

UNLOCKING CHILDREN'S MUSICAL POTENTIAL WITH THE PIANO - article in Tomorrow's Child Magazine, End of School, 2005. By Christine Bemko Kril

Leave a piano keyboard open and it draws children like a magnet. Even the smallest child responds to the magical possibilities of those 88 gleaming black and white keys. The interest and the potential are there, but how do you unlock that potential?

“The first trial with music at the keyboard should be a happy experience and, by all the rules and regulations of modern education, should deal with music itself and not an approach to it. This can happen if the only reason for touching the keyboard is to bring to life a familiar melody.When tone is the medium what else is there to guide the learning, process, except: How does it sound?”
(Abby Whiteside, Mastering the Chopin Etudes)

According to the highly regarded early childhood education authority Jean Piaget, children learn ‘organically’, moving from simple to complex by adding to and building on the storehouse of information they already have acquired. New information has to be readily applicable to the child’s understanding of their known world, and arise as a natural outgrowth of that understanding.

This process is followed when children learn to speak. They begin by creating vocal sounds and imitate sounds produced by others, move on to understanding sounds and making sounds that are understood, and finally they string those sounds together for complete thoughts and conversation. Beginning readers follow the same organic process: first learning the alphabet and the sound of each letter, moving on to string letters together to create words, and then string words together for meaningful sentences.

When this learning model is applied to the study of the piano we see children play and identify key sounds, arrange those sounds into understandable sequences, and move on to position the sequences into musical expression or songs, creating music that is understandable and meaningful to themselves and others. Following this natural progression forms a strong foundation for future musical growth.

The I Can Do It! Piano Book, First Book of Favorite Songs is based on this learning model. It was developed and first used at a Montessori School in Kailua, Hawaii, with pre-school children who were interested in the piano but seemed too young for the music notation system. The natural learning progression quickly became evident as children first learned key names and keyboard geography, started understanding hand and finger technique, and began playing easy, well-known melodies. Here the groundwork was being laid for learning the ‘new language’ of music notation. The children enjoyed this learning process greatly and had a wonderful feeling of success. Older beginners also enjoyed the easy and fun success the book provided. Rather than focusing on notation, the focus became music and the piano.

A common thread in early music education in the Montessori environment and other movements, including Suzuki, Orff, and Kodaly, is that a foundation in aural and rhythmic understanding is necessary in order to proceed successfully. Aural understanding is dependent upon knowledge of melodic/song material – heard and learned through play and repetition. Rhythmic understanding comes from a