

PIANO NOTES

Summer 2006

RMM – One Teacher’s Journey

By Brenda Dillon

Much has been written and discussed about RMM (Recreational Music Making), especially in music trade magazines and at industry meetings. Recently it proved to be especially significant to those organizations seeking recent market development grants from NAMM, the International Music Products Association. Seven of the fifteen grants were awarded to recipients with a Recreational Music Making focus.

Although RMM has been discussed in the piano teaching community at national and state conferences, it is only now beginning to enter the consciousness of mainstream piano teachers. There has been a variety of responses toward it, ranging from “What’s all the fuss? Isn’t RMM the same as the leisure piano classes I’ve taught for years?” to “Piano lessons aren’t meant to be fun. This is a serious profession and we need to keep it that way.” There’s even been a caustic reference to it as the “dumbing down of piano lessons.”

Not wanting to accept these observations at face value, I decided to do my own personal investigation of RMM. It began with attending a Global Economic Summit hosted by NAMM and hearing two gentlemen who have devoted their recent careers to RMM and all its ramifications. Karl Bruhn (an industry leader who is recognized world-wide as the “Father of Music Making and Wellness”) and Dr. Barry Bittman (an M.D. and CEO/Medical Director of the Mind-Body Wellness Center) gave a presentation which later proved to be life-changing for me personally. As I’m one of those teachers who had taught leisure piano classes to adults, I needed to know what was different about RMM. I learned that RMM is a philosophy rather than the traditional kind of teaching I had been doing throughout my career. Its focus is on student-centered goals rather than teacher-centered goals.

Other key insights I learned about RMM is that it’s NOT about inspiring extraordinary music – it’s about inspiring extraordinary living. It’s NOT about exceptional performance – it’s about exceptional support and personal experience. It’s NOT about teaching people to play – it’s about giving people permission to play. Its best facilitators are NOT just talented musicians – they are caring compassionate and intuitive guides. At first those were just words put into catchy phrases, but they ultimately became very believable to me.

I decided to try teaching one RMM class and learn about it for myself. Although I knew that Yamaha, Kawai, Lowrey, and Roland had RMM keyboard programs, I wanted to develop something generic that didn’t have a brand focus. I contacted a senior center in my area and after a warm welcome, my class was included in its 55+ catalog section.

My class logistics included the following:

- Two pianos side-by-side (one acoustic and one digital)
- Class of 6 students seated in a semi-circle facing the pianos
- Plastic keyboards for each student to use while in class
- MIDI accompaniments
- Eight-week classes

I developed the materials (eight modules) with an emphasis on learning how to read music and inclusion of easy arrangements of public domain music. But more important than the materials was the philosophy I brought into this class and subsequent classes. We WOULD have a good time and learning music was going to be secondary to having fun. I instinctively knew that having fun created the best climate for learning.

To me, having fun is stress-free. I knew that over 70% of adults’ visits to a doctor’s office are for stress-related

problems. I also knew that I had been guilty in the past of imposing stress on human beings who were being pushed to perform better than they could or would. There would definitely be none of that in my RMM class. Each student would decide the performance level they wanted to attain and that was going to be perfectly acceptable to me. I told them about my experience in a Spanish class where the professor didn't know I was taking it just for fun. One day I thought my heart would leap out of chest and that she might have to call 9-1-1. I was determined not to repeat that experience with this class.

Here's what happened.

First of all, I have never had so much fun teaching in all my life. I wanted it to be stress-free for these students, but I quickly realized how stress-free it was for me, too. I have never laughed so much or enjoyed making music with beginners as much as I did with that class. I thought they would go to other music making endeavors after that class, but what I quickly learned is that they wanted to keep coming back. So they became Level 1+ and I started a new Level 1 class. This new class was just as much fun and they also wanted to continue, so I bumped their levels up and started a new Level 1 class. What started as just a learning lark on my part was now turning into an impact on my career which I never anticipated.

I have always believed that anyone who wanted to learn to play the piano could do so. I'm sorry the word talent has ever been used in conjunction with music making. I think it's done us a disservice.

Most adults never think they have to have talent in order to learn to play tennis or golf, so how did music making get saddled with that word?

I know that human beings have an affinity for learning certain skills, but I think you can learn to do almost anything if you are willing to devote the time and attention to it. With every new class, I urge them to remove the word talent from their vocabulary. I tell them the formula for learning to play the piano is simply:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{DESIRE} \\ + \text{ SLOW REPETITION} \\ \hline = \text{ SUCCESS} \end{array}$$

Obviously one can learn to play the piano in a variety of settings — private lessons, class lessons, or a mixture of both. I found the class setting to be magic in that the students quickly developed a camaraderie and became very supportive of each other. I didn't anticipate how much fun each of these groups would be and how entertaining the whole experience would be for me and them. One example is that I encourage them to keep tip jars on their pianos at home when they play for family or friends. One of the students came to class with an empty cup from a fast-food place as his tip jar with added words — "Please be generous. I need more lessons." In a discussion about directional reading on the staff, we noted that notes mostly move in one of three ways (repeat, step up or down, or skip up or down). When I asked how we might describe notes that move farther than a skip, one student immediately said "trouble."

