

MUSIC

A Dance with

By Juliet Aucreman, MS

MUSIC STUDY IS A DANCE OF THE MIND, a mind we come to know better and better as it bends and grows with a melody. Music study is process-oriented—it is a journey. Through music study, we build a learner’s toolbox—a personal owner’s manual of our own mind, and discover how we can use it strategically.

Learning how to practice effectively is an opportunity to practice and hone attention skills. We teach our students the thoughts behind our methodology, so they may use the experience to excel in all areas of life. “I’m befuzzled!” my middle-school piano student proclaims, after battling through a complicated section in *Hedwig’s Theme* from *Harry Potter*. I giggle. “Uh-oh! Earthquake!” I say, shaking the bench she perches upon, to lighten things up a little.

“I can’t get it,” she says. I cock my head. “Actually, you got a lot of it—but—do you think you could do it in your sleep?” I say. “No!” she says, laughing. “What do you think you might do to make it easier?” I say. “I don’t know—practice it more,” she says. I smile. “It’s not really about IF you practice,” I say. “It’s HOW you practice. Doing things the same old ways will give you the same old results,” I say, parroting an oft-cited coaching mantra. Then I pick up my cellphone to show her a favorite Einstein quote. “Read this out loud,” I say. She reads it and shakes her head. “I guess this one really is for me,” she says. “INSANITY: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

“So,” I say, “how have you been working on this?” “I don’t know—I just play it over and over,” she says. “Okay,” I say. “How’s that working for you?” “It’s not,” she replies. “Might you be open to another way of doing it?” I say. “Sure,” she shrugs.

I smile. “You can break down anything you’re trying to learn into smaller and smaller parts,” I say. “That way, your



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With Attention

brain stands half a chance—you need to give it the opportunity to really focus on less things and learn them well. Is this about the piano, or is this about everything you need to learn?” “The piano!” she insists. I shake my head. “Actually, you’re here to learn HOW to learn things,” I say. “You think you’re here for a piano lesson, but I say you’re here to learn how your brain works so you can tackle anything that comes up for you in your life. When you learn how to practice, you learn how to focus, so you can learn anything that comes around the corner.” She nods slowly.

“Apparently,” I say, “the average person can remember about seven numbers in a row. I think I can do about five. I bet you can do nine. So, if you think of music practice that way, wouldn’t it make sense to just practice seven notes in a row, instead of the whole line, which has... (*I quickly count the notes*) ... about twenty-nine notes in it?” “Yeah, I guess,” she says. “Let’s try breaking it down like that,” I say, and whip out some post-it notes to give her a starting and stopping point.

She plays the block of music, a little too quickly, and misses a note. “Let’s take it a little slower,” I say. She plays again, with no nod to slowness, and misses a different note. “You know,” I say, “I think you’re just like me. You need some help to go slow enough to get it right every time.”

I pull out the metronome. “Okay,” I say. “The metronome is here to give you the just-right challenge—just slow enough to get all the notes right, but just fast enough to keep you from getting bored and making more mistakes.” She sighs, plays the blocked notes flawlessly, then looks back, expectantly. “Okay,” I say. “Now—do it three more times.” I make the metronome speed slightly faster. She plays again, glances at me, and I motion for her continuance. Her fingers move more fluidly. Just a little faster—barely perceptible to a listener, but just enough to pique her attention.

Once she finishes, she says, “Okay! Now can I play that whole part again?” “Hold your horses,” I say. “It turns out

your brain learns best the first few times you do something. When your brain is saying, “Wait...WHAT?”—that’s when it’s really packing in information. After doing it four or five times, it’s better to go on to the next thing. While you’re doing the next thing, your brain is actually still working on the first thing. And then you can go back to the first thing again later, and jolt your brain some more, because it will feel like a fresh challenge again. And this is good news, right? Because it would be really boring to do something ten times, right?” “Yeah!” the student nods vigorously.

“Well, it turns out, when you’re bored, your BRAIN is even MORE bored,” I say. “We have to find ways to keep our attention going when we’re learning things. So we mix things up. We go back and forth between things we need to learn, to keep our attention fresh. Is this about the piano, or is this about everything you learn?” “Ummm... everything...?” she says. Now it’s me nodding vigorously.

“So, how could this help you learn other things that are hard?” I ask. “Break things down into small parts?” says my student. “Sure thang!” I say.

“If you’re trying to memorize something for school, spend some time with that one thing—then move on to something else, and return to the first thing later. Don’t put too much into your head at once. Be patient with yourself. Forgive yourself when it doesn’t come quickly. Make your learning be like how a farmer farms. Don’t water one sunflower for ten hours, thinking it will quickly grow to six feet. Spend a little time on each sunflower—then move on. Come back the next day. Believe that, in time, the roots will grow. In time, you’ll have the most beautiful flower imaginable.” 🌻

Juliet Aucreman, MS, is a pianist, coach, pediatric occupational therapist, composer, artist, and author. Her multimedia book/music CD and music download (sold separately) *Fireflies of the Mind: A Journey into Mindfulness and Inner Strength embraces the ADHD mind and experience, in a whimsical coaching path toward transcendence.*