

A FRESH LOOK

Into The Transfer Student Process

By Margarita Denenburg

Teaching a transfer student is one of the most complicated components of the piano teaching profession, challenging some of the bravest piano teachers. As teachers, we are responsible to provide a solid continuation of their musical studies, help strengthen existing knowledge, enrich any missing parts and, at times, rebuild their foundation entirely. This is not an easy task, and in some situations more difficult than in others.

Many established pedagogues recog-

nize that difficulty. Marianne Uszler, for example, points out that one of the biggest challenges is “being able to teach the transfer student at a number of levels simultaneously.”¹ Frances Clark said she had a “fair degree of success with [beginner] students” but readily admitted that even she needed “help with students who transfer [to her] from other teachers.”²

Where Did My “Starting Point” Go?

The challenge of teaching the transfer student lies in the many unknowns a teacher faces. We can comfortably offer solutions and suggestions to problems that are known and visible, but it becomes more challenging to solve something we cannot clearly see.

Unlike the beginner student, a transfer student lacks a clear, identifiable starting point, thus creating uncertainty in our planning and teaching. It adds a layer of complexity when we have to become “musical detectives,” deciphering a student’s placement in their musical studies and only then

develop a plan that would merge the student successfully into our studio. We have to be attentive, flexible and willing to change, taking paths we have never taken before, constantly adjusting the lessons and at the same time embracing the student’s already-acquired (good or bad) skills.

Why such uncertainty? A transfer student arrives to us from an unknown environment, where they learned their skills from a different teacher, often in a style different from our own.

The student’s acquired skills might be exceptional, ordinary or underdeveloped. Their playing might exceed our expectations or be unacceptable by our standards. We simply do not know their experiences, learning habits and overall playing level.

As complicated and uncomfortable as the “transfer student” teaching might seem, we all have to experience it sooner or later, whether precollege or in college. When approaching any transfer student, it is crucial to learn about them prior to accepting them

Margarita Denenburg, DMA, is an assistant professor of keyboard studies at Heidelberg University. She is an active performer, educator and researcher. To learn more about Denenburg, visit www.MargaritaDenenburg.com.



into our studio—this is the key to our success. In this article I would like to share a proposal, concentrating on the evaluation of students' abilities during the initial interview, in an effort to help us to approach any transfer student successfully.

The Square-One Assessment

The Square-One Assessment (SOA) is named after the idea that we should approach our transfer student as if starting from the very beginning. Since teaching a complete beginner is our comfort zone, it is helpful to get to that point with our transfer students as well and find their “new” beginning point.

The assessment needs to be well-organized and clear. We want to gather information in a way that allows us to plan how to teach that student in the future. Completing a puzzle where the pieces match our studio's standards while recognizing which pieces are missing or need further attention is essential. By conducting the SOA, we equip ourselves with a systematic apparatus and can successfully approach nearly any transfer student, eliminating the unnecessary frustration and “unknowns” from the transition. We establish a “starting point” that helps our students, and us, successfully proceed with piano lessons in our studio.

The SOA consists of different categories that help the teacher easily navigate the evaluation process, creating a big picture that is relative to the specifics of the program. It is individualistic and aims to help us better understand where the student stands in relation to our own studio. We recognize what the student knows and should know at this point in their musical studies.

The assessment can be done during the initial interview and should take approximately 30 minutes, depending on the age and level of the student. During the SOA the following questions are targeted, helping both the student and teacher to gain needed feedback and a common ground to

move forward. Some of these questions take longer to realistically answer; however, these are good questions to keep in mind during the interview process.

- What is the level of the new student based on your program?
- Will you accept the student into your studio?
- Is your studio a good fit for the student?
- What will be the short- and long-term goals?
- Is the student ready to join the studio by committing to the designed plan?

The SOA can help answer all of the above questions by filling in the particulars in each category. Each form will be different and relative to the age and level of the student and the individual studio.

Square-One Assessment Categories

The SOA is divided into four categories: Musical Literacy, Technique, Musicianship and Practice Habits. Each category has several options that range from the best-case scenario (4 or 3) to the more problematic (2 or 1).

Musical Literacy

This is, perhaps, the easiest category to assess; it consists of three options and is transparent for both teacher and student. After conducting a short assessment on Musical Literacy, you should be able to place the student into one of the following categories:

3. Exceeds expectations
2. Proficient
1. Not proficient

The particulars of the assessment itself may include note recognition, rhythm understanding, articulation signs, tempo markings, expression symbols and music theory. There is no right or wrong assessment; it is all up to your personalized curriculum. Tailor it as needed to fit your studio

and what works best. Gather as much information as possible and place the student in the 3, 2 or 1 group. If the student scores less than 2, find the missing puzzle piece(s) and adjust the future plan.

