



TEACHING ROTE PIECES IN ONLINE PIANO LESSONS

Vibrant, vibrant, vibrant music teaching. Proven and practical tips, strategies and ideas for Music Teachers.

This is Episode 119 of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. I'm Nicola Cantan and in this show, we'll walk through how to teach rote pieces in online piano lessons.

Hey there, wonderful teachers. Welcome back to another episode of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. It is fantastic to have you back with me again. And if this is your first episode, an extra warm welcome to you.

This episode is part of a mini-series we've been doing to help us all level-up our online music lessons. So right at the start of when many teachers went online back at the start of March, a lot of us were in panic mode.

And my primary concern was getting teachers through it; making sure no one was stressed out about tech or basic stuff and then adding a few fun games on top of that for people that we're ready for it.

But back then, I kept this podcast as a bit of a sanctuary from all the online teacher chat and I know many of you appreciated that little break and the focus back on teaching, right? General teaching stuff and business stuff and long-term thinking.

But we'd been running this series now because I believe many of us are ready for it at this stage. We're thinking about second waves and maybe we're in the middle of one or we never got back to in-person lessons or maybe we're just thinking about how we can do this better in the future if online lessons become one of our many tools in our teacher toolkit.

So we've talked so far in this series about equipment and tools and adding fun to online lessons. Last week, we covered technique; teaching technique online and that is one of the things that a lot of teachers have found really, really difficult to do. So I hope that was useful for you.

Today, we're covering an area that I've found easier; not easier; just as easy to teach online – equally difficult; equally easy to teach online and many teachers have told me that they found really, really challenging to teach online and that is rote pieces.

So this one's going to be a little bit different because it's not all specific to online teaching. I mean, well, that's true in general. So maybe it's not that different. But I'm going to start by covering my basic rote teaching process and a little bit about rote pieces more generally.

The logo for 'Vibrant Music Teaching' features the words 'Vibrant', 'Music', and 'Teaching' stacked vertically in a black, cursive script. The text is set against a background of vibrant, overlapping brushstrokes in shades of orange, red, and yellow, creating a dynamic and artistic feel.

Because I believe that probably if you're struggling to teach rote pieces online, you might be doing it different to me in person as well. And so, I want to cover some basics of that first and then we'll talk about some things that are particularly important in online lessons.

So first of all, let me just talk about rote pieces and what they are. Bear with me if you already know. But rote pieces are not like learning our times' tables by rote. In a way, they are. But really, what we mean by rote teaching in a piano lesson context is pieces that we teach by pattern and imitation.

So those pieces that we teach not by reading and also not actually by ear but that we're showing our student how to play it, talking about the patterns in the piece and they're playing it from our demonstration basically.

So these pieces are all designed for teaching by rote, okay? It's intentional. It's not a case of taking their reading pieces and teaching them by rote in stand. It's about pieces that are specifically designed to be taught this way or that particularly lend themselves to being taught this way because they are highly patterned. And that is a theme that's going to run through this episode.

Patterns are important. First of all, though, let me take you through the basic rote teaching process as I see it. For most new rote pieces, the first thing I will do is play the piece for the student; the entire piece.

So we do this so that they can get a sense of the whole thing, they can start to notice where the patterns and the repeats are and all that good stuff. And they can also just get inspired by it and think, "Oh, my gosh. I'm going to be able to play that? That's cool."

Because rote pieces often, well, I'd say this is almost a qualifier that they sound harder than they are and that they're usually beyond the student's reading level if they were to read them. But they are at their playing level.

So first thing to do is play the piece in its entirety. Now, we'll put in one caveat here, which is if you have a student who; how can I explain this type of student; I'm sure you will have met one like them.

These are the students who, if you get to the end of that rote piece, they will try to immediately play the whole thing and they do this from a motivation of wanting to show you or themselves that they can do it. So they kind of believe that they're supposed to be able to do it straight away or they think that that's expected of them somehow, and so, they jump right in.



If you have a student who you know is going to be like that or you discover your student is trying to do that no matter what you say, then you might not want to play their pieces in their entirety for them straight away for a little while until you can kind of ease them out of that belief that they're going to need to be able to play it from start to finish straight away or that they should be able to imitate what you're doing instantly.

Some students could just have that misinformation baked in and it takes a while to get it out of their head. But assuming your student is not like that and they're not going to attempt to jump in and play the whole thing, you should demonstrate the full piece first.

The next thing you're going to do is play a tiny section for them to echo. Before you do this and as you do this, explain the important details or ask them to explain them. This depends on the circumstance. But in general, the further along your student is, the more I would be asking them questions rather than explaining the details.

