

Keys to success

By STEPHANIE QUEEN
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Learning the piano doesn't have to be hard. That's what Janita Pavelka tells her students when they come to piano lessons at her house every week, and she isn't just saying it because she is a teacher. She knows.

Pavelka teaches Simply Music, an Australian-based piano teaching method that goes straight to the "fun stuff." The program teaches students to learn the principles of music and to play songs before ever reading a single note on a treble clef.

"I teach them songs from the very first lesson," said Pavelka, a classically trained pianist.

She said she used to teach piano lessons with the traditional approach, which is reading-based.

"It would break my heart when they would quit," Pavelka said. "I want them to love piano, to have a passion for it."

She heard about Simply Music from a friend several years ago.

"At first, I was skeptical," she said. "But once I was sold, I was sold. I found it much easier."

Pavelka went through training in the program two years ago. She still has some difficulty with it because she learned to play by reading music, and Simply Music does not have students learning to read music until they are nearly through their first year.

Reading music, Pavelka said, requires a student to look at seven different "languages" at once, notes, rhythm, dynamics, lyrics, fingering, pedal, and order and continuity.

With Simply Music's approach, a student learns one language at a time, breaking each into a single thought process that will eventually bring all seven together into one track.

A typical lesson is about an hour long, and instead of individual lessons, many of them are done in a group setting. Pavelka teaches the students patterns or "sentences" on the keyboard, which will allow a student to change key signatures. After a student learns the pattern for one hand, they then learn the pattern for the second hand. In the end, a student puts the two "sentences" together to play song.

"You're actually playing real music," she will tell her students.

Pavelka lets the students watch her fingering, and then has the children mimic what she has done, one at a time, each getting their chance to play on the keyboard. They can play this finger pattern anywhere on the piano, which teaches them how to transpose songs anywhere and in any key.

Pavelka also enjoys letting children sing along as they play, which teaches them what songs can mean and shows them a different aspect of the music.

Much of Simply Music is taught by instruc-

tional videos students can take home. Parents are encouraged to get involved with their children's lessons, from monitoring their child's home practice session, to even learning to play alongside their child so they can experience it together.

Karen Starks' two daughters have been taking lessons from Pavelka for about a year and she has learned right along with them. Her daughter Kaylin, 7, admits to getting bored with playing sometimes, hoping to someday take up



Photo by Stephanie Queen
Janita Pavelka helps Taylor Starks, 10.

the guitar. "They do get bored with it, but I tell them to keep at it," Karen said. "It helps to be learning new songs all of the time. It keeps them interested."

Tami Classen loves the progress her sons are making with Simply Music. Classen took traditional lessons for 10 years and is pleased with the fact that her sons are enjoying their lessons and are progressing so fast in just one year.

"They have no fear of moving around and up and down the keyboard," Classen said. "We love to sing together as they already chord out familiar songs."

The songs first-year students can play include classical pieces such as "Sonata in C," contemporary songs, accompaniments and the blues.

Pavelka is one of only three teachers in the Omaha area who teaches Simply Music. She said she enjoys the method of teaching because it helps any student, no matter their perceived musical ability, to play and enjoy music.

"People say 'I don't have a musical bone in my body,'" she said. "But we're all deeply and profoundly musical. Therefore, we can teach you piano."



Photos by Stephanie Queen

Janita Pavelka teaches a group of students fingering on cardboard keyboards. From left: Pavelka, Tyler Classen, 10, Trent Classen, 9, Kaylin Starks, 7, and Taylor Starks. Tami Classen watches her son's lessons in the background.

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