

Private piano instruction is the most common mode of piano teaching. However, private lessons are the exception to most other learning activities such as school, sports, band, drama and choir. Group lessons can also be effective in piano instruction, either as an enhancement to the private lesson or as the sole mode of teaching. A group of students can be as small as two or as large as the teacher can handle. Students can be grouped homogeneously by age and/or level, or with different ages and levels in the same class. The format of the class will vary greatly, depending upon the grouping and goals for the class. Group instruction is only effective if *all* students are actively involved *all* of the time.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF GROUP AND PRIVATE INSTRUCTION

Both group and private settings for teaching have advantages and disadvantages to consider.

### Advantages of Group Lessons

Group teaching gives students distinct advantages that are not possible in the private lesson.

In regard to IMPROVED SKILLS:

- ◆ Group lessons develop poise and other performance skills when the student plays for others.
- ◆ Group lessons develop critical listening skills through listening to others.
- ◆ Group lessons broaden students' musical understanding by hearing and studying a greater variety of music. (This is especially true when individual students are assigned different compositions by the same composer or by different composers in the same style.)
- ◆ Group lessons develop rhythmic security and counting ability by providing an opportunity for several students to play the same pieces together or through other ensemble work.
- ◆ Group lessons provide an environment that encourages the development of functional skills.
- ◆ Group lessons develop communication skills and the ability to work in a group.

In regard to INCREASED MOTIVATION and ENTHUSIASM:

- ◆ Group lessons provide inspiration through peer performances.
- ◆ Group lessons motivate students through healthy competition.
- ◆ Group lessons provide a social outlet surrounding a common interest not normally available to private piano students.
- ◆ Group lessons promote enthusiasm and enjoyment as a result of sharing in ensemble work, rhythm drills and music games.

- ◆ Group lessons bring out the best in students through the challenge of cooperation.
- ◆ Group lessons develop supportive camaraderie.
- ◆ Group lessons provide motivation from other students as well as from the teacher.

In regards to PRACTICAL MATTERS:

- ◆ Group lessons allow a student to make up a missed lesson by attending another group at the same level on another day.
- ◆ Group lessons provide more diverse activities and expand the opportunity for creative drills and exercises, due to longer lessons.
- ◆ Group lessons allow unprepared students to benefit from the lesson.

Teaching skills are likely to improve as a result of the requirements of group instruction.

In group teaching, it is essential that teachers act accordingly as follows:

- ◆ be organized
- ◆ have clear goals for every activity
- ◆ develop systematic lesson plans
- ◆ deliver information efficiently
- ◆ use lesson time effectively
- ◆ give precise explanations
- ◆ listen and respond carefully to students
- ◆ balance attention between the group and the individual

When teachers develop these skills through group teaching, they often find their private instruction techniques also improve. They become more flexible, give consistent reinforcement and learn to teach skills in a gamelike format.

In addition to advancing teaching skills, group teaching provides practical advantages. Basic concepts and skills can be presented more efficiently to several students at once without having to repeat the same material for individual students. Group lessons allow teachers to earn more income in the same amount of time, and lessons can be less expensive for the individual student. For example, if a teacher charges \$40 an hour for individual instruction, but charges each of six students in a class \$10 for one hour of group instruction, he/she will earn \$20 more per hour. From the student's point of view, an hour of group instruction costs only one-fourth the price of a one-hour private lesson. When considering the financial advantages, however, teachers should understand that lesson and assignment preparation for groups requires more time than for individual lessons.

## Disadvantages of Group Lessons

While there are many advantages to group lessons, teachers need to prepare for problems that are unique to this form of instruction.

- ◆ Small groups may not be time- and cost-efficient.
- ◆ Teachers must have enough students at approximately the same learning level and age to form an effective group.
- ◆ Students who fall behind, or move ahead more rapidly, will need to be moved to other groups or to private lessons.
- ◆ The teacher must have several groups to have the flexibility to transfer students to another class.
- ◆ Scheduling is often difficult since students have active schedules and all students at one level must be able to attend the lesson at the same time.
- ◆ When group lessons are scheduled at a different time than the private lesson, it is easy for students and parents to forget about them.
- ◆ When students have both private and group lessons, they may not prepare as well for the group lesson.
- ◆ Group teaching may make it difficult to refine students' technical development and artistic playing.

