Every year, there seems to be a new body of evidence supporting the claims that music makes children smarter. As piano teachers, this translates into younger students knocking at our doors! The average age of beginning piano students is becoming younger and younger. Many teachers now accept students as young as 5- or 6-years old – before the child can even read! This presents teachers with a unique set of challenges. Here are some ideas for effectively teaching these energetic young students, using Level 1 of the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library.

**MAKE IT FUN – MOVE AROUND!**

Children at this age learn through play. Asking a kindergarten child to sit on a hard piano bench for 30 minutes is a recipe for disaster! Try spending a few minutes on the bench, then move to the floor for a different activity. In my studio, I’ll often do the written Hal Leonard Student Piano Library Piano Practice Games material on the floor. To reinforce rhythm concepts, move around the room! “Grandfather’s Clock” (HLSPL Piano Technique Book 1) is a great song to have children act out, waving their arms from side to side like the clock in the illustration. By using the accompaniment CDs or General MIDI disks, teachers can have their hands (and bodies!) free to move around the room with the student. Play games with the student, using a variety of learning tools (flash cards, Piano Practice Games cut-outs, stuffed animals, etc.).

**SING!**

So many of the songs in Piano Lessons Book 1 have great lyrics. Take time to sing them with your students (along with the CD or GM disk of course!). This helps children develop their ear, as well as listening skills. Plus, the children always find the lyrics so entertaining – what better way to teach that music is fun than through fun lyrics!

**PRE-TEACH THE PIECES**

The Teacher’s Guide for Book 1 has wonderful suggestions for pre-teaching the pieces in the Piano Lessons Book. Spend time at each lesson having the student point to the notes as the CD or GM disk plays. This helps young students in a number of ways:

- It reinforces the concept that music moves left to right, top to bottom (called tracking, a skill still new to beginning readers).
- It teaches that the notes on the page represent sounds.
- It helps students understand the general shape of the music (mapping).

Here is how I typically “pre-teach” a song to a 5-year-old in my studio:

1. We listen to the CD or GM disk with our eyes closed, and discuss the music. Questions I ask include: What instruments did you hear? How did the music make you feel? Was the music fast or slow?
2. Sing the lyrics while listening to the accompaniment.
3. Point to the notes while listening to the CD or GM disk.
4. Point to the notes again, this time counting the rhythm.
5. Clap and count with the CD or GM disk.

continued on page 2
TAKE TIME TO ENJOY THE MUSIC

Teaching 5-year-olds is much different than teaching 7-year-olds. Children in kindergarten are just learning basic skills (reading, math, etc.), and need time to process new information. At the end of the Teacher’s Guide for Book 1, there is a wonderful “map” that gives a general lesson plan for teaching the material in Book 1 over approximately 32 weeks. This map has proven to be invaluable in my teaching efforts! It reminds me to slow down, enjoy the journey, and spend time doing review. By using all the available materials for each level in the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library (Piano Lessons Book, Notespeller, Technique Book, Piano Practice Games and Piano Solos), students get many opportunities to practice their new skills before moving on to the next new skill. Which brings us to…

MOVING FROM THE KNOWN TO THE UNKNOWN

A core philosophy in the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library, moving from the known to the unknown, is a vital part of teaching 5-and 6-year-olds, simply because they don’t know very much yet! Taking concepts that they know (such as a heartbeat) and turning it into something they don’t yet know (rhythm) makes the learning process more comfortable. It is also important to note that very young students should not be rushed through the material. While spending 3 or 4 weeks on a short piece from Piano Lessons Book 1 may be unnecessary for an 8-or 9-year-old beginner, it is vital that very young students firmly grasp the concepts before moving on to the next new idea. This will prevent frustration, and make music learning fun.

My goal in teaching 5-and 6-year-olds is not to produce the next child prodigy! It is to help young children reap the benefits of early childhood music, while making music learning fun and free from frustrations. Working with this age group can be extremely rewarding. Remembering that a child in kindergarten learns differently than a child in grade 3 is the key to teaching 5-year-olds. When the material is presented at a pace that is comfortable to a young child, learning music becomes fun.

Karen Ferguson is a test market teacher and Teacher Ambassador Clinician for the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library. She studied piano through the Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto, as well as composition at Simon Fraser University. With over 12 years of teaching experience, Karen currently teaches nearly 50 students per week at the Centennial Community Centre in New Westminster, British Columbia. Her students have won numerous gold and silver medals at local music festivals. Karen specializes in teaching piano to young children, pre-school music and pre-piano classes, and jazz piano for young children.

