-pattern vocabulary, within a context, that they initially apply to performance pieces and improvisation, then eventually to printed notation.

Teaching by bridging from sound to notation is very different from teaching from notation. Harriet Ayer Seymour understood audiation already in 1910. She wrote, "How many thousand students of music have given up in despair because they had never been taught to think music!" (Seymour, 1915). With an audiation approach such as is found in *Music Moves for Piano*, students acquire the readiness for reading music notation. They become very good music readers because they know how to audiate. Still, the most frequently asked question about a sound-to-notation curriculum is: When should children learn to read music? The response is that music

¹CD recordings are a pivotal part of the *Music Moves for Piano* series, and are provided with each level as well as a separate "Pattern" CD.



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reading is a long "whole-part-whole" process, similar to language reading. Students can only learn to read music notation with comprehension after they:

- Have acquired a large music pattern vocabulary and can audiate,
- Are able to perform solos and ensembles comfortably without notation,
- Have extensive experience playing by ear, improvising, composing and arranging music,
- Have acquired a wide variety of keyboard skills and can play confidently in many keyalities and tonalities,
- Are able to play with correct physical balance and alignment,
- Are able to read and write their personal music pattern vocabulary, and
- Are able to think abstractly, which occurs around the age of eleven.

Conclusion

We know that music has a profound effect on the human soul and spirit. However, today, many activities compete for the time and energy of both our students and parents. Therefore, we need to encourage students by making sure that our instructional materials apply the best current research about how we learn music. By using audiation-based piano materials, teachers can make piano lessons fun and educational for all, regardless of music aptitude. Learning is internalized when music triggers an active response as students engage in purposeful audiation.

Whatever our goals for our students -- from hoping that they become music advocates in their communities, professionals, or "merely" functional musicians, all of them benefit from their ability to better speak the "language" of music as a result of this approach. □

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Marilyn Lowe has taught piano for more than 40 years, experience culminating in *Music Moves for Piano*, based on Edwin E. Gordon's theories of audiation. Lowe has been using this approach successfully with her students for more than 15 years. Lowe's academic credits include degrees in liberal arts and piano (cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa) from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, a master's degree with distinction in piano from Indiana University, Bloomington, where she was a student of Menahem Pressler, and completed additional graduate study in organ and music theory at Indiana

University.

Lowe has performed on piano and organ as soloist and in collaboration with college and university faculty members. She has taught piano and music theory at the college level, conducted workshops in Rome, Hinterzarten, Lisbon, and Aviero, and presented at the 2007 MTNA Conference in Toronto. She has also recently directed, with Dr. Garik Pedersen, the first *Music Moves for Piano* Symposium at Eastern Michigan State University. Currently, she spends most of her time in Springfield, Missouri, teaching piano to students of all ages and writing her instruction books.