

Singing Comes First

BY JILL HANNAGAN

Group piano classes for young beginners should be a friendly experience in which children develop a musical foundation for the future. I find a group of six to eight children who are ages six to nine to be a good size because everyone receives some individual attention as they sing and play games. The beginning sessions devote more time to singing and dancing, but later sessions spend more time at the keyboard as the children develop both aural and keyboard skills. Each child has a keyboard to play during the hour of class.

The Singing Circle

A group lesson in my studio begins with the children seated in a circle to sing at least four folk songs, with a new song added each week. As the list of songs grows to about eight, I eliminate some of the earlier ones. Next

the children sing and play a variety of games that go with the songs, so everyone develops a repertoire of similar songs.

I usually try to select songs that quickly become favorites, such as "Mouse Mousie," a folk tune about a cat and mouse, to which children play a chase game similar to "Duck, Duck Goose."



"Who's That?" is another folk tune that includes the lyrics, "Who's that tapping at the window? Who's that knocking at the door?" The child who sings the question has to figure out

who is tapping from the sound of the soloist's voice. The reply is "I am tapping at the window. I am knocking at the door."

With some of the songs, children learn patterns of notes, which they sing using solfège. Common patterns that establish tonality include *sol-mi-do*; *sol-do*; and *do-do-do*. These three-note tonal patterns, combined with

Jill Hannagan is a piano and an early childhood music teacher. In 2006 she was selected to speak on the programs of the national meetings of the Music Educators National Conference, the Music Teachers National Association, and Suzuki Association of America. She is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Delaware and co-author of the group piano method, *Music Makers: At the Keyboard* (Musikgarten/Music Matters).



short melodic patterns, are most American folk songs and become a musical vocabulary for children to play later at the piano.

The goal is for the children to learn the patterns by ear, then transfer them from the songs to a keyboard. In later lessons and with practice the children should be able to look at a notated pattern, such as A-F \sharp -D, and hear the sound of *sol-mi-do* in their head by turning the symbols into sound.

Dance and Drumming Activities

Dancing and drumming activities should be a part of each class because they help children feel the pulse of music and develop a framework in which to express rhythm. I use classical literature, such as Haydn's Sixth German Dance and Kabalevsky's Rondo Op. 60 #1, for dancing and interesting folk music, such as "Kwaheri," a Kenyan folk tune, and "Kolomekya," a Cossack folk song for drumming. The activities should help children feel both the macro beat (the big beat of each measure) and the micro beat (the division of the macro beat).

As students dance it is helpful to have them show a new phrase in the music by a change of direction in their body

a rhythmic vocabulary. Through several weeks of lessons my goal is to give students a wealth of experiences with both tonal patterns and rhythmic patterns that will transfer to playing a keyboard.

Keyboard Skills

After the circle activities, children have the joy of playing recognizable melodies on the piano, which is often motivation enough to practice. The basic keyboard skills we cover include playing in a five-finger position; extending the position by one note, either higher or lower; and crossing the thumb under (or a finger over) to play scales.

Other skills include playing in a variety of keys and registers as well as the tonic and dominant chords, when a child's hands can reach the notes. As the children's keyboard skills begin to develop, some of the folk songs they enjoy include "All the Little Ducklings," a German folk tune that starts with an ascending scale, D



drumming students can create a new rhythmic pattern to show each phrase. After each activity the children chant short rhythm patterns in either duple or triple meter, depending on the piece.

Rhythmic Patterns

To teach rhythm I use what is called a rhythmic language created by Edwin E. Gordon. Instead of explaining the difference between eighth notes and quarter notes, I teach children to speak patterns of sounds that represent different rhythms. For example, eighth notes are spoken, *du-de, du-de*; and repeated quarter notes are simply *du, du, du, du*.

As with tonal patterns, children repeat the rhythmic patterns during games to develop

to B. Children cross over or under notes, depending on which hand plays the melody.

"The Old Grey Cat" is in $\frac{6}{8}$ and has contrasting sections about a cat and mouse. The teacher and students can explore arm weight and articulation to depict a stalking cat and scampering mouse.



"Follow Me," another German song, has a descending scale, for which children learn scale fingering.



By playing songs with the help of solfège rather than note names, students can play in any key once they



Jill Hannagan teaches a class of junior high school piano students.

figure out the patterns of the new key signature. Because they already know the sound of the songs, they can easily play a variety of rhythmic patterns in the songs.

Some folk songs have the melody shared between the hands, while others have one hand play the melody as the other plays tonic and dominant chords. Some have a question-and-answer phrase style, with one hand playing the question and the other the answer.

Learning to Read Notation

After students master tonal and rhythm patterns, they can discover other patterns in music and begin to learn the letter names of the notes as well as rhythmic values. In groups these activities unfold as games instead of flashcard drills, which I remember from my childhood. Most children learn to read in different keys, as well as in treble and bass clef, with ease once they see and hear the tonic of the key.

Group lessons are a great way to train children's ears as they learn to play the piano and work with fellow students. Lessons follow a natural progression from hearing and singing

music to playing and reading notation. When lessons begin with the ears – not with the difficulty of reading notes on the staff – music making is an especially joyful activity. □

The pieces mentioned in this article can be found in any number of collections, including Gemeinsam Musizieren (Schott), 120 Singing Games and Dances for Elementary Schools by Lois Choksy and David Brummit (Prentice-Hall), and Music for Fun-Music for Learning by Lois Birkenshaw (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).