



Music Makers: at the Keyboard, Year 1 – Weeks 1 through 4

Dear Teachers,

If you are receiving this e-news than you have completed the ***Music Makers: at the Keyboard*** training for year one (or you are about to). For the next nine months, I will be holding your hand, as you teach this wonderful curriculum. For many of you, it may be the first time you have taught a group keyboard program. If you think it is going to be very different from teaching private piano lessons, I assure you, you are correct. You will never view a beginning piano student the same way ever again. In this program, the student is on a journey towards total musicianship and the keyboard is part of the process, not the central theme, and it is very exciting to be the facilitator for this. Everything we do in this first year is going to set the aural foundation for the next three years of study for your students. I hope I can help you stay on track so that you have a successful first year of teaching ***Music Makers: at the Keyboard***.

My name is Ellen Johansen. I have taught piano lessons since I was 16 years old (that is over 40 years ago). This will be my seventeenth year of teaching ***Music Makers at the Keyboard*** and I find myself still celebrating this weekly experience of sharing music with children. But like all great experiences, it has a learning curve. I expect you will make as many silly mistakes as I did. But perhaps this and subsequent e-news will keep you on top of your form from the first day of classes to your end of year celebration.

I will go through Weeks 1 through 4 with you in this essay. You watched the trainer float through these introductory classes. Now it is your turn. Ready? First, you need a class. I assume you have done your homework, set up your studio, contacted the local media, posted flyers in your community, and enrolled a class of willing seven-year-olds. If you need any help in these areas, I highly recommend going to the Gartenloop (this is a Yahoo Group that you can join and I happen to be the moderator) and read through the archives to find out how other teachers are setting up their studios for a group experience and attracting students. The licensed teacher section of Musikgarten's website also contains many useful resources.

You have keyboards are set, your home material is labeled and marked, and all of your students are paid and ready to go.

They are walking in your door.....

Week 1

Overall, follow the lesson plan as written. You can vary this plan next year if you want to, but first, you will want to know how the lessons flow before you change it in the future. Keep notes. Some teachers add stickies to their teacher's guidebook. I am not shy – I write directly on my lesson plans, "This was Great!" "What was that?" "Try that again next week."



Singing Circle – this part of the class occurs in every lesson this year. I always give this part 15 minutes (and yes, you can run a timer) and include tonal and rhythmic patterns after every song. I make sure I

have at least one card per child in the classroom. If I have time and they are picking more than one card each I may return cards into the basket and we will sing that song again but not necessarily dance or move to it. In this lesson everything is new so expect to sing solo. In repeats, I will ask the children if they remember how the song began (what word) and then ask them to start off the song without me (but this can be tricky so you may want to save this idea for later lessons). As the children read the cards you can assess whether they are reading or sounding out the words on the card. Make a mental note of this. Plan ahead before class what activity you wish to include for that song. Some will stay on the floor with a steady beat on their knees. Some will need floor space for a small dance or large movement. After the song is sung, sing the resting tone and have them echo. I sing on the resting tone, “And the resting tone is Dooooooooo (or Laaaaaa) and then have them join in matching the pitch I am holding. Perhaps you watched the trainers use different strategies to find the resting tone. Use the strategy you liked the best. Next, have your students echo the tonal patterns as group responses. You can ask for individual responses later to assess their ability to match pitch. No correcting here! Just listen and thank them for their response. Move quickly and after the patterns, sing another verse of the song. Repeat the resting tone game you selected and let them sustain the note as you drop out. Then move on and have a different child pick a card. Some movement suggestions for the cards:

- Include many varying motions for **Debka Hora**. You can create a dance that goes around, in and out and around again. You can add a new motion as you change the word, “Sing”, to “jump”, “Clap”, “Jig”, “Swing” or ask for suggestions. Just be careful that you set up parameters here (no climbing walls or crawling under the pianos, please.)
- Wiggle your fingers through the opening of **Stars Shining**. Numbering the fingers can happen by point to the fingers, tapping the fingers or playing the fingers on the floor, the children laying on their bellies as they do this, wrists on the floor and hands in a rounded position. Don’t let them raise those fingers too high, especially the fourth finger.
- Sway like a large bell during **Listen for Bells**, or lie on backs and clap your legs. You can also create tiny bells with thumb and the second finger, tips touching and then change the fingers to the thumb and third, thumb and fourth, thumb and fifth. This is a nice way to introduce the playing surface on the digits.
- Dance through **See the Pony** and end curled up on the floor as you sing the resting tone. Then leave out the resting tone on the next verse and have them supply it. Another game is to sit on the floor and keep the macro beat with my legs tapping, getting faster and faster in an accelerando and then assuming the sleep position at the end. Keep singing!
- **Mouse Mousie**. - It never fails to amaze me that this song will be cheered by the children. Do not underestimate the *Mouse Mousie* game. Enjoy this simple cat and mouse chase game as described on the card.

