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This issue's contributor:

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Issues and Ideas: Perspectives in Pedagogy

Rebecca Johnson, Editor

How do you incorporate RMM into your teaching?

Editor's Note: In our Summer issue an interview with Karl Bruhn introduced many of us to the concepts of Recreational Music Making (RMM) and some of the research that supports it. After reading the article, you may have said, "Sounds great,

but how would I begin incorporating these concepts into my teaching?" In this issue Brenda Dillon shares her ideas and experiences from teaching RMM. Join me in discovering the rest of the story. ▲

Student-centered outcomes

by Brenda Dillon

This question is interesting in that it can be reversed — how do I incorporate my teaching into Recreational Music Making piano classes? I started teaching RMM classes two years ago and found the major difference is that I have become much more student-centered rather than teacher-centered. I have also learned to relax about performance outcomes and just enjoy the fact that my students don't drop and they seem to look forward to every class. I never knew teaching could be this much fun. This is how it all began:

After hearing a presentation about RMM at a conference and reading numerous articles about it in music trade publications, I thought it sounded intriguing and might be enjoyable for me. I know that has a semi-selfish ring to it, but I was at a point in my life where I wanted to feed my soul and seek avenues where fun reigned over pressure. I couldn't have chosen a better path than RMM teaching.

And so it began

Getting started was easy. I found a senior center that enthusiastically endorsed this kind of program and had highly effective

advertising. It was near my home and it had an ideal space for the program. I initially chose materials that were public domain as well as music and activities from a book no longer on the market that I co-authored with Lynda Garcia (*Acquiring Music Fundamentals*).



Brenda Dillon

These materials have evolved into a new book — *Piano For Fun and Fulfillment* — which I now use during the first 8 weeks of class (see "RMM Resources" on page 34).

I teach these classes on two pianos side-by-side (one acoustic and one digital) and the students (six per class) sit in a semi-circle facing the pianos. My

only prop is a small plastic keyboard; I also use MIDI disks in many activities. After I found the small plastic keyboard to be so effective when the students are sitting in their chairs, I purchased six more to use in all my classes.

Depending on the activity, I sometimes have two or three students at each piano. I explain that solo playing will be on a volunteer basis and that we will go to the pianos in a "round robin" fashion so that those who

With RMM the teacher can be stress-free and just focus on the pleasure of helping others.



Students often share a piano during class.

want to play will always have an opportunity. I tell them about my experience taking a Spanish class where the professor circled the class asking questions routinely rather than voluntarily. I thought my heart would burst from my chest every time and I don't want the RMM students to experience that sensation without having a choice about it. The good news is that almost every student chooses to play at almost every class.

Accommodating a range of skills

As you might expect, these adults (ages 50 and over) either have no musical background or they can play a little because of lessons years ago. I assure them that this class will accommodate knowledge ranging from none to more than a little. However, if they are enrolled in the first level, I do start at the beginning. I have learned from experience that assuming previous knowledge can get you into trouble. As happens in most piano classes, even if they are near each other's skill level initially, some soon pull ahead. I accommodate this by creating at least two levels of the same arrangement.

Technically, the greatest challenge these students face is what I call "wandering fingers." Their mistakes usually occur because their fingers don't stay on the piano keys needed for a particular piece. I encourage them to imagine that they are magnetizing their fingers to those keys. We hum Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again* when fingers go far afield.

We also have a discussion about "talent" and/or the lack thereof. I let these adults know that I wish that word had never been used in conjunction with music making. I believe all human beings have an affinity

for learning certain skills, but I don't believe you have to have talent to make music. I think the formula for learning to play the piano is:

**Desire + Slow Repetition
= Success**

I tell them that in spite of the fact that I appear to have an affinity for playing the piano, I still had to go through the same slow repetitions they do before I could play very well.

The other area I find challenging in teaching adults is the sound aspect of music making. There appears to be a difference in adults who take piano lessons and those who take tennis or

golf lessons. When piano students "hear" mistakes, they get frustrated and are less motivated to continue the slow repetitions needed for success. Tennis and golf students who "see" their mistakes seem to experience less frustration and contentedly go through endless repetitions until the ball goes where they want it to go.

Enjoying the experience

An area I find incredibly enjoyable about these classes is the sense of humor that just seems to bubble up and around these adults. They can be self-deprecating but their pride when they improve is so apparent and joyful to watch. I encourage them to keep a tip jar on their piano at home every time they play for friends and family. Recently one of the students bought an empty cup from a fast-food place with the added words — "Please be generous as I need more lessons." In a discussion about directional reading on the staff and how notes mostly move one of three ways (repeat, step up or down, or skip up or down), I asked the class what we might call it when the notes move farther than a skip. One student immediately said "trouble!"