Technique

With an overwhelming amount of information, opinions and schools of technique, this category is cumbersome. It is a passionate topic that sparks controversy among many pedagogues. As we assess our students, we have to momentarily forget about our own preferred technique: it is not about us; it is about the student. With a wide range of materials and technique varieties, we have to remember our way is not the *only* right way. There are multiple different styles of teaching piano technique and while we all are extremely passionate about “how” and “what” we teach, we have to accept that there are multiple ways to get to the desired outcome. Russian school, French school, Taubman Technique, to name a few, can all achieve similar results with quite different passageways.

When making the decision of placing the student in one of the above-explained groups it is important to be vigilant and attentive. The technical assessment can be taken while the student plays a few of his pieces, a simple passage, or a scale. Marianne Uszler recommends, “Keep your eyes on the student, not the music. Step back from the piano, and move around it so the student's entire posture is observable.”³ In addition to this valuable advice, I would recommend a few additional tips:

- Survey the sitting position.
- Observe arm alignment: wrists, elbows and arms.
- Watch for tension in the back, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists and hands.
- With student's (or parent's) permission, gently touch student's arm, checking for tension.

- With student's (or parent's) permission, hold student's hand. Check for tension and whether student is able to relax his hand quickly on request.

Basing the assessment on these ideas, I offer the following groups to be marked after observing the student:

4. Healthy technique in your style
3. Healthy technique not in your style
2. Unhealthy technique in your style
1. Unhealthy technique not in your style

The ideal situation for a teacher is category 4: *Healthy technique in your style*. It is comfortable, familiar and easy to proceed with. We understand the student's technique and will gladly continue working with them. It is a "happy" situation for any teacher; unfortunately, these types of transfer students are rare.

The *Healthy technique not in your style* is where the flexibility and knowledge of a teacher comes into play. As long as the technique is not harmful and does not possess physical threat to the apparatus, I believe there is no reason to immediately react. Over time the student naturally will follow your style and transition into your domain without too much pressure or unnecessary setbacks.

Both categories 1 and 2 are perhaps the most complicated and "high-risk" to the well-being of a student. The *Unhealthy technique in your style* belongs to students who arrive from a novice teacher or a teacher who is not proficient in "your" style. At times we might decide to take a radical change to our teaching style altogether. Such adjustments and novelties take time to develop and perfect; therefore, the teaching might not produce results right away.

Much can be said about the *Unhealthy technique not in your style*.

It is perceived to be the worst possible scenario, requiring patience, dedication and willingness on both sides. Cooperation in this case is essential as a brand-new foundation must be built starting from bottom up and the student has to wait patiently to proceed. Initially the progress will seem slow and even to regress; however, it is vital to make these changes to continue to safely develop as a musician and prevent hand injury.

Musicianship

Musicianship or *being musical* is a relative and personal concept. This category can be quite controversial as every musician has different tastes, ideas and training. In spite of our differences as music teachers, there are some common-ground ideas of style, form, phrasing and more that we have to follow and try to teach our students. Only after the basics of musical interpretations are learned and internalized can we add our own personality and vigor. It cannot work any other way. A wonderful book by Deborah Sinn, *Playing Beyond the Notes*,⁴ provides a great resource for teachers and older students to better understand the musical interpretation process. The categories below offer a wide perspective, helping us organize the way we approach the complex Musicianship assessment.

4. Above-average musicianship
3. Basic musicianship
2. Underdeveloped musicianship
1. Developed musicianship in a different style

Again, the *Above-average musicianship* scenario is preferable and desirable for every teacher. It consists of a student who has internalized the intricate details of musical interpretation and is able to add intelligently their own interpretive mark. It signifies a student who possesses knowledge, ability and musical intuition, and is ready to continue his musical development.

Basic musicianship indicates the average student that we, teachers, would also favor and usually readily accept.

Underdeveloped musicianship signifies a student who lacks basic understanding of musical interpretation according to your own expectations. This student will require guidance, small steps and clear directions. For an older student, *Playing Beyond the Notes* can be an excellent way to build that musical foundation.

Lastly, the *Developed musicianship in a different style* takes the lead in its complexity. To make matters worse, the habit of playing in the *wrong* style can make the transition more challenging. This scenario is especially complicated with the older student, whose ear is used to certain musical ideas and who gained a certain level of proficiency not realizing that their musical ideas are not appropriate in certain styles.