Stars Shining, Step 1 – This is an important activity. We want to make sure everyone calls each finger by the same name. Making sure the children all face in the same direction as you do this activity is very



important. Review finger numbers weekly and reinforce with the tactile game often. I find many older students confuse their fourth with their second finger. For your information, we call our thumbs one and our index 2, etc., but string instruments call their index 1 and the middle 2. Confusing? For some

children.....yes. For your OT students, yes, yes. A colleague who teaches group piano in college tells me her students have trouble identifying their finger numbers and she has to resort to calling fingers, “thumb” and “middle finger”. You want to be able to state what finger to play and connect this to the numbers they will see later as fingering in Books 3 – 6.

Meet the Keyboard – every piano teacher has his or her own way of meeting the keyboard. Most have the discussion about how black keys are organized, in twos and threes. I have found it helpful and fun to use the image of the two-eared bunny (fingers two and three with other fingers held down by thumb) to locate the two back key group, and the rare “three eared bunny” (fingers two, three and four with the fifth held down by the thumb) to locate the group of three black keys. There are actually two each of these species and they like to “hop” bunny over bunny as they play all the groups up the piano and down the piano. I am already looking for a type of sound and I am using imagery to achieve it. You can find your own way. When playing the Keyboard Game, I take all of the children’s cards and make two large piles and have the children first take turns to find the location of the cards and then repeat this with parents at the end. At that point, they use their own set and I put on a timer for three minutes while they pick, locate, pick, locate, pick, locate, etc. By the way, I do take away the benches at the keyboard so they can move quickly to and from the keyboards. ***(Just a tip: after a few weeks you can ask for “donations of these cards” and then you will have a growing pile of cards to use for future classes.)***

Drumming: Renaissance Dance - Establish your routine for taking out drums. This will be your routine for the next three years. I have a low shelf where my drums are stacked and I go through the routine of taking one drum with two hands and returning to the circle ready to play. I want this to happen quickly so I demonstrate what I want and then have the children get their drums, first individually and later in a group but I may go back to each individual child completing the process if it gets too chaotic. Last week I had each child select their drum and then select the next student to get a drum. Once all are settled, I ask them to show me different ways to make sounds with the drums. Then I show them ways I would like them to play the drum. I model two contrasting rhythms. Then I put on *Renaissance Dance*. I will often add an ostinato based on the duple patterns during the song. I will ask them to listen as I start and then join me. At the end of the dance, I have them place the drum behind them and then keep a steady beat on their knees as we chant and echo the four duple rhythms. Then I have them place the steady beat on the drums and we again chant the four duple rhythms. Then I go through my ritual of returning the drums to my drum shelf. Then I play the rhythm of the duple patterns on one drum and ask for a group echo. Then I ask for individual echoes. Time to move on.

It’s OK to repeat *Debka Hora*. This is not a mistake in the lesson suggestions. Keep this dance fun from the very beginning. Some teachers add a joyful clap at the end of the song with the shout, “Hey!” This piece establishes hand position and it may be more difficult for some of your younger students. For



some of your students, this may be their only piece at the piano for a while, and for others, they will not remember the piece. It comes back later as a warm-up piece in my studio for hand position. As soon as we are finished, I show them the VERY, very rare "one-eared" bunny. At this point, you may want to

