

From the Newtown Bee - March 9, 2007

Adult Music Students Pick Up The Tempo

By Nancy K. Crevier

According to a 2006 US Gallup Poll, since 2003 there has been a five percent increase in the number of music students between the ages of 18 and 34. Jeff McGill, director of the Music Learning Center in Danbury and manager at Westport Fairfield Piano, has found that statistic to ring true. They have discipline and are committed. Generally, adults have already sat down, looked at their lives, and figured out how they are going to [fit in music lessons] and they succeed wonderfully," he said of the older music makers at the Music Learning Center.

"There is a new perception in the last decade or so that you can start to learn music at any age," said Mr McGill. "That consciousness continues to grow, supported by research." Yamaha Corporation of America, manufacturer of digital and keyboard instruments, has developed a curriculum geared toward adults called the Clavinova Connection, which the Music Learning Center will soon be offering, said Mr McGill. Clavinova Connection may appeal to older learners not only for the sense of mastery it quickly instills in new musicians, but because of research that has linked the method to measurable health benefits. The research, supported by Yamaha Corporation of America, and its results discussed in the August 2006 issue of Music Trades, proves a direct connection between music skills, reduction of stress, and the human genome.



In that article, Dr Barry Bittman, the principal investigator of the study, notes that with constant stress from various daily sources, the human body's instinctive "flight or fight" response is continually triggered, "a destructive biological cascade that can ultimately be devastating. Multiple health challenges such as heart disease, cancer, infections, inflammatory processes, diabetes, and autoimmune disorders have been scientifically associated with stress responses." Dr Bittman's research team studied key genomic switches - sets of personal DNA that serve as a sort of instruction manual for the body - that set off the human stress response and measured them at the source.

They then attempted to reverse the induced stress, using a variety of relaxation techniques, including participation in the recreational music program, Clavinova Connection. The Clavinova group was made up of people with no prior music background, yet more than three times the number of genomic markers reversed with that group compared to subjects who were not involved in the program. The recreational music philosophy, said Dr Bittman in the Music Trades article, "fosters a nurturing, supportive and expressive approach with an emphasis on building bridges of communication ...I now consider recreational music making an antidote to stress!"

Health benefits are not the primary reason the Music Learning Center attracts adult students, though, said Mr McGill. Most of the older students are seeking individual satisfaction in mastering a new skill. The Clavinova Connection program, he believes, will provide a function for people who want a music experience and sense of fulfillment, rather than a traditional method of musical training. "It's a matter of pacing," he said. "It allows students to experience enjoyment of music. Clavinova digital pianos provide accompanying, pleasing background while skills develop."

Robin Barrett Thomson is a Newtown resident who has been taking group piano lessons with Juan Torres at the Music Learning Center for three years. As a child, she had been exposed to music in the household and even taught herself chords on the organ owned by her father. Her lifelong dream, though, was to own a piano and when she and her husband bought a home a few years ago with a living room that cried out for a baby grand piano, said Ms Thomson, she began to look into fulfilling that dream. "I planned to get a used, refurbished baby grand piano, but then for my 50th birthday my husband decided we should take a look at new ones," Ms Thomson said. They settled on a Yamaha disc-clavier piano.

"I thought, 'This is pretty good. If I don't learn how to play it, at least it will play itself,'" laughed Ms Thomson. But since her goal was not to just have a very big music box in her living room, Ms Thomson picked up some beginner piano books at the library book sale, looked them over, and then started taking lessons. "At first I took



private lessons twice a week to get a jump on learning," she said, and later joined the weekly group lessons.

Ms Thomson's music experience supports Dr Bittman's research, in that she realizes a deeper sense of relaxation. "Focus is important for me because I have ADD," said Ms Thomson. "With piano practice, you have to be there in the moment. It's kind of a Zen thing. You have to just think about the next note." Oftentimes, said Ms Thomson, more than an hour of practice time can go by as she loses herself in playing. "It's like a meditation," she said.

"I've been in a musical family my whole life and I think that's why I need music in my life," said Ms Thomson. "Music, especially a piano, has to do with your home. And you can always dream of performing."

Mastering traditional skills is important to some adult students at the Music Learning Center, said Mr McGill, most of whom follow the national trend of selecting piano or guitar as their instrument of choice. The music industry has responded to the influx of older musicians, as well, with more materials than ever being published to support adults. "There is more interesting music available even at early levels," Mr McGill said. "Many adults are happy to see that. It helps tremendously when we can show them the music that is out there is more in line with an adult's taste in music."

Motivated By Their Kids

While many of the adult students at the Music Learning Center specifically seek out lessons for themselves, others find themselves inspired by an outside source: their children. "We do have a segment of parents who are looking for things to share with their kids," said Mr McGill. The parents may take up the same instrument as their child, or they may simply schedule lessons at the same time as they pursue their own interest.

Mike Nathenson is a Music Learning Center student who is just such an example. Mr Nathenson, who resides in Newtown and works in financial planning for PepsiCo, has been taking piano lessons for two years from instructor Walter Jakoboski, motivated by his two children, Ryan, a violinist, and Justin, a piano player. When they rented a piano for 6-year-old Justin, Mr Nathenson decided it was time to remedy one of his lifelong regrets, that of having not pursued a skill on a musical instrument. Since he had to bring the boys for lessons, anyway, it seemed a logical time to get involved in music lessons.

"I had always loved music, listening to it, going to concerts. I had friends who were involved with music and I always thought, 'I wish I could do that.' So now I am," said Mr Nathenson.

