

Back to Basics – A Composer/Pianist Reflects on Some Foundational Music Teaching Principles

Presented on Friday night, September 13, 2024, Abbotsford, BC

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To start, I would like to acknowledge my own appreciation and love of this land we call Canada and how colonialism has inflicted lasting pain and great injustices upon the Indigenous nations that held these lands for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the first Europeans. I recognize that growing up as part of the white settler society has afforded me an inherent level of support and preferential treatment that has not been extended to Indigenous communities. I welcome you to join with me in supporting the efforts of reconciliation.

I also want to begin by thanking the British Columbia Registered Music Teachers' Association for inviting me to provide these opening remarks and to serve as the adjudicator and clinician for the conference's competitions. As someone who has spent almost four decades serving on the boards of service organizations, and who recently helped organize the 2022 Ontario Registered Music Teachers' Association Conference in my hometown of Kingston, I have some understanding of the work involved. To everyone who served on this event's planning committee, well done. Finally, it is worth conveying appreciation to all the teachers here as attendees. I recognize that it can often take an extraordinary effort to free up time to simply get to an event like this, especially in September, and I do hope you are richly rewarded for your efforts.

As someone who is primarily a composer, I've structured this talk on "Back to Basics," to include performances of three of my own piano compositions. Truly, to talk about music and music teaching without performing or listening to music, seems like a particularly cruel punishment and far too disconnected from reality. The first two works I will play, tie into the conference's theme with their use of basic compositional building blocks, while the last piece was written in 1996 for the wonderful Canadian pianist, Janina Fialkowska. More importantly from a personal perspective, this last piece was dedicated to Dorothy Hare, my Calgary piano teacher from grades 9 to 12 in public school (1975-79). Titled, *Everything Waits for the Lilacs*, some of you may know this final work from List E of the RCM's ARCT syllabus. Dorothy taught and instilled in me, so many music truisms and life lessons and before playing this piece, I will share with you, some of her mantras that still resonate through my soul to this very day. To save time and maintain flow, I'd ask that you hold any applause until the very end.

As a quick aside, I'll just add that all of the compositions I will be playing today are published with Red Leaf Pianoworks and can be examined with many other Red leaf titles at the Conference's Trade Show. Red Leaf has greatly benefitted from the support of Long &

McQuade, who in addition to distributing all our publications nationally, has in recent years handled our music sales at conferences like this. I am thrilled to let you know that during the conference at the Red Leaf booth, you can meet fellow Red Leaf composers Susan Griesdale from Ontario and Irene Voros from Surrey. It is always hard to predict how much interest there will be in purchasing music, and so I have prepared a handout that you can pick up after my talk that lists my own Red Leaf Pianoworks titles. Should Long&McQuade run out of music, you can use this form to order music directly from me at the same price and I will cover the postage. Also, the first page of this handout lists the main points of this talk and provides a URL to Google Drive folder where you can download the complete text of my presentation and the handout.

Now, down to the topic at hand.

I believe that when one talks of “basics,” in education, usually the first thing that springs to mind is an emphasis on rote memorization, often captured rather humorously in the primary school directive to, “Teach the Three R’s.” These, as we all know, are only phonetically connected to the letter R, because when spelt correctly, we actually have an R, a W and an A; or “Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic.” It is always fun though, to take the collective list literally and say, “reading, ‘riting, and ‘ritmetic,” and in truth, said this way, people will know what you mean and appreciate the joke even more.

In fact, because humor is often the best way to get someone’s attention and make a lasting point, I would posit that it is the self-mocking misspelling or mispronunciation of the Three R’s that has made this phrase so lasting and memorable. More pointedly, the idea that if you simply teach “reading, writing, and arithmetic,” students will have the fundamental skills to succeed in life, becomes inherently ironic when one realizes that the label only has one word spelt with a first-letter R. This irony works on many levels, beginning with the situation that if teaching the Three R’s makes one an educated person, why is the label misspelt. The deeper dichotomy though, is that for someone to understand the joke, they must already have a fairly advanced understanding of the English language spelling which is a crucial component of both writing and reading. In other words, to “get the joke,” one must rely on, and then appreciate, the education they have already received.