demonstrate a curved index finger that will lightly play the "D" found between the two black key group. Let them go find all the D's and come back to the circle. No big deal if they use different fingers. Some teachers like to use "O" rings for younger students (thumb and index form an "O" and they use this to play the key). I don't want this technique to get in the way of the ear so I don't make a big deal of this (but this is a great opportunity to create "Owl eyes" and hoot tonal patterns, but I digress). I then have them sit and we echo the interval between D and A using the words "Bam, Bam, Bam". Have them echo in a group and then individually. Here you will watch. Who is matching? Who is not? Who is too low? Who is too high? Who finds the note but continues to look? Who gives up? Don't correct; just model the sound. Then demonstrate by trial and error how you find the second note. It's OK to find the correct note eventually, as long as you use your voice as the primary tool to find the correct sound. Then let them go find it. LET THEM! Don't go to individual students with the begging dog eyes and visually show them. You may need to re-sing the interval for individual students. Watch your body language – students are already savvy how to read a teachers body language to know if they got the correct answer. Simply sing the interval and move on. When a few students get it (and I don't fuss over whether it is done with any particular fingering or with two hands) I have them play the interval while we sing the interval.

When it is time to play *Debka Hora*, I want all to have a successful experience playing their first song. Some will play the interval and some will play D's. Have I shown some the interval? Yes. Should I? Ummm..... probably not. Will I show the interval in the future? Ummmm....it depends on how well I can hold back my desire to show it rather than to let them find it. In the long run, their ear benefits if I hold back. But I am worried they may not come back if they get frustrated too quickly. That's me worrying about parent perspective. Remember, parents will want to see their student get it from the beginning and they will show them the correct answer at home (it's in their guidebook and more or less in their book 1) so I prefer to hold back.

Sometimes, the week 1 lesson suggestions will run out before the hour. Yikes! You can repeat songs from song circle or plan to have parents come slightly early for the first class. You can also use that extra time to ask the children to share any pieces they know on the piano. Be prepared to here versions of "Heart and soul", "Für Elise", "Twinkle" and "Mary had a Little Lamb" and original creations (these may need a timer). The most important part is when they leave your studio with a first group experience and are looking to return for lots more. If you are handing out home material, this will take some extra time. I find the parent time takes a bit longer the first time to fill out the home assignment. In coming weeks you will wish you had that extra time.

I hope this review of Lesson 1 gives you an idea of how one teacher turns a lesson suggestion into a fun class of making music.



Week 2 reinforces and repeats many of the activities and brings in their first “by ear” piece, Listen for Bells.

Sing Circle – repeat the same ritual you created in Week 1 with the singing circle. I expect the children will be more comfortable and may join in the singing now that they have been listening to their recorded music at home. There is a new song in the basket: **Who’s That?** The game never ceases to amaze me! It is such a simple game, yet produces such innocent giggles. Don’t let the children create variations and make sure you model excellent singing as you are gently tapping a child’s back as they are hiding their eyes. To keep the guessing child from opening their eyes too soon I place my hand on their back and add, “And wait” on the resting tone. When then tapping child is back on their spot I sing, “Who was that?” (Do do sol). After all the songs remember to find the resting tone and add appropriate patterns between verses or after the song is complete.

Keyboard Posture – “**Good posture, proper arm and hand position, and finger technique are vital to instrumental education. For lifelong joy and success in playing an instrument, good habits must be established in initial sessions and then be observed continual and reviewed frequently.**” - page 39, **Music Makers: at the Keyboard Teachers Guide 1**. Technique is an ongoing strain in this program. However, except for this one card, you will not see direct activities that relate to this. You can and should bring your own training and experience to this part of the program. As a good teacher, you will observe, model good posture and technique, and adjust the children as needed. Just remember to keep the aural aspect of this lesson as the most important goal of every lesson and don’t get side-tracked if a student is exhibiting less than stellar hand position. I highly recommend, if this is an issue for you, to take piano lessons with a colleague so that your posture and technique is developing along with the children, so that you can model for the children. It is a wonderful way to give back to yourself musically as well.

Stars Shining Step 2 – I remind the children the rules in my studio about approaching the keyboards and we practice this. Here are my rules:

- We sit (or stand) at the keyboards and make no sounds, hands on lap (or at your side)
- We wait for the directions and raise hands to ask a question
- We show we are done by placing our hands on our laps (or by our sides)
- No “scratching” (playing every note or banging)
- Buttons are Off-limits unless I say otherwise)

I am sure you will create your own set of rules. I know the biggest challenge for the children is to play the keyboards and press all those buttons. Cacophony ensues. Setting a quiet foundation NOW will pay off in spades later on.