So asking them before I start, "Okay. When I finish, I want you to tell me which keys I used or what kind of rhythmic pattern I played," or whatever the pertinent details are, asking them a question and priming them for that before you start playing.

Or if they're right at the beginning of their journey, generally, I'll be saying, "Notice that I'm starting on the black key." And then I'd go black, white, black, white, black, white if that's the important factor that I believe is going to help them be successful with playing it; whatever that is.

So I'll explain the important detail or ask them a priming question then demonstrate that short section. Always go smaller because it's easy to expand it from there and you don't want your student to feel overwhelmed.

So something really, really small. And with some students, it might be just a couple of notes just to make sure and then they echo it back for you. Then if they're going fine with that, if that was easy, you can add another part. Play the next part for them; ask them to play it back. And then, if that goes okay, ask them to piece it together without you demonstrating both.

So let me give you an example. Say we're learning Hot Cross Buns and I play E-D-C; we're doing it on the white keys and I play Hot Cross Buns E-D-C. And then, I play the next part, which is the same. So they play E-D-C after me and then I play E-D-C again and they play it again. And I say, "Okay. Can you put those two together?"

Now, that's the same thing twice, but still, I wouldn't play it twice and then ask them to play it; I would have them put it together themselves and I keep doing that. Every time we add a



new thing, I ask them, "Okay. Go back to the start and play it from there including the new part."

In general, unless it is a student who is really under-confident with rote pieces, I will have them put it together with the part they already know without me demonstrating the whole thing together first. Hope that makes sense. It's about them doing a little bit more work, really. I'm trying to engage them and make their brain work that little bit harder so that things are stickier.

So that's the basic process. Now, I know some of you are sitting there going, "What the?" But some of you aren't. Some of you are thinking, "Oh. Well, I normally demonstrate much bigger phrases than that or sometimes I don't play the piece for them at all even though my student doesn't attempt to play the full thing," or whatever.

It could be that some part of that was new to you. So I wanted to start from that foundation together. That's not true for every single piece. There are variations in how I approach these things but that's the basic process.

But there are some key points to remember when it comes to teaching rote pieces and these are the things that as I train other teachers to do this, these are the things that give them the best success and tend to be the hardest to really implement and imbed in your teaching in the beginning.

So the first one is to understand yourself how this piece breaks up. And really what you need to do to do that is to understand why it is a pattern piece, why is this a rote piece, why does it qualify?

Is it that it repeats the pattern on, you know, in separate octaves going up? Does it go A-B-B-A in some way? You need to understand what is highly patterned about it. It can be about how it is played on the piano and how it looks on the piano.

So if you don't understand what makes it a pattern piece, it's very hard to break it up in the correct way that's going to lead to understanding and there can be a lot of trial and error then where you're breaking it up at the wrong point. Because it's not just a case necessarily of doing a whole phrase and then the next whole phrase, it's about breaking it up in a way that helps the student to see the pattern.

So if it goes; I'm going to take I Love Coffee from Piano Safari as an example. At the start of that, the pattern is black, white, black, white, right? On the keys. And it goes I love coffee, I love tea and then it's the same pattern down lower. So that's where you would break that is where the pattern repeats itself. That's one simple example.



But in some cases, it's not going to align with the lyrics like it does there so you need to understand what makes this easy to learn because that will help you to break it up in the correct spot for your student.

The second key thing that I believe leads to success with rote teaching is repetition, right? And we all know that about practice in general; repetition, repetition. But it's about spaced repetition. And if you're going to space out the repetition of this rote piece within the lesson, basically, especially if you're a beginning teacher, you need to teach that first in the lesson.

Move your rote piece, especially the new rote piece to the beginning of the lesson. That's a simple way to improve so much about how you teach rote pieces. Do it at the start of the lesson. Don't listen to what your student practised first; just do the rote piece first.

This isn't a rule, okay? It's just the way to get yourselves started so that you start to find the time to repeat it throughout the lesson. And then once you get used to that, I don't always start with new rote pieces. But I do have it in my brain, in my mind while I'm going through that lesson that I need to get to it in a way that allows me to space it.

So I never leave a rote piece to the end of the lesson; that never happens. Because what I want to do is do that little bit of the rote piece, have my student repeat it a few times, go away and do something else, come back and check if they remember it, go away and do something else and come back and check if they remember it.

If at any stage I come back and they remember it; no problem; and it seems like they're going ground with it, then we can add on another piece of that rote piece, right? We can add on another chunk. But if they are struggling with it after taking a break and doing some reading work or whatever else we were doing, then it gives me an opportunity to reteach it to them.