As an aside, I would suggest that there are lots of great analogies for understanding and enjoying this kind of “inside” joke, that can be found in music. For me, some of the most sophisticatedly funny instances appear in some of the rondo movements composed by classical composers such Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. Here, I am thinking specifically of the rondos in which the music appears to be building through a final retransition back to the main theme and a big ending, only to have the anticipated ending, become dramatically avoided or interrupted with a surprising harmonic pause or unexpected modulation to an as yet, unexplored key. To be able to hear and comprehend the humour of these moments, is to have achieved an almost profound understanding of classical music, either through focused listening to classical music or through music education. One of the best examples of this comedic interjection can be heard in the final movement of Mozart’s B Flat Major

Piano Sonata, K.333. Towards the end of this movement, the music builds to a huge cadential 6/4 chord and then seems to step outside of the solo piano genre by incorporating a build-up to a cadenza as would be heard in a piano concerto. It is almost as if the piano has become the orchestra and is setting up a solo pianist's cadenza. After the pause on the "orchestra's cadence," the pianist virtuosically jumps into this cadenza and even builds to an implied ending, with a series of trills. Indeed, the use of a trill at the end of a cadenza comes from the practice when cadenzas were improvised by the soloist during the performance and the trill was a necessity that alerted the conductor/orchestra to enter upon the trill's resolution. In this Piano Sonata though, the trill becomes the springboard for a join to a descending scalar retransition, that seamlessly slides back into the Rondo's main theme. The return of this melody makes everything right in the world, and we are all satisfied. In fact, we can grin all the more because we have gotten the joke. To understand this kind moment in a concert, or even better, to be able to pull this off in performance, is to see enlightenment and smile.

Returning to the public-school system's approach to basics in education, as someone in my sixties, I have seen the public school system shift from emphasizing the fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic, to exciting students through a more creative and investigative approaches and then observing slight shifts between the two perspectives like a slowly swinging pendulum.

For the "back-to-basics" teaching approaches discussed so far, although I didn't clearly state this, I am sure you've all assumed I am talking about "classroom teaching." In the case of elementary schools and the Three R's, I have been told that in some provinces, these classes can have 30 or more students. I expect though, that the teachers I am talking to today, will probably have the wonderful advantage of delivering their teaching to one student at a time. The advantage here, is that by working one-on-one, a teacher can tailor the instruction to address the students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Even better, for some early-aged students, the individualized instruction can be directed to a youngster AND a parent, which reminds me of the old joke that is always worth repeating: "How do you become a successful musician? — Choose great parents."

Before leaving the classroom setting though, I want to share a quick summary of an article I read this past summer by BC journalist Gary Mason in the Globe and Mail (July 10, 2024). It was titled, "Back-to-basics learning is having a moment." It described the "Directed Instruction" method (DI, for short) used in Washington State with specific reference to the Wahitis Elementary School in the town of Othello, a mostly rural area with high levels of poverty. In 2014, when Directed Instruction was introduced, only 26% of the fifth graders at the school were passing the state's standardized reading assessment test and 38% passing the math assessment test. In 2023, after nine years of incorporating the DI method into the curriculum, the percentage of students passing the reading assessment jumped 34 points to 60% and math, up 10 points to 48%.

I'll quote a few comments directly from Gary Mason:

DI is not revolutionary. Class lessons are highly structured and carefully planned. Learning happens in small increments and is extremely repetitive. It is often criticized for being no different than rote memorization, the classroom standard for generations. [Rote memorization] was rendered obsolete by many jurisdictions in North America on the grounds that it was boring and stifled creativity....An example of what direct instruction looks like in action: A teacher explains a math concept to the class. When she asks how many understand it, those who didn't hold up two fingers. Those who did, hold up four. Now she knows who to go back to assist before moving on to the next concept.

