

Access Piano Method Teacher Guide

By Christy Reynolds

Music Learning Theory

Humans learn to speak before they learn to read. That is how we learn language. Dr. Edwin Gordon spent years researching how humans learn music. He developed learning sequences based on his music learning theory. From there, Dr. John Feierabend with his *Conversational Solfege* and Dr. Christopher Azzara and Dr. Richard Grunow with their *Developing Musicianship through Improvisation* provided methods to apply Gordon's along with their continued research. Based on their research and approaches, I developed this piano method so that teachers can apply music learning theory to piano pedagogy.

First of all, when learning a language, it is broken down into patterns. First, syllabic patterns are grouped into words, and word patterns are grouped to form sentences. Babies learn to babble, then form syllables, and then words. Later on, they can group words together. At first, they are simply repeating what they hear. But then as the words take on meaning, they can group them in new ways to form new thoughts.

It is not until young children can do all of this that they are introduced to symbolic representation of that spoken, heard language. Why then would we teach music any differently? This piano method seeks to introduce the patterns, both tonal and rhythmic, that are encountered in the songs we play and sing. The teacher will sing the patterns for the student to echo. The research shows that putting the tunes onto the voice before the instrument is the best and most effective way to develop musicianship in humans. The student will hear and sing the tunes before being asked to play them on the piano. The student will play them on the piano before being asked to read the notation. Just like learning to have a conversation, the student and teacher will spend time having musical conversations, made up on the spot.

Guide to Rhythm Patterns

The rhythm patterns used in this method follow those designed by Froseth and Gordon and demonstrated in the following YouTube video. These charts demonstrate the point that the syllables represent BEAT FUNCTION. Notice that two measures of $\frac{3}{4}$ feel like one measure of $\frac{6}{8}$. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RYOte_xRKg

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Guide to Solfege

This method utilizes solfege syllables to enable tonal context, which is very important in music learning. Random intervals out of context mean little to the brain. From the very beginning, students will gradually build a strong tonal “language” that will enable deeper understanding and more proficient singing and playing. More importantly, the student will be able to improvise with understanding. For teachers new to solfege, write in the solfege syllables on the music you need to teach your students so that you may easily and accurately model it vocally.

Major key example	Minor key example
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Chromatic Scale/Accidentals Example; Sharps Ascending, Flats Descending

Do is moveable, meaning, if we are in C Major, C=Do. If we are in G Major, G=Do, and so on. This is extremely important for students to understand, so this method introduces songs in three keys simultaneously. This also lays a foundation for effortless transposition later on. This method incorporates a La-based minor, meaning that minor keys begin on La of their relative major keys. The chromatic solfege is also given here to utilize with accidentals. For instance, if

the song is in F Major, and there is a B natural, then that would be “Fi.” If in F Major there is an A flat, that would be “Me.”

Guide to Modeling and Improvisation

Have the student sway with you the macrobeat and tap the microbeat (sway the *Du*'s and tap the *Du-de*'s or *Du-da-di*'s). It is important to model the rhythmic patterns on a neutral syllable for students to echo. Then, after they can successfully do that, you can use the rhythm syllables. When modeling the tonal patterns, first play an arpeggiated I chord in the key of the tonal patterns. Then model the tones on a neutral syllable. If necessary, play the tones on the piano first, then sing them, gesturing for the student to echo you. Once the student can do that successfully, use the solfege syllables.

Be sure to model the correct singing register for a child's voice. This means that if you are a male teacher, you need to sing in falsetto for the student. Children need to learn that there are three vocal registers, and they need to be very comfortable in their head voice. American children sometimes do not know how to do this because in our culture, everyone speaks lower. Vocal exploration using slides from head voice to chest voice, imitating puppy whines and kitten meows is a great way to get students to feel what their head voices feel like.

Many children are inaccurate singers at first, but they can be taught to sing in tune. The most important thing for these children is the ability to try. Do NOT react to hearing wrong pitches. Simply model it again. If the student is still inaccurate, match his or her pitch and slide up. Many times, this will aid the student to being able to sing in tune. Slow and steady wins the race! Be patient, encouraging, and gentle. Over time, any student can learn to sing in tune with careful and accurate instruction.

For more information on modeling healthy singing techniques for children, please see *Teaching Kids to Sing* by Dr. Kenneth Phillips. For more information on Music Learning Theory, visit <https://giml.org/mlt/about/> . If you are new to the idea of improvisation, please watch Dr. Christopher Azzara's Ted Talk:

<https://youtu.be/e4LIKG035Eg>

The improvisation part of this method is important because students need to be able to explore sounds and combinations of sounds on the piano. By setting parameters for the improvisation (unique to each lesson), the students get to explore different ways of having musical conversations with you, the teacher. If you have never improvised before, do not worry. The accompaniments for student improvisation have been notated for you. Of course, if you are comfortable improvising, you can simply take the idea and run with it.

This method is sequenced deliberately. For more information, see *A Research-Based Approach to Piano Pedagogy*.