When teachers recognize these limitations, their expectations for students taught solely in a group setting can be more realistic. Teachers can find ways to minimize the problems of group instruction. Although students often find group lessons more enjoyable than private lessons, parents must frequently be educated to the value of group instruction. Parents can attend group lessons or be invited to a demonstration group lesson. Once parents see the benefits and positive results, they are likely to be more responsible for seeing that their children attend every lesson. Additionally, when students have both private and group lessons, a term tuition that is all-inclusive will generally motivate parents to remember the group lesson schedule.

Students who have both private and group lessons may take private lessons more seriously than group lessons. If teachers present group lessons as a privilege, students will look forward to them and will be better prepared for them. Students will have greater motivation to participate if they have a vested interest in the lesson. For example, if each student has a responsibility for one part of the lesson, he/she is more likely to come prepared.

## PREPARING TO TEACH GROUP LESSONS

Good teachers, whether group or private, share many of the same characteristics. Careful preparation ensures effective learning. It is helpful for teachers with no prior group teaching experience to observe and/or participate in effective group instruction before they begin group teaching on their own. The following are different types of teaching environments that are good entry points for beginning group teachers:

- ◆ teaching occasional master or performance classes
- ◆ conducting monthly classes dedicated to a particular type of learning, such as theory
- ◆ offering introductory summer group lessons
- ◆ teaching partner lessons

Teachers should also consider practical aspects when starting group instruction. If groups are an adjunct to private lessons, policy statements should include clear language about whether or not group lessons are mandatory. Parents should be made aware of the benefits and procedures, as well as the policies concerning fees, absences and make-ups. When teachers instruct in a home studio, they should research zoning laws to make sure they are allowed to teach more than one student simultaneously.

Generally, students should be grouped by level and by age (usually no more than one or two years apart). To help the teacher determine the best group/private curriculum and the most appropriate group for each student, the student's interview should assess the following areas:

- ◆ readiness
- ◆ maturity
- ◆ learning ability
- ◆ physical development
- ◆ rhythmic development
- ◆ aural skills

Students should be moved to a different group when they fall behind or outgrow their group. Students of different ages and levels can be grouped together for master and performance classes. Transfer students who need remedial work may benefit from having only private lessons until they are ready to join an appropriate group.

The length of group lessons varies depending on the age and level of the students, the frequency of the group lesson and the private/group lesson format. Most group lessons and partner lessons last between 45 and 60 minutes. Once-a-month groups for intermediate students can be up to 90 minutes in length.

## TYPES OF GROUP LESSONS

While it would be ideal for every piano student to have both a private and a group lesson once a week, it is not always possible. With creative planning, teachers can offer quality group and private instruction for all students using a variety of formats.

- ◆ performance (master) classes
- ◆ group lessons as an adjunct to private lessons
- ◆ private/group lesson formats
  - private lessons for three weeks/group lesson during the fourth week
  - private lessons every week/group lesson every fourth week
  - both private and group lessons every week
  - private and group lessons on alternating weeks
- ◆ group lessons as the only form of instruction
  - partner lessons
  - partner/group combination lessons for groups of four students
  - group lessons every week

## Performance Classes

Historically, the master class was the first mode of group teaching. In a master class, a teacher offers interpretive ideas to a performer as an audience watches. Independent teachers have applied that same mode of teaching in weekly or monthly performance classes. These classes expose students to larger amounts of repertoire and prepare them for formal performances.

In traditional master classes, the audience (other students) are generally passive learners. However, performance classes for pre-college-age students are more effective if students are active learners. Students can watch the score while the piece is performed. Following the performance, students can be asked to comment on the playing, before the teacher begins to work with the performer. Students should be encouraged to make positive comments, followed by constructive ideas. For elementary performance classes, this is most effective when each student listens for one specific element, such as the following:

- ◆ rhythm
- ◆ correct notes
- ◆ articulation
- ◆ dynamics, phrasing and other musical aspects

Since each student has a specific focus, all students can participate in the critique, not just the more outgoing ones. When students are older, the teacher can expand the auditors' involvement by including them in the actual teaching. As the teacher works with the performer, the listeners can be asked questions, such as the following:

- ♦ What do you think of the staccatos?
- ♦ Could you hear the crescendo?
- ♦ Was this performance better?
- ♦ How could it be even better?