The article goes on to compare some of the approaches used in primary school teaching of other countries, ending with Ontario, my province, and how the Doug Ford Conservative government has signaled a "back-to-basics" intent that would put an emphasis on reading, writing and math skills. Mason concludes that, "There would seem to be room, somewhere, for a hybrid approach that emphasizes the basics, but also makes room for student creativity. Education doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing proposition."

With regards to music, and music studio teaching more specifically, if I had to make a big generalization, I'd state that "the basics" fall into two categories: first, the skills needed to read music and understand the vocabulary of foundational elements such as pitch, harmony and rhythm (often referred to as Music Theory or Music Rudiments); and second, the more technical skills needed to play an instrument or sing in such a way that the sound is always generated with ease and facility. This latter category is often achieved by the practicing of technical exercises such as scales. While mastering both categories leads to becoming a fine musician, it is the second one, that seems crucial to becoming a confident performer in the way that mastering technical exercises helps one perform tension-free and using appropriate body position and movement. Truly though, achieving success in one area supports the other and both can often be taught near simultaneously. Returning to Directed Instruction, I would strongly suggest that because you are teaching music, one of the most creative forms of artistic expression ever produced by humanity, you have already developed a hybrid form of instruction that is constantly adjusting the ratio of time spent on the basics with time spent on creative expression.

Alright, so let's regroup. On a foundational level, we have two categories of "the basics" in music education: theoretical knowledge—rudiments—coupled with second category of technical exercises—scales and the like. Further, because as teachers we are always trying to show how these basics apply directly to an actual piece of music, we can in real time gauge a student's understanding and adapt our use of the basics and the time spent in this area as required. In other words, music teaching in both the studio setting and the classroom has already mastered the Directed Instruction method because as soon as you hear music being made, you can tell if the lesson has been learned.

Now I am sure many of you will find the simple truths presented so far, so self-evident that you can't imagine why I have spent so much time covering them. On the one hand, I would answer that I am always a firm believer that the best lessons in life are the ones that you constantly need to relearn. On the other hand, now that the "basics" have been covered, I want to extrapolate further and suggest that there are really three basic tenets to successfully teaching music and what I have been really describing up until now, is just the second of the three components. Again, I am sure that you are all already structuring your lessons with these goals in mind, but here they are anyway:

1. Teach the love of music
2. Teach music fundamentals in a variety of areas
3. Teach the student how to work on their own

I do think that this list is somewhat hierarchical in that it is far easier to inspire a student to practice technique when they already love music and can see how practicing technique or learning theory, will help them realize their love of music through performance. Similarly, the process of learning technical skills through repetition and improving accuracy, is the first step to training a student to work on their own. Always though, it is important to recognize that teaching students how to work on their own creates life-long learners and gives them a skill of dedication and time management that is transferrable to so many other aspects of one's life.

Another observation I would make about these three basics principles, is that for young students, it is usually best to spend most of the lesson time on No. 1, "Teaching the love of music." These beginner lessons should focus on fun. In fact, it is often fine if not desirous, to have a different strategy or concept for each lesson without worrying too much about polishing pieces. Equally, with young students, never try to fix more than one thing during a lesson or the task will become too tedious. In a reciprocal relationship, the older the student, and this applies to adults in particular, it is often more productive to gravitate towards teaching the student how to work efficiently and effectively on their own. Providing these kinds of students with a clear list of details to improve before the next meeting, can generate the spark to light the fire and is often very much appreciated.

