

Spring 5-10-2014

Your Guide on Learning How to Play the Piano

Jankiben Patel

University of South Carolina - Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses



Part of the [Music Education Commons](#), and the [Music Performance Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Patel, Jankiben, "Your Guide on Learning How to Play the Piano" (2014). *Senior Theses*. 22.
https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/22

This Thesis is brought to you by the Honors College at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

YOUR GUIDE ON LEARNING HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

By

Jankiben Patel

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors from the
South Carolina Honors College

May, 2014

Approved:

Dr. Milind Kunchur
Director of Thesis

Katia Gasperi
Second Reader

Steve Lynn, Dean
For South Carolina Honors College

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS SUMMARY.....	2
INTRODUCTION	4
STEP 1: SET A GOAL.	4
STEP 2: GAIN ACCESS TO A PIANO OR A KEYBOARD FOR PRACTICE.....	4
STEP 3: UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A KEYBOARD AND A PIANO.....	5
STEP 4: FIND MATERIAL TO GUIDE YOU.....	5
STEP 5: BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE KEYBOARD AND THE MUSICAL NOTES.....	6
STEP 6: LEARN THE SCALES.....	7
STEP 7: LEARN THE CHORDS.	9
STEP 8: PRACTICE EASY PIECES.....	9
STEP 9: PICK A SONG.....	10
STEP 10: PRACTICE. PRACTICE. PRACTICE!	10
CONCLUSION	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	13

THESIS SUMMARY

I've had a strong desire to learn how to play a piano ever since my first music class in elementary school. I asked my parents if I could receive piano lessons. They saw how extremely excited I was and they agreed to seek out a piano instructor for me. Unfortunately, my parents soon realized that they simply could not afford the fees. I brought up the topic a few more times, but to no avail.

In middle school, I joined the band to play the clarinet. Although my hopes of playing the piano were put on hold, I grasped this opportunity to pursue my interest in music. Along with mastering how to play the clarinet, I achieved my main goal of learning how to read music. I gained valuable background knowledge that would have taken me much longer to understand on my own. Most importantly, my band experience taught me the importance of practice.

It was time to take my dream off hold and expand my musical horizon. With a college student budget, I knew I would have to rely on a self-teach method. I knew it would be a difficult, time consuming, and even frustrating process. Well, I was definitely right about all of that. If you have an incredible amount of time to invest in this, it's a spectacular idea! If you're balancing college courses, a job, research, and extracurricular activities, it will be much tougher. Either way, it's not impossible if you really want to learn how to play without opening your wallet.

Following me through this guide will only be beneficial to you if you already know the basics of reading sheet music. If you do not know how to read sheet music, I recommend that you take a music class that will teach you (if you can afford it) or teach yourself. There are many online materials and books available that can help you. Don't be intimidated – it's similar to learning a new language. It takes patience, but it will become second nature in time.

Before you begin, you will set a goal. You can revise the goal and make it stronger as you go along, but make sure you don't lose sight of why you started reading this guide in the first place. Then, I will take you through a series of general steps I followed to learn how to play the piano. But remember, even though I knew how to read music, I had never received any piano lessons so I am not an expert. I gathered

information from online sources and tested out what worked best for me. I created steps that I thought would be helpful in order to teach myself how to play the piano. I revised these steps as I went along and you are welcome to modify them to your liking as long as you follow certain key rules that I mention.

Four months have passed since I started learning how to play on a keyboard. I knew I wasn't going to become a master pianist in such a short time. My goal for this project was to create a foundation for myself from which I could expand on by learning the fundamentals of piano playing. Even after presenting my progress, I will continue to play the piano in hopes of improving my skills through new goals.

This thesis project has allowed me the opportunity to test out my dream. Starting something is always the biggest hurdle to overcome. Once you set a target goal and begin, everything will fall into place.

INTRODUCTION

When attempting to fulfill a goal, a person's hard work, determination, and passion should be what aid them to achieve success. Financial complications should not discourage anyone to follow through on their dreams. I'm not saying that it will be a smooth journey, because it probably won't be; goals can seem much closer when you don't have to worry about money. However, this is where I'm going to quote the old English proverb: "Where there's a will, there's a way." After years of hoping to learn how to play the piano, I am taking a step in the right direction. Allow me to take you on my 4-month journey where I taught myself how to play the piano at no cost.

