

# The Power of Visual Progress

By Gloria Chu

“Thank you, Johnny, I look forward to hearing you share the newly explored interpretations in the Chopin Nocturne next week”. This is a common phrase I hear myself saying at the end of many lessons. As I reflect on it, much of Johnny’s lesson was spent on discovering additional musical expressions to his current repertoire, fixing misread notes and clarifying rhythmic notations. As a teacher, it is easy to focus on what’s wrong or not done, more than what has been accomplished thus far. I was anxious to find a way to show and help the student feel the progress. Research has shown that more of our brain is devoted to processing visual information than any other senses. Such as, we tend to remember images better than words. Thus, visualizing progress can empower the brain to further motivate us in the learning journey.

To guide my students in visualizing their progress, I have explored three strategies: I Kan!, gamify it: puzzle, and a progress bar. The three strategies can be mixed and matched for different musical concepts.

## I Kan!

This strategy is based on the Kanban workflow management method. In learning a piece, there are many components to consider. With notes, rhythm, form, key changes, and tempo, the mind engages so much mental energy just to manage what needs to be comprehended from the piece. Prioritizing what to do is a daunting task for the brain. To nurture growth and independence, I challenge students to discover the most appropriate strategy unique to their learning abilities and the time available.

**Step 1:** Create the following chart:

Tasks	Doing	Done

**Step 2:** List out what needs to be accomplished to learn the repertoire. Each task is on a separate post-it note. Put all the items under the “Tasks” column.

**Step 3:** Limit the work, choose two tasks and move them to the “Doing” column. Choose tasks that are appropriate to the time available for the current practice session.

**Step 4:** Upon completing the task, move it to the “Done” column.

The objective is to have two tasks in the “Doing” column until all tasks are completed. Tasks can be shifted to the “Doing” column but the limit is only two. Students can see the “Done” column for all that has been accomplished. Thus, for the practice session, students can target the goals in the “Doing” column and not be overwhelmed.

## Gamify it: Puzzle

A puzzle game can be formed for a visual representation of the goals or practice items.

**Step 1:** Draw or print out a picture of your choice. This can be a picture of a composer, the first page of

the piece, or any visual artwork.

**Step 2:** Cut the picture into puzzle pieces, the number of pieces can be chosen based on the number of practice goals for the current stage of learning.

**Step 3:** Write a practice goal on the back of each puzzle piece.

**Step 4:** Add the piece to the puzzle each time the practice goal is accomplished.

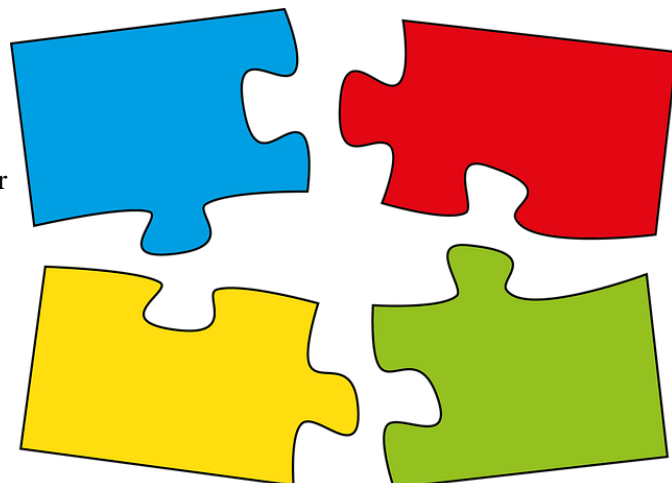
**Step 5:** Continue this process until all pieces of the puzzle are complete.

This can be used as a visual indicator for the practice goals to be accomplished during each practice session or a long-term project for an upcoming recital. Students can see the formation of the picture and feel proud of their small wins through the completion of each goal.

## Progress Bar

Much like video games, visually tracking progress with a chart or progress bar can be a huge motivation.

**Step 1:** Dedicate a small space for the progress bar. Consider putting this progress bar in an area where the student can see it easily. I usually suggest it on the music stand, in front of the practice





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notebook, or on a wall beside the practice area. Some students have chosen the fridge to display their achievements on the progress bar. This adds further accountability as family members also see the progress bar.

**Step 2:** Each time a practice goal is accomplished, a sticky note is added to the progress bar.

The progress bar can be adapted for any level of learning.

For a beginning student, we started with achieving 5 sticky notes during the week for the practice piece:

- 1) Naming all notes aloud correctly.
- 2) Clapping the rhythm aloud with a steady beat.
- 3) Play and sing the note names accurately.
- 4) Play and tap with a steady pulse.
- 5) Perform for a family member or favourite toy with a good tone and steady pulse.

For an advanced student, to achieve sticky notes:

- 1) Each sticky note represented a practice section.
- 2) Each practice section is to be played with a steady beat at a specific metronome tempo, gradually progressing quicker.
- 3) Listening to specific music concepts discussed in the lesson.

The three strategies can be adapted to each student's unique learning abilities and current level. In my studio, having visual progress not only helped manage practice goals but also added confidence, relieved a sense of being overwhelmed and boosted motivation to practice! ■



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Gloria Chu is a dedicated piano, violin and vocal pedagogue, an RCM examiner, festival adjudicator, composer, and performer. She is the recipient of the 2022 RCM Teacher of Distinction Award for her leadership as a music educator instilling lifelong love of music in the community. In addition, she has been recognized by Steinway & Sons with a Top Teacher Award for her outstanding instruction and leadership in piano education. Her innovative teaching methods motivate students to develop confidence in expressing their unique voice in both music and life.



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