

Are Piano Students Really Different Today?

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There is no doubt that the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” We are all a little different than we were a year ago and much different than we were ten years ago. Our world changes on a daily basis. The real question for piano teachers is “how do we adapt our piano teaching to effectively teach music to today’s students?”

Students are very busy with a variety of activities. The homework loads are so heavy that it can be overwhelming at times. There are numerous attractive alternatives that vie for the small amount of free time that they do have. Technology plays a large part in the many things that students do and they tend to be much more tech savvy than most adults. Many of them are involved in participation sports, but even when they are not, their lives are still oriented toward group activities. They are exposed to very little classical music and almost no piano music. They listen to numerous popular styles including rap, hip-hop and vocal bands that perform music with very few melodies that can be sung.

Schools have changed as well. Subjects are now introduced much earlier than they were several years ago. Our daughter’s sixth-grade math is the same that we had in tenth grade. When we attended our son’s second-grade open house, the teacher announced that the math curriculum had been changed to an accelerated curriculum. She would need to teach all of the concepts normally covered in one year in the first six weeks of school to catch the class up to the new curriculum. This accelerated curriculum was being dictated by the standardized testing program that is so much a part of the school curriculum. Such testing can limit the curriculum to “teaching for the test” and stifle any “aspirations for excellence” in subjects beyond those on the tests.

With technology, the entire world expects things instantly. People tend to be impatient when they have to wait in lines, when the cell phone service is interrupted or the computer access is slow. This need to have information so quickly is influencing students’ attention spans and how they want to receive information in all learning situations. Such instant gratification makes it difficult for some students to practice the piano in an intelligent and patient manner.

Four kinds of technology are influencing how students of all ages learn. Wireless Internet gives us access to the web from almost any location. Touch-sensitive screens provide even the youngest students with rich, interactive learning experiences. Improved semiconductors are allowing huge amounts of information to be packed into inexpensive memory chips and are transforming common toys into powerful learning experiences. Powerful microprocessors that can listen, talk and adapt to the child’s abilities are boosting the brains of both cell phones and toys.

Unfortunately, technology has not increased the amount of time that students have for extracurricular activities. They have less time, but more choices. Most students participate in some kind of organized sports and the choices are overwhelming – baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, volleyball, kick boxing, roller hockey, karate, Tae Kwando, dance, gymnastics, cheerleading, bowling, skating, roller hockey. There are more entertainment choices as well. While students still attend movies, watch videos and DVDs, there are computer games, Game Cube, Nintendo, Game Boys, Play Station, iPods, web surfing, chat rooms and instant messaging (every parent’s nightmare). TV and Tivo gives access to stations far beyond NBC, ABC and CBS including numerous cable channels, CNN, ESPN, MTV, VH-1, Fox Sports and MSNBC. Then, of course, there is E-mail, voice mail, cell phones, PowerPoint, smart toys, educational software and web sites.

There are no indications that there are fewer piano students than there were several years ago. Many teachers have waiting lists and several areas of the country are in need of piano teachers. However, there is some concern among teachers that students may not be studying as long as they once did. Several years ago, students who were going to drop out of lessons did so after three or fours of study. It seems that today they are dropping out after one or two years of lessons. The question that the profession has to face is “How do we get students to study long enough to develop a life-long appreciation of the skill of piano playing?”

In many areas, the country is faced with a severe lack of qualified music teachers who are willing to teach – both independent piano teachers and public school music teachers. Again, the profession must face this issue by aggressively enlisting many more teachers into the profession.

There is a generation of potential students who are beginning to “cry out” for lessons – the baby boomers. This group of people born between 1946 and 1964 is the most educated generation in history with over 25% possessing college degrees. As this group begins to retire in 2011, music making should be one of the things that they do in retirement. The music profession now has a second chance to recapture these students. The profession must ensure that there are enough piano teachers willing to meet the needs of this age group through lessons.

