



PIANO TEACHER MARK MILLER AND HIS KEYS TO SUCCESS

- By Lisa Stamos -

“It makes me feel great to bring music into people’s lives, especially when they didn’t believe it would be possible,” says local musician and piano teacher Mark Miller. He finds that having the ability to help improve his students’ quality of life through music is extremely rewarding. There are about 20 million pianos in America, and most are busy collecting dust, as the well-intentioned owners get bored quickly without any results during their lessons, and they give up. Mark Miller is here to change all of that. It’s about time.

Barrington piano teacher Mark Miller knows no boundaries when it comes to how, and where, his unique teaching methods can help people learn to play the piano. It doesn’t matter where his students live—the country or the time zone—as long as they have a desire to learn and have access to a telephone, the Internet, and a piano.

Unlike the structure of traditional piano lessons, Miller “meets” his students remotely—most often by phone. He talks them through the lessons while they play the piano on the other end. Most of Miller’s students don’t actually meet him face to face, as his reach includes students as far away as England, Hong Kong, Australia, and Ireland. He also has a strong base of students throughout the United States, including a six-year-old from California who is traveling the world with her parents with Miller’s piano lessons following her wherever she goes.

Even those with physical handicaps such as blindness or the use of one arm have sought out Miller’s music lessons. They are simply overjoyed to find that he can retrofit his unique custom methods to teach them with their particular needs.

From his studio in Barrington, Miller can teach a student situated anywhere in the world to play the piano. For those who don’t believe it’s possible, or had given up the keys once before, Miller’s method allows them to strike familiar chords in no time.

The key to piano-playing success, at least for those who aren’t truly gifted in musical note reading, is to get people to play something—hopefully a song—quickly. Miller knows this keenly and has found a way to get his students playing chords and then full songs within the first or second lesson. By delivering the song to the student within one or two lessons, Miller secures the interest and the future success of the student. The music arrives just in time.

Practicing patterns

Some piano students experience years of lessons, yet they still can’t play anything. Traditional piano lessons generally teach the individual notes and then require a focus on playing scales. That is similar to the rote learning of the alphabet over and over without teaching word structures. Miller realized with his extensive training in music theory that this doesn’t work, because it’s like teaching the pupil to learn how to talk in letters.

“You don’t call your friend by the letters of his or her name,” says Miller, “you say the name—a word built from the letters. It’s a concept and it has a connotation. We learn and are taught to quickly build words from our alphabet letters. Then, we arrange those words into phrases and sentences. It should be no different in playing the piano.” Then,

FOUND IN TRANSLATION



Miller explains, “You move from learning the words—in my method, a chord is a word—to talking in full sentences; that is, playing a song.” The average person’s motivation is greatly enhanced if he or she can play a song with the teacher creating the time compression necessary to get there faster. It gives tremendous satisfaction and motivation to keep going.

Talking with chords

Most piano instruction begins with classical music forms, which can be more difficult to learn. Classical music does not use chord symbols (such as you might find in contemporary guitar or piano music books), so Miller doesn’t start lessons there. Instead of notating with chord symbols, classical composers such as Chopin or Bach require both hands to play individual notes simultaneously. Classical instruction also attempts to teach the student to read two different musical systems—bass and treble clefs—simultaneously. This leads to frustration and then quitting somewhere along the way in the lessons. For most piano students, playing classical music is a long-term proposition.

Instead, Miller focuses on teaching jazz to get quick results. “Western music is a descendant of European classical music,” he says. “But Western music—jazz, blues, and contemporary selections—use chords. I teach chords with the left hand so the right hand can focus on building the melody,” explains Miller. He uses this analogy: In our alphabet, there are 26 letters to

learn. On the piano, there are really only 12 letters—the seven white and five black keys that comprise the 12 notes in a scale, which is the foundation for all music. On the keyboard, every eighth white key or note just repeats all over again. Since we learn through patterns, learning chords, in which three or more notes are played together, you can move into the patterns that make up songs.