We find all the Ds on the piano together from low to high, then high to low. Then we find the middle D. Then I ask them to find D position and watch to see how they respond with hand position and do minor corrections as they play *Debka Hora*. Then I segue into Stars Shining and have them put their hands TOGETHER as they tap their ones, twos, threes, fours and the fives. Then I pause as they find the D



position and finish the song. I will repeat this with the Right hand along, the left hand alone and then hands together. Then we all sit and I ask for any solos. We sing along as the soloist accompanies us.

Drumming/Renaissance Dance

Before we take out the drums I review the four duple rhythms accompanied only by a body beat. Then drum taking out ritual is repeated and before I start I ask for different sounds on the drum. I give them time to explore the sounds and ask them to take turns demonstrating their sound. Then I start the recording and ask them to follow me. After this, I ask them to place their drum behind them and review the duple rhythms again accompanied by a body beat. Then we bring out the drums and play the beat on the drums. You can't do too much preparation towards duple rhythm!

Aural Recognition – this activity has over the years become more an important part of every week's lesson and perhaps my favorite part of song circle because I can't witness those ears truly thinking. I believe it puts the children squarely on the path to literacy because it gets them to actively engage in the process of connecting a pattern to its language name. We begin with rhythm in this lesson and move later to Tonal recognition. I try to include at least one game per week throughout the first year and beyond. I have them put the drums away and I introduce the game. I use sticks over drums here because they are less exciting. Your choice here. I model the game with the entire group. Then I divide them into two or three groups (it is nice to have parents in the room for this if you have the luxury). Once they get the form of the game you can repeat it with all the duple rhythms. Don't rush this and be tempted to give them two duple rhythms. Let them feel mastery at one pattern. Remind them in this game there is no du, du, du, du (chanted quickly). Keep the tempo the same throughout the game so they can experience the division of the beat.

Debka Hora again? Absolutely! Watch the mastery.

Listen to Bells

You will use the five-part song process to teach this song.

Before you read on, take a breather. ...

Ready? OK...

Follow the process exactly as written in your guidebook.

Here are some tips:

Set up the ritual to the keyboards that you established earlier in class and be consistent all year long. It is OK to practice from the floor to the pianos and you may need to gently repeat the process three or four times. I do not allow talking during the five-part process. They must learn to find the sound and then stop from banging or scratching or you will have children complaining that it is too loud in the room. Before we get into the process we sing the song we are learning with our hands on our lap. Then



we might play a “Simon says” game that brings their hands to their laps a lot. I say, “play all the ds”. “Hands on your Lap”. “Play two black key groups going up the piano”, “Hands on your lap”, etc. I want

to be clear from the beginning that there are times we all play together and times we take turns. Here is the process:

I sing.

They Echo with hands on their laps.

I sing and play in the air.

They echo and play in the air.

I sing and play in on my arm.

They sing and find the pattern on the piano all at once.

I go around and make sure they at least begin on the starting note.

HANDS ON LAP.

I sing and play on my arm.

Children take a turn singing and playing.

I ask “How do I turn this pattern into the song?”

I sing the words and play on my arm.

They play as a group to figure this out.

HANDS ON LAP.

I ask for an individual response (I choose those that have figured it out first.)

Next Pattern

More tips: The children take turns playing the patterns after an initial group exploration. It can get very loud when everyone is playing at the same time so I would limit this exploration time to just a few seconds. I have tried using headphones but I noticed that some children are very busy fussing with the headphones and can’t stay engaged and the rest are zipping up the down the pianos and pressing buttons. In other words, resist the temptation. Better to learn to take turns so all have a chance. You can usually teach all the patterns in one sitting but feel free to divide the time spent working through all of the patterns with keyboard song process into two separate timeslots in the lesson. Don’t forget to connect the patterns to the song before leaving the piano. Make a note if you did not cover all the patterns. I often finish off the final review of the patterns if I have to with parents shadowing. If the children have the patterns down they can teach the patterns to their parent. I also like to go around and listen individually to the children. When they learn a pattern or connect the pattern to the song I have them go and show another child what they did. If I know both children have learned the pattern or part of the song I have them take turns sharing what they learned with each other. Connecting the patterns to the song is crucial when parents are in the room. I always worked hard to make sure I covered all the patterns and then let the child show the parents the patterns that they learned. At this point, I can assess what is really going on with the child. You will see some playing the whole piece and some still



can't find the D without assistance. Make sure the parents are not overwhelming the poor child with correction or faulting. Often children are exhausted and can't perform by the end of the lesson so I come and join the parent/child pair and support the child while we find the D position and review the patterns together. Again, it can get noisy in the room. I ask the children to play softly and sing with the

sound. I also take turns at this point but I don't want the parents to compare children's progress so I do this when they all have the patterns well in hand.