For the first performance break, I am going to have lots of fun and play a Level 1 piece titled, "Playing with Prisms." I've selected this short piece because it is the kind of simple composition that I think is designed to teach the love of music while introducing lots of simple concepts and has only a few small, but repetitive, technical challenges. Like all good early level piano pieces, it can almost be taught without using the music, as the few patterns make more sense looking at them demonstrated on the keyboard, rather than reading them on their two pages music. Teaching immediate memorization of a pattern focuses the mind while freeing up the eyes and ears to appreciate how the music creates a sonic effect that immediately captures the image of the title. Here's the list of piece's main parts:

1. It can be played entirely with the right-hand middle finger while the LH silently sustains a cluster of five notes.
2. All the rising intervals are pairs of climbing Perfect Fifths while these become descending Perfect Fifths and finally Perfect Fourths.
3. Every pattern is stated twice with small rhythmic changes occurring in the repetition. All the initial statements for the rising patterns have the exact same rhythm (while not marked on the score, teaching the piece to a very young child, the rhythm fits the words, “I am playing Perfect Fifths upwards.”).
4. Musicality is achieved with very clear dynamic contrasts.
5. While young students rarely get a chance to play a glissando, especially one that goes up to the top note of a piano, in this piece the sympathetic reverberations generated by the LH cluster makes the glissando at the end quite magical. Small children might want to play this piece standing in front of the piano to easily reach this final high note.

Before performing, “Playing with Prisms,” I might just add that this piece is found in the collection of Level 1-8 composition titled, *Parking an Octatonic Truck*. This collection contains the RCM Level 6 Etude, “Dancing Scales,” and “Cluster Blues,” an RCM Level 8, List D, alternate piece.

PERFORM: *PLAYING WITH PRISMS*

As teachers, and I am certainly guilty of this, we often get focused a bit too much in lessons on either the technical improvements the student needs to perform better, or on issues of musical interpretation. Indeed, you will note I haven’t even mentioned musicianship yet, which is very important but is really more of an end goal. Musicality will happen so much more readily if one first teaches the student to love music, helps them gain facility in both performing and understanding the vocabulary of music, and finally, ensures they have the ability to do all of this on their own. However, I will also acknowledge that musical phrasing and shaping can often be harder to nurture in a student after a piece has been learned, especially with older students.

What I would like to do now is shift the lens out a bit further and explain how the three basic goals can be further reduced to just three words. This process of abstraction more accurately articulates why being aware of these three basic principles while teaching or making lesson plans, can be so important. Additionally, the simple three-word list is expansive enough to show once again, how if a student embraces these areas, the skills learned are transferable to all aspects of a successful life or career. Finally, it is worth pointing out that I have taken the DI initials that earlier referred to Directed Instruction, and flipped them around to create ITD or Inspiration, Tools and Determination.

1. INSPIRATION – This is what we give when we teach the love of music.
2. TOOLS – These are what we provide by teaching music fundamentals.
3. DETERMINATION – This is what we instill by teaching students to be their own masters.

This seems like a great spot to play “One-Note Groove,” a Level 8/9 that lasts about three-and-a-half minutes. From a compositional perspective, the constant E flat above middle C is definitely the piece’s point of inspiration. Using as much creativity as I can to make the music avoid boredom and monotony, I employ the tools of harmony, counterpoint, and rhythm to generate interest. With a clear ABA structure, the way that each section gets more difficult is where the determination comes into play as a performer must consistently shape and balance the repeated E flats within a denser texture while maintaining an overall steady tempo. The piece is found in a collection of 10 pieces ranging in difficulty from Level 7 to Diploma titled, *Piano Reflections*. I might just mention that the set includes a great arrangement of *O Canada*.

PERFORM: *ONE-NOTE GROOVE*

We now come to my high school music teacher, Dorothy Hare, and how she turned me into a far better pianist than I deserve. Like many people in this room, the route that brings us to a productive career as a musician, can be circuitous, but there are often major turning points that grow in importance when examined from the rearview mirror. For me, Dorothy and her guidance are such a touchstone. Thank my lucky stars that she accepted me as a piano student at the start of my grade 9 school year.