Although there are several excellent adult piano methods on the market, I have enjoyed compiling my own arrangements of public domain music and activities in a booklet. What these adults enjoy playing and which activities are not worth the energy they require quickly becomes obvious, so I continue to revise and test the materials. I have



Playing 'in the air' and plastic keyboards are helpful teaching tools.

Schaum

divided my materials into eight modules since my classes are in 8-week segments. I always begin each class asking review questions about the previous week.

No downsides!

After reflecting on the experience of RMM teaching prior to writing this article, I realized I just haven't found a downside. I always wondered what it would feel like to experience zero stress when my piano students didn't show immediate progress. We teachers are usually evaluated by our ability to motivate our students to practice and produce. I'm happy to report that letting go of this stress feels great. Some of these students are steadily progressing, but even the ones who aren't continue to come to class and exhibit great enthusiasm about what they're learning. That's just fine with me! During the 8th class I ask questions from



RMM seeks to provide a relaxing, stress-free environment for enjoyment and learning.

the previous seven modules before the students perform pieces of their choice. One time I handed out play money for each correct answer, but I learned they didn't need this motivation and that they didn't see themselves as being in competition with each other. Getting "real money" in their tip jars when they play for friends and relatives at home is okay because they perceive

the competition as being with themselves and not with their classmates.

A career helper

When one examines how piano teachers make a living, you realize that some teachers don't — if making a living is defined as being totally dependent on what one earns



The 'Tip Jar' was a fun contribution from one of the students.

without any added source of income. Of course, many teachers are self-supporting, but I suspect there are several challenges along the way for them.

One challenge piano teachers routinely articulate is the number of hours per day or week that are available for lessons. Those who teach children know the limited number of hours available for their lessons — especially if these lessons are taught individually rather than in groups. What's great about RMM students is that many of them have flexible schedules and can come during the day.

Even those who are working are able to come if the classes are offered at lunchtime.

Another challenge teachers increasingly face is the competition piano lessons face when parents and children are choosing activities. It's not that RMM students don't also have other choices of activities, but they appear to have narrowed them down in a more discerning way. And, most of them

are long past soccer, basketball, hockey, etc. They do spend time on the computer, but that seems to be more confined to e-mail and checking out products and sources. If they are playing video games, they aren't talking about it in my classes!

The future is "booming"

I have been pleasantly surprised at how many of the RMM students are familiar with the research that supports the benefits of piano instruction and how music making reinforces wellness. As most of my students are between 50 and 85, they are very familiar with Alzheimers and other cognitive concerns with aging. They know that when it comes to the brain, not using it is equated with losing it.

RMM Resources

- The National Piano Foundation's website (www.pianonet.com) now has a Recreational Music Making section. A documentary RMM DVD is posted on this website.
- The National Association of Music Merchants' RMM website (rmm.namm.org) contains many diverse articles and news items about RMM for all instruments.
- To learn more about Brenda Dillon's *Piano for Fun and Fulfillment*, contact her at Brenda@dondillon.com.
- The piano communities of PMAI, MTNA, PTG and RPMDA are working on a joint RMM endeavor. In addition to sponsoring four RMM Teacher Training Seminars, the project includes an MTNA document that articulates differences between RMM and traditional teaching, a PTG (Piano Technicians Guild) document that technicians leave in customer's homes to recruit students for local RMM classes, an RPMDA (Retail Print Music Dealers Association) document that includes each publisher member's top 10 publications for RMM students and the location of dealers where they can be purchased, and a cooperative public relations initiative that includes speakers, articles, presentations, and press releases. ▲

