



Recreational Music Making

Why Is Playing The Piano Important To Our Country?

by Brenda Dillon

Editor's Note: The first part of this article is a reprint from the Winter 2002, issue of PianoNotes; the second part is a reprint from the Winter 2009 PianoNotes.

Given all the events of 2001 (September 11th, anthrax, the war in Afghanistan, increased tension in the Middle East), what significance do any of our daily activities have? Can playing the piano, or making music through any medium, eliminate airplane hijackings, find terrorists in caves, eradicate biological threats, or cure the ills and stresses of our time?

On the surface, the answer is probably "no." However, what isn't readily apparent is how music has historically guided countless individuals from anger to peace, from depression to hope, and from fear to calm. William Congreve wrote in his tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, "Music hath charms to soothe a savage beast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak." Even if it isn't literal, that's a powerful image.

A guest editorial in the *Dallas Morning News* by Dayle Shockley eloquently communicated what playing the piano has meant in her life. Although her mother was a musician, Dayle's parents let her discover the piano on her own. The

piano was there night and day. If she and her twin sister wanted to check it out, they could.

Dayle began by picking out simple melodies with one finger, which led to adding a second finger, which led to harmony. After using three fingers to make a chord, she yelled to her mother in the kitchen, "Hey, I just made some-thing! Come see what it is." That's when her mother told her what she had done and helped her to make other chords. Eventually she could make full chords in almost every key.

With time and patience her abilities increased, and she learned to read music as well as play by ear. When the church was left without a pianist, her father encouraged her to step in and "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." As Dayle wrote, "Many times, that is precisely what it was: a noise and not so joyful, either." She discovered, though, that the more she played, the better she played.

Dayle believes that the gift of music has been one of her greatest blessings. "Many have been the times when I sat down at the piano and played away my blues. When my heart was aching and all I could do was cry, playing the piano always brought a certain amount of comfort and stability to my world. Music is a gift that lasts a lifetime. While not every-one possesses the natural talent for playing well, the way I see it, a little music is better than no music at all."

Music has always been a vital part of every country's culture, but it is becoming increasingly more essential to humanity's well being. Retailers and the media are reporting that people are "cocooning" in their homes, staying close and buying food and other household items that bring comfort. There's strong evidence that people are yearning for connection and relevance to an extent that hasn't been seen in decades. The arts have always helped us express our deepest desires and emotions, and making music is one of the most powerful avenues available to us.

Brenda Dillon, project director for the National Piano Foundation, currently teaches RMM classes at a senior center in a Dallas suburb. She is an RMM teacher trainer, has written numerous articles about RMM teaching and has developed materials for beginning classes.



SEVEN YEARS LATER

It's now winter, 2009. What has changed in seven years? It's eerie to read the events of 2002 and compare them to today. One event not mentioned in 2002 newspapers was the economic meltdown like we're experiencing today. The losses in the stock market and personal portfolios are too staggering to comprehend. Those of us who can't begin to comprehend "millions" now read and hear "trillions."

I had the interesting experience of teaching four Recreational Music Making classes at the Plano Senior Center in Plano, Texas, on the day the stock market fell more than 700 points. Before students came to their classes, they had been watching the news on television. Their faces reflected fear about their financial futures.

Rather than immediately starting each class, I decided it was more appropriate to talk about the reality of the situation. I shared with them stories my parents told me about the depression, how they survived by banding together with their friends and family, and how important it was when they realized that they could get through it and be stronger because of it.



My dad spoke of working for fifty cents a day and being grateful when he could get any kind of job. I still have my parents' three-piece bedroom suite that cost \$35, for which they paid fifty cents a week. Although mailing a letter cost only a penny or two, sometimes they had to hold the letter for two or three weeks before being able to mail it.



I reminded my classes that we would also get through this and be stronger for it, and that playing the piano was even more important during hard times.

Making music won't strain their resources, and it will bring joy to their lives and provide a retreat from everyday worries and tensions. It was amazing to see my students' attitudes shift from outright fear to the calming thought that playing the piano could be a coping strategy.

Economists have different views on the outlook for 2009 and when recovery will begin. What isn't included in their projections is the impact everyday activities will have on individuals experiencing the ups and downs of these turbulent times. Those of us who know the power of making music through the best of times and the worst of times do know how lucky we are.

If you are a piano teacher reading this and you haven't started teaching RMM classes, now is the time to start. If you are a retailer reading this and you aren't working with a piano teacher to develop an RMM program in your store, now is the time to make this happen. Making music is more important than ever given the challenges we face in 2009.