

Starting out as a peripatetic piano teacher

Helen Reid

Introduction

Starting out as a peripatetic teacher can be daunting, since there are different ways in which to build up a career, which can involve multiple teaching positions. For students graduating from university or college, teaching beginners can seem like the place to start.

However, having reached a high level of ability themselves, and probably having spent the majority of their time in higher education working on diploma-standard repertoire, teaching piano to young beginners is often far removed from new graduates' own recent work. This means that instrumental teachers often begin their peripatetic careers by teaching at a level at which they themselves have not worked for several years.

In addition, they may be working with young age groups, with whom they have had little regular contact. This may be a challenging prospect, but it can also be immensely rewarding and successful.

This resource is intended to offer ideas about how to manage this transition from study to peripatetic teaching:

- ▶ what to expect when working within a school setting.
- ▶ how to build a community of support and practice.
- ▶ dealing with financial considerations.
- ▶ some suggestions for helpful teaching materials.

The resource focuses on teaching piano to school-age children, but much of it will also be relevant to those teaching other instruments.

Starting out

There are various ways to go about finding a teaching position, but a good place to look for instrumental teaching jobs is the Rhinegold website (www.rhinegoldjobs.co.uk). Jobs also appear on the Tes website (www.tes.com).

In addition to keeping an active lookout for advertised teaching jobs, there are other ways in which you can go about searching for work.

Helen Reid is a freelance pianist and teacher. She currently teaches piano at Bristol University, as well as privately, and leads the professional studies course at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She has performed as a soloist and chamber musician across the UK and internationally.



- ▶ **Curriculum vitae:** you will need to prepare a good CV. This should include the schools you have attended and your examination results from these schools – both GCSEs and A levels – as well as the highest level music grades you have obtained and your university or college qualifications, if applicable. In addition, you should list any teaching experience and performing/accompanying experience, and ideally provide email addresses for two referees at the bottom of the CV (make sure you ask them first!).
- ▶ **Letters:** once you're satisfied with your CV, you can then write to the schools or music hubs for which you'd be interested in working. Make sure you address your letter to the head of music personally, not just to Sir/Madam, and enclose a brief covering letter, detailing why you would like to work at the school and what you feel you could offer. You will find that schools often advertise instrumental jobs by contacting those people who have previously written to them.
- ▶ **Advertise yourself:** if you're looking for private teaching, create a flier that you can display in the local area, and a website or Facebook page to which you can refer people. Your online presence is an area worth considering. Prospective employers or parents may search for an online profile in the first instance, so you should make sure you're happy with everything they will be able to find on there – and that, if your profile is public, your personal page directs people to your professional page.
- ▶ **Contacts:** if you have friends or teachers who are working in schools, let them know that you're looking for teaching work. It may be that they spend time performing and need deputy teachers, or that they will bear you in mind when they hear of a position becoming available.

Practicalities

Being a peripatetic teacher requires not only skill in teaching your instrument, but also administrative and organisational skills, in order to manage a successful practice.

Fees

All schools, whether you're employed or self-employed, will set their own hourly or per lesson rates. As a private teacher, you should not set your rate too high, but nor should you set it too low. The Incorporated Society of Musicians (<https://www.ism.org>) conducts surveys of current lesson rates, both inside and outside London, and is a very useful resource. You can access it without being a member.

Contracts

If you are self-employed, but teaching within a school, the school will invariably have a contract that you can use with parents. Always make sure this contract is signed and returned to you by the parents. This will protect your income. The contract should include the notice period you require – usually a term. In addition, it contains a clear policy on making up a lesson that a student has missed due to absence from school, school clashes or simply forgetfulness. Generally, you do not have to make up these lessons, as long as you have been available for that student's timeslot. It's good to have some flexibility about this, however, but finding a solution must be on your terms: you should make up the lesson only if you're able to find another time that suits you both.

Timetabling

Some schools will make your timetable for you, but this is the exception rather than the rule. In many schools, you will be asked to produce your own timetable. Again, this allows flexibility for you, to work around any performances or other commitments. However, schools have differing policies on students missing academic lessons in order to attend instrumental lessons, and you should become familiar with them.

For example, in some schools GCSE and A level students are not allowed to miss any academic lessons, so their instrumental lessons can only be timetabled before school, during lunchtimes or after school. In certain schools, students are not allowed to miss the core subjects of maths, English and science. Additionally, if you timetable a student during a games lesson, it might be difficult for them to miss half of it (or difficult to find them if they're younger and you're picking them up). Timetabling can be a challenging jigsaw, and quite time-consuming.

