

KEYBOARD SKILLS

Young Learners

Classroom Management

Focusing a Young Learners Class

Great lessons are a team effort between the teacher and students. Always be flexible to improvise during your lesson depending on the energy and focus of your group—your best teaching will result from a constant reaction to the class on that particular day. If something is obviously not working, skip it or improvise an adaptation based on what’s happening in the classroom.

Common reasons for behavior and attention issues in keyboard classes are frustration and boredom. These effects usually stem from too much continuous instruction or independent practice at the keyboards. Young learners benefit from spending time away from the keyboards during a lesson. Keep in mind, however, that “away time” does not need to mean a disconnection from developing keyboard skills. The following activity ideas use different modalities for young learners to create context around the keyboard pieces they are learning:

1. Finger exercises
2. Rhythm games connected to the song
3. Exploring bits of piano history and its physical construction
4. Listening to or watching recordings of the songs they are learning. Use movement, scarves, puppets, or drawing to make it a more active experience.
5. Sharing segments of composer biographies
6. Reading a book about listening:
 - *Hearing (The Five Senses)* by Maria Rius, J.M. Parramon, & J.J. Puig
 - *The Noisy Book* by Margaret Wise Brown
 - *The Listening Walk* by Paul Showers
 - *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern
 - *Night in the Country* by Cynthia Rylant

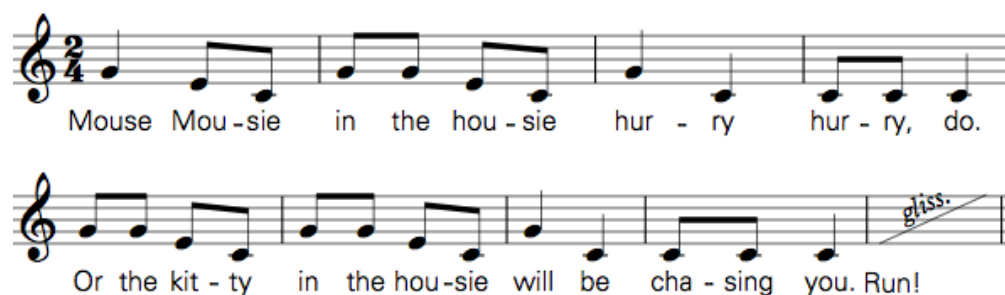
"Energy" Songs

If the group seems restless, stop your lesson to sing through one or two of these "energy songs." They should feel like a game, yet still offer educational benefits. Try changing where the students are in the room. If at the rug, go to the keyboards; if at the keyboards, go to the rug. Sometimes young students just need to move around, and a quick change of location will focus their attention. Once you have them focused and having a good time singing, you can then move back to where you were before and continue your main teaching goal of the day (or skip to something new, as necessary).

Some fun energy song suggestions:

- "Where is Thumbkin" and "The Itsy Bitsy Spider": Use these classics to develop finger dexterity necessary for keyboard players.
- Warm up with a stretch on the solfege scale going up, going down, and both up and down. (tap your toes for "do" and tap going up your body until you get to the "do" which is your head). Change up the patterns in quick a call and response game.
- "Mouse Mousie": Warm up with sung solfege patterns first. Sing and play the game version on the rug. You can follow up by teaching the children how to play a glissando at the keyboard. (Try with soft gloves on their hands first.)

Mouse Mousie



Game Rules:

1. Arrange students in a seated circle.
2. Select one student to be "Mousie" and have him/her move to the center of the circle.
3. As a class, sing "Mouse Mousie." As secretly as possible, choose another student to be "kitty." When the class sings "Run!" Kitty must jump up and try to tag Mousie before s/he can get back to her seat in the circle.
4. Consider ending the game by letting both Mousie and Kitty play the closing glissando!
5. Repeat this for as many rounds as you'd like!

Note: Mouse Mousie is a variation on "Duck, duck, goose."

- "Down Comes Johnny": Warm up with solfege patterns. Play the game version on the rug. Teach the students the finger pattern for "I have the money" and have them go to the keyboards to sing and play.

Down Comes Johnny

Traditional

The image shows the musical notation for the song "Down Comes Johnny". It consists of two staves. The first staff is for the Right Hand (RH) and contains the melody for the first line of the song. The second staff is for the Left Hand (LH) and contains the melody for the second line of the song. The lyrics are written below the notes.

