

## Why Teach by Rote?

Luke comes bounding in for his first piano lesson. He is young, with bright red hair and endless enthusiasm. "I can already play some songs on the piano!" he announces to me and proceeds to bang through a clumsy rendition of "Chopsticks," the theme to "Heart and Soul," and the melody of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

"Wow!" I say to him, grinning at his energy. "Where did you learn those songs?"

"My grandma taught me," he says.

This is hardly the first time I have watched someone proudly demonstrate the music they have learned to play by rote. I have seen adults who taught themselves to play the first page of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* with little to no formal instruction. I have observed children teaching one another simple tunes on the piano with no thought given to technique or fingering. Over and over again, I have witnessed respectable performances of music that students learned simply because someone had the patience to teach them one note, one pattern, one phrase at a time.

Early in my career, I recognized that teaching music by rote was a highly motivating but often overlooked pedagogical tool. Students loved learning pieces that featured easy patterns but sounded sophisticated. *This* was the music that they wanted to play at recitals and perform for

grandma when she came to visit. Without prompting, students would practice these pieces by the hour, gaining technique and confidence in negotiating the keyboard. Learning rote pieces developed their ear and improved their ability to recognize musical patterns. Rote music provided the opportunity to work on musical character and dramatic effects without the added challenge of deciphering written notes and rhythms. While rote teaching did not substitute for the all-important task of learning to read music traditionally, it was not long before I made this a standard part of my lessons, teaching beginning students colorful pieces that sounded more complicated than they were.

Admittedly, teaching rote pieces takes lesson time, but the payback in motivation, technique building, ear training, and pattern recognition more than outweighs the cost. Time spent on rote pieces does not have to take a huge chunk out of any single lesson; the pieces can be learned in five-minute segments, bit by bit.

Just today, I taught "Oh, Purple Sage" to a six-year-old boy and then to a sixty-six-year-old woman, each with only a month of piano lessons behind them.

They were both grinning from ear to ear the entire time.

Amy Greer