Keep in mind - 4 months is not at all enough time to master the piano. Every individual naturally learns at a different speed. Having past musical experience can also be a great advantage. Even though I played the clarinet for three years in middle school, I went back to the beginning to give myself a refresher before diving into the fundamentals of the piano. Learning anything new can be frustrating, but if you're ready to work hard, let's begin.

STEP 1: SET A GOAL.

Before you do anything, you should answer this question: What do you hope to achieve from this? The answer may be simple, but writing it down ensures that you know what to focus on. When you feel like giving up, you can go back and look at why you started in the first place. It will remind you to keep your eye on the prize. Don't skip this step; go ahead and set a goal for yourself.

STEP 2: GAIN ACCESS TO A PIANO OR A KEYBOARD FOR PRACTICE.

Unless you already have a piano or keyboard, you might have to search for locations where you can practice. Some schools have pianos that are available during certain hours on specific days. Most churches also have pianos that you can practice on if you ask in advance. You can also borrow a keyboard from a friend or relative to get you started as

you look for more long-term options. Fortunately, my roommate has a keyboard that she's letting me borrow. If you already don't own a piano or keyboard, I wouldn't advise you to buy one right away. Just because you have a deep desire to learn the piano doesn't mean you will fall in love with the instrument immediately – or at all.

STEP 3: UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A KEYBOARD AND A PIANO.

The obvious distinguishing factor between the piano and the keyboard is the size and the number of keys on the keyboard. Most modern pianos have 88 keys: 52 white keys and 36 black keys. Keyboards can range from having 25 keys to 88 keys. The one that I am using has 61 keys: 36 white keys and 25 black keys. Therefore, my keyboard covers 5 octaves (1 octave includes 7 white keys and 5 black keys).

Another difference is that some keyboards do not have weighted keys. When practicing on a keyboard, you may become accustomed to the light feel of the keys and it could be a challenge when switching over to the piano for the first time. This is just something to keep in mind, but it should not discourage you to use a keyboard to learn. For many people, keyboards are just more convenient because of their size and portability.

The third difference between the keyboard and the piano is the versatility. The keyboard allows you to easily switch between musical styles at a touch of a button. You can also adjust the volume of the keyboard, which can be useful if you don't want to disturb anyone. However, the piano offers a finer control of sound. Many classical pianists will always prefer the piano to the keyboard.

STEP 4: FIND MATERIAL TO GUIDE YOU.

YES, this is a guide on *learning* how to play the piano, but you will have to refer to other material to teach you HOW to play the piano. I'm here to show you that it is possible to become a piano player without those costly professional piano lessons. This method will

certainly save you money, but it expects you to invest more time because self-teaching requires you to play both the roles of a teacher and a student.

You can borrow old piano books from someone you know or you can find instructional material online. I chose to use the information I found on the Internet because it was free, fast, and easily accessible. Do some research on sets of videos or written instructions that will work best for you. The information that I provide in the next few steps comes from these sources:

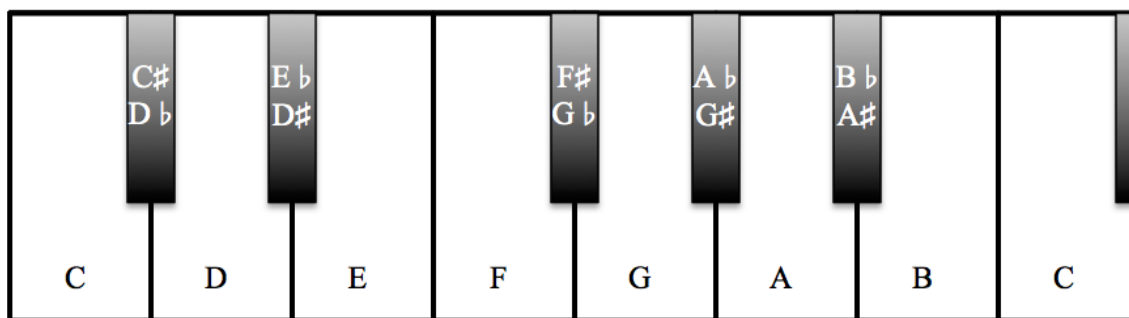
- Andrew Furmanczyk is a pianist and piano teacher on YouTube. He has two main sets of videos: one teaches you piano theory and the other shows you how to play the piano. I began learning about the piano through his first few “How to Play Piano” videos. Here is the link to the first video (the rest of the suggested videos are on the page as well): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vphWgqbF-AM>
- I found this website to be very useful when learning scales because it shows what notes are in each scale as well as the fingering for both hands: <http://www.pianoscales.org/>
- This website is also great for learning scales because it includes videos to demonstrate how the scale should sound if played correctly: <http://www.true-piano-lessons.com/>. Additionally, I learned how to play some chords and the tunes “Mary Had A Little Lamb” and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” through this source.
- Once you advance through the basic scales and chords, this website will be helpful for learning how to play all the other numerous scales and chords: https://www.pianoworld.com/fun/vpc/piano_chords.htm