Found in translation

Most of Miller’s students can play the individual notes—an arbitrary process that basically has them recognizing and stating the letters of the musical alphabet. But they don’t understand the underpinnings or infrastructure of the musical language. They haven’t been taught the relationship between the notes based on the mathematical movement of musical harmonies. Miller says that the piano is the quintessential harmonic instrument that lends to musical learning. “The harmonic patterns found in jazz unlock the mystery of the song,” he explains.

The structural basis for all Western music is the tension in the dominant chords, which move to a resolution or relative stability through the calmness of the major chords. Chords have personalities: the major chords (which are harmonic and “easier” on the ear) are the nouns, and the minor chords (which are more discordant and colorful) serve as adjectives. Miller simply translates piano playing into the language form we already know—one full

H E A R I N G I S B E L I E V I N G

of syntax and grammatical foundations. It's in the chords and their predictable relationships—based on the mathematical circle of fifths—where Miller's students are taught how to play.

A musical quality of life

The technology of the Internet and telephone enables Miller to offer his distance learning piano lessons to busy students of any age. It's his ability to hear the music that makes this possible. "My ears are my eyes," says Miller of his teaching style.

Ruth Rothstein, a Chicago-based student, never played a piano until she started lessons with Miller in her early 80s. "It's the method Mark has created that works, and it's fun," Rothstein says of her telephone-based lessons. "Mark is a terrific teacher, and he has taught me chords that I can then later convert to notes. I've never even met Mark, but I've seen his photo on his Web site."

Kay Breslin of Barrington believes that her ability to play the piano is now a life-saver. Trained in classical music as a child, Breslin thoroughly enjoyed filling her home and life with the music from her piano. She was studying jazz with Miller, with lessons at her home, but then an AVM (arteriovenous malformation, which is similar to a brain aneurism) left her paralyzed on the left side of her body. She could no longer use her left arm or hand. Years passed, and she had become resigned to the fact that she could no longer play piano with only one hand available.

By chance, Breslin met up again with Miller at a local restaurant years later. He encouraged her to come back to her lessons, though she resisted. A friend of Breslin's commissioned Miller to make a one-handed arrangement for her. "No one can believe I'm playing with one hand," she exclaims. "The sound is so incredible! I have been able to play the 40 custom arrangements that Mark has prepared for me, two of which are classical," she says. "Playing

the piano is one area where I can forget that anything is physically wrong with me," she adds. "Music has saved my life. I play for two hours a day and don't know how I'd fill that void otherwise."

Kay's story led to the success of another of Miller's students. A successful corporate communications designer, Seattle-based Stephen Black was flying when he suffered a DVT (deep vein thrombosis) which caused a stroke that paralyzed his left side.

"I can't walk, I can't drive, and I am not able to multitask at all," he explains. But as someone who "noodled around" with the piano in the past, Black said he wanted to learn some jazz tunes. "So I searched online for one-handed piano playing when Mark's Web site came up," he says. "I viewed a video clip of Kay playing piano, and I just lost it. I said to myself, 'What an answer.'"

Black feels that he's been given the gift of reclaiming his life.

Hearing is believing

Carol Rosofsky, a grandmother of nine, learned about Miller while listening to a story about him on WBEZ-FM in Chicago. "My happiest day of the week is when I have my piano lesson with Mark," she says with enthusiasm. "There is no such thing as a bad lesson. It's a relief to feel you can learn and not be intimidated about making mistakes."

Rosofsky enjoys the opportunity to "argue points about her lessons" with Miller, which she feels is one of the ways he is responsive to her needs. They constantly reassess and evaluate her progress, and they learn from each other.

"This has been a revelation for me—and a rewarding one at that—that I can live in Lincoln Park [Chicago], have piano lessons by phone from someone in Barrington, and find, feel, name and play the chords," Rosofsky says. "It's a breakthrough." 🎵



For more information about Mark Miller and Mark Miller Piano Studios, visit www.pianoweb.com or call 847-382-6346.