RH
Down comes John-ny, down comes he. He is hold-ing the mo-ney and the key.

RH LH RH LH
Who has the mo-ney? I have the mo-ney! Who has the key? I have the key!

Game Rules:

1. Arrange students in a seated circle on the carpet or floor.
 2. Choose one student to be "Johnny" and give him/her a coin and a key.
 3. As the children sing, have Johnny give the coin to one student and the key to another. The students with the appropriate items can sing the appropriate solos when they appear in the song. Students could also play their solos on keyboards or pitched percussion instruments!
 4. Repeat this game with new students in the roles of Johnny and the holders of the key and coin.
- "Debka Hora": This is an Israeli folksong which is useful for introducing the minor mode. Consider composing lyrics with your class for the tune and then sing the song and lead the dance at the rug. Ask one or two volunteers to accompany the group on a two-note chord while the others perform the dance. They can simply play a steady pulse. More advanced students can play the rhythm of the song with the same two notes.

Debka Hora

Israeli Folk Song



Dance Rules:

1. As a class, stand in a circle holding hands.
 2. Sing the song! While singing measures 1–4, walk around the circle. In measures 5 and 6, walk toward the center of the circle and in measure 7 and 8, walk back out.
- "I Hear the Mill Wheel": This French Canadian folksong can reinforce the minor mode. Introduce the song using note names. Then have the students contour the melody using their hands in the air. Sing the song and teach the dance on the rug.

I Hear the Mill Wheel

French Canadian Folk Song



Dance Rules:

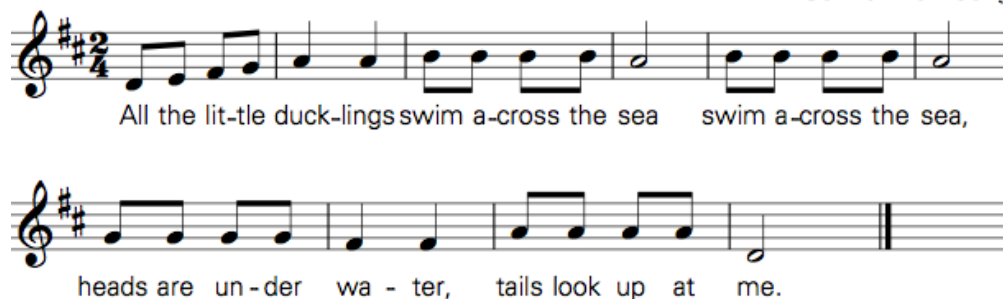
1. Select three students to form the mill wheel formation—these students will stand facing one another, holding on to each others outstretched right arms in the center.
2. Arrange the rest of the class in a large circle around the mill wheel.
3. While singing measures 1–4, have the mill wheel move in one direction while the class circle moves the opposite way. In measures 5 and 6,

students stop in place and tap the pulse with their foot while singing. Have students resume their circular dance for measures 7 and 8.

- "All the Little Ducklings": This German folksong is useful for introducing the D Major Scale family. Review the scale by asking: *Where is Do? Where is Sol? Where is Fa? Who is missing?* Try this as a movement game as outlined below.

All the Little Ducklings

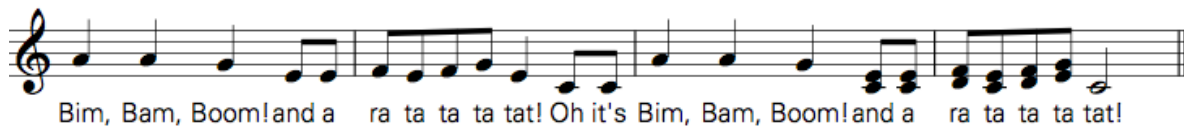
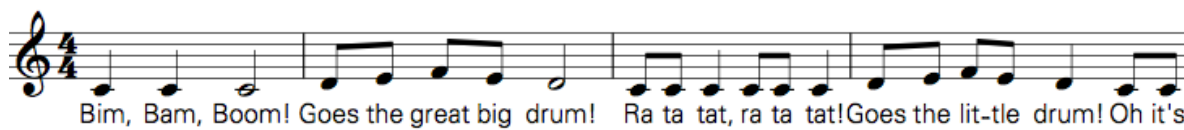
German Folk Song



Dance Rules:

1. Arrange your class in two lines, spaced along the border of the rug.
 2. Have students hold hands in each line and face the other line.
 3. Choose a few volunteers from each line to be ducklings—you should have an equal number of ducklings from each line.
 4. As a class, sing the first six measures of the song. In measure 7, have the chosen ducklings “swim” across the rug and join the other line of students.
 5. To help develop confident singers, consider having only the ducklings sing from measure 7 to the end.
- "Bim, Bam, Boom": Emphasize the song's suggested percussive vocal sounds to create contrasting timbres and texture. Students can easily learn to play the first four measures on the keyboard.