Technically, the greatest challenge these students face is what I call "wandering fingers." Many of their mistakes occur when their fingers don't stay on the piano keys needed for a particular piece of music. I encourage them to imagine that they can magnetize their fingers to specific piano keys. When the fingers wander, though, the class and I start humming Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again*.

Another area I find challenging about teaching adults is the sound aspect of music making. This is a significant difference between learning to play the piano and learning to play tennis or golf. With those latter two skills, you don't hear your mistakes. Adults seem content to go through endless repetitions until the ball goes where they want it to go. However, in learning music, adults often stop when they hear mistakes and eventually get frustrated with the process.

This is where we teachers can be "knights in shining armor." Our students need to know we once knew nothing about making music and that we had to slowly go through these repetitions until we could control our ten fingers to play what eventually sounded pretty good. It takes time but the journey is well worth it. It's like a train that slowly pulls out of a station until the right combination of energy propels it forward to take us where we want to go.

The Future of RMM Teaching

After my plunge into RMM teaching, I decided to tell other teachers what they could be experiencing. In addition to having more

fun than they could ever imagine, they would also have an excellent opportunity to augment their income. Teachers who predominantly teach school-age children usually have available time slots during the day. RMM students have flexible schedules and can come at almost any time of the day. Even those who are still working have managed to come during their lunch hour.

Teachers with school-age students well know the fierce 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. Obviously most of them are past soccer, basket ball, hockey, etc. Two of my students who enrolled this summer let me know they were considering taking line dancing but decided to take something more worthwhile like piano!

The greatest benefit to RMM teachers will be the staggering number of students who might be available to them. Consider that 10,000 baby boomers turn 50 years old every day. A recent issue of *Time* magazine (July 3, 2006) reported that an average of 7,918 Americans turn 60 years old every day. That's 330 new sixty-somethings every hour!

The Boomer Project (a marketing consultancy and research company in Richmond, VA) published a report titled "50 Things Every Marketer Needs to Know about Boomers over 50." In addition to giving the numbers of this vast market, the report also noted:

- 70% of the nation's net worth is in their hands.

- 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."

The question isn't if vast numbers of the senior boom will choose to make music. We already know they will. It's been a lifelong dream for the majority of them. The question is whether they will have access to learning how to make music in a stress-free environment. And when all is said and done, it's not the place and it's not the materials — it all comes down to the teacher.

We piano teachers have the potential to attract them in droves or drive them away in droves. We already know more than we'll ever need to know about how to teach someone to play piano. That's not the learning curve we need to consider. Our challenge is (if we make it a challenge) shifting from a performance-based outcome to an outcome defined by these individual students. I found they truly did want to learn how to read music and how to play the piano at a level they found acceptable to them. All I had to do was hop aboard their train and enjoy human relationships more than I could have ever imagined.

The day I felt most successful was when one of my students played the same piece she had played the week before for the class. (Solo playing is always volunteer.) Her playing had improved, but it once would not have been acceptable to me. Since I have resolved never to patronize these students, I asked her if she had any idea how much the piece had

improved in a week. She replied, "Oh yes I do, honey, and I'm so proud of me."

NAMM is going to fund a test of my program in the Dallas area, where 10 teachers will teach my curriculum and assume the same philosophy as I have incorporated into these classes. Joe Lamond, President of NAMM, wants to determine if this program is replicable. I will meet with these 10 teachers at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the program. We will also gather detailed data about the enrollees and the teachers will be asked to write a comprehensive evaluation of the program.

The Rest of the Story

This will appear in a future issue of *PianoNotes*. However, as I have already done numerous workshops on this program in the past months, I can affirm teachers' enthusiasm for starting their own RMM classes in their communities. A follow-up e-mail from one of the piano retailers let me know that according to immediate feedback he received from the workshop attendees that "this program is hitting a homerun."

There are few situations in life that can be described as an unconditional "win-win" for everyone involved. RMM classes are definitely in that category. Whether you are a teacher, a retailer, a technician, or a piano enthusiast, check it out for yourself. And be quick about it!

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RMM Resources

NAMM has a website devoted to Recreational Music Making. (www.namm.com/rmm) In addition to detailed information about RMM, many articles can be downloaded and printed off the website.

- *Making Music* is an excellent magazine for adult music makers. The articles are directed to music makers of all instruments. (www.makingmusicmag.com)
- The October/November 2005 issue of *American Music Teacher* includes an interview with Dr. Barry Bittman and Karl Bruhn discussing the human genome research and recreational music making. *AMT* is the official publication for members of Music Teachers National Association.
- *Keyboard Companion*, a magazine for piano teachers, has an adult teaching section in each issue. (www.keyboardcompanion.com)
- NAMM publishes a *Recreational Music Making* booklet. For more information contact rmm@namm.com.
- Kawai, Roland and Yamaha have recreational music making programs for their instruments. Check their company websites for more information.

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