



2020 Piano Syllabus: Helping Students Benefit from the Exam Critique

This year our newsletter articles have focused on Getting Started with the Piano Exam Syllabus – highlighting the tools and resources available to help prepare your students, diving into the technical skills, and detailing what to expect at an actual exam. Today we’re going to address one more important aspect of the exam experience: helping your student get the full benefit from the adjudicator’s written comments.

Self Evaluation

At the next lesson after a student takes an exam, I like to start by asking the student to evaluate their own performance. “How did the exam go? Tell me what it was like for you.” Often, students will tell me details of how they got to the site, whether or not their parent got lost, how they were running late or arrived early and had to wait, or where they went for ice cream when it was all over. These details paint a clear picture of the student’s state of mind at the time of the exam – whether they were calm or stressed, excited or scared.

I ask about the performance, often zeroing in on a specific challenge they had worked to overcome. “Did the keyboard skills go well? How was the memory on your Bach piece?”

The student who was well prepared for the exam is usually quite self-aware and knows exactly how things went. They can tell me whether the instrument helped or hindered their efforts to play with dynamic contrasts, and they can tell me right where their fingers stumbled or their memory slipped.

Reading the Judge’s Comments

After hearing the student’s view of how things went, I’ll bring out the critique and we read comments together. Sometimes we have to decipher hard to read handwriting, and sometimes a word or phrase needs explanation.

The judge’s comments are a wonderful opportunity to confirm and expand a student’s awareness.

- When the comments reinforce the student’s self-evaluation, commend the student. “Yes, the judge agrees that you could have made the contrasts between loud and soft even bigger.”
- Comments that suggest areas for improvement can open the student to new ideas. Young students are often focused simply on whether or not they played the right notes, and a judge’s comments about dynamics, articulation and phrasing can help a student expand their idea of what makes a musical performance.
- Sometimes the comments reinforce a concept or skill that you as the teacher have been trying to convince the student is important – it’s helpful for the student to hear it from another source.

- Sometimes a judge's comments will actually contradict your own philosophy or musical ideas. That's a great opportunity to talk with students about subjectivity in musical interpretation.

The Value of the Learning

At the end of the conversation, I like to set aside the critique and draw the student's attention back to the experience itself. "Wow – you really learned a lot of music for this exam." I sometimes flip back in their assignment book and take note of how many weeks (or months) they worked on a particular piece, or take note of a new skill they worked to acquire. I congratulate them for taking on the challenge of the exam and working incrementally toward their goal.

These conversations are great ways to congratulate students on their accomplishments, set some next goals, and reinforce the idea that it's their daily commitment to practicing that makes their musical dreams come true. The MMTA Piano Exam Syllabus and testing program is a valuable tool in my studio, providing the structure and opportunity for students to learn and grow.

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