Bim, Bam, Boom



- "Cymbals and Drums": This Bohemian folksong is helpful for learning eighth note rhythms and rests. Students may use vocal sounds, body percussion, or actual instruments to fill in the sounds of the instruments. Change the second verse to suit your teaching goal at the keyboard: "Play the keyboards lightly with our song..." or, "Play some fast notes lightly with our song..." or, "Play three C-notes lightly with your thumb..." or, "Play Mi-Sol-Sol lightly with our song..."

Cymbals and Drums

Bohemian Folk Song

1. Play a mer - ry meas - ure on the drum. (Play)
 2. Play the cym - bals light - ly with our song.

Just a mer - ry meas - ure on the drum.
 Just the cym - bals light - ly with our song.

When you play a tune to - day, Make it bright and make it gay.
 When you play a tune to - day, Make it bright and make it gay.

Play a mer - ry meas - ure on the drum,
 Play the cym - bals light - ly with our song.

Just a mer - ry meas - ure on the drum.
 Just the cym - bals light - ly with our song.

- "Frere Jacques": This makes a nice cool down song. Try singing as a round in French or English. Explore pulse by having the students imagine they are bells ringing by singing a "Do" accompaniment (an accented whole note decrescendoing through each measure). Have volunteers accompany with bell sounds on the keyboards. Some students may be able to add pedal to make the "bells" vibrate.

Using the Voice

Song Routines

Young learners often benefit from routines in the classroom. Using a "hello" and "goodbye" song to open and close your keyboard lessons and tailor it to the musical theme of the day (e.g., dynamics, dotted rhythms, intervals, patterns). Once familiar to the students, these songs eventually become motivating for students to learn on the keyboard.

Keep or vary the songs, as will engage your students. Below are a few examples, but try composing your own to suit your lessons!

Call and Response Exercises

Teacher: Student(s):

Hel - lo keyboard class Hel - lo Sa - sha
Good-bye (student's name) Good - bye (teacher's name)

Teacher: Student(s):

Sol Mi Sol Mi

Teacher: Student:

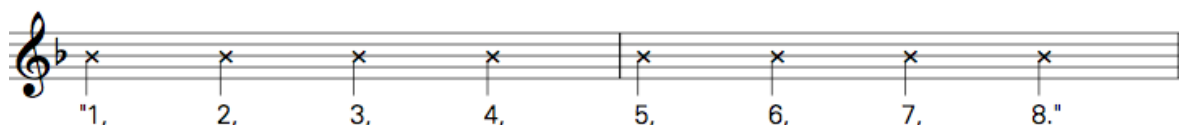
Hel - lo Fra - ces Hel - lo Sa - sha
Good - bye (student's name) Good - bye (teacher's name)

It's So Good to See You

DeLelles

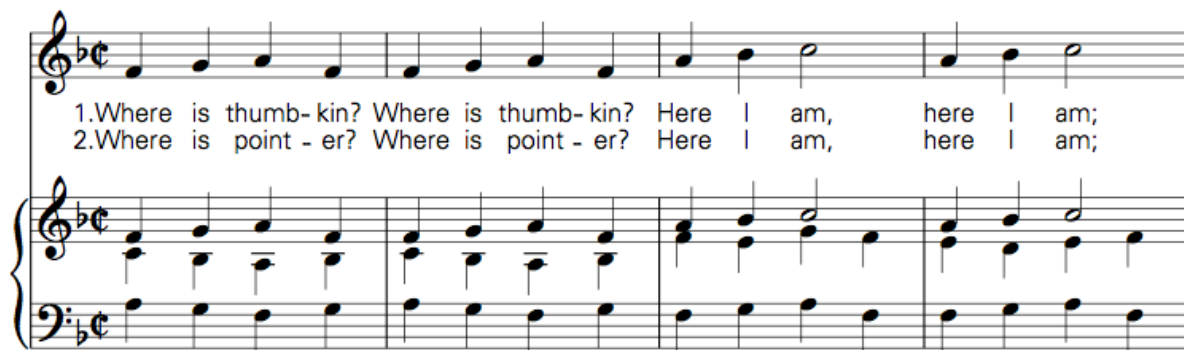
It's so good to see you, I al - most could - n't wait, would you

clap your hands and count to eight?

