

## WE'RE PSYCH-ED

# Your Personal Learning Style

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Every day we respond to people and events in terms of our thoughts and emotions. We live in keeping with our psychological makeup even though we might not recognize it as such, at least not on a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute basis. As we speak, choose, react, and evaluate, we are walking, breathing “psychological types.”

This is certainly true of learning ... and therefore something of vital importance to those who teach. “Learning” is as much a matter of “feeling” as “knowing.” How, why, and what you learn is the result of innate tendencies, cultural conditioning, and trained behaviors.

### How Do You Learn?

The study of educational psychology—learning about learning—should play a role in your development as a piano teacher. The best way to begin is to examine how you learn.

#### Ask yourself the following questions.

- ◆ Do I prefer to try things out rather than listen to explanations?
- ◆ Do I like to have an outline or plan for what I'm about to learn?
- ◆ Do I look for a ready made outline, or would I rather design my own?
- ◆ Do I grasp a new idea or skill more quickly by modeling, or by verbal direction?
- ◆ Do I need time to make a new idea or skill my own, or am I a quick study?
- ◆ How curious am I to discover things on my own?

There are no “correct” answers to these questions. People learn in different ways and at different speeds, just as they prefer to learn certain things more than others. Some respond best to a hands-on approach. Others love charts, notebooks, and schedules. Some can run with an idea, while others need time for things to settle in. Some accept ideas without much questioning. Others are apt to be skeptical or analytic.

### What did you learn about yourself?

#### Are you

- ◆ Eager to try things on your own?
- ◆ Cautious and thoughtful?
- ◆ Searching and critical?
- ◆ Trusting or skeptical?
- ◆ Patient or impatient?
- ◆ Spontaneous or organized?

### “Feelings” and Learning

Emotions also play a part in what and how you learn. Liking/not liking is something over which you have no control. Although

you can learn to govern or moderate your emotional reactions in order not to offend or alienate others, you can't ignore how you truly feel.

#### Here's a different set of questions.

- ◆ Do I prefer music that is dramatic or subtle?
- ◆ Do I thrive on public performance, or am I less comfortable when “on stage?”
- ◆ Am I happier playing in an ensemble or as a soloist?
- ◆ Do I rely on extemporaneous emotions, or do I carefully plan interpretations?
- ◆ How important to me is the praise of my audience and my peers?
- ◆ How willing am I to learn something if I don't “like” it?

Once again, some answers are not “better” than others. They indicate only who you are, what makes you “you.”

Answers to all the questions posed above give you a way to begin to sketch your own “learner” profile. You have probably been aware of these attitudes and predispositions without giving them much serious thought. But looking at your profile with some objectivity now gives you added insight into how learning takes place and what may affect the learning situation. That's a very personal introduction to educational psychology. It's a good place to start.

### You Teach Like You Learn

What you may be less aware of as you teach is that you tend to teach as if those you are instructing learn best the way you do.

- ◆ If you prefer the workbook-and-explanation approach yourself, you may be impatient with those who won't wait for explanations.
- ◆ If you're a try-it-out kind of learner, you may find it hard to understand that some of those you teach aren't comfortable with such a direct approach.
- ◆ If you are analytical and probing, you may wonder why students don't seem to respond when you list details and try to make connections.
- ◆ If you are passionate and empathetic, you may feel challenged by those who always want answers to questions and reasons before acting.

The successful teacher is one who knows many ways to say the same thing to allow for differences in learning preferences. This is only one of the insights you gain by a study of educational psychology—how to “get into someone else's head” to figure out what it is that they need to know and how best to deliver the messages. The more you learn along these lines, the more you'll see how important and valuable it is to stay “psych-ed.” ■■■

## TALKING TECH

## Predictions

BY EDWIN MCLEAN

## Keyboards

We live in a technological society. Many inventions which seem so indispensable today hardly existed before 1980: the CD player, the microwave oven, the home computer. Indeed, one hallmark of our society is that we are becoming increasingly technological—a seemingly irreversible process.

As pianists we are primarily engaged with a technology that is over 300 years old—the mechanical piano. The acoustic piano reflects a high level of craftsmanship, creating sonorous tones which cannot be duplicated electronically.

Despite their compromised sound, digital keyboards have improved dramatically in recent years. Not only do they sound more realistic, but new keyboard actions are becoming more like the “real thing.” And ... digital pianos never go out of tune.