And that's a normal part of the process; they are going to forget it. But the more spaced repetition you do within the lesson, the greater chance they have of remembering it when they go home. If they just do it a bunch of times in a row at the last segment of the lesson and then go home and don't play it till the next day, they have very little chance of remembering it, honestly.

The last note I wanted to make is about reminder videos and listening tracks. So this is partially specific to Piano Safari but many, many rote piece composers do this also. So it's in a lot of rote material that you'll have a reminder video available to the student on YouTube or some other service and they may also have listening tracks. So one or other or both.



So for Piano Safari, it's both. They have listening tracks that they can download digitally with a code in the front of their book and there are also reminder videos available for free on YouTube.

Now, here's my note about this. Reminder videos are a backup. The listening tracks are super important. A lot of teachers getting started with rote pieces, and you may disagree with me while beyond this, by the way. I feel like I might be on my own with this one. But I don't think the reminder videos are essential whatsoever.

And I know I might be alone on this one or at least in the minority because I see comments from teachers saying, "I just can't get parents to follow up with the reminder videos at home and it's so hard for me, for the student to remember without them and I just can't teach without those reminder videos being watched at home."

And most of my students don't use their reminder videos, and yet, they do learn the rote pieces. So I think that the spaced repetition is what's probably missing for those teachers that the reminder videos are a great backup and I make sure my parents know how to access them. But they rarely need them.

So either you're giving them too big; the chunks are too big or you're not doing enough spaced repetition if they're having to use the reminder videos to teach themselves the pieces at home.

And possibly, that's nothing to do with your teaching and it's just that your lessons are too short. And so, increasing your lesson time is a great way to have that space to repeat those rote pieces throughout the lesson.

The listening tracks, however, are so, so, so valuable. So these are just a little performance of the piece. They're just for listening; they're not play-along tracks or backing tracks; they're just for listening to. And the students whose parents get them to listen to those tracks at home consistently and in advance of us doing the rote pieces, oh my gosh, how much easier is it for me to teach those pieces to those students.

Some kiddos, even as we go through, as they progress in their levels, they start just learning them from the listening tracks. So that they're just playing them by ear at that stage, it's not truly a rote piece, right? But if they do listen to those tracks, especially for those students who find this a challenging area of their studies, it makes a massive difference.

So for me, reminder videos are a backup. Listening tracks are almost essential although not every parent will follow through with them at home and I can make do without them.



Right. So that's some general rote piece teaching advice and I wanted to start with that because although we're talking about online lessons in this mini-series and this is specifically about teaching rote pieces in online piano lessons; if you don't have those things in place, that might be where things are falling apart for you.

So hopefully, one of those tips can make the difference for you if you're really struggling with rote pieces in online lessons that you realize, "Oh, I was doing it differently in in-person lessons and maybe if I follow that procedure, it will work better in online lessons as well."

Now, there are a few things though that are specific to video call lessons. The number one thing is to give smaller sections to your students in online lessons. This is not so much anything to do with it being harder to learn online as much as a video call issue because it might glitch out or something like that in the middle of you playing something.

Smaller sections are better and actually make things flow faster. However, before you play the small section, make sure you give that explanation. Like, "I want you to listen out for this thing," or "I'm going to play this pattern, which is on the three black keys," and yadda yadda; whatever preamble you have.

The reason that's extra essential online is not just for your student to be paying attention to those things although that is important, it's so that you can make sure that the audio has fully switched over to you. So in Zoom, like it switches dynamically back and forth; it prioritizes the audio from the person who's speaking.

And right at the start of you speaking, it might not pick you up fully, so especially at the start of playing the piano. Whereas if you speak first, it tends to pick you up and then you play the piano and it picks that up as well because you're already the prioritized speaker if that makes sense.

So that's just a little technical thing but smaller sections and making sure you give that verbal preamble to what you're going to play so that the student focuses on the right thing and so that the audio is picked up clearly by the video call software.

Another thing about teaching these pieces online in particular, this is a general online teaching thing, actually, but for rote pieces, in particular, they can be overwhelming for students especially students who find them challenging.

And kids do have more trouble than adults expressing what's going wrong in a video call. So if they can't see something, if the audio didn't come through clearly, they can sort of end up blaming themselves I find.

Like, they feel like they just didn't get it when actually, it was a technical issue and/or just a matter of them not being able to follow you. But it's harder at the same time for us to see



their face and see their expression and gauge their sort of aura to gauge how they're going with it, basically.

And so, just while your student is playing it back for you or while you're playing, if possible, try to watch their face as closely as you can because kids are under a lot of pressure and a video call environment can be quite volatile for them.