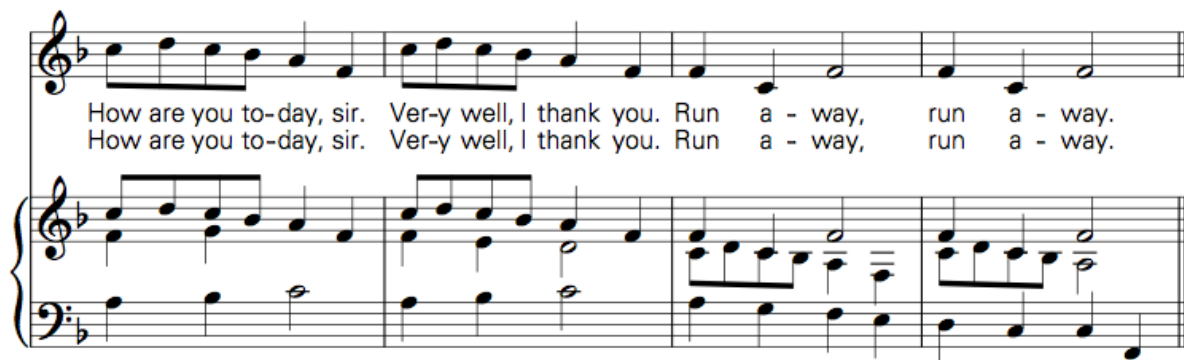


"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8."

Where is Thumbkin?



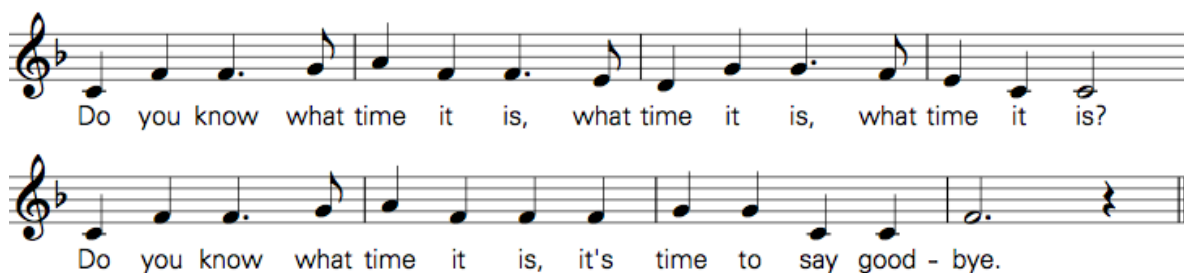
1. Where is thumb-kin? Where is thumb-kin? Here I am, here I am;
 2. Where is point-er? Where is point-er? Here I am, here I am;



How are you to-day, sir. Ver-y well, I thank you. Run a-way, run a-way.
 How are you to-day, sir. Ver-y well, I thank you. Run a-way, run a-way.

Goodbye Song

English



Do you know what time it is, what time it is, what time it is?
 Do you know what time it is, it's time to say good-bye.

Sing then Play

Singing a new piece before playing it by ear can be a wonderful shortcut to learning more advanced pieces in the first year of keyboard. Three steps that help learning a new piece by ear are:

- 1) **Sing** the song with lyrics. (Have fun writing them if there aren't any!)
- 2) **Contour** the shape of the melody in the air with your hand.
- 3) **Play by ear.** Give students the starting pitches by playing and saying the notes out loud and then ask them to find the rest of the song on their own keyboard. Remind them to sing along as they look for the notes.

Contouring the Melody

Contouring the melody (by hand) in the air before learning a new piece helps students with music reading by making the connection between direction and interval leaps on the keyboard and direction and interval leaps in the score. For example, you might ask your students:

Imagine that you are holding a paint brush in your hand. Listen one more time to the music, this time to the melody. Can you paint the contour of the melody with your paint brush? Where does it go up, down, or stay the same? What did you discover? How does our melody move?

Try singing a section of the melody together and have the class "paint" the contour in the air at the same time. Ask volunteers to demonstrate while you or the class sings.

