

5 Keys to Assisting Students with Hearing Loss

By Nancy M. Williams

In the early years of my adult piano lessons, whenever I played forte chords in my piano teacher's soundproofed practice room, my hearing aids squealed with feedback. I cringed. I was afraid that if my teacher discovered I had a hearing loss, he would decide I was hopeless as a pianist. So I tried to hide my condition, from my teacher and, at some level, even from myself.

Six years later, I debuted in a master class recital in Carnegie Hall wearing my hearing aids. That appearance precipitated my career as a national speaker and pianist. When I deliver my workshop on claiming passion despite hearing loss, I frequently perform my classical repertoire on the piano.

How did I make what may seem to be a chasmic transition? Through practice, practice, practice, of course, but also through a personal quest to understand the process of hearing and the impact of hearing loss.

I have distilled from my experience five key steps for piano teachers guiding students of any age with hearing loss. My recommended program relies on candor and collaboration.

Step 1: Appreciate the stigma.

When I finally confessed to my first adult piano teacher that I wore hearing aids, he said, "I noticed. But it doesn't seem to affect your playing." He told me that he found my playing very musical. To me, his opinion felt like a blessing.

Many people with hearing loss will try to hide their condition, because they are afraid it will keep them from pursuing their desires. The first step for a teacher is to recognize the societal stigma against hearing loss, a stigma seemingly invisible yet powerful. Assure your student that her hearing loss does not define her. Praise her for her strong points on the piano, such as her musicality or her technique.

Step 2: Understand the profile of your student's loss.

Hearing losses come in all shapes and sizes. The severity of a hearing loss can vary from so-called “mild,” more than 25 decibels—which is really not mild but a significant quieting of the world—through moderate to severe to profound, at greater than 90 decibels. A piano student with a severe loss will face more challenges than one with a mild loss.

Inquire about the profile of your student's loss: is the loss more pronounced in the low or high frequencies, or flat across the board? Finally, does your student treat the loss with hearing aids? Recognize that the default setting on hearing aids are maximized for conversation. Piano students ought to take advantage of a “music setting” on their hearing aids so that tones outside of conversational range are not compressed. I recommend that students work with their audiologists to customize the music setting. (Learn more here: <http://www.grandpianopassion.com/2014/10/20/joyce-morton-advice-hearing-loss/>)

Step 3: Map the loss to the keyboard.

For years, I thought that my loss was severe in the top two octaves of the piano. But as it turns out, the piano only goes to 4,000 hertz, a region where my loss is still moderate. Those notes in the top two octaves sound clipped to me because I'm not hearing their high-pitched overtones. Comprehending my situation has helped me to imagine these notes' full sound.

An understanding of how your student's loss relates to the keyboard can be illuminating. Ask your student to bring his audiogram to the lesson. Together you can compare his loss to the frequencies on the keyboard, using this handy chart designed by the deaf composer and pianist Jay Alan Zimmerman. <http://www.grandpianopassion.com/2014/09/08/piano-keys-theory-history-math/>

Step 4: Select appropriate repertoire.

With your student's loss mapped to the keyboard, you are now able to assign repertoire with your student's hearing challenges in mind. For example, if she has a low-frequency loss, she may struggle with Beethoven's throaty chords deep in the bass. Or if she has a high-frequency loss, she may wrestle with the shimmering chords that float through the high octaves in the closing to Debussy's Claire de Lune.

Step 5: Create practice strategies.

Occasionally you and the student will select a piece of music that has passages squarely in the region of the student's hearing loss. In those cases, the student can practice those passages out of her range of hearing in a different octave on the piano.

For example, I recently performed Beethoven's Bagatelle No. 3 from Opus 128. The high-pitched 32nd notes cascading down the keyboard were difficult for me to absorb stripped of their overtones. So I practiced the entire sequence in a lower octave, memorizing the melody, singing it out loud, and also consciously ringing the notes in my mind. After I performed the music, I felt gratified when audience members told me that my music had put them in a trance.

Many musicians with hearing loss have told me they would have quit if not for their teachers' steady belief and buttressing encouragement. I hope that the approach I've outlined will help you and your student flourish.

Nancy M. Williams is the founding editor of the online magazine, *Grand Piano Passion*[™], which celebrates making music despite hearing loss and studying the piano at any age. She has spoken throughout North America on claiming one's passion. To learn more about her speaking engagements, visit her at nancymwilliams.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@NWilliamsPiano](https://twitter.com/NWilliamsPiano) and use the hashtag, #MyGrandPassion