So just be careful with those chunks that you're giving them that you are paying attention to their face and their body language carefully so that you're avoiding meltdowns and confusions. It just can happen a bit more frequently online.

Another factor in online lessons, which is a little bit funny, is that I found it necessary to split up rote pieces more from each other and get clear with the titles of the rote pieces. So one issue I found in the beginning weeks of teaching online was that if I was doing a couple of different rote pieces with a student, they would kind of mix, mish them, mash them up together.

They would end up mixing a beat of Swans on the Lake together with I Love Coffee; if you're familiar with Piano Safari, you know what I mean. But basically, that's just two pieces that use the black keys and they would kind of create a mash-up accidentally of the two.

I don't know why this; I can't really pinpoint why this would happen more in a video call than it would in person but I suspect it was just to do with me trying to save time by not introducing things properly properly.

Most likely, my fault. But I've had to tell myself to be really clear about, "We're going to play this piece now. So this is one," and like making sure they say it back to you; stuff like that so that they're really clear about which one you're doing because I've found that doesn't come through as clearly through the video call.

And then also, by the same token, splitting those pieces more from each other. So where I would have done a beat of I Love Coffee and then a beat of Swans on the Lake, it's better to do a beat of I Love Coffee something else completely different – reading, improv, game; whatever else, and then, the beat of Swans on the Lake. Just split them up that little bit more because I did have several students, especially beginner students who were getting their pieces mixed up with each other more.

Another essential thing or I hate to say it as essential but I think if you're going to teach rote pieces, it kind of is, and that is an overhead camera view for piano teachers. And we talked about this back in the equipment episode, which was Episode 112 if you want to go back and check that out.



I talked about overhead camera views. We'll also leave the link in the show notes here to the YouTube video, which explains how to set up your overhead piano camera. So if you don't already have one, it's really a huge benefit when it comes to teaching rote pieces online.

Now, what you won't probably have is an overhead view of their keys and that can be challenging, especially for your beginner students. So a little tip with that is just to get them to play the first note of the piece, kind of slow things down and say, "Okay. We're going to play this. This is the position that it's in, this is where it starts," that kind of thing and say, "Can you play just the first note for me so I can check we're in the right spot?"

And then you quietly play the note on your end on your piano so that you can check that they are on the right key to start with. Because from there, from your angle of them, it can be quite hard to see, especially which octave they're in.

But even for beginner beginners, you need to double-check that they found the three black keys and that they've put their hand on the right spot. So just get in there to play that first note first if you can't see clearly whether they're in the right place or not is a great way to get yourself started.

Okay. So I hope that's given you some food for thought when it comes to teaching rote pieces online. As I said, this hasn't been the hardest thing for me to teach online and it may be something to do with how I teach rote pieces more generally or that I've been doing these types of pieces for quite a while maybe compared to some teachers.

So if you are new to teaching rote pieces, definitely check out more resources on this and try following that simple process and see if it helps you out. I would love to hear what the hardest thing has been for you to teach online.

What have you found really challenging? Maybe it was technique like we talked about last week, maybe it was this week's topic of rote pieces or maybe it's the topic we're covering next week, which is about beginner reading.

But whatever it is for you, I would love to hear it. You can tell us about it in the Facebook group or over on the show notes for this episode at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/119.

Now, as I said, we're talking about beginner reading next week, which is something else that's come up as a challenge to teach and this was probably my one that I'd found the most challenging. Not probably, it definitely was.

For me, the students who were at the stage of just about starting reading on the staff or getting close to that or had just started before the lockdown, that was the thing that was really challenging for me because a lot of the games I play at that stage and to make sure of those concepts are big physical games.



So I had games I could play on the screen and I was doing different things but it was challenging without the floor staff, to be honest. It was really a lesson for me in, oh my gosh, how valuable is my floor staff.

So we're going to be tackling beginner reading next week and how I've overcome those challenges, how I've gotten those students on to the staff and not had to delay any of their step and skip and landmark, note work and all of that good stuff.

So we'll cover that in next week's episode. That's going to be the last one in our mini-series about Online Teaching 2.0 for now. But if you have more topics that we haven't covered yet about online teaching, do let me know about it and we'll see if we can cover it in a future episode.

That's it for this week. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.

If you're new to the idea of online teaching or rote teaching, in particular, you might like to see some actual teaching in action. I know many teachers find it much easier to understand how these things look in practice by seeing real teaching happen.

You can see tons of examples of my own teaching inside the video library. So if you're a member, just go to the video library to check those out and select the teaching videos option. Or if you're not a member yet, you can sign up at VMT.ninja.