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Dr. Hinz with student Heather Pollak at the 2005 student recital.

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Dr. Hinz
working
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Q: At what age should a student begin formal instruction in piano?

A: Although it depends somewhat on the student's level of skill and maturity, most students are ready for weekly instruction around age six or seven. A child is capable of learning music and piano at a much earlier age. Parents and siblings can get a youngster involved with music through listening and exploring the piano at a very young age. A parent, for example, might regularly play recorded music for a young child. Formal instruction, however, is most cost effective when the child can be attentive on a consistent basis, and can retain enough of what is presented during the lesson to practice effectively during the week.

Q: How can the student make the most of weekly piano instruction to achieve maximum results?

A: Students do best when a regular routine of practice is encouraged. Although most parents leave practicing up to the student, many parents treat practicing like homework. Accordingly, the student is required to practice, even if he or she "doesn't feel like it." This approach seems to work best as it teaches the student the importance of discipline and commitment in achieving a goal. Some parents motivate their children with financial incentives; this approach can also be effective. Finally, teachers can motivate students by choosing pieces that students know or recognize. These complement the pieces that students study to achieve technical, musical, and artistic goals.

Q: How often should my child practice and how long should each practice session be?

A: Ideally, a child studying piano should practice five or six days a week. Practice time depends on age, maturity, and attentiveness. Generally, students between the ages of six and nine should be

encouraged to practice for fifteen to thirty minutes each day. For students between the ages of nine and twelve, thirty to forty-five minutes is appropriate. For students older than twelve, practice time can be increased gradually to an hour or two a day by age eighteen. These are basic guidelines; students vary greatly in their motivation and disposition.

Q: Should a student learn to play by ear?

A: Not all parents realize the importance of learning to hear music accurately. Generally, they are anxious for their children to "learn the notes" and use this as the sole criterion on which to base their child's musical progress. The fact that the child plays by ear or that he memorizes quickly and never looks at the music should not be disconcerting. On the contrary, these are the signs of good music development that form the basis of good music reading. In general, playing by ear is a basic and essential aspect of playing music and is often neglected in traditional piano instruction. A child's initial approach to music can be by ear, with the printed music playing a secondary role. Difficulties arise when students are taught to read music at the expense of doing any playing by ear, or vice-versa. Accordingly, a balanced approach is the most effective.

Q: Is a student born with a "musical ear," or can the ear be trained to hear and reproduce music?

A: Learning music is not unlike the learning of a spoken language. In the case of a spoken language, a child first hears the sound of words, and imitates these sounds after hearing them repeated. In music, students often grow up hearing many music phrases, melodies, rhythms, and chords. These experiences become the foundation for musical instruction. When a student has difficulty hearing a melody or chord, it is not so much that he has a weak or "tin" ear. Rather, it is more a matter of not having a sufficient enough experience to *know what to listen for* and to recognize and label what is heard. As the student's level of experience increases, his internal cognitive awareness of musical relationships gives him a large "vocabulary" to use to compare what is heard with his experience. The remaining difficulty is to verbally identify and label what is recognized. This is an important aspect of musical training, but not as important as the basic experiences (both at and away from the instrument) that promote the student's awareness and understanding of music at an aural level.