Wingsound

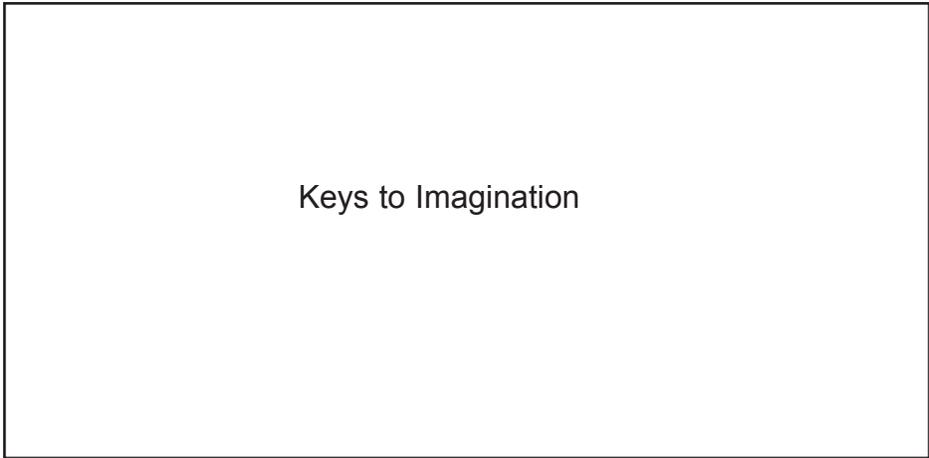
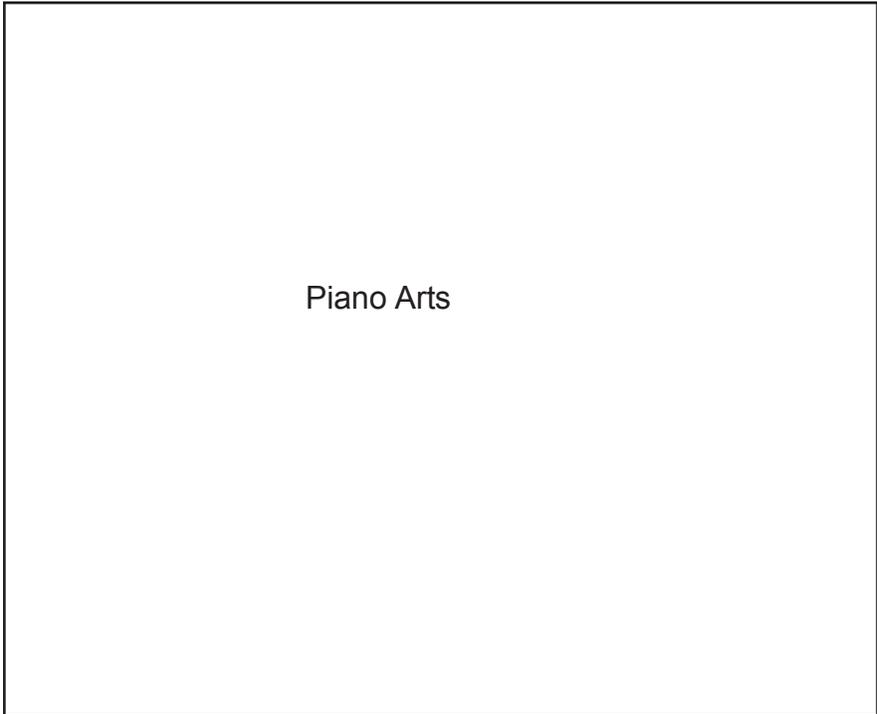
Perhaps the greatest benefit to RMM teachers in the future will be the staggering number of students available to them. It's predicted that over the next 16 years, the number of people over 50 years old will grow 74% and the number of people under 50 will grow only 1%. The Boomer Project (a marketing consultancy and research company in Richmond, Virginia) published a report titled "50 Things Every Marketer Needs to Know about Boomers over 50." This is the generation born between 1946 and 1964. Matt Thornhill, the author of this report, gave me permission to use the following statements:

- Every day another 10,000 Boomers turn 50 years old.
- One out of every three adults over 21 in the US is a Baby Boomer.
- Seventy percent of the nation's net worth is in their hands.
- The age segment of 50-65 will grow in size by 70% over the next 15 years.
- Boomers at 50 expect to live 35 more years.
- Half of all grandparents are Boomers.
- Boomers are now more about "experiences" than "things."
- Boomers are concerned less about "becoming someone" and more about "being someone."
- Boomers want life-long learning.
- Boomers want the "Fountain of Health" more than the "Fountain of Youth."

Although I have a few Boomers presently in my RMM classes, I think the number will vastly increase in the future. Considering that 10,000 of them turn 50 years old every day boggles the mind. Not only will it be a huge market, but they will control the majority of discretionary income.

I know I will likely need to teach this future market somewhere else besides a "senior center." Boomers don't want to be called "seniors," "mature," or other similar labels. They typically see themselves as 12 years younger than they are. It puts it in perspective to realize that Jerry Seinfeld and Howard Stern are 53 and Robin Williams is 55. Boomers at 50 agree they're now middle-aged, but they believe old age doesn't happen until after age 70.

Another difference in Boomers is that most won't completely retire as their parents did. They will increasingly look for "soul-satisfying" experiences, since most of them have realized that their careers usually didn't provide that kind of fulfillment.



It's predicted that Boomers will pare down their physical belongings and increase their life experiences. We piano teachers couldn't be in a better position to meet this need once we learn how to best serve them. Learning how to make music has the potential of ranking exceptionally high on the list of life's quality experiences for this group.

A win-win situation

There are few situations in life that can be described as an unconditional "win-win" for everyone. Teaching RMM classes is absolutely one of them. The teacher can be stress-free and just focus on the pleasure of helping others start or continue down the

path of music making. As long as the experience is relaxing and they feel they are learning, the students stay with you because most of them are realizing the dream of a lifetime. The best time to check this out for yourself is now. Enjoy! ▲

In the next issue:
An interview with
Robert Vandall.