For Mr Nathenson, the opportunity to use lessons as a way for the family to spend time together figures hugely in his commitment to the lessons. He said, "Playing is a together thing for me and the boys," although they rarely actually play simultaneously. "It is completely noncompetitive. I have tried to play duets with Ryan, but he's better than me. When I make a mistake, I worry I'm going to bring him down. And he's going to play up to tempo, which I can't really do yet."

He is aware that learning music comes more easily to his young sons than it does to him, despite putting in at least one-half hour of practice four to five times a week. "I feel like my son has improved greatly and you see in a couple of years that he'll pass me by. I think it takes longer for adults to master the agility thing."

He keeps at it, though, for a variety of reasons. "I find playing very relaxing and I enjoy it," said Mr Nathenson. "I absolutely use music as a way to destress. On weekends, I just pick out things and play for fun."



The music that he and Mr Jakoboski select for lessons ranges from classical to pop, said Mr Nathenson, and the pieces are challenging. "One of the things I like is that we work on a piece for two or three weeks and if I'm struggling, we move along. Then we might go back later on and work on the challenging material again."

As with many adult music lesson students, setting aside the time to practice is the hardest part for Mr Nathenson. "But I'm paying money for the lessons, and I want to get the most out of them, plus I don't want to let down Walter [Jakoboski]," he said, and added, "I think the goal is really in the relaxation, the doing it, and the music. It's something I really wanted to do."

A Little Something For The Soul

Jan Gregory, co-owner with John Dulina IV of the Renaissance Center Conservatory of Music at Bennett's Square in Southbury, has also seen multiple incidences of parents being inspired to take music lessons when they see the success their offspring is having with an instrument. "Adults think it would be fun, or they just love to play, even though they can't practice as much as they would like," she said. In one case, when a longtime piano and voice student went off to college, her mother, Darlene Jackson of Newtown, took over that lesson opening to learn piano. That was 20 years ago, and she has been taking lessons ever since, said Ms Gregory.

Ms Jackson was not a stranger to music. "I knew how to read music and had played accordion for 11 years, but I only knew the right hand notes. I had always wanted to play piano, but we didn't have one when I was growing up," she said.

A side benefit that she has realized from playing piano has been flexibility in her hands. "I am getting arthritis, but I find that playing eases the pain. I totally believe that keeping my hands moving makes them better," said Ms Jackson.

The years of lessons taken on and off as time permitted for two decades has been satisfying for Ms Jackson. "I have progressed at my own rate." She said. She has mastered piano technique to the point now that she is working on pieces by Mozart and Bach. For Ms Jackson, the goal was never to perform, but rather to experience the music. She is a musician, she said, because "I just love it. [Music] is a part of my system. I do it for my soul."

In keeping with the national trend, the Renaissance Center has also noted an increased interest in adult music lessons over the years. Adult students are most likely to take piano lessons, stated Ms Gregory, but the rest are evenly divided between voice, guitar, and other instruments, as well as those who take part in African drumming offered at the center.

One of her most dedicated adult students is nearly 87 years old. "She started drumming after heart surgery when she was 82 years old, I think. She thought that the arm movement would be good physical therapy for her recovery. Now she drums every day to a video and she comes to our drumming circle once a month. It's just incredible," Ms Gregory said.

Adult students differ from school age students in that they tend to analyze what they are doing, Ms Gregory has observed. "Adults are more aware of mistakes than children are. Children will make joyful music and make mistakes and that's okay. Adults will play something and make mistakes and think that they have messed up. Adults are more critical of themselves," she said.

There are other challenges adult students must overcome, as well, said Ms Gregory. "Our dexterity is a little less as we age, there might be arthritis. Getting out of the thinking stage into the muscle memory stage takes longer for an older student." The biggest challenge for adults, though, said Ms Gregory, is an attitude of having to get it "perfect."

Once students allow themselves to just enjoy the music making process, Ms Gregory has noticed clear benefits for her adult students. "Music makes people happy. They go away from a lesson with more of a spring in their step. I think music tends to relax a person. I think it balances energy overall," said Ms Gregory.

"I always had it in the back of my mind to sail around the world single-handedly," said Newtown resident and author Justin Scott. When he realized that was a dream unlikely to be realized, playing piano popped into his head as another exciting option.

"I'm around music a lot," said Mr Scott. "My wife sings professionally, so we decided to get a small grand [piano]. We got this exquisite piano and I'd look at it and think, 'What could I do with this?' Poet laureate Billy Collins once called grand pianos 'a hallucination on three legs,' and you know, this piano really did make my heart beat faster," Mr Scott recalled.

Having never learned a musical instrument before, Mr Scott undertook to teach himself from the ground up. "I had to learn how to read music and everything. It was so hard and it went really slowly," he said. After a year and a half, though, he felt he was spinning his wheels. That was when he met up with Sandy Hook music teacher Irina Virovets. "She's gifted. She observes and watches and listens. We work on one thing at a time. Irina is very good at knowing when to go in one direction or another."

His goals include proficiency at playing music by composers such as Bach or Beethoven, as well as being able to play American songbook music. To that end, he practices at least one hour a day.

Mr Scott has noticed unexpected benefits from piano playing. "About six months into this, I realized my memory was getting better. If you want to exercise your brain, learn to play piano. And I have found that this memory improvement has carried over into my work [as a writer]," he said. For Mr Scott, though, it is the benefit of "a joy beyond description when you hear something you yourself are playing."

It may not get them to Carnegie Hall, but for the adult musicians who practice, practice, practice, music lessons are a road paved with self-satisfaction, confidence, and a sense of well-being. So, beat me Daddy, eight to the bar.