In my case, I was the oldest of six kids and while my father was a lawyer by profession, he was also a skilled pianist. In his youth, he had studied with the Sisters at a nearby convent in Windsor, Ontario and had completed his ARCT while in high school, which in the 1950’s was much less common than it is today. Much later, I realized that he really was what is best described as a “natural pianist” with great hand position, a good ear and likely never had to work to correct too many problems. However, being naturally gifted, and not a musician or music teacher by profession, he didn’t seem able to instill in his kids these good habits. He did though, generate a love of music, and for that, I will be forever grateful. From a technical viewpoint, my siblings and I all had quite awful hand position, a great deal of tension in our bodies and were playing repertoire far beyond on technical ability.

When I arrived at Dorothy’s studio, the first thing she did was take me back to “Three Blind Mice,” and using similarly simple pieces and technical exercises, taught good hand position, relaxation and how to use body weight to generate a beautiful sound. Indeed, one of her dictums was to always create a beautiful sound and play the piano with your ears, and not your fingers. For that entire year, I was only allowed to play assigned pieces until these concepts were mastered. I worked hard at this and within two years completed my Level 10 Piano Exam and the ARCT diploma a year-and-a-half later. I can tell you though,

that because I had to correct my own bad habits, when I do teach piano, I have a keen understanding of why it is important to teach a whole-body performing mechanism and foster the best possible technique and musicianship that borrow heavily on what Dorothy gave to me.

The three rules of Dorothy's studio that stuck with me are:

1. Rule No. 1: You were only allowed to use the music to play a new piece once and for the next lesson, it had to be played from memory. In the case of larger pieces or movements like a sonata, the music could be broken down into sections. For example, I recall taking three weeks to memorize each week, the Exposition, Development and Recapitulation of a sonata's first movement. I still have copies of music where she has signed her name in pencil with the date to indicate the music up to that point must be memorized before she'd hear it again.
2. Rule No. 2: In her studio she had two interlocking grands; an old, but functional, Heintzman, and a recently-purchased Bösendorfer, that she loved. She had a rule that if you were banging too much and making a harsh sound, you got demoted to the Heintzman. You then had to work your way back to the Bösendorfer by playing with utmost sensitivity, projection and musicianship.
3. Rule No. 3: You always had to have a polished piece ready to play so that if called upon, you could demonstrate that your proficiency as a pianist. Ideally, you should have two or three contrasting pieces at your fingertips.

Dorothy passed away in 2002, but before that, I tried to stop by to see her every few years. I know that she was touched by seeing her name as the dedicatee on the score to *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* in 1996. Since composing this work, the piece has always been my go-to piece if I am asked to play something of mine. Following Dorothy's third rule, the piece became the corner stone of a piano program of my own music that I kept close at hand, even if there wasn't a concert planned for the future.

I know that this talk has wandered a bit, but by way of conclusion, I want to pull it together with a story that I am sure you will enjoy. In the summer of 2011 the Saskatchewan Registered Music Teachers' Association held the Canadian Music Federation of Music Teachers' Associations national conference in Regina. Heather Schmidt, the wonderful Canadian composer and pianist had adjudicated that year's composition competition and the conference, in a real feat of planning, had invited all of the prize-winning young composers to come to Regina to perform or play a recording of their piece and to receive their prize from Heather. Additionally, Heather had agreed to present a lecture/demonstration of her own music as part of the conference's schedule, an event that was primarily set-up for the young composers to attend and learn more about composition and performing one's own music. Finally, she was to play another solo work of hers on the final concert that included the Gryphon Piano Trio and the composer/pianist,

David McIntyre who was also playing one of his own compositions. There were a few other performers but my memory fails me.

Two weeks before the conference, Heather let them know that she'd be unable to attend the conference. In the scurrying to find a replacement, apparently my name came up a few times and when asked, I agreed to step in. For the lecture/recital, I played my first six *Studies in Poetry* which were in my fingers at the time and are pieces I love to talk about as the titles of each piece are taken from the titles of some of my favourite books of poetry. Published in sets of three, I have now completed 5 volumes with 15 pieces in this series. Of course, for the final concert, I played *Everything Waits for the Lilacs*. Before playing this piece, I spoke from the stage about Dorothy Hare and how she probably had no idea that the 14-year-old student who arrived on her doorstep needing a great deal of remedial help, would be able to make a career in music, let alone imagine seeing or hearing me perform on this Regina stage. I thanked Dorothy and extrapolated that the great thing about private music teachers, is how their instruction and guidance can create ripples that effect their students' lives for year to come.