STEP 5: BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE KEYBOARD AND THE MUSICAL NOTES.

To learn the musical language, you have to familiarize yourself with the “letters” that are organized to compose a story. There are 7 full notes: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. The white keys on the piano/keyboard represent those notes. So what about those black keys? Those keys play the sharps (#) and flats (♭) of a note.

Locate the two black keys in the center of the piano. The white key to the left of those black keys is the middle C note. From there, the white key to the right is D, then E, and so on. The white key to the left of C is B, then A, then G, and so on. The way I locate notes on the piano is by finding the D first. The D is in the “doghouse” – the D is in the middle of the two black keys.

Sharps are a half step higher, while flats are a half step lower. The black key in the middle of C and D is known as C \sharp (or D \flat). The next black key in the middle of D and E is known as E \flat (or D \sharp). Refer to the figure below for a visual representation of a keyboard.



Although the black keys can be known as sharps or flats, the names that are on the top of the black keys are the ones that are most commonly used.

STEP 6: LEARN THE SCALES.

This is the step that many people skip because they’re too anxious to start learning how to play their favorite song or they simply find playing scales boring. Piece of advice: don’t skip this step. From my previous musical experience, I know that scales are a crucial part of understanding music. Scales help you understand the importance of fingering and instill confidence in your technique. Familiarizing yourself with the keys on the keyboard will strengthen your skills and make you a talented piano player. Don’t rush yourself – master one scale before you move on to the next one.

There are 12 major scales and 36 minor scales. The minor scales are equally separated into 3 different groups of minor scales: natural, melodic, and harmonic (12 scales in each group). I suggest learning the scales in this order: major, natural minor, melodic minor, harmonic minor.

If you memorize the formula of these scales, it could help simplify the learning process. For example, the major scale formula is whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half. To understand what whole steps and half steps are, take a look at the piano figure displayed in Step 5. If you play D after playing C, you are moving a whole step higher because you are skipping a key (C#) in between. If you play C# after playing C, you are moving half a step higher instead. Also, keep in mind that playing an F right after playing E is a half step because you are not skipping any notes in between. To demonstrate more clearly, here is the C major scale: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C.

C to D: whole step

D to E: whole step

E to F: half step

F to G: whole step

G to A: whole step

A to B: whole step

B to C: half step

Similarly, the 3 groups of minor scales have their own formula. The natural minor scale formula is whole, half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole. The melodic minor scale formula is whole, half, whole, whole, whole, whole, half. The harmonic minor scale is a little different because it includes a whole and a half step: whole, half, whole, whole, half, whole and a half, half.

Needless to say, you will need to dedicate a great amount of time in mastering these. To fully learn and understand the musical language, you need to spend time absorbing the fundamentals. You can certainly skip the scales and dive right into playing songs,

especially if you know how to read music, but it will be like you're speaking broken English. You'll get your point across, but you won't fully comprehend what you're doing; you'll be more prone to mistakes.

STEP 7: LEARN THE CHORDS.

Knowing your scales will help you tremendously with learning chords. A chord is a group of 3 or 4 notes. Because there are hundreds of chords for the piano due to the countless combination of notes, I would suggest focusing on the 24 basic major and minor chords. There are 12 different notes on the piano and each note has a major and minor chord associated with it. The rest of the chords are also important, but because there are so many, my recommendation is to learn one or two chords each week instead of overwhelming yourself. Many of my friends who are piano players have told me that knowing your chords is beneficial when learning how to play something new because many compositions include chords. Therefore, knowing your chords and scales will make you a strong piano player.