Before you start, ask the music secretary or head of music what their policies are, and ask for a copy of the school day. In this way, you'll be able to see where lunchtimes, break times and lesson changeovers fall, which is helpful place to start. Some parents or carers will ask that a child does not miss any academic lessons, but be clear that this might not be possible, unless it's school policy.

Schools generally ask that you teach 30 lessons over the year. It's advisable to try and teach slightly more lessons during the autumn term. In the summer term there tend to be a lot of trips, as well as exam weeks for all years. If a student misses a lesson because of a school event, it will be your responsibility to make up the lesson, so it's important to check the school calendar regularly for possible clashes.

You will generally have to rotate students, so that they don't miss the same lesson. One way of tackling this is to assign each student a letter (eg A = Sarah, B = John, and so on). Take a blank timetable and mark out the dates you're planning to teach. Fill in the slots for those students who have a fixed lunchtime or before- or after-school slot. Then fill in the other letters across the timetable, leaving two slots each week (most lessons last two periods, so this is the way to make sure that students are not missing the same lesson two weeks in a row). This is a good basis from which to start.

Finally, it's worth being aware that GCSE students might want to give up lessons during the summer term. You need to decide whether you're happy with this, as it means a loss of income and holding the slot open for the autumn term.

Although this may all sound a little overwhelming, once you have your basic timetable you can reproduce it in subsequent terms.

School administration

Following on from questions about timetabling, make sure you keep meticulous registers, even if the school doesn't officially require it, so that if there is any disagreement about the number of lessons a student has attended, you have a clear written record. The registers may also need to be seen by the head of music and are useful when writing reports for your students.

Make sure the bulk of your correspondence with parents, if you are self-employed, is in writing and kept in a separate email file. It's advisable not to correspond by text, and some schools ask that you do not give out your mobile number to parents. Book your teaching day or days as early as possible with the music secretary or head of music. Some schools are very short on teaching space, so your preferred day might not be available. It's important to know this as early as possible, especially if you're juggling other teaching and performing commitments

DBS checks

All schools require an enhanced DBS check if you're working with children. The school should do this for you. Once you have received your DBS certificate, you can sign up to an online centralised system. This costs £13 per year and is very useful, as you can refer other schools and organisations to it. Some schools insist that they complete their own new DBS check, however.

Insurance

If you're teaching at home, you should have your own public liability insurance. If you're a member of a professional organisation, this may be included as part of your membership. You should also inform your home insurance company that you're working at home, as this could impact your home insurance agreement or policy.

GDPR

In 2018, there was an important change in the data protection law. You are now required to tell your private students what information you record about them and how you use it, and ask for their consent. You can find templates for this online.

Communication with parents/carers

It's important to remember that students will have many different motivations for learning the piano. Some will be very keen pianists, and others will be learning because their parents are keen for them to learn. In short, some will be more enthusiastic than others!

Teaching in a school usually differs to private teaching with regard to parental communication. It's possible to teach a child for years without ever meeting their parents or carers. Peripatetic teachers are not usually involved in parents' evenings. Therefore your written communication, whether reports or emails, is very important.

When you're assigned a new student, you will probably email the parent or carer to arrange lessons. In that first communication it is also good to introduce yourself, so that the parents/carers and child know a bit about your background, qualifications and work as a musician.

In that introductory email, you could also ask for details of the child's musical background or work so far. It might be useful to set out your expectations (in addition to a contract). For example, children sometimes come for lessons but have no instrument to practise on at home, so it's worth suggesting that they will need to have access to at least a keyboard, in order to progress.

A basic keyboard will only really be suitable up to around Grade 1, from which stage they will need to think about getting a piano or an electric piano. Parents often ask for suggestions of suitable instruments, so have some links which you can share with them.

In addition, you should give an expected practice time for the level at which the student is working. Younger children generally progress much more quickly if the parents sit with them during their practice.

Managing expectations

It's worth having an upfront discussion about the length of time it can take to work towards a Grade examination. The typical time for a piano student to take Grade 1, for example, can range from one to three years, depending on the student's ability, the amount of practice time and the support they receive at home. Between grades, it's important to have a transition period, working on a variety of pieces and developing sightreading, aural skills and scales. Explain why this is important, and that there can be quite a jump between one Grade examination and the next.

Financial considerations

Wherever you're working, you're likely to find that you are only able to earn for a maximum of 39 weeks a year. In fact, most schools ask that their peripatetic teachers give 30 lessons a year, spread over the year. This is helpful if you are also performing, since it will give you the flexibility to arrange lessons around concerts, but it's less helpful financially. If you're taken on by a school on a self-employed basis, you will normally be paid for the term by the parents at the beginning of each term.