Literacy through Listening

Students are never too young to look at scores and you will be surprised by what they notice. An important goal of keyboard learning is to develop the student's ability to listen actively using their ears and their imagination so that they learn to play with the same active listening and imagination. Listening while following scores can connect what the students hear to the contour of the musical notes that they see on the page. They can analyze the score for patterns, musical symbols and vocabulary and then hear those concepts realized.

Start with familiar music like folk songs or nursery rhymes you have been singing together and then move to new music as they become more accustomed to the listening activity.

Listening to and Reading "Scores"

Have your students listen once and then on the second listening, follow the score. Share the score of the piece you are listening to by holding up the score like a book as the class sits in a circle on the rug. If your class is very large, another option is to project the score from a computer or a projector to the front of the room where everyone can see it. Demonstrate by moving along the score with your finger and then ask a volunteer student to try this.

Use open-ended questions to guide their observations such as: *What do they notice? Where do you see patterns? When does the music look complicated or simple? What symbols do you see besides the notes? What directions do you see? What shapes (contours) can you see in the music?*

You can also treat a complex score as a "book" and use imaginative and interpretive questions to connect to the feelings they hear in the music. For example, if listening to *Flight of the Bumble Bee*, have them trace the "bee's" flight with their pointer. *What kind of bee is it? Where is it flying? Where does the bee try to sting us? Where does it fly toward us? Where does it fly away from us? Why do you think that--what do you hear and see?* Draw their attention to crescendos, diminuendos, note directions, sforzandos, etc. As bonus, invite the children improvise their own "bee flights" on any two black keys!

Repertoire for Young Listeners

Play recordings or, if you are a pianist, play some of these shorter pieces or excerpts--students love to be inspired by their teacher role models! *Use piano reductions of any orchestral suggestions listed. Use lead sheets or written out arrangements for piano and voice while listening to songs.

Pieces to consider

- "Flight of the Bumble Bee" – Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov
- Toccata and Fugue in D Minor – J.S. Bach
- "The Pink Panther" – Henry Mancini
- Hungarian Rhapsody No. 5 – Johannes Brahms
- Twelve Variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman" – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
- Symphony No. 4 – Peter Tchaikovsky
- Any pieces from "Album for the Young" – by Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev
- "The Entertainer" – Scott Joplin
- "Maple Leaf Rag" – Scott Joplin
- "I Got Rhythm" – George Gershwin
- *Rhapsody in Blue*, –George Gershwin
- "They Can't Take That Away from Me" – George Gershwin
- Symphony No. 5 – Ludwig Van Beethoven
- "Moonlight" Sonata – Ludwig Van Beethoven
- "Für Elise" – Ludwig Van Beethoven
- "Ode to Joy" in Symphony No. 9 – Ludwig Van Beethoven
- *Ma mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)* – Maurice Ravel
- "Claire de Lune" – Claude Debussy
- "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from *Peer Gynt Suite* – Edward Grieg
- *Lyric Pieces* (choose any that you love!) – Edward Grieg
- *Waltz in C Sharp Minor, Op. 64, No. 2* – Frederic Chopin
- *Nocturne Op. 9, No. 1 in B-Flat Minor* – Frederic Chopin
- *Fantasia Impromptu, in C-Sharp Minor* – Frederic Chopin
- *Peter and The Wolf* – Sergei Prokofiev
- "Habanera," "Toreador Song" – from the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- "Black, Brown, and Beige" – Duke Ellington
- *The Rite of Spring* – Igor Stravinsky
- "Everyday I have the Blues" – Sparks Brothers
- *Carnaval* – Schumann

Technique Building

Warming Up the Body

Before beginning a keyboard lesson, help students warm up their whole bodies using stretches such as the following:

- While standing, sway the upper body and arms grandly and proudly. Finish by crossing the arms in front of the body and let them hang down.
- Stretch both arms side to side as though you are a bird or an airplane with large wings. Imitate the sense of soaring by gently bouncing arms up and down with a buoyant lightness that counteracts their size and weight.
- Swim through the air with a breast stroke motion, throwing hands and arms to the opposite ends of the keyboards, reaching for the corners then crossing them.
- Wave hello or goodbye to find freedom of motion in the wrists.
- Briskly rotate your arms as though opening a doorknob.

Hand and Finger Exercises

Proper hand and finger positions are vital in training healthy and agile keyboardists in the classroom. Consider some of the following exercises, focused on the fingers and hands, to help develop dexterity and ease of playing.