Tips for Teaching 5-and 6-Year-Olds

• Make a set of fun flash cards by laminating the cut-outs from the Piano Practice Games books.

• Play a variation of the childhood game “I spy with my little eye”; call it “I hear with my little ear”. Play a measure from the student’s piece and see if he or she can guess which measure you played. Take turns being the “spy”.

• Use manipulatives…little “hands on” toys, such as small stuffed animals, toy cars, etc. When teaching a new set of notes, such as groups of 2 or 3 black keys, CDE, FGAB, have your student place these little “toys” on the appropriate keys.

• Teach the Warm-Ups in the Piano Technique Book by rote. Not only does this help the ear and the memory, it allows students to focus on the physical technique of playing, rather than note reading.

• Have fun with “My Own Songs!” Young children think that improvising is fun. At first, the sounds they produce may not sound much like “music.” Tell the child that it is their song; they can’t make a mistake! In addition to the “My Own Songs” included in Piano Lessons Book 1, there are a number of suggestions for improvising in Piano Practice Games Book 1. Improvising teaches children that music is a creative process, and allows them to express themselves through music (a wonderful gift to give a child!).

• Take your time! Learning to play the piano is about the journey, not the destination. Young children aren’t in a hurry to “get somewhere,” musically speaking. Teaching a young child to play the piano is very much like building a house: you first need to lay a firm foundation.
Piano Practice Games – Book 1

HL00296002 $5.95
Written by Barbara Kreader, Fred Kern, Phillip Keveren, Mona Rejino

This Imagine & Create activity is found in Piano Practice Games Book 1 and can easily be used with any young child learning FGAB on the piano, allowing them to improvise and create their own song. We hope you and your young students enjoy this activity.

Imagine & Create

Write in the F G A B groups on the keyboard below.

Shift the taxi’s gears to a slower speed and make up a new piece!

Choose one of the F G A B groups on your piano and place your hands in the Taxi Tangle position. Improvise a new piece as your teacher plays the accompaniment below.

How is the mood of your new piece different from Taxi Tangle?

Accompaniment

Lightly

Repeat as necessary

Last time

Hal Leonard grants permission to photocopy and enlarge this activity for your student.
Relationships: How and When They Matter
By Brenda Dillon

The National Piano Foundation and the Retail Print Music Dealer’s Association recently co-sponsored a survey of piano teachers’ buying habits when purchasing print music and instruments. The survey was printed in the newsletters of both organizations, the February/March 2003 issue of American Music Teacher, and Hal Leonard elected to print it in its fall issue of the In Touch newsletter.

To date, over 900 responses have been received and they continue to come to the headquarters office of NPF and RPMDA and to Hal Leonard. That’s not an unimpressive number considering there was not an enclosure with a stamped envelope. The results of the survey appear at the end of this article. However, as is usually the case, there were influences that led to the implementation of this survey.

I began thinking about the relationship between piano teachers and retailers several years ago when I was involved in the SPELLS program on behalf of the piano manufacturers. SPELLS (Study of Piano Enhances Learning and Life’s Success) was designed to encourage competitive retailers to work with each other and with piano teachers and technicians to increase the number of piano students/participants in their communities. Prior to the inception of the SPELLS program, piano retailers in one city had conducted their own survey of local piano dealers for their recommendations. Not one piano teacher recommended one piano retailer in that city. In fact, they all recommended that this parent try to buy a piano through the newspaper want ads! This was discouraging to these piano retailers, as they had provided complimentary recital space to these teachers, had often provided complimentary tunings of their pianos at home, and had faithfully purchased ads in their association handbook every year. Imagine the retailers’ chagrin when they discovered the lack of loyalty toward them.

That disconnect started my thinking about this topic and wondering how prevalent it was throughout the U.S. I know colleagues who have no qualms about browsing in the local print music retailers’ stores and attending workshops hosted by them, but then they buy all their music online or from a discount catalog. This practice may not be viewed as illegal, immoral, or unethical, but to me it is disrespectful to the local dealer.

The next event that ultimately led to this survey happened at an industry-liaison committee meeting at the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy convention the summer of 2001. The committee, chaired by E.L. Lancaster from Alfred and myself representing the NPF, was composed of independent piano teachers, manufacturer representatives, publishers, and a magazine editor. We determined that our priority would be to investigate the teacher/retailer relationship and learn how we might impact it.

Following this meeting, RPMDA decided to host a panel at their convention to discuss the teacher/retailer relationship and how it impacted both groups at the local level. This panel, moderated by Gary Ingle, Executive Director of MTNA (Music Teacher’s National Association), also included members of the teaching community. The disconnect was again reinforced when one of the teachers complimented the retailers for stocking a good selection of print music and for hosting workshops, but the teacher admitted purchasing music online from other sources.

