

TEACHING BOYS TO PLAY THE PIANO: *Its Challenges and Rewards*

By John R. Stevenson, DJD

Through my thirty-seven years of training musicians from pre-school through graduate school I have can categorically state that women, and girls learn very differently from men and boys. The challenges of teaching young men and boys to play the piano become obvious when one realizes that the small-motor skills and therefore, the reading skills develop at a slower rate than those of young women, the attention span of is often shorter, and not only is the energy level higher it is more intense. The reason, of course, is that the wiring of the male brain is different from that of the female; men and women have physiological and psychological differences. Therefore, when teaching one gender or another, it is imperative that we approach them with a methodology and a psychology that understands those essential differences.

I understand these differences because I have extensive experience teaching in a single gender school in New York City for many years. It was evident from the first day of my appointment that the young ladies were far easier to teach. Young ladies share their feeling openly, they are able to multitask and accomplish several goals simultaneously, they are comfortable working independently but can be very competitive in small groups, and they are inclined to resolve their differences more readily through discussion and without hostility. Even though the girls were not perfect and needed real guidance and discipline, they learned quickly, retained information well, and were apt to be consistent.

Young gentlemen, on the other hand, feel they must accomplish one project at a time; project "A" followed by project "B," etc., but with patience, they can learn to multitask. Young gentlemen are inclined to keep their inner struggles private or until they feel very comfortable and secure sharing. They believe that sharing their feelings is a sign of weaknesses and something only girls have permission to do; and even though they seek and need affection both physically and emotionally, they tend to see it as a weakness and do their best to deny that part of who they are. Even at an early age, they take on the role

of the warrior who is strong physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Only with maturity and education do they learn that emotional needs are a part of the human experience and not just relegated to women. In addition, young men can learn the discipline of working independently, even though they are far more inclined to work in a group environment. When left to working alone on a project, their thoughts tend to wonder and their minds easily turn to the fantasy of their daydreams. Young men prefer to work as a team where everyone helps to keep the project on task. Finally, the young male is not as ego centered as is commonly thought; they have a rather fragile ego and the more musical and artistic they are, the more they feel different and therefore, the more fragile the self-image. This fragility might be manifested in either of two ways: one, they embarrass easily by praise and public attention and affection or two, they seek to mask their fragility by overtly seeking adulation and praise even if unwarranted.

The main purpose one teaches piano to either boys or girls is to provide the student with the necessary skills and techniques to teach him/herself. In order to accomplish this goal the students must learn how to practice and how to listen. Without an actual practice technique, students float their way through their practice time with a great deal of daydreaming and thoughtlessness. As a result, they do not learn to hear themselves play, evaluate what they heard, and design a method to correct any problems. Therefore, they remain incapable of teaching themselves. Discouraged by a lack of progress and bored by the perceived "noise" of the piano; they stop trying, and once the student stops trying; the end looms nearby.

Some students simply quit without hesitation because for some reason, they were unable to connect and identify with a particular instrument or a certain teacher or with music itself. Quitting for them is simple, clean, and easy. However, others who are equally discouraged may find quitting out of the question. No matter how discouraged they become, no matter how little they

practice, and no matter how much they denigrate themselves for not practicing, they keep returning to lessons week after week. They expend a lot of energy avoiding answering the unavoidable question: "Should I face myself, forgive my shortcomings, and simply dig in and learn to practice or should I remain in my rut of denial and self-pity and hope someday I find the courage to give up something I really love."

This dilemma which I call "Practice Dilemma Syndrome" usually manifests itself in students who are very musical, have little or no problems getting good to excellent grades in school and score in the highest percentiles on the national, state or local examination, and can tolerate nothing for themselves but perfection. These individuals are usually male as young as ten or twelve years old that have developed and continue to perpetuate an unrealistic standard for themselves that no one could meet. When practicing the piano they are easily frustrated with themselves and with everyone else around them. They act out their frustration by shouting expletives, pounding on the piano keys, slamming down the fallboard, hurling the score across the room and always concluding with the obligatory stomping away from the piano.

This student, and there are more than one registered at the Settlement, has difficulty with a learning processes that requires him to examine each problem, break it down into its components, and then gradually seek out the solution by trial and error, deductive reasoning, instinct and repetition. In addition, he must get his body to respond expressively, and yet accurately in time. In fact, he must unite his cognitive domain with his physical domain through his affective domain. For them, having to go through a process at all is somewhat insulting. Furthermore, they view the process I prescribe as time consuming, tedious, laborious, and boring; and they are correct. Nevertheless, this process must emerge if learning is to take place.

