

# How to Prepare Students for a Successful OMTA Syllabus Exam

## Eugene OMTA 9/13/10 Teacher Panel Discussions

By Sandy Hull, NCTM

### I. Getting started in OMTA Syllabus

#### A. Tools crucial to keeping organized and guaranteeing successful exam for each student including cost and where to find:

1. **2006 Edition of OMTA Piano Syllabus Manual**: \$10.00 – OMTA office
2. **Repertoire lists**: Lower division (revised 2007) \$10/Upper division \$4.00-OMTA office
3. **Syllabus study sheets level I-X**: \$12.00 + \$5.00 ship, Ed Davie at edavie@oregonmta.org; or Sandy's check-off study sheets (ask for pdf file/free)
4. **Syllabus DVDs** (set of 2) \$20.00 (also available in Eugene OMTA library)
5. **OMTA Super Scales A La Syllabus** – Bk 1 levels 1,2, 3; Bk 2 levels 4,5,6; Bk 3 levels 7,8,9; \$20.00 each plus shipping. Includes all syllabus requirements written out in all keys required. See state website or contact Eileen Knox, [EileenKnox@verizon.net](mailto:EileenKnox@verizon.net) or 503-466-2964.
6. **Rhythm reading and sight reading** examples from previous years levels 1-10. 3 sets available for 2001-03, 2004-06, 2006-08 at \$3.00 for each set. Send check to Lisette Sage at 15240 SW Obsidian St., Beaverton, OR 97007-8949.

#### B. Preparation for exam – Sandy's top 11

1. **Review General Guidelines** in syllabus manual p. 3-5 each year and look for any changes or updates to requirements; manual is currently being updated, due out in January 2011 by Aaron Bloom, Geneva Wright and Heidi Evens. Any suggestions for updates are welcome-please send to Aaron at [abpianolessons@gmail.com](mailto:abpianolessons@gmail.com)
2. Print all Syllabus Evaluation **Teacher Forms** from OMTA website. Especially **General Instructions for Teacher**. This will help guide you through registration.
3. **Check district website for important dates (time request and registration deadlines) early in the year.** Time request forms are necessary for chair to plan enough adjudicators and locations. Return all forms before or no later than due date. No late entries please.
4. **Master skill requirements in all keys** in each level. Provide each student a bright photocopy of syllabus level requirements and check-off sheet to work through that level for the entire year. I started playing scales with student on second piano and it seems to help keep them going and improve their rhythm and tone production.
5. **Use all 3 tiers of exams** – Evaluation, Demonstration, and Audition – Especially for transfer student or student who tend not to test well on theory. Be sure to sell audition as being just as important as full evaluation. I've had many parents and students insist on full evaluation when I know the student is not ready and I should have stuck to my instincts and put them in demonstration or audition. You be the final judge what level is best for that student at that time.

6. **Use syllabus skills as an outline for your curriculum** even if student is not planning on participating in syllabus; keeps student moving forward and working toward mastering critical skills to be successful musician
7. **Keep in mind the student's benefit for entering exams.** Is this student a good candidate for a successful exam? Consider student age, learning style, extracurricular activities, parent support, and plan accordingly
8. **Resist rushing students through the levels** . When serving the student becomes foremost, then fast progress through the levels subsides. "Do I know It?" becomes "Look at what I know!" (G. Wright) Some students need more time to become proficient at musicianship skills - let them master skills through ample drills at the lesson.
9. **Resist waiting until the end of the year to start working on sight reading, rhythm reading and modes.** Incorporate these skills in every lesson and make it part of daily lesson time. Count aloud a lot.....make them. Good sight reading is by far the most important skill a pianist can have, and is quite often the deciding factor in whether or not a student continues lessons or stops in frustration and despair. Get out duet books and have student warm-up with sight-reading duets at beginning of each lesson; make it routine and fun. Rhythm - have student play downbeats only, then half beats, then notes between the beats while maintaining a steady beat and counting out loud.
10. **Never assume student knows all their musicianship skills** - continue to **drill, drill, drill** - forwards, backwards, upside down - ask for skills in a variety of ways.
11. **Challenge students to a scale competition** during group lesson or a separate performance class. How beautiful can they play their 5-finger patterns or 3 octave scales? Who plays the fastest scales? Bring in a judge. Have fun. Can students improvise against another student's chord progression? Be creative.

