

## HAVING IT ALL: TEACHING EXPRESSION & TECHNIQUE

By Dr. Timothy Hagen

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### Overview

From July 2003 until March 2004, I held a Kenan Fellowship at Lincoln Center Education (LCE), one of the premier arts education organizations in the world. The purpose of the fellowship was to develop my skills as a teaching artist under the guidance of LCE's faculty. This experience taught me how to teach and, equally important, that I loved teaching.

LCE's mission was guided by a practice called aesthetic education. Over the intervening years, the organization has continued to refine its educational philosophy and eventually replaced "aesthetic education" with "imaginative learning." The practice remains essentially as I remember it, however, as stated on the LCE website:

Each individual—child or adult—possesses an innate ability to respond to works of art in ways that can heighten perception, ignite the imagination, and challenge preconceived notions. Imaginative learning is designed to foster and support such responses by using extended, in-depth engagements with works of art. Through these engagements, students develop an inside understanding of the artistic choices that contribute to the creation of a work of art, and their own imaginations are activated.

Indeed, my experience teaching for LCE was marked by the realization that when a learner's imagination is ignited, she will leave inhibitions behind and naturally engage a work at whatever level of artistic understanding she already possesses. Once she is engaged, the process of deepening and broadening her understanding can unfold.

I have long wondered how to bring this approach into my studio teaching. Mature musicians are responsible for taking every effect produced on any instrument and using it to convey expression and meaning, a process that requires engaging the imagination. When working with young players, however, we often teach the "hows" (of tone production, finger technique, articulation, etc.) but not this great, overarching "why" of expression. Given that children have far more sophisticated imaginations than motor skills, I see every reason to engage their imaginations, building a bridge from there to the physical technique involved in playing instruments. In this way, expression and technique can be fused from a reasonably early stage of musical learning (certainly beginning within the first couple of years after a child takes up an instrument). Moreover, this is a way to get to the fun part of music-making sooner!

### "NarrEtudes"

Given that children think in concrete terms, even in their remarkably vivid imaginations, etudes tied to a specific narrative are more appropriate than those that explore varying musical character, a concept too abstract for many, if not all, children.

The narrative in this case begins with the ubiquitous children’s song “Three Blind Mice” and expands, following the mice’s adventures after the song ends. Each part of the narrative corresponds to an etude, each of which, in turn, is a variation on the original song. As the narrative changes character from one part to another, so does the music, exploiting various musical techniques to clearly convey the character in question. Below are two sample etudes we can use to explore connecting expression to technique.

### NarrEtude #1: Funeral for a Tail

**Adagio** (♩=60) *Put a tiny bit of space between all unslurred notes while keeping the notes as close to full value as possible.*

The musical score is written on two staves in G minor (two flats) and 4/4 time. The tempo is Adagio with a quarter note equal to 60 beats per minute. The first staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by mezzo-piano (*mp*), and then mezzo-forte (*mf*). The second staff starts with forte (*f*), then mezzo-piano (*mp*), and ends with pianissimo (*pp*). The score includes various note values, slurs, and accents.

*Imagine having your tail cut off when you were just leaving your house to go to the grocery store! That’s exactly what happened to the three blind mice, whose house happened to be inside the walls of a much bigger house that belonged to the farmer, Mr. MacDonald, and his wife (who was deathly afraid of mice). After losing their tails, Josephine, Lucy, and Allie ran home to bandage themselves up. Afterward, they decided that their tails deserved to have a formal funeral, so they went back to the farmer’s kitchen in the middle of the night and collected their tails, which were still on the floor. The three sisters took their tails out to their favorite hill, under their favorite tree. While the full moon and all the stars shone down beautifully, Josephine, the oldest of the three said a few serious words about how much they would miss their tails. They all sniffled and cried for a good, long while. Afterward, they dug a hole, and as gently as possible, buried their tails. The sisters walked home very slowly because they were still so sore and so sad.*

Below, you see the etude again, but this time, there are no markings aside from the treble clef, key signature, time signature, and notes on the staff. Try adding your own markings that are different from the original. Maybe you can try slurs in some new places or add staccatos or accents that did not exist in the original. New dynamics and tempos are fun to try out too. Once you’ve written in your own markings (in pencil, because you might want to change things later), play it, taking care to do exactly what you marked. Then, ask yourself whether the character is exactly the same as it was above or if it has changed as a result of the changes you made.



**NarrEtude #2: The Hospital Visit**

**Allegro** (♩ = 120)

*p* *accel.*

**Vivace** (♩ = 144)

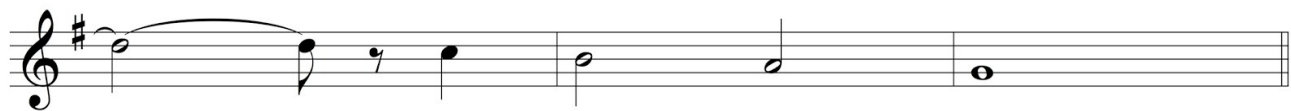
*mf* *rit.* *fp* <

**Andante** (♩ = 72)

*ff*

*When they got home, Lucy remembered that her friend Dr. Buckley once told her about the time he sewed a new tail onto a mouse. This cheered the sisters up, and they decided they would go get new tails in the morning. As soon as Josephine, Lucy, and Allie arrived at the hospital, the doctors and nurses rushed them into the operating room. With three new-tail surgeries going on at once, the place was a swirl of doctors and nurses running back and forth, attending to their patients. All was well in the end, though, each sister with her beautiful new tail.*

Below is the melody for mini-etude #3 with all of the markings removed. Add in your own markings that are different from the originals, and play it, making very sure to do every single thing you mark. Do your changes affect the character? If so, how would you describe the new character?



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