In this case, much reinforcement is needed. To create a future plan for that student, the teacher has to include specific requirements that would include musical exposure. Concert attendance, guided recording listening, studio classes, master classes, evaluation program participations (for example, RCM), and many other opportunities can help. While time is always an issue in our studios, especially with older students, there are ways to bypass this problem. In an article, "Using Social Media in Private Lessons,"⁵ the author offers ways to enhance weekly lessons with social media. Creating a closed Facebook group, for example, can be a place where teachers can share YouTube performances, exposing students weekly to high-level musicianship, thus retraining their ear.

Practice Habits

This category is perhaps the most important during the first interview. The teacher must communicate their expectations and determine whether the student is ready to commit to

them. We know without a quality daily practice routine, nothing can be accomplished. Practice charts, video recordings, online programs like Practicia.com and CollabraMusic.com, and the like, all target successful practice routines. However, in spite of all the efforts we make with our students, they still have trouble holding up their end of the bargain. A teacher should dedicate a substantial portion of the SOA talking about the practice routine and new requirements. This is your “once-in-a-lifetime” chance to make a difference! It is a perfect place to establish boundaries and explain your expectations, especially since practice routines can vary significantly from one teacher to the next. Practice habits categories are:

3. Practice routine aligns with your studio’s policies
2. Practice routine exists but differs from your studio policies
1. Practice routine is lacking

This category might require a lot of time to appropriately place the student. More often than not students believe they know how to practice efficiently or are fully convinced they practice for “long periods” of ten minutes a day. It is only after a few lessons that the teacher can recognize whether the student can or cannot efficiently practice. This is why I recommend to always start with option 1, *Practice routine is lacking*, explaining in detail what your expectations for practice are. If within a few weeks you see the student practices and progresses well, you may change their placement to 3; however, I have learned it is easier not to have expectations and assumptions in this category, because more often than not they are false.

Planning For The Future

After you decide whether or not you are the best teacher for the student, it is time to create a plan and share it with your student. That plan has to be flexi-

ble and sensitive to their needs and will most likely change course and direction several times during the year. You must not be discouraged by those changes—quite the opposite: changes are necessary to make desirable progress. Despite these considerable changes it is still important to offer a plan and set short- and long-term goals. These goals might include performing two pieces by memory in the December concert, learning bass clef notes, completing a listening list or fixing hand alignment. No matter the goals, they will help you and your student to stay focused in your work together.

If you are unsure whether the student is a good fit, you might consider offering a trial period. It has to be defined and shared with the student, highlighting the clear steps the student has to take to join your studio permanently. Example requirements might include “record your practice sessions with *Collabra* six days a week,” “arrive at your lesson ready to learn with completed homework” or “attend all studio events.” These requirements have to have a direct relationship with the previously completed SOA. By keeping these requirements short, simple and doable, you set your new student up for success. The conditions have to be simple enough for your student to fully understand what to do and how to do it. Set a time for the trial period and schedule a reassessment meeting as soon as your learning plan is ready. The reassessment form should be similar to the SOA, showing the student’s progress.

Conclusion

Teaching a transfer student entails many different challenges; however, with an assessment and an organized system in place it is possible to transition a student with a more positive and hopeful outlook. Creating a common ground by highlighting their *square-one starting point* can make a huge difference in their transition.

Begin the SOA approach slowly. Starting with small steps will help to avoid unnecessary stress and frustration. Any changes we make take time, thought, and experience, and we should not attempt changing everything all at once. Try the SOA with your existing students first. If at the moment you do not have a clear curriculum in place, that’s okay. Gradually put your program together. Choose several students and list all of the “4” and “3” options they have or in your opinion should have. What are your goals by the end of the month? What should they achieve by the end of the year? What are some of the skills you wish for them to improve? How does their progress compare to other students in the studio? Asking these questions can help your studio flourish, affecting your current, future, and transfer students. And *yes!* every student is different and *no!* we do not want to take creativity and personalized learning away from them. But we do want to provide an environment where every student feels comfortable, accomplished and musically fulfilled, especially if that student did not start in our own studio. ☺

Notes

1. Marianne Uszler, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher* (New York, NY: Schirmer, 1999), 137.
2. Frances Clark, *Questions and Answers: Practical Advice for Piano Teachers* (Kingston, NJ: Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, 1992), 201.
3. Uszler, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 31.
4. Deborah Sinn, *Playing beyond the Notes: A Pianist’s Guide to Musical Interpretation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. Margarita Denenburg, “Using Social Media in Private Lessons,” *Piano Pedagogy Forum* 17, no. 2 (2016): 2–6.