All of this means that your income will not be evenly spread across the year. In addition, if you're working mainly on a self-employed basis, your tax bill will also be due twice a year (in January and July). Therefore, careful budgeting and planning are crucial elements of a successful peripatetic teaching career.

One possible solution is to have two current accounts, and to pay yourself a fixed amount from one to the other each month. Another option might be to have a separate account for tax, and to make sure that you're saving a percentage of all your earnings into this account. You will also need to budget for students who decide to give up, in case they cannot be replaced straight away.

For some peripatetic teachers, being able to earn for only 30 weeks of the year is a financial challenge. But there are other ways to supplement your income. Some parents will be happy to carry on with lessons during the holidays, if this is something you would be keen to offer. Perhaps you could run special duet classes, supplementary aural skill classes or performance classes during the holidays. If you're happy to teach Grade 5 theory, this might be another class that could be popular.

Many people employ an accountant to manage their tax, though it is possible to do it on your own. Above all, keep records of your earnings as they come in, and save receipts that can offset your tax bill. These include items such as sheet music, tickets to concerts, membership of professional organisations, piano tuning and any professional development expenses, among others.

Basic resources

The resources that schools have available can range from very little to a full music library. It's therefore useful to have a basic set of resources that you can use with your students.

Aural tests

It's helpful to have a full set of graded aural tests with you each week. With some publishers, you won't have to buy eight books: there will be two or three books that cover Grades 1 to 8. For beginner students, you can develop your own musicianship and aural training games, perhaps using the Grade 1 tests as a starting point – for example, marching in time to the music you play, or asking them to sing along to their pieces.

Manuscript paper

When you're teaching beginners, a very good way of enabling them to learn notes and rhythms is to create pieces with them. Mark out a few bars on a page, choose a rhythm together that fits the time signature you've chosen, and then ask them to choose the notes they want to use for that rhythm.

If you feel a book you're using is moving a little fast for them and you want to consolidate note learning, you can also make up some more pieces using those notes and notate them on manuscript.

For older students, too, it's good to have some manuscript paper handy, in order to explain concepts such as leger lines. If a student has a song they particularly want to learn, you may be able to notate a simple version for them on the manuscript. Students often start to play the piano because they want to be able to play a particular melody, so it's wonderful for their motivation to be able to start to play even a little bit of a tune. And when it comes to Christmas, then 'Jingle Bells' and other Christmas tunes are not too hard to notate or play, and very popular.

Spare music

Keep a few volumes of easy music that you can use when students forget to bring their music. A volume of student/teacher duets is always a good thing to use in a lesson, to improve ensemble and sightreading skills. And sightreading books are always useful.

Stickers

Almost all primary school children love stickers. They can be given at the end of a lesson as a reward, and used to fill in a practice chart each week.

Undertaking professional development

Working as a peripatetic teacher can sometimes feel quite isolating. It's rare that someone observes your teaching, and therefore feedback is sparse. In addition, it can be hard to feel part of a school if you're teaching for perhaps just one or two days, or teaching in several schools, as well as privately.

However, there are ways in which you can build your own community of practice, which allow for continual professional development (often referred to as CPD) as well as peer support and interaction. There are an increasing number of courses available, ranging from one-day workshops to full postgraduate certificates. Here are a few suggestions:

- ▶ Several universities offer an MA in music education, with instrumental and vocal teaching strands.
- ▶ The European Piano Teachers Association (<https://epta-uk.org>) provides opportunities for piano teachers to meet up and exchange ideas via their publications, local meetings, seminars, courses and conferences.
- ▶ The Piano Teachers' Course (www.pianoteacherscourse.org) offers a range of courses, including a 15-day part-time course, leading to a Cert PTC or a Certificate of Professional Development.
- ▶ The Guildhall School of Music and Drama (www.gsmd.ac.uk) offers a PG Cert in performance teaching, connecting professional musicians, actors, production artists and dancers who teach as part of their career, focusing on pedagogy and reflective practice.
- ▶ Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (www.trinitylaban.ac.uk) runs 'The Teaching Musician', for any musicians working in the UK in an educational setting, offering a PG Certificate, PG Diploma or a full MA qualification.

A community of practice and a commitment to professional development will enable you to continue to develop as a teacher. Membership of organisations such as the Musicians' Union, ISM or EPTA may also provide you with insurance and free legal advice, so they are highly recommended as sources of support. **MT**