Ironic as it might seem success in

school might become a liability for the sufferer of "Practice Dilemma Syndrome." The very place where learning is easy, quick, and happens without frustration might create the expectation that learning to play the piano is as quick, easy, and efficient as learning math. When faced with the truth, frustration and real emotional pain arise. Yet, he will not let go of his lessons. The reasons are many but some include:

He might not be able to walk away from an environment that recognizes him as a musician and values him for his musicality (Please see the article on our website: "Understanding the Role of the Transformational Teacher" by John R. Stevenson)

He might not be able to abandon something he loves and loves to do

He might not be able to turn his back on his own musicality and musical instincts

He might not be able to grant himself permission to fail; his ego will not allow him to face that possibility.

This young man possesses a brain that is predisposed and reinforced for the mainstream school environment where logic and reason are highly valued as the main or the only learning tool. In effect, he has a strong memory and can easily learn data quickly, especially for an examination. He must expend some effort, but not the kind of effort the other boys must muster whose brains are predisposed for an experiential environment where the need of their five senses: taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing, and the nervous and muscular systems are vital for quantifying, qualifying, remembering and disseminating information. In both cases, each young man can and will learn through cognition. Some will thrive and others will struggle. However, we ignore, unwittingly or not, a large part of who our young male musicians are, and whom they could become when approached from one isolated angle. How many schools teach experientially, and how many teach cognitively?

Maria Montessori, (1870-1952), and especially Emil Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), did their best first as collaborators

and then later separately to infuse tangible teaching techniques that incorporate the whole person within the educational process. Both education revolutionaries affected the way countless human beings teach. These techniques are viable, and produce excellent results on all population groups. Even though we continue to collect data that substantiates their philosophies, it has not affected mainstream America thinking today nor will it anytime in the distant future. Experiential teaching is difficult to master; it takes time, patience, and money. Experiential learning is also expensive, time consuming and even messy at times, and who has time or money to spend on education? Today, and perhaps for the first time in our history our public school children MUST stay on track and march to the government's drummer. Is it not true that everyone MUST learn to read by a federally mandated age, MUST continue to improve at a federally mandated rate, and above all, MUST pass the federally mandated examinations or their school will suffer extinction? In reality, our children are learning how to take examinations rather than learning how to be good citizens who live a full and productive life. Nevertheless, I believe that all students, not only the artists, and not only the men, must experience a holistic approach in their education: An approach where they are taught as human beings who have strengths and weaknesses, where all aspects of their personality are called forth, and where their spirits are merged with their mind and body. All musicians must experience this merger of mind, body, and spirit, no matter how they learn. It is a difficult task and if not begun from the very beginning, it might be impossible to master.

This government's program "No Child Left Behind" is efficient, cost effective, and designed for ease of administrating to the masses. However, we are teaching human beings who are made of flesh and blood and who learn very differently from each other and develop at varying rates of speed. Only some individuals with a unique learning style

and a unique physiological and psychological makeup can survive and even succeed in this environment; and in the process they fail to develop their powers of reasoning, intuition, instinct, creativity, and fantasy. The result is that our young musician, who struggles to learn his piano scores, fails to see why piano is so hard and school is so easy. He has not been made unaware that in art just as in life itself, perfection is an illusion, struggle forms the curb of every path worth walking, and joy and fulfillment can only come to those who have listened carefully to their heart's desire. (Please see the article on our website: "Talent: A Gift from God" by John R. Stevenson)

Learning to practice and learning to listen are extremely difficult skills to master. Without exaggeration, it takes a lifetime of effort by an exceptional human being. He must be willing to let go of his fears, and grant himself the permission to just be and experience without judgment. However, there are a few concrete and measurable requirements that are needed if one is to learn to practice.

One needs intelligence, a type where intuition and abstract thinking occur naturally.

One needs a great deal of natural musical instinct, an instinct that helps one make sense of harmony, melody, and rhythm, and knows how they might affect the human spirit.

One needs to possess an aptitude for self-expression accompanied by a very healthy ego. In other words one needs the ability to someday concur the fear of "Self" and allow ideas and feelings to flow freely without self-effacing judgmental thoughts.

One needs discipline, a discipline that will develop the power of concentration, focus, and stability.

Finally, one needs love, a love that fosters a deep respect for music and its power for human transformation.

At the Bethlehem Music Settlement, we have been striving to help each student find those requirements within themselves. We work especially hard to help those young men who manifest the "Syndrome" to relax

and find comfort, security, and joy as they emerge themselves into a process in which every step unveils more about how they learn, how they create and how they perform. The first step, relaxation, is the most difficult. Once these young men see that, they have imagined the expectations and the accompanying timetable they begin to let go. They embark on a journey where the learning is slow, rich, and even messy. They do not just learn they experience, they do not just experience, they live, they do not just live they become.