Whew! That was a lot.

Now bring the parents in and celebrate with a rousing scarf dance to Ode to Joy.

Week 3

All your students back for more? Great! Let's look at the lesson. I won't go through every component, rather, the new ones that seem to need a helping hand.

Song Circle – By now you should have established a ritual of having the children coming into the room, putting their books in the space you have reserved for them or on their piano desks and sitting to get ready to play Song Circle.

Keyboard Share – The children are bursting to play Listen for Bells. Often I have them all play during Song Circle. We practice taking turns. You can use two strategies to keep the audience at bay. One idea is to have them all sitting at the pianos ready to share - sharing moves quickly this way. Another idea is to have them sit quietly on the floor (good luck on that) while each child gets up to share. The second takes more time but it also gives some children a chance to blend in and choose not to share. I prefer the first strategy and I make it clear that if a child wishes to pass, they can.

Keyboard Warm up – I do the warm-up as a song process on the floor while wiggling fingers in the air. Then, while seated quietly at the keyboards, we sing the patterns of the exercise again and find the patterns in the air with our fingers. Then we do it the third time on the pianos. It can get noisy and I have found it helpful to play along and even add a backtrack beat on my Roland Digital keyboard.

Stars Shining – We review posture at the piano, sing the song as we place the tips of our fingers together and tap. Then I ask them to find the *Debka Hora* position (D position). Once established we sing the first part and then I have them take their hands off and do the tapping. At the end, we return to the *Debka Hora* open Fifth to finish. We then float off the keyboards and land our hands on our laps. No need to add Mi yet.

Aural Recognition: Rhythm Game 1 – follow the guide step by step. Don't miss this activity. Play it often.

Week 4



By this lesson you will have noticed there is a lot of review of activities. Every lesson reviews and presents new material. When you review, you have a choice of either repeating the activity exactly the same way or adding expansions. This will depend upon your particular class of children. By now you will know the pace of your class. Please remember that ALL activities in the lesson suggestion are equally important. Be careful that you are not spending all the lesson time learning the new song. We want the children to become independent learners and by giving them the tools on how to find the patterns in the song, they can then go home and learn the song on their own with the reinforcement of the practice CD. Often I will play the practice CD for children and parents when we review the patterns at the end of the class.

Mouse Mousie – sick of the song yet? Just wait until year 3. It still is the number one pick in all of my classes. I think they pick more for my reaction (I fall on the floor and flail around lamenting, “Not Again.”)

Just one tip – make sure they are quite comfortable with playing *Mouse Mousie* in D before assuming they will play it in C. Most of the children will flip easily, but there is always one child that just doesn’t get it. Prep C position, play the game AGAIN (flail, flail) and then go and play the piece in C.

Have fun with **Cathrineta**, one of my favorite dances.

I hope this covers the essentials of the lessons. If there are particular questions about any activities in the first four lessons, please ask me and I will share the answer with all the teachers received this email.

Happy teaching

Ellen

P.S. If you wish to have more resources at your fingertips, I highly recommend that you:

1. Join our Musikgarten Teachers group at Facebook. This was created by Musikgarten to support all licensed Musikgarten teachers. Amy Rucker and I administer the day to day in the group. You must be a licensed teacher to join this group. You may request to join and Musikgarten will review your request. This format is fun because the teachers share day to day successes with pictures and videos, share their latest marketing, discuss ongoing issues and answer any question that bubbles up.
2. Join Gartenloop, an email support forum for Musikgarten teachers. This group is independent from Musikgarten and I am the administrator. You do not need to be a licensed teacher of Musikgarten to join. This group has been active for over 20 years. There is a wealth of information in the archives as well as lots of files to look through.
 - a. To join:
 - b. Sign in to **Yahoo Groups**.



- c. Open a **group**.
- d. Click **Join Group**.
- e. Set your membership info.
- f. Click Send Request.