At the reception following this final concert, a piano teacher came up to me and said that she too had studied with Dorothy Hare and recalled seeing me play at some of Dorothy's studio concerts. She was a bit older and had headed off to a university music program a year or two before I did. She agreed completely with my assessment of Dorothy and her influence. In sharing stories, I said that it took me a while to get used to her rule that you could only use music for a new composition once, and after that, it could only be played for her from memory. She looked at me like I was from another planet, laughed, and said that rule must have been just for me because she never seemed to learn more than about 6 pieces a year and she would use music at lessons for months. Even as the flash of the first light bulb went off in my mind, I didn't hesitate and went on to ask if she too had got demoted to the old Heintzman piano for making too brutal a sound. Of course, she laughed even harder and indicated that, "No, *she* always got to play the good piano."

It is now getting close to 50 years from when I started studying with Dorothy. Memories can certainly morph into reminiscences that only have a kernel of truth. Dorothy had probably told me that for my own good, she was imposing some rules that I'd need to follow. In my mind, these were rules for all her students but in retrospect, I know that she used the immediate memorization requirement to slow down my voracious appetite to learn new music which even then, was probably a good indication that I was going to be a better composer than pianist. Such a rule meant that I was always analyzing music as I played it for the first time and have learned to do much of my memorization and composing away from a keyboard.

Dorothy put into practice the principle of Directed Instruction that I mentioned earlier. In doing so, she certainly taught me how to teach myself when learning a new work and by extension how to be a better musician and composer. While she could have told me to stop

banging at the keyboard, making me physically walk over to the inferior piano was a punishment that certainly fit the crime in her mind. I would have to agree.

To end, I'll play *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* and let the final chord act as a conclusion to this talk. The dedication to Dorothy Hare is echoed in the composition in two ways. First, I recall a few times in my lessons that after I had played a chord that spanned a 10th without have to roll these notes because my hand was large enough, she would say with chagrin, that she could only reach a 9th but that there were few pieces where this was required. *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* is built around chords that span a ninth, specifically a three-note building block consisting of two Perfect Fifths stacked on top of each other. This can be heard in the very first chord where the left hand plays A-E-B and the right hand plays B flat-F-C. Second, I must also add that Dorothy had big bushes of lilacs outside her home.

It is also worth mentioning that the piece's very descriptive title is taken from a line of poetry written by the Canadian poet Margaret Avison. One of my favourite poets, back in 1986 I was the first composer to set her poetry to music with my choral work, *Sunblue—Three Images of Canadian Spring*. Avison was a deeply religious person, and her poetry often has a spiritual center that uses Canadian landscape and the changing seasons for her imagery. The first poem of *Sunblue*, is titled "Thaws," and the poem captures the moment when we know that winter has finally started to release its grip, but in typical fashion, there might be a few false starts in our anticipation of spring when the weather shifts back to colder days. However, once we smell the lilacs, we know spring has arrived. To musically capture this sense of longing and waiting, at the end of the piece you'll hear the use of sympathetic reverberations like those heard in *Playing with Prisms*. Here though, the effect is used to generate echo-like waves of sound that for me, are the musical equivalent of catching the fragrance of lilacs. The poem is short, so I'll recite it before returning to the piano bench.

"Thaws" by Margaret Avison

The snowflow/nearly April releases/melting bright

Then a dark down/needles and shells the pools

Swept of sun-coursing sky/steeps us in/salmon stream/crop green/rhubarb-coloured
shrub tips.

Everything waits for the lilacs/heaped tumbling/and their warm/licorice perfume.

PERFORM EVERYTHING WAITS FOR THE LILACS