

Think you don't have rhythm?

Simply Music piano lessons will teach you otherwise

By ZACHARY McDONALD
LEADER STAFF WRITER

There is a scene in "The Jerk" where Steve Martin is trying to snap his fingers to the rhythm of his "mother" singing, but he just doesn't have any rhythm and he looks like he's in pain from the effort of trying to keep a beat.

Most people would say there isn't a musical bone in his body. But any good Simply Music teacher would tell you that Steve is just as musical as Kenny G, he just hasn't realized it yet.

In an instructional video given to new

piano students, Simply Music founder Neil Moore says that "every one of us is deeply and profoundly musical."

He breaks the sentence "I haven't got a musical bone in my body" down into sections and demonstrates the hidden rhythm of the words that betrays the intent of the sentence. He adds that walking has a constant rhythm that one must consciously try to disrupt, demonstrating the innate musicality of every person.

I took two Simply Music piano lessons from Anne Smith of Bellevue in an effort to understand why these piano lessons are
SEE PIANO, PAGE A10

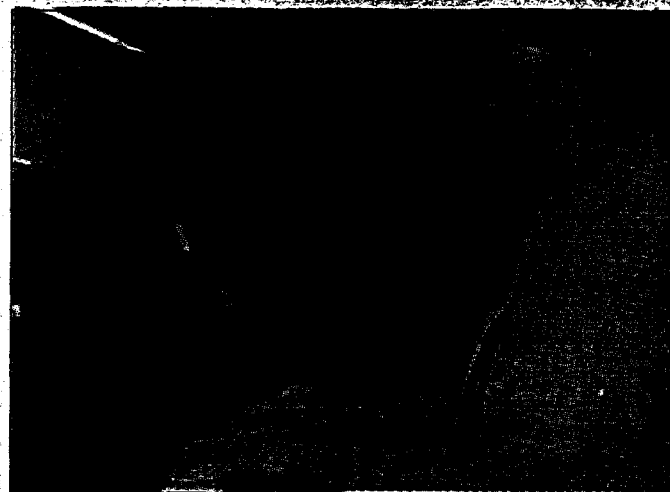


Photo by Zachary McDonald

Anne Smith of Bellevue demonstrates they way Simply Music relies more on shapes and patterns on the piano keys than music.

Piano lessons require students to talk with their hands

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1
different from the lessons I abandoned after fifth grade.

It turns out, a whole lot is different.

For starters, I didn't read any music during my lessons. Smith said Simply Music students don't read any music for the first year.

"We wait until we can get the students playing 30 to 50 songs with both hands on the keyboard," she said, "then we introduce the reading process."

She compares it to a child learning to read.

"Parents don't require that that child learn how to read and spell before they allow him to talk."

So I was "talking" with both hands by the end of my first lesson. And the surprising part was, I didn't need any materials or music—or even an instru-

ment—to practice.

"Ode to Joy" was one of two songs I learned first. Smith explained the movements of my right hand as a "sentence." My pinky was named "top," middle finger named "middle," and thumb named "bottom."

To play "Ode to Joy," I placed my hand on five keys with my thumb on middle C, and played the sentence, "Middle to top, top to bottom, bottom to middle."

There's no point in even looking at the book because the "Ode" page has only a series of three short diagonal lines that wouldn't make any sense without a teacher explaining them.

And once Smith explained what the lines meant, there was no need to look at them again. I could sit at my desk moving my fingers in that order and say I

was practicing—with no piano in sight.

So is there a downside to Simply Music? The only problem I thought might exist is making the move from not reading music to reading after a year. You spend the entire first year learning to play by looking at your fingers and remembering the shapes they make.

It might be just like taking a computer keyboarding class after you've spent years using two fingers and picking out letters. It takes a while to acclimate yourself to the idea that you don't have to look at the keyboard once you are familiar with where to place your hands and what keys are where.

It takes a whole semester to familiarize yourself with a computer keyboard, so it will take a little longer to know where your hands should go on a piano

without looking too often. They don't even talk about quarter notes, half notes, and time or key signatures for the first year, so there are quite a few new things to learn a year into it.

Janita Pavelka, who teaches Simply Music lessons in Olde Towne Bellevue, said the transition to reading is easier than if the student had been reading from the beginning.

"[In Simply Music], we break everything down into single-thought processes and start with reading rhythm first," she said.

"When students are learning by the reading-based approach, they can be reading up to seven languages at once. The student is concerned with correct rhythm, notes, dynamics, fingering, order and continuity, lyrics and pedaling. It can be overwhelming for many stu-

dents and lead to information overload to the brain."

Yet some traditional teachers say Simply Music just delays the inevitable.

"Eventually they have to learn to read music," said Nancy Neely, who teaches piano traditionally in Papillion. "My adult students in a short time are reading music and playing chords with the melody line."

But the primary focus of Simply Music seems to be teaching children who may not have the discipline or patience to learn what a bunch of dots on a page mean before learning to play.

Neil Moore came up with Simply Music when someone asked him if he could teach a blind 8-year-old child to play. Using shapes and patterns as the basis of the lessons, the boy made surprising progress and,

after four months, began teaching his 4-year-old sister, also blind, to play.

Those lessons Moore gave the blind boy provided a basis for Simply Music that still pervades every lesson.

When Smith taught me a song, before I even touched the keyboard, she had me hold up my right hand and touch with my left hand the fingers I would be using in the correct order.

"It's just another sensory input to your brain to help you learn this," Smith said.

There are roughly 250 Simply Music teachers in the world. Some states don't have any, but Bellevue alone has two—Smith, who lives in west Bellevue, and Pavelka, who lives in Olde Towne.

For more information or to find a teacher, go to www.omahapiano.com.