## II. Repertoire

1. **Choose shorter pieces.** Student will be able to work on more pieces through the year and keep interest and enthusiasm engaged. Use OMTA repertoire lists as a guide for level. If unsure of level, see "The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature" by Jane Magrath (Alfred).
2. **Number measures** of repertoire before exams - not just syllabus pieces - all music - good way to identify form - memorize - establish key starting points etc.
3. **Begin to collect duplicate copies** of repertoire as soon as pieces have been chosen; go to [SheetMusicArchive.net](http://SheetMusicArchive.net) to purchase download of hundreds of pieces if you are in a bind (\$9.99 for yearly subscription but a free 3 day trial may be all you need).
4. **Students should know everything about their pieces** - key, form, composer, meter, and tempo marking. Develop descriptive words to help describe mood and interpretation of piece. Helps bring piece to life and will be more meaningful to student and audience.
5. **Interpretation of various styles** is important and **requires solid technical skills**. Don't overlook the **necessity of working on technique**

as well. Many technique books available like Hanon, Schmitt, Czerny, Dozen a Day, Sportacular Warm-up, and of course method books offer good technique training. **“Succeeding with the Masters”** (published by FJH) series is a great reference to ideas on **interpretation and practice strategies** for Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras. These books are compiled and edited by Helen Marlais, one of our featured guests and presenters at the OMTA state conference this summer in Corvallis. I also like **“Keys to Artistic Performance”** (Alfred) and **“Keys to Stylistic Mastery”** (Alfred) compiled and edited by Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield and Dennis Alexander. These also offer development of interpretation skills. There are many other collections that are useful as well for developing technique.

### III. Game day - Preparation for day of exam

1. Remind parents and students the importance of this exam and the need for **plenty of rest** the night before and to **eat well** before exam; arrive 15 minutes early
2. Teach **syllabus manners**
3. Teachers should **introduce student to adjudicator** with a good hand shake and smile
4. Teach student **when not to play**, important to sit quietly while adjudicator writes comments
5. Teach students to be able to **ask questions for clarification**
6. Say **thank you** and **dress appropriately**
7. **Congratulate and conference** with each student immediately following exam to go over exam and experience while it's fresh in their mind.

### IV. Teacher conference with adjudicator

1. Remember this conference is not just to hear how your students are doing but more importantly for us as teachers to evaluate how we're doing as teachers. Use this **interview as a tool to improve your own teaching**. Be prepared with questions for the adjudicator to capitalize on their expertise. Any new helpful ideas are always welcome in my studio and often keep me growing as a private teacher.
2. What three things I'm doing well?
3. What do I need to work on?
4. Always ask for repertoire suggestions or pieces they like to teach at specific levels
5. How or what do they use for teaching Memorization? Sight reading? Rhythm Reading? Technique? Etc.

### V. Teacher challenge

Choose a level and prepare for a syllabus exam each year. End of year test with a friend your memorized selections and all of your musicianship skills. Schedule a small performance of teachers who worked toward the challenge and hear each others interpretation of the greats. I would love to hear how other teachers would play “Fur Elise” or a Kuhlau Sonatina.

### V. Helpful reference materials

1. Flip-a-Rhythm books 1-2 and 3-4 by Sheila M Nelson, published by Boosey & Hawkes available at Hal Leonard

2. Winning Rhythms by Edward Ayola, published by Kjos
3. FJH Classic Scales - Takes student from level II - X in all keys; including scales in 6<sup>th</sup>'s and 10<sup>th</sup>'s

There are many methods and books out there for sight reading. I find it easier to just open a book during the lesson and go through the steps of sight reading with student.