As a result of these continuing attitudes and concerns RPMDA president, Richard Rejino, approached NPF about working together to more formally address these issues. We began with intense teacher focus-group sessions. We also had an opportunity to address these topics at a meeting of the Dallas Music Teacher’s Association. A healthy and lively discussion reinforced that many disconnects happen because we teachers just don’t think about some of these issues or even if we do, we don’t always take action on them.

This survey became the next logical step and its results were presented during a panel discussion at the recent MTNA national convention in Salt Lake City. Although the percentages are revealing, the added teacher comments are fascinating. We thank every teacher who took time to complete and mail a survey. We know more than we did before, but this is an ongoing process. Should you have responses to this topic or the survey results, please e-mail piano@halleonard.com. We welcome your input. Stay tuned for future activities.

Brenda Dillon serves as Project Director for the National Piano Foundation and education consultant for Roland U.S. She serves as editor of NPF’s “Piano Notes” newsletter and associate editor of “Keyboard Companion” magazine and Roland’s “Keyboard Educator” newsletter. With experiences in academia and the music industry, her formal education includes bachelor and master degrees, as well as doctoral work in music from the University of North Texas.
5. What influences you to attend workshops? (The choices included (1) my local music store, (2) online, (3) at conventions and (4) through mail order catalogs. Teachers were asked to write an estimated percentage for each choice.)

It was reassuring to learn that the majority of teachers purchase the majority of their music through their local dealer:

- 69% my local music store
- 16% mail order catalogs
- 11% online
- 3% at conventions

One teacher wrote, “New teachers and those in rural areas are mostly ignored by retailers and publishers.”

6. What percentage of your students practice on these instruments? (The choices included portable keyboards, digital pianos, vertical pianos and grand pianos. Teachers were asked to write an estimated percentage for each choice.)

The largest percentage of teachers (51%) indicated that 70-100% of their students practiced on vertical pianos. However, a surprising percentage of students practice on portable keyboards.

7. Where do you refer your students/parents to purchase a new or used piano? (The choices were (1) local retailer, (2) newspaper want ads, and (3) other and the respondents rated them from 1 to 3, with 1 as the top choice.)

The largest percentage of teachers (78%) selected the local retailer as their top choice. “Other” was the next largest followed by newspaper want ads. This question also generated many teacher comments. When their first choice was “other,” the majority of teachers refer students/parents to piano technicians. Some even specified “piano technicians who are members of the Piano Technicians Guild.” Some teachers indicated they tell their students/parents to beware of piano ads.

8. When you refer students/parents to a local piano retailer, rate these criteria in order of importance from 1 to 6, with 1 being most important. (The choices included (1) brands carried by retailer, (2) pricing, (3) referral fee from retailer, (4) the retailer and/or salesperson has earned your trust, (5) services and (6) other.)

The largest percentage of teachers (52%) selected “the retailer and/or salesperson has earned my trust” as their number one choice. This was followed by brands carried by retailer, pricing, other, services and referral fee from retailer. This question also generated numerous teacher comments:

- I’m most interested in their rental, moving and tuning services and whether they take time to educate the consumer.
- I’m most interested in the retailer’s honesty and attitude.
- I recommend retailers who have sensitivity to specific musical and financial needs of my students.
- I’m not terribly impressed with knowledge and/or integrity of local piano dealers.
- I’m interested in the retailer’s customer satisfaction policies and customer relations.

9. Are you comfortable accepting a referral fee from a retailer? (yes or no)

This question was almost evenly divided with 51% of teachers indicating they were comfortable and 49% not comfortable. Teacher comments ranged greatly:

- Absolutely not!
- I know nothing about this, what is a referral fee?
- I’m comfortable accepting one but I don’t. Student referrals by the retailer are more valuable.
- I don’t want or need a referral fee. If there is a good value I can pass on to my parents, I’m happy to do it.

10. Is the advent of electronic music making (keyboards, digital pianos, synthesizers, computers) impacting the way you teach? (yes or no)

A slight majority (57%) of teachers do believe technology has impacted their teaching and 43% indicated it has not.

11. Rate the criteria that earn your loyalty to a local retailer from 1 to 4, with 1 as most important. (The choices included location, service, selection and discounts or referral fee.)

Although service had appeared near the bottom in question eight, 43% of teachers selected it as their #1 choice in this question. Selection was next followed by location. Discounts or referral fee was the bottom choice. One teacher wrote, “The quality of the instrument is #1. All other categories are an insult to my integrity.”
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