

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC TEACHING?

Recreational Music Making

Brenda Dillon is project director for the National Piano Foundation and serves on the board of the Frances Clark Center. She has music degrees from the University of North Texas and has taught in public school, college and an independent piano studio.



MTNA and the National Piano Foundation have held a series of recreational music making (RMM) teacher training seminars. Brenda Dillon, noted RMM teacher and author, tells why there has never been a better time to explore RMM.

AMT: What is RMM?

Brenda Dillon: Recreational Music Making (RMM) likely means different things to different people. The definition closest to what I believe is that it's music making for the joy of it in non-stressful environments.

A predecessor of RMM was "amateur music making." This was used to describe those who were unskilled or didn't make a living as a professional. My favorite movie about amateur

music makers involved a volunteer church choir preparing the Christmas portion of the *Messiah*. During one of the rehearsals a pretentious choir member left the rehearsal in a huff while lambasting the choir as "nothing more than a bunch of amateurs." The choir director, played by John Housman, gave an eloquent speech about the word "amateur." He noted that it was from the Latin word "amare" which means to love. He also observed that amateurs were very noble people because their love and humility toward an art tended to enhance and elevate it. That perfectly describes how I perceive RMM.

AMT: Why is RMM important?

BD: Anecdotal evidence suggests that

5 percent (or less) of the U.S. population is involved in music making of any kind. If that's accurate then what are we doing to involve the other 95 percent in something we believe has lasting value and is life-enhancing? If we believe that music making can be life-changing for every human being, why do we accept the status quo even when it appears to shrink before our very eyes?

We music teachers are like most of humankind. It's easier to teach the way

of them turn 60. Also consider that they control 70 percent of the nation's net worth. And the best part is that a **vast number of them have a lifelong dream of learning to play the piano.** It just doesn't get any better than this.

AMT: What are the implications for the average teacher?

BD: RMM will provide large numbers of potential piano students who can take lessons during the day when our

cient and it gives students a comfort level before they produce sounds.

Although I have no marketing expenses because I teach at a senior center with a superb catalog mailed throughout my suburb, other RMM teachers in the Dallas area found that churches were a fertile recruiting ground for their classes. Another excellent source of students proved to be the parents of current piano students.

AMT: What are the differences between RMM and traditional music teaching?

BD: I found the major difference is whether the focus is teacher-centered or student-centered. As a traditional music teacher, I have always felt a sense of obligation to teach a curriculum that I believed was best for students, with standards that would hold my students and me accountable to this curriculum. I still allowed for learners' individuality, but the curriculum and the accountability didn't waver.

I have found RMM to be primarily student-centered. These adults primarily want to learn music they have always wanted to learn how to play and they want me to be a partner in that process. They do learn how to read music, but it's music *they* prefer rather than what *I* prefer. Where my teaching skill is most needed is to teach the music theory or fundamentals that will simplify the process for them.

Another difference is that I had to learn when to push and when to relax. Had I focused on hand position, tone production and other technical skills from the beginning, these students would no longer be in my classes. It's ironic that by not initially hammering these techniques, the result was that students were eventually able to master technical skills *on their schedule, not mine.*

“There are few situations in life that can be described as an unconditional “win-win” for everyone involved. RMM teaching is definitely in that category.”

we were taught and to assume that the path we're on will continue throughout our careers. The supply of music students was fairly consistent until students were bombarded with a huge array of choices and music making didn't rise to the top for the majority of them. As many piano teachers weren't completely self-supporting, the profession adapted the best it could to this new reality.

However, RMM teaching offers an opportunity that can move us from adapting to flourishing. Demographics suggest that there will be a huge market of students if we want to teach them. Consider that 10,000 boomers turn 50 years old every day, and 8,000

school-age students aren't available. They can be taught in a variety of settings, including our studios, churches, music stores, senior centers, retirement facilities and so on.

There's minimal overhead to teaching this population. I teach on two pianos side-by-side with six students seated in a semi-circle facing the two pianos. I rotate the students at the pianos one or two at a time depending on the concept I'm teaching. The only investment I have made was to buy seven two-octave plastic keyboards. After I hold mine up and demonstrate the concept, the students try it out on their plastic keyboard before we go to the pianos. I have found this to be effi-

It's important to note that RMM teaching is not the "dumbing down of piano lessons." The repertoire may be different and there may be lots of laughter during the learning process, but these students do learn how to read music and play pieces that appeal to them.

AMT: Can RMM be taught to private students as well as a group?

BD: The answer is yes, but I can't imagine that it would ever be as much fun for the students or the teacher. The group can be magical and can offer peer support in very powerful ways. When one student in the group gets discouraged and even hints at dropping out, the others just won't hear of it. They have bonded as a family and these family members believe that their camaraderie and support of each other has surpassed individual music making goals. I have found the class to influence individual members beyond my ability to do so. I may be the musical authority in the group, but I'm not the only one with the ability to encourage, motivate and provide those other attributes that contribute to a successful experience.

Once I learned how to rotate the students at the pianos and how to ensure that the entire class was engaged in each activity, any concerns I had about RMM group teaching seemed to dissolve. All solo playing is volunteer so that removes any fear of putting someone on the hot seat who doesn't choose to be there. Ironically, toward the end of the eight-week sessions, they are almost all volunteering to play at every class.

Another challenge I had to overcome was letting go of my desire to have everyone at the same skill level before I moved on. Therefore, I explain to each class that the train

leaves the station during the first class and will continue to move through the eight weeks of classes. Just because someone in the class doesn't play as well as some of the others, they continue to come to class and learn. Every class has what I call those who struggle and those who soar. I learned that if you don't force anyone to solo play, eventually some of those who struggle move to a "soaring" place. The important fact was that the strugglers continued to come to class and enjoy what they were learning. As I have my classes divided into four levels (beginner, early, intermediate and advanced), students can choose to repeat a level before they move on.

AMT: What is the future of RMM and what impact will it have on MTNA and the music industry?

BD: Although I can't predict the future, I am confident RMM will have an impact on MTNA and the music industry. At least it will impact teachers and retailers who recognize the significance of RMM students to the world of piano. Here's what we know about RMM students today:

- They have discretionary income.
- They will grow in size by 70 percent over the next 15 years.
- They expect to live 35 more years.
- They have leisure time depending on their retirement status.
- They are more interested in experiences rather than things.
- They want lifelong learning, and playing the piano is a lifelong dream for many of them.
- They believe in "using it or losing it" when it comes to their brain cells.
- They want non-stressful learning environments as they have had enough stress throughout their lives.

I encourage every piano teacher who gets involved in RMM teaching to establish a retailer partner. I have learned that these students are in the market for renting/buying pianos, upgrading their present instrument and buying as much print music as they believe they can play. My retailer partner hosts special evenings, and we are planning future events focused on enjoyment of playing the piano rather than selling.

There are few situations in life that can be described as an unconditional "win-win" for everyone involved. RMM teaching is definitely in that category. The only way you will know that for sure is to try it. If you do, lucky students and lucky you!

AMT

BONUS BYTE

Although regional RMM Teacher Training Seminars were held in four locations this summer, there will be RMM sessions at the 2008 MTNA National Conference, March 29–April 2 in Denver, Colorado. For more information about these sessions go to the MTNA website and click on "Programs" then "Conferences," then "2008 Conference."

For more information about RMM, go to these two websites:

- National Piano Foundation website (www.pianonet.com). Click the Recreational Music Making tab on the opening page to access RMM information related to piano.
- NAMM's RMM website (rmm.namm.org). This site includes RMM information on piano and other instruments..