

What I Think the Multiple Piano Festival Teaches

Of all the incentive programs I've used with my students over these last 50 years of teaching (Achievement Day, Guild Auditions, CSMTA Competitions, Federated Festival, my own Practicing Contest as well as 4 studio recitals per year),

BAMTA's Multiple Piano Festival has been the incentive event my students stick with the longest. Even after they think they've become too grown up to sign up for Achievement Day, Guild Auditions, or the Federated Festival, and are too caught up with other activities to put in the time needed to prepare for competition events, they seem to want to play in Multiple Piano



Festival. Sometimes they even come back after they graduate from high school to play with the adults and alums. There is something about the fun of making music up on that big stage, playing on a freshly tuned piano, with a dozen or more other pianists, that's worth their time. I personally love collaborative playing the most. So, to me, the Multiple Piano Festival is simply **the most fun I can have playing the piano!**

When the idea of a multiple piano event occurred to me back in 1984, I wasn't looking for a way to inspire my piano students. At the time, my day job was marketing director of a new piano store in Niwot called Chris Finger Pianos. I was simply looking for a way to help people find the little northern Colorado town where the store was located. All these years later, however, the event has become the foundation of much of my teaching, a way to teach many of the skills I think are necessary to become a well-rounded musician. Let me name a few:

PLAYING WITH A METRONOME

For some students, this is intuitive. For others, however, letting a device outside yourself control your speed and adherence to a specific tempo is VERY difficult. Students who successfully audition for MPF are required to demonstrate their ability to play with a metronome. And metronome work is a HUGE part of my teaching.

CONTINUITY

Because pianists usually practice alone and perform alone, I find that perhaps the most difficult thing for me to teach is the ability to keep going, no matter what! ANY kind of ensemble experience requires that you not stop and try to correct your mistakes in the middle of a performance. Playing in the MPF requires a commitment to hours practicing with recordings. Then more hours learning to share the keyboard with your partner. And if you make it past the auditions, you practice even more with other pianists and a conductor. All this focused practice adds “continuity” to the vocabulary of musical skills better than any other experience I can provide.

PAGE TURNING

Really? You’re probably saying! But if you’re ever going to get to have the fun of playing in an ensemble, you’re going to need to figure out how to turn your own pages. While this is a skill that may seem intuitive, we pianists who play collaboratively know how hard it is to decide exactly *where* to allow *which* hand to leave the keyboard so we miss the fewest notes. Really!

RESPONSIBILITY TO OTHERS

Unlike in private lessons where unpreparedness is more easily forgiven, it is not acceptable to cop out on your partner once you’ve committed to learning a duet. I have found peer pressure, in the best sense, through duet playing, to be a powerful incentive to completing a piece.

SIGHT READING and BETTER TECHNIQUE, FASTER

Often, in solo playing, we get locked into mastering just one way of playing a piece. In duet playing, this is simply not an option. Adaptability is essential. Strong sightreading skills make us more adaptable. Adaptability, in my opinion, is the foundation of a strong technique.

FOLLOWING AN EXTERNAL TEMPO

Playing in an ensemble means careful listening and keeping one eye on the conductor, while keeping an eye on the music and occasionally watching your hands. There’s a lot going on with ensemble playing. This is multi-tasking at its best. Hence, better musicians AND smarter people!

TECHNIQUE

In my studio, most students want to sign up for a level higher than the one they played the previous year. Choosing music just a little harder makes you work harder, and when you work harder, you learn how to work harder. Simple as that!

The following quote, by 1997 Van Cliburn Gold Medalist Jon Nakamatsu, says it best:

“The piano is the most independent of all the instruments. You can play by yourself forever and not even scratch the surface of the existing repertoire. And that’s, I think, also a problem, that leads to people basically locking themselves in a practice room learning sonatas and concertos and never really understanding what it is to play with other people. And music is so social – I think it’s integral. *My teacher, fortunately, felt this way and had me start playing with others when I was quite young. And even if it was just playing with a fellow student or reading through things at the start, you already got a sense of what it was like to depend on somebody else, or to understand what was going on in a part that wasn’t your own, and that develops all types of skills including listening and higher reasoning, the understanding of dynamics in a group. I was lucky...*”

Come join us for **BAMTA’s 37th MULTIPLE PIANO FESTIVAL**. You and your students can be lucky too!

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