Finding the Proper Hand Position

Balloons are an excellent tool to help beginning keyboardists develop a rounded hand position and become comfortable with improvisation. Blow up small balloons for every hand in the class. Ask the students to hold the balloons in their palms, creating a slightly rounded palm with curved fingers. Ask them to experiment with playing the keyboard with the balloons in their palms.

For Finger Agility and Sensitivity:

- Tap a song's rhythms on a table with wrists touching the surface and hands cupped over imaginary balloons
- "Draw" numbers, letters, or words on a flat surface with the pad of each finger, paying special attention to the thumb, keeping it extended and relaxed when using each of the other fingers.
- With an elbow on the table, roll circles with the thumb towards each finger cushion, one at a time, going from pointer to pinkie and then back. Try rolling with both hands at the same time. Try this activity with students' eyes closed so they can really tune into their fingertips.
- Using the eraser tip of a pencil, tap the eraser with each of finger pad, using varying finger patterns and rhythms.

Single Finger Games:

- Begin with the pointer finger, the strongest and most naturally independent. Ask the children to touch their noses and then a black key on the piano. Alternate hands. Repeat this with all fingers.
- Imitate the pecking sound of a woodpecker all over the keyboard with a light staccato.
- Imitate sandpipers running along the shore with trills on any melodic second.
- Pick a note—white or black—and “hide it” in your pocket and then put it back on the keyboard.
- Ask children to put their hands behind their backs. Quickly call out a finger number and a hand and ask them to show it to you. *Hold up Finger 2 on your right hand! Now show me finger number 1 on your left hand.*

Playing and Listening with Closed Eyes

Whenever introducing a new technical concept about a pattern or topography of the keyboard, ask the students to try the exercise with closed eyes. Doing so allows them to shut off their visual sense and focus all of their concentration on their senses of touch and hearing. Asking students to play pieces they have learned with their eyes closed is also a fantastic teaching tool for memorizing.

Keyboard Posture

Ideally, the keyboard will be placed on a keyboard stand or desk in front of the student. If stands are unavailable, the keyboard can be placed on a desk. If possible, try to find a flat, sturdy surface on which to place keyboards to avoid putting them on the floor—sitting and playing instruments on the floor makes learning correct posture and playing technique difficult, especially for beginning students.

Make sure the student’s elbow is the same level as the keyboard or a little bit higher. When seated, ask students to sit on the front half of the piano bench so that they lean forward slightly toward their feet. Make sure their feet are grounded to the floor. Footstools or stacks of books can be used under the feet of children who are seated but not yet able to reach the floor.

To help them find and envision their best posture, consider sharing a helpful phrase from Alexander Technique: “Tall, wide, and open.” In this position, guide students to breathe deeply and calmly.

It may be helpful to review the notes and videos for beginning keyboard players, found [here](#) in Beginner Repertoire.

Young students may find it challenging to maintain proper posture throughout a lesson. If verbal reminders are not sufficient to refocus their attention and posture, consider facilitating a class stretch such as this one.

The “Library Stretch”

Standing next to your keyboard, stretch your arms all the way up to the ceiling like you are picking up a book from the top of a tall book shelf. Stretch all the way to the right

and then move left, as though you're moving the book horizontally across the shelf. Then move the book from the left back to the right. Now reach as though you're placing the book on the very bottom shelf and then lift it back up to the top. Take ten seconds to return to a position that felt especially good—high, low, left, or right!

Building Quick Reflexes

Reimagined games like “Simon Says” are great ways to get students quickly identifying notes and finding them in multiple octaves: *Simon says, ‘find and play as many G# notes as you can find in 5 seconds. Go!’*

This exercise can also be done by asking students to play certain intervals. You may want to give students a starting pitch and have them generate the proper interval, or just call out an interval and give students time to find as many variations as possible.

Developing Independent Hands

One challenging technique of more advanced repertoire requires keyboardists to play different note values between their two hands--sustaining one note in one hand while the other hand fits in two or more notes. Simple preparatory exercises for young learners like this one (with lyrics, if desired) helps develop independence in students' hands. Encourage mastery of this preparatory exercise before introducing a new piece of repertoire to the class.

1
Ba - by inch-worm creep-ing crawl-ing, mov-ing fast - er as the flow-er grows.

1
Dad - dy inch-worm creep-ing crawl-ing, chas-ing lit - tle ba - by as he goes.