To meet the needs of today’s students – both traditional ages and baby boomers – teachers must be willing to redefine success in piano teaching. Traditionally, success has been measured by performance at a specific level of proficiency as determined by teachers, adjudicators and professional organizations. Success for students in the future may be determined by the students themselves. The students (especially adults) will determine the level of proficiency that they need to derive satisfaction from playing piano and successful teachers are those who can get them to that place. There is room in our society for those who perform in public and those who participate for enjoyment.

To be successful with this expanded student base – children with busy lives and adults who value participation more than performance – some adjustments may need to

be made in our curriculum. The following list includes options that need to be given consideration.

- **Choices** – Music is still attractive to students, but to keep them interested teachers need to understand the vast world of music beyond the traditions of Western Europe and give choices to students.
- **Musical Style** – Music today consists of variety of styles that the public are beginning to recognize and appreciate. The line between pop music and classical tradition is becoming so blurred that it may eventually disappear. Teachers will need to expand the types of music that are taught.
- **Love of Music** – The goal of teaching students to love music must parallel the goal of teaching musical skills. If students truly love an activity, they will spend the time and money to do it and tell others about it. Even if they leave it for a while, they will come back to it. Teaching the love of music is done by example. When students see the teacher's passion for music, it inspires them.
- **Teaching Listening** – Teaching students to listen is crucial to the success of music. They must learn to listen to music in two ways. Artistically, they need to learn about style and musicality. Theoretically, they need to learn about the basics of music. The ear training that forms part of our curriculum must encompass both areas. With the availability of music via the computer for downloading and the popularity of digital music players, listening should form a central role in the curriculum.
- **Meet Students Where They Are** – The piano teaching curriculum in the early part of the 20th century was serious business. Piano methods that evolved over the 20th century tended to take into account how students learn and in doing so gradually began to get easier. Today, methods that are used with students should relate to where students are in their life. Lyrics and subject matter in beginning methods need to be relevant to daily living.
- **Making Connections** – Concepts that are introduced should relate to material that has been previously studied. Teachers have consistently applied this to note reading – teaching students to read by patterns. Similar connections can be made with rhythm – teaching students to read rhythm by patterns as opposed to strings of single notes. Such connections can be made in other curriculum areas as well.
- **Integrate Learning** – Learning music is truly an integration of skills. Students can be led to see that technique and functional skills are related to repertoire and are not separate entities.

- **Make Music Fun and Rewarding** – Efforts should be made to make music study fun and rewarding to each individual student. Ask students if they are having fun. Help them discover what is truly fun for them. Then use your creativity and the student’s creativity to make study rewarding. This can be as simple as helping them prepare so that they can play for holidays and special occasions.
- **Make music social** – Private lessons and individual practice can be lonely. Use some type of group instruction to make piano study a social activity. It may be as simple as having monthly performance classes, organizing a book club to read about music subjects or having students work together on ensemble music. Students who have friends who study piano are likely to continue for a longer period of time.
- **Incorporate Technology into Teaching** – Technology can be difficult for adults, but children have grown up with it. Adults see technology as something new that requires a change in lifestyle. Children see it as “the way it has always been.” Let children teach us how to better use technology to reach their generation and how to incorporate it into our teaching program.
- **Performance Venues** – Performance venues do not always need to be so formal. The annual spring recital that can be a source of stress can be augmented (or replaced) with more informal performances for family and friends at open houses or in other community venues such as retirement homes, churches and schools.
- **Involve Parents** – The success of piano study is heavily dependent on the involvement of the parent. Keep parents informed about what is happening in lessons. Encourage them to participate with their child in study and practice and provide them with tools that will make them successful in this endeavor.

Yes, the world in which we live is changing quickly. Our students are different. They come with different backgrounds and expectations. Change is necessary; change is irreversible; change is difficult. How music fits into this changing world is the piano teaching profession’s responsibility. Let’s meet the challenge with energy, enthusiasm and vigor.