Piano teachers are often asked by students and their parents what kind of instrument to buy. For those on a budget, a digital piano has become an ever more attractive option: It is affordable, stays in tune, is compact in size, and its volume can be adjusted to a level that doesn't disturb family or neighbors. Though digital pianos are a compromise, some may be preferable to the inexpensive or used acoustic piano. What kind of piano will you recommend for your students? The more you know about pianos and keyboards, the better your advice will be.

## Prediction

Digital pianos will continue to grow in popularity and improve in quality.

## The Internet

Perhaps one of the most surprising technological developments has been the explosive growth of the Internet. It's hard to believe, but soon most of our students will have used the Internet their entire lives. This is a generation for whom e-mail, MP3s, and Websurfing are routine.

## Prediction

The Internet will continue to grow in popularity, serving as an important transmission medium for recorded and printed music.

## Emerging Technologies

The typical 21st-century piano student uses computers at school, e-mails his/her friends, downloads music from the Web, and may already own a digital keyboard. This is the technological picture of today. We cannot predict what new technological innovations—already in development—will burst on the scene

and become pervasive. Superior technologies quickly crowd out and supplant previous technologies. In 1980, no one could have predicted how quickly the compact disc would render phonograph recordings obsolete. Cassette tape is on the way out, supplanted by CD burners. DVDs are replacing VCR tape. Quality acoustic pianos are already beyond the budget of many students.

## Prediction

New technologies will continue to render past technologies obsolete.

## Coping with Change

Teachers need to keep an eye on emerging technologies, but it is not necessary to rush out and buy every new gadget that comes along. However, the marketplace has its own driving power. Technology can achieve an unstoppable momentum. Accepting the pervasiveness of a successful technology involves a realistic rapprochement with the world around us. With this in mind, I recommend that you become familiar with technologies that have proven to be mainstream:

## ◆ Computers

e-mail  
MP3 files  
music software

## ◆ Digital keyboards and MIDI players

## ◆ Digital audio and video

CD burners  
DVD

Remember, most of these technologies are already an integral part of many students' lifestyle and classroom education. While the traditional paradigm of acoustic piano, paper and pencil, and oral instruction has not lost—and may never lose—its relevance, as teachers we need to confront the challenge of mainstream technology in order to stay relevant.

In subsequent columns, we will examine some of these existing technologies and offer strategies for incorporating technology in the traditional piano lesson. ■■■

Edwin McLean is a free-lance composer who also enjoys a busy career in music publishing. As Senior Piano Editor for The FJH Music Company, he currently divides his time between editing and MIDI orchestration, as well as creating educational keyboard works, many of which are published by The FJH Music Company.

## TAKIN' CARE OF BUSINESS

### Starting Out

BY BETH GIGANTE KLINGENSTEIN

*Editor's note: This first article is for the beginning teacher—whether in college, just emerging from college, or making a new career choice.*

One of the most rewarding and potentially lucrative careers for a professional pianist is that of the independent music teacher. In order to operate a truly successful studio, you must have top-notch musical and pedagogical skills, but you must also develop top-notch business skills.

If becoming an independent teacher is your career choice, it's necessary to acquire the professional skills and attitude you need to make such a business a success. One of the first steps is to get rid of any outdated stereotypes.

#### The independent piano teacher is *not*

- ◆ a little old lady
- ◆ a part-time teacher earning a bit of extra money
- ◆ a mom with little kids at home
- ◆ someone who had lessons as a child, but no other training
- ◆ an "amateur"

Today's independent piano teacher is highly trained.

#### The successful piano teacher

- ◆ is of any age, either gender
- ◆ operates a professionally run studio
- ◆ thinks like a businessperson
- ◆ is capable of earning a substantial salary
- ◆ usually has a Bachelor's degree in music
- ◆ often has advanced degrees

Any businessperson does a great deal of planning before starting a new enterprise. So must you if you expect to open an independent studio. Start with a plan.

#### Many decisions can be made in advance.

- ◆ Choose an appropriate and functional space for your studio
- ◆ Investigate all laws affecting small businesses, such as local zoning, tax, and business license requirements
- ◆ Research the cost of similar services in your chosen geographic location before setting your own prices
- ◆ Plan a budget that balances income and expenses
- ◆ Organize a professional-looking studio
- ◆ Determine all business policies that will affect students and parents
- ◆ Develop attractive and carefully worded written materials
- ◆ Devise a system for record-keeping
- ◆ Develop a long-term plan for acquiring necessary inventory
- ◆ Think how to market your business
- ◆ Network with other professionals

If any of these areas seems foreign to the idea of establishing an independent studio, think again. What would happen if

some were eliminated? No budget could lead to unexpected financial difficulties. No marketing plan could limit the number of students. No preplanned policies could lead to endless headaches with attendance or collecting payments.

