

Adult learners

I enjoy working with adults. They are usually highly motivated, organised well (or at least as well as possible given other demands on their time), and critical of their own performance. This can be a bad thing, as they can feel disappointed with what they have produced; I find that a sense of humour and lots of encouragement can help to make lessons more enjoyable. Yet this self-criticism can also be a good thing; when shown a way of improving the music they study, create or perform, adults usually recognise quickly the difference it makes to the way the music sounds. They are pleased when I can suggest ways in which they can make this improvement (such as making the melody “sing”, and making the accompaniment support it rather than overpower it).

On the other hand, adults tell me that they enjoy learning from me because I bring a wealth of experience and understanding to my teaching. I can help them relate the music they study or perform to the composers who wrote it, the world in which they lived, and what they were hoping to achieve. I can also draw links to the arts and history in general.

Weekly lessons work best – even if they are quite short. What I normally do is that, if there is not enough time to cover everything, what we have not done is put at the top of the list for next time. Fortnightly lessons work better at higher levels, when students already have the musicianship to guide their own improvement. I often find that students at lower levels have spent the two weeks between lessons repeating errors, or at least not improving stylistic or technical elements (such as fingering and expression). All of us tend to put off what we need to do until the last minute; so if lessons are once a fortnight, students tend to do most of their practice in the second week – yet by this time they may have forgotten what they learnt in the lesson, so the practice has limited effect.

I encourage adults to take an interest in what they want to achieve. I then work with them to reach that goal. This gives both of us a feeling of satisfaction when the goal is reached.