

30 / 40 piece challenge presentation

by Lizbeth Atkinson

Where did the challenge begin?

The idea of the 40 piece challenge began when Elissa Milne, an Australian born composer, musician and teacher discovered this statement in a book one day, “how on earth can students be expected to gain a wide variety of skills, let alone an understanding of musical thinking and pianistic style, if they only ever learn 6 pieces each year? Our students should be learning many times this number, 40 or so at least each year, if they are to have any hope of truly mastering the instrument”.

Here is a quote from her presentation at the national MTNA conference in San Antonio. “Once upon a time I was a teacher in Australia teaching my students the way teachers in exam-oriented and competition-oriented cultures have always taught – spending between 4 and 9 months working with students on their exam/competition repertoire and then having a few months per year for “fun” pieces that weren’t “for” anything. Students working this way would be learning between 6 and 10 pieces a year total, as a rule. The more students progressed in degrees of difficulty the more their sight-reading skills lagged behind. And at the end of about 10 years of serious study throughout their childhood the students would cease lessons with a slew of certificates and awards and probably never really play very much again. The students who could play quite well by ear tended to be the ones who kept on playing after formal lessons stopped. And that struck me as signaling that there was something very wrong, possibly even unethical, with the way I was teaching. Shouldn’t 10 years of serious study equip you for a lifetime of engagement with your instrument?”

And from her blog, “Firstly, my students gain a wide, practical, lived experience of many distinct musical idioms and forms. Instead of learning one or two pieces from the Baroque period in a year, they may learn ten. Instead of mastering one piece in a swing groove, they may learn to play fifteen.

Secondly, my students become very musical sight readers. When you are learning a new piece every week or so you simply don’t have time to learn the music line by line, or playing separate hands for a couple of weeks. And if you can basically sight read your new piece of music then about 95% of your practice time can be devoted to exploring performance possibilities and finessing your interpretation of the work.

But most importantly of all, my students become very happy. In fact, I have observed a direct correlation between number of pieces learned and student happiness.”

She goes on to say that the 40 piece challenge may not be for everyone in your studio. If you read discussions on the various Facebook pages, you will find that there are many ways to go about setting up your challenge and there is no right or wrong way to do it.

<https://elissamilne.wordpress.com/2015/02/04/where-did-the-40-piece-challenge-begin/>

Who is Elissa Milne?

<http://www.fabermusic.com/composers/elissa-milne/biography>

How do I choose repertoire?

- #1 Mix up levels of difficulty – a few pieces from the student’s current level and then many pieces from several levels below
- #2 You choose what the student will be playing – the student should be passing off a piece per week.
- #3 Encourage the students to make suggestions – arrangements of popular music, holiday music, repertoire from easier classical collections

<https://elissamilne.wordpress.com/2012/11/24/the-hal-leonard-australia-40-piece-challenge-2013-suggestions-for-getting-started/>

Where can I find charts and ideas?

<https://composecreate.com/take-the-30-piece-challenge/>

Wendy Stevens of ComposeCreate.com has created charts and ideas for the studio to help teachers track the student’s progress along the way. These charts are made for 30 or 40 piece challenges. There is a chart that can be blown up to poster size and used in the studio. There is also a chart for the student’s notebook. The chart used in the studio has a place for the student’s name and a box for a sticker. The chart for the student’s notebook has a place to record the title of each piece and the composer’s name. Wendy also suggests awarding prizes at the 10, 20, 30 and 40 piece levels. I have done this in my studio and it is something that not all teachers do nor do they feel the same way about. I have awarded a large candy bar at the 10 piece level. I award a \$5.00 gift card at the 20 piece level and a \$10.00 gift card at the 30 piece level. Students who make it to 40 pieces get to choose a \$15.00 gift card to the location of their choice.

Elissa Milne suggests that teachers celebrate the start of each new piece of music by placing it on the chart when it is presented to the student. In my studio, when we start a piece of music, it goes on their assignment sheet first. Rarely, will we not complete a piece, but it may happen. We add it to the student’s Challenge chart when the piece is completed. For completion of a piece, it is required that the piece have good rhythm, correct notes, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. It does not have to be memorized. We do memorize pieces for recitals and judged

events. When a piece is ready, I quickly set up my video camera and record the piece. Every few days, I will upload the videos to my computer and store them in the student's files. At the end of the year, all of the videos go on a flash drive for the families to have. I also upload them to the student's YouTube folder.

If it is taking longer than a week or two for a piece to be completed, then the pieces are too difficult and the level needs to be easier. Also, if a piece just isn't working and the student is really struggling, then it may be time to move on.

The most important thing you can do as a teacher during this and any challenge you decide to do is to maintain the dignity of your students. Always be aware of how they are feeling and try to keep a positive atmosphere where learning can take place.

What counts as a piece? This is really up to you. Transposing, etudes, sight-reading, piano maestro app?

Get creative and read about how others have done this challenge. Ask about how others have done the challenge. Try something new!

Where can I get posters made for a great price (~\$20.00 per poster)?

<https://www.vistaprint.com/vp/welcomeback.aspx?xnav=welcome&rd=1>

Where can I find music to assign?

Dan Severino - <https://www.pianoteacherpress.com/freebie-friday>

James King III - <https://alijammusic.com/>

Susan Paradis - <http://www.susanparadis.com/>

Improve Your Sight-reading A Piece a Week Grade 1, 2, 3 by Paul Harris

Piano Morning subscription - <https://www.pianomorning.com/>

Little Peppers Books by Elissa Milne - <https://www.amazon.com/Very-Easy-Little-Peppers-Faber/dp/0571523129>

Wendy Stevens - <https://composecreate.com/>

What have I learned from the challenge?

Students who have participated in the challenge for the past three years in my studio have become much better sight readers. They are confident and willing to try new music. Their ability to play more difficult music has increased. They are much more expressive and fluent. And, yes, they are definitely happy!

The 40 Piece Challenge

elissa milne

MTNA San Antonio 2016

Reward quantity

Celebrate beginnings

Assign challenges

Set time frames

Know when to move on

Maintain the student's dignity

Create context

Mix it up

Make your own rules

www.the40piecechallenge.com

NAME	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Abby																														
Alaina																														
Annabelle																														
Annelise																														
Anthony																														
Ari																														
August																														
Ayla																														
Calvin																														
Carlie																														
Eleanor																														
Eli																														
Elias																														
Ethan																														

30 PIECE CHALLENGE

compose create.com

NAME	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Felix									
Finn									
Isabella									
Jasmine									
Jillian									
Kai									
Leila									
Liam									
Lilly									
Luca									
Lukas									
Maria									
Mikael									
Mila									

30 PIECE CHALLENGE