## VI. Websites for sight reading, rhythm reading, composition, and theory

1. [www.emusictheory.com](http://www.emusictheory.com) - Some free drills available that are great including note names, paced note names, rhythm performance and dictation, key signature, intervals, scales, chords etc. \$9.00 per month up to 25 students for full program. Some higher level drills do not work completely on free sight but pick and choose ones that will work for your students. I like the key signature drill.
2. [www.musictheory.net](http://www.musictheory.net) - Great website! Free. Teachers and students can explore fundamentals of music theory in **Lessons** with simple definitions of intervals, scales, and chords, and even formal analysis of classical pieces step by step. The **Exercises** allow you to create custom drills or use predesigned drills to improve skills in sight reading, **ear training, and rhythm reading**. The **Tools** tab lets you calculate chords, generate blank staff paper, etc. This is a good review for those of us who forgot what a Neapolitan 6<sup>th</sup> chord is or just need a refresher in general music theory.
3. [www.noteflight.com](http://www.noteflight.com) - Free; **Composition software**. Music notation for a connected world. My students love this because they can continue to work on a composition from home and share with other students. I've had students working on a string quartet with each student contributing their own parts and commenting on each other's additions. This is a great way for young musicians to communicate and get excited about composing. Not all my students worked out their pieces, so some of the pieces are just practice or junk trying program out but some are really great.
4. [www.ronimusic.com](http://www.ronimusic.com) - Amazing Slow Downer program for \$49.95 download and well worth it. Student can play along with any repertoire CD - slow it down without changing pitch and **sight read** along while hearing piece - hands alone, both hands, practice counting aloud, etc.
5. [www.musicnotes.com](http://www.musicnotes.com) - Musicnotes Suite -free download - includes Musicnotes Player and Guitar Guru. **Download and print sheet music** (small fee/some free) as well as practice sight reading. Musicnotes Player allows you to play along with CD and slow down piece without changing pitch similar to the "Amazing Slow Downer program" but for free. This program also offers ability to follow score while hearing midi file of piece and playing along with recording.
6. [www.miles.be](http://www.miles.be) - Functional Ear Trainer freeware download created by Alain Benbassat. Good ear training drills for intervals and chords.
7. [www.Musiced.about.com](http://www.Musiced.about.com) - a go to site for just about anything you're not sure of
8. [www.PianoWorld.com](http://www.PianoWorld.com) - teacher forums and other links
9. [www.Cadenza.org](http://www.Cadenza.org) - not a theory website but fun to see what teachers and performers from around the world are doing

10. [www.Classicsforkids.com](http://www.Classicsforkids.com) – free podcasts on composers, great for music appreciation
11. [www.metronomes.net](http://www.metronomes.net) – variety of affordable metronomes. Matrix MR500 \$16.95. I order several to keep in studio for students to purchase. Has dial – easy to adjust tempo. Don't get cheap Qwik Time -you have to hold button down to change tempo – not easy to use. A good metronome is essential for students to work on steady rhythmic scales and solid rhythm in pieces and is a requirement in my studio. Start student early with metronome skills.
12. [www.MTNA.org](http://www.MTNA.org) – don't forget our own national organization has many resources. See “Resources” and find Studio Resources, Websites for kids, and Teaching Tips (MTNA teachers from around the country have submitted useful tips on teaching technique, rhythm and repertoire; send in your ideas and teaching tips to be on the website) would love to see your names in there.

Please do not hesitate to call me at 541-485-3524 or email me at [hullpiano@gmail.com](mailto:hullpiano@gmail.com) with any questions on preparing students for syllabus or if you need some assistance with any of these websites. Please send on to me any of your favorite teaching strategies or tools for preparing students for syllabus. I'm always looking for new and better ways to teach musicianship and theory skills and can continue to share with other teachers.

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