For all levels, the master class format is effective when all participants study the score prior to the performance. Students can be asked to describe what they see on the page relating to various musical elements, including the following:

- ♦ time signature
- ♦ key signature
- ♦ tempo terms
- ♦ the range of keyboard played
- ♦ accidentals
- ♦ rests
- ♦ dynamics
- ♦ articulation
- ♦ clef changes
- ♦ texture

Teachers can lead students to make such observations by asking questions such as, "Do you see a lot of rests?" or "How much of the keyboard is used?" Based on their observations, students can be asked what kind of sounds they might expect to hear, leading to a discussion of the character or mood of the piece. At the conclusion of the performance, the teacher can ask the listeners whether that mood was effectively communicated in the performance. This format allows all the students to learn, not just the performer.

For example, if one student is playing "A Little Piece (*Stückchen*)" (see example 9.1), the other students might make the following observations:

- ♦ The piece is in  $\frac{4}{4}$  (C) time.
- ♦ The left hand has eighth notes and the right hand has quarter notes.
- ♦ Half notes are the only other note value.
- ♦ There are many slur markings.
- ♦ The piece has a moderate tempo.
- ♦ The piece is generally quiet throughout.
- ♦ Both hands are in the treble clef throughout.
- ♦ There are two sections.
- ♦ There are four phrases in each section.
- ♦ The melody is in the right hand.
- ♦ The piece begins with an incomplete measure and all phrases begin with upbeats.

### *Group Lessons Every Week*

In this format, three or more students learn in a group setting as the sole form of instruction. Group teaching often occurs in a digital piano lab equipped with a keyboard for each student. Group lessons maximize the teaching time and the teacher's income. Students receive the benefits of group instruction and more instruction time for less money.

Teachers should plan many activities; however, they should not feel as though they must cover everything they have planned. Rather, they should make sure that each concept is presented in sufficient depth so that students have a clear understanding of the ideas and are able to practice effectively.

### Planning Considerations for Group-Only Lessons

Group lessons will be easier to teach if logistical matters have been considered, such as the following:

- ◆ Classes should have only as many students as space and equipment permit and the individual teacher can manage.
- ◆ Classes for younger students should have fewer students than classes for older students since younger students often require more attention.
- ◆ Groups past elementary levels using only group instruction may have too few students to be economically viable.
- ◆ All students should stay together in a basic text or method series, but more or less challenging supplementary material can be assigned to individual students as needed.

### Conducting the Lesson

Specific group-teaching strategies are essential for successful group lessons. These strategies include the following:

- ◆ Material, instructions and the pace of the lesson should be directed to the average student. (If lessons are directed to the slower student, other students may become restless and bored. If lessons are directed to the fastest student, the other students may become discouraged.)
- ◆ Activities should be planned so that all students, even the slower ones, can be successful some of the time.
- ◆ Measures of all pieces common to the group should be numbered to facilitate quick reference during the lesson.
- ◆ A minimum amount of time (if any) should be spent helping individual students during class time.
- ◆ Teachers should capture the attention of all the students before beginning any new activity.
- ◆ Teachers must constantly observe student behavior and response and be aware of the each student's level of understanding.

- ◆ Deviating from the lesson plan is essential when dictated by student response. As teachers become more adept in group teaching, they will be able to adjust the lesson plan quickly.
- ◆ High-energy activities alternated with quieter ones and activities at the piano alternated with activities away from the piano provide variety in the lesson and help control student behavior.
- ◆ Routinely used verbal cues help students begin and end activities together, play together and maintain a steady beat.