STEP 8: PRACTICE EASY PIECES.

At this point, I know you're eager to learn a song. Start with something easy. I began by learning "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and "Mary Had A Little Lamb". Then I went on to "Jingle Bells". The most important thing to remember when learning how to play these is the way you position your fingers on the keyboard. Practice proper technique from the very beginning. You may get away by sliding your fingers all over the keyboard while playing simple songs such as the ones I mentioned above, but when it comes time to learn something more difficult, you will be wishing you learned the proper technique. You'll also be thankful when you start playing with both hands instead of just using one hand at a time.

Because my right hand is my dominant hand, I chose to learn the right hand parts first followed by the left hand parts. When I attempted to play a piece with both hands, I had trouble coordinating because my mind would only focus on what one hand was doing at a time. This is a problem that many people may face, but the only way to overcome it is through practice and patience.

STEP 9: PICK A SONG.

Don't get carried away and select the hardest piano piece out there. You don't want to discourage yourself from the start. However, you do want to challenge yourself. I chose one of my favorite Indian songs, "Tum Hi Ho", and found the sheet music for it. You will probably find many different versions of sheet music for one song, some harder than others. You can choose what you're comfortable playing and start from there.

STEP 10: PRACTICE. PRACTICE. PRACTICE!

I know you've heard this everywhere. My band teacher always preached to us: "Practice makes perfect." If you really want to develop the skills to play the piano, you have to keep working at it. Don't stop when you get frustrated – take a break and come back. Set aside some time in the beginning to learn and practice. Over time, you won't have to schedule a time to play – you'll gravitate towards the instrument on your own.

CONCLUSION

Through months of teaching myself, I am slowly on my way to becoming a skilled piano player. There were a few challenges that I had to overcome along the way. My first challenge was due to my short fingers. I know that having shorter fingers won't prevent me from becoming as great of a player as someone with longer fingers. However, it's going to take me much more practice and finger stretching to get there. Second, learning all of the scales and chords in a small time frame became difficult so I decided to focus on a few of them. To decrease confusion, I decided that it would be best if I spent adequate time on each of the scales and chords even if it meant that I would not know them all before the defense. My third challenge came when I searched for sheet music for the song "Tum Hi Ho". I could not find any sheet music with an intermediate level version of the song. Therefore, instead of changing the song, I decided to be creative with the advanced version. I modified the notes and the speed to ensure that I would be able to use the proper technique when playing without taking away the challenge.

Some steps in learning the piano were intuitive for me while other steps were established through research and consulting friends who play the piano. When learning the scales, it made sense to me to learn how to play the scales first with my right hand and then my left hand before learning how to play the scales with both hands together. However, I did not know how to position my fingers so I had to explore further to understand the importance of finger positioning. The downside of following through with a step that's instinctive is that sometimes it may not be the correct technique. For example, before looking into finger positioning for the C major scale, I tried to play the scale the way it made sense to me. Even though it worked for the C major scale, after I looked into the fingering, I realized that it would not have worked for most of the other scales. Thankfully, I looked up the proper technique very soon after I played around with the C major scale a few times. I strongly suggest researching every step even if it feels natural to avoid problems in the future.

This project is only the beginning. I will be going back and mastering all of the scales and basic chords. Then, I will begin learning the other chords a few at a time while continuing to practice everything that I have learned thus far. Also, as I advance further, I will consult more online materials to plan out my next steps. This will also be the stage

where I will look into buying my own keyboard and piano books. Despite the obstacles in the course of this project, I am thrilled to have had a successful start and am looking forward to rest of the journey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "How to play piano: The basics, Piano Lesson #1." *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 July 2008. Web. 8 Jan. 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vphWgqbF-AM>>.
- "Piano scales." N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Jan. 2014. <<http://www.pianoscales.org/>>.
- "True Piano Lessons." *True Piano Lessons*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Jan. 2014. <<http://www.true-piano-lessons.com/>>.
- "Virtual Piano Chords." *Piano Chords and Scales made easy*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Mar. 2014. <https://www.pianoworld.com/fun/vpc/piano_chords.htm>.