These areas will need continued attention and adjustments as your business progresses, but a great deal of thought must go into the business side of your studio before you teach your first lesson.

#### Once your business is started, project a professional image.

- ◆ Dress appropriately
- ◆ Keep the studio space organized and clean
- ◆ Describe your expectations in professional language
- ◆ Handle all communications in a businesslike manner
- ◆ Separate home activities from business hours
- ◆ Project real pride in your skill, experience, and position

There are many benefits to being an independent teacher. You have personal control over work hours, rates, student selection, program development, and artistic direction. A hardworking, musical, and well-educated pianist can enjoy a lifetime of personal growth and achievement. Success, however, does not rest on artistic and pedagogical abilities alone. A well-organized and businesslike studio is essential if you are to reach the many musical and personal rewards of running an independent studio. ■■■

Beth Gigante Klingenstein is nationally known for her work on business policies for the independent music teacher. The author of *A Business Guide for the Music Teacher*, she taught as an independent music teacher for 28 years. Klingenstein is presently on the music faculty of Valley City State University (North Dakota) and is the Founding Director of the VCSU Community School of the Arts.

## Smiles from the Studio

Every piano teacher can "tell tales." Here are two from the editors' albums.

Knowing the value of orienting a student to the lesson topic, I began Mollie's piano lesson by saying, "Today we're going to talk about eighth notes." To which Mollie replied, "Okay. You start the conversation."

Nate ran excitedly into the studio. "We set a new record! My soccer team just set a new school record!" I acknowledged with an enthusiastic, "Wow, that's great!" To which Nate replied, "Well, it's not actually great. We just set the record for the most games lost in a season."

You, too, have experienced some studio "smiles." Why not share them with us?

Send them to [muszler@pianoteaching.com](mailto:muszler@pianoteaching.com)

## FAMILY TREE

## When “Methods” Meant “Rules”

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Most of the time, we don't think in terms of history. We tend to assume that what we experience and know is both universal and ageless. We find it hard, for example, to imagine a world without cars, planes, refrigeration, TV, phones, and computers. Yes, we've heard about horse-and-buggy transportation, home-growing all the food that goes on the table, and waiting weeks for news to travel between cities and countries, but we seldom, if ever, put ourselves into a picture in which these things are true for us.

So it is with piano methods. You may be surprised to learn that the beginners' books used to teach you may now be considered out of date, surpassed by materials with different approaches to teaching reading and technique and complete with supplementary CDs and MIDI disks. If so much change has occurred within your own lifetime, can you imagine what it was like to begin piano lessons 200 years ago, in a book with a cover like this?



The English composer, James Hook, was also an excellent teacher who made a substantial income in that capacity. The cover shows that his book could be used to teach either harpsichord or pianoforte—a “modern” touch since the publication date was 1785. The instrument pictured, however, is clearly a harpsichord.

Forty-one years later, in Benjamin Carr's 1826 “Analytical Instructor,” the female student sits at what appears to be a four-octave square piano. In his Philadelphia store, Carr sold—in addition to sheet music—pianos, stationery, umbrellas, blankets, looking-glasses, and “black beaver hats.”

The first pages of Carr's book provide information and rules (not music), a practice typical of method books during a good part of the 19th century. The music—which appears later in the book—has carry-overs from European, especially English models. Carr uses English fingering (“x” for the thumb and 1-2-3-4



for the long fingers), English names (minims and crotchets) for note values, and places notes without regard to rhythmic synchronicity (half notes, for example, sit in the middle of the measure).

Nathan Richardson was one of the first Americans (the others were European immigrants) to write a piano method used in the United States. His “New Method for the Piano-Forte” appeared in 1859. The first 22 pages contain the usual rules, including some ghastly, tension-producing hand positions!

Exercises with no rhythmic or musical interest were interspersed with “Amusements,” pieces that

were the rewards for doing the hard work that came first. These pieces included arrangements of well-known tunes and truncated versions of pieces by composers such as Mozart, Clementi, and Mendelssohn. The “Amusements” made Richardson's the most popular American method of its day.

In columns to come, we'll continue to trace the piano method from its early days and to profile those who made important contributions to its development. These musicians and educators are all part of your piano teacher “family tree.” ■■■