### Keeping All Students Active During the Whole Lesson

Effective group lessons keep all students active all of the time, but individual students may have different tasks during any given activity, such as the following:

- ◆ As one student plays a piece, the others can sing along, clap or tap the rhythm, or improvise an accompaniment.
- ◆ Occasionally, an individual's technical problem can be worked on by the group, to the benefit of all.
- ◆ Each activity should involve all students at their individual level of ability and should have a variety of possible verbal or playing responses, such as the following:
  - the slower students play the easier of the two hands
  - the average students play the more difficult hand
  - the faster students play hands together
- ◆ To ensure that all students have had sufficient reinforcement, the teacher can ask, "Who wants to do it again?" If any student wishes to repeat the activity, all students would repeat the task together. Students are sometimes reluctant to ask for help unless the teacher gives them an opportunity to request it.

### Classroom Management

When there are well-planned lessons, behavioral problems rarely arise. Most negative behavior can be eliminated if the teacher sets the tone at the very first lesson. The teacher can employ the following tools for effective classroom management and to help ensure successful lessons:

- ◆ Start and end lessons promptly.
- ◆ Prepare a thoroughly organized lesson plan for each class.
- ◆ Know the lesson plan and music well enough to allow for close observation of students.
- ◆ Establish class routines and rules to eliminate confusion and unruly behavior. For example, say "no playing the piano while the teacher is talking," and "raise your hand only to give responses."



- ◆ Give affirmation for a student's positive behavior to help eliminate negative behavior by others.
- ◆ Use an approach that is warm and friendly, yet businesslike in that it does not allow for nonsense.
- ◆ Project your voice and use a positive tone.
- ◆ Give simple and direct instructions.
- ◆ Insist upon eye contact and observe student behavior carefully.

### Use of Lesson Time

More will be learned when lesson time is used wisely. Time can be saved by implementing the following teaching strategies:

- ◆ Have the students trade and correct their written homework assignments during the lesson time.
- ◆ Ask students to play their best-prepared or favorite pieces from the assignment.
- ◆ During individual or shared board activities, have one student complete the task while another corrects the work.

### Developing Stimulating Lessons

Excitement, focused learning and healthy competition can be achieved as follows:

- ◆ Create a contest and assign points to students who succeed with various tasks.
- ◆ Divide the group into competing teams for the various activities.

## **EQUIPMENT, MATERIALS AND GAMES**

Group lessons are most effective when a variety of equipment, materials, games and other activities are used to enhance the learning.

### **Equipment**

The equipment needed for group teaching depends on the age and number of students in the class. One piano is sufficient for small groups. For larger groups, each student should have a keyboard. While not as effective, silent keyboards can be used successfully by skilled teachers.

Variety and interest can be added to group lessons by using additional equipment, such as the following:

- ◆ a sequencer to play General MIDI disks
- ◆ a compact disc player
- ◆ writing boards (dry-erase boards)
- ◆ a velcro® board and/or easel

- ◆ an overhead projector
- ◆ games and visual aids
- ◆ a video recorder and monitor

## Materials

Any method book or materials can be used for group lessons if the teacher plans carefully. For groups that meet monthly, students may not use their regular weekly lesson materials and may have separate theory, ear training or other books specifically for the group. For groups that meet weekly or bi-weekly, a regular piano method or a series designed especially for group teaching may be used. Since such group piano series usually include all materials in one book, students don't have to switch from one book to another during class as they move among the various activities. These activities may include the following:

- ◆ solo and ensemble repertoire
- ◆ technique
- ◆ theory
- ◆ sight-reading and ear training
- ◆ rhythm drills
- ◆ composition and improvisation

Teachers can also find a wealth of ideas for activities in college group-piano texts.

## Games

Games are an important part of group teaching for reinforcing musical concepts. A variety of board and card games can be purchased or created by the teacher. Commercially developed games that reinforce note values, musical symbols, rhythms, and note names are available from music stores, music catalogs and Internet sites. It is easy to make musical games that teach and drill important concepts patterned after familiar children's games. To reinforce key signatures, for example, a set of dominos can be altered by taping the letter name of a key to one half of each domino tile. Students match the key-name half of one tile to the correct number of dots on half of another tile; the dots represent the number of sharps or flats in the key signature (see example 9.2). An occasional group lesson can be a game lesson in which students rotate from game to game every 15 to 30 minutes.

**Example 9.2** Dominos adapted for a key signature identification game

