

Music School Conducting Expanded Programs

By Sandra Diamond Fox Correspondent

Eleven-year-old Jeremy Bahr's favorite song to play on the piano is "Maple Leaf Rag." His brother Matthew, 13, prefers playing the theme song from "Mission Impossible" on his trumpet. "The music is a lot of fun. My teacher picks out songs that are just at my level -- not too hard or too easy," Jeremy said. "If there's a part of a song that I'm struggling with, my teacher shows me how it's done by playing on his own trumpet. He would help me get the rhythm and tempo," Matthew said. "If I'm having a stressful day, playing the trumpet helps me to relax."

Both boys, who live in Brookfield, study music at The Music Learning Center Inc. on Main Street in Danbury. The business, which opened in 1993, offers small group classes from beginner to advanced levels in piano and guitar, as well as private lessons for over a dozen musical instruments including cello, drums, trumpet, percussion and flute. Voice and singing instruction, as well as a summer music day camp program, are also available. Since the center was founded, it has grown to 2,700 square feet, which is nearly five times its original size. Three hundred students, from age 4 through adult, are enrolled. Classes meet weekly. Beginning this month, the center is offering several new and expanded band and ensemble programs. One is a jazz combo; Both boys, who live in Brookfield, study music at The Music Learning Center Inc. on Main Street in Danbury. The business, rock band classes are also being offered, as well as youth, intermediate, and blues and jazz guitar ensembles.



"Our goal in creating these many different groups is to provide every student with a band that fits their playing level, age and musical interests," said Newtown resident Jeff McGill, 52, the center's director and owner. He added that playing in groups teaches students about cooperation, improves their rhythmic skills and motivates them to do their best. Three times a year, students perform in free recitals at the Danbury Music Centre on Main Street. "These recitals provide a great way for parents to see students' progress," McGill said. "Also, it gives students who take private lessons a chance to play in a group setting, and get inspired by hearing more advanced level students perform."

Many of the center's former students have received recognition in the music industry. One of them is New York composer Dan Zank, who was one of the musical arrangers for actor Hugh Jackman's opening medley at the 2009 Academy Awards ceremony. Among the 25 music teachers at the center are Mary Peters, who is director of the strings program at Danbury High School and Broadview Middle School in Danbury; and Elliot Isaacson, a graduate of The Juilliard School in Manhattan. Twenty percent of the center's enrollment is made up of adults.

"It's never too late to begin playing a musical instrument, or return to an instrument you once played as a child," McGill said.

For the past year, Sherman resident Pat Walker has been taking voice lessons at the music center, which have helped her sing in "Red Dirt Road," the local Bluegrass Americana band she plays in.

"I had the wrong breathing techniques," she said. "Whenever I performed, I was straining my vocal cords and losing my voice. After I began taking lessons, I learned that I was singing right from my throat, when I needed to sing from my diaphragm. From taking lessons, people have told me that I now sing louder, higher, and clearer." As far as when the best time is to introduce children to a musical instrument, McGill recommends age 5 to 6 for the piano, violin, viola, and cello; age 7 for the guitar; age 8 for the drums; and age 9 for the trumpet and trombone.

"If children begin too soon, they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated and want to stop lessons," he said. "Sometimes if they wait a year to start lessons, their progress can be much faster."

In general, he said that when children begin to express an interest in music, parents should be responsive to it.

The Music Learning Center, at 425 Main St., and has office hours weekdays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Lessons take place weekdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Enrollment is ongoing.

The center's next recital, called the "Student Showcase," is Feb. 27 at the Danbury Music Centre, 256 Main St. The showcase includes 50 to 75 band students and advanced soloists.

For more information about the recital, The Music Learning Center, or for a free introductory lesson, call 203-748-1444 or visit www.musiclearningcenter.org.

