

# The Piano Partnership Lesson

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The private lesson is and has been the hallmark of piano study. The student goes to the lesson alone and practices in isolation. There is little opportunity to meet with friends who play the piano. How can this isolated experience of piano study be enhanced? In an effort to bridge the gap between the private and the group piano lesson, Music Works Academy has utilized the partnership lesson for ten years as an optimal lesson format. This dyad – a musical ‘team’ effort – not only maintains the integrity of private study but also provides the missing ingredient, camaraderie.

The *well-matched* partner lesson is superior to the private lesson 99% of the time. Our goal is to match partners based on sex and grade in addition to the intrinsic qualities of motivation and aptitude. The extrinsic qualities of practice habits and learning styles are influenced dramatically by the addition of a piano partner. This ‘buddy system’ can thereby influence that critical intrinsic ingredient of motivation. The main criterion for a long-lasting partnership is the friendship that develops between the two students. The ‘piano friend’ relationship is unique and can last for years; in fact, one of our teachers has two partner students who played at each other’s wedding! Thirty years of teaching children helps in making wise decisions in pairing students. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts!

As studio teachers, our main musical competition is organized music such as band, orchestra or chorus. Whether the group musical experience is part of the school curriculum or a private program is not the critical factor. The bottom line is the group dynamic, getting together with friends to make music. This ‘team effort’ does not routinely happen in the piano studio. If the group musical experience is part of the school curriculum, students are recognized by the grading system for their time and effort. As teachers and parents, we urge our students to seriously apply themselves to the discipline and rigors of learning the piano. The rewards our piano students gain from piano study are mostly internal since schools and peers do not recognize their effort nor the time of their practice. Many times, their peers ridicule them for having to practice. In order to join the ranks of extra-curricular activities that have appeal and value to children, we, as piano teachers, must endeavor to create an atmosphere that not only stimulates musical development but also fosters a desire to learn and develop a skill over time. What better way to do this than create an instructional environment that eliminates the isolation that is inherent in daily practice?

What are the advantages of a piano partnership?

## 1) Performance Anxiety

Peer recognition and praise are strong motivating factors that encourage piano study. If a student has anxiety about performing, playing for a piano friend is the best way to work through this fear. On the other hand, for the student who loves to perform and always needs an audience, the partner lesson affords opportunity to perform *only when repertoire is ‘performance ready’*. The student who is inclined to ‘show off’ long before a piece is polished is required to pay attention to detail before he/she can play for his piano partner.

## 2) Realistic Expectations

A teacher demonstration of a song makes it look ‘so easy’ to play the piano. Reality hits when the student takes the piece home to practice. Watching a friend make mistakes, struggle with a difficult passage, and ask ‘stupid questions’ is a leveling experience and helps students’ have realistic expectations of themselves, independent from those critical “piano pros” in their life - their teacher, parents who play the piano, and siblings who excel at the piano.

## 3) Accountability

Being accountable for practice takes on a new dynamic when a friend is present. When a piano friend gets fifteen tickets because she practiced 300 minutes that week, a statement is made without any words from teacher or parent. When students hear each other perform at informal Keyboard Clubs, messages are being sent about accomplishment that are independent from teacher and parent. These nonverbal expectations are much stronger than parental nagging or even words of encouragement.

#### 4) Ensemble Experiences

Duet playing develops listening skills, an element easily ignored by the piano soloist. The ensemble experience lays the foundation for accompanying, a musical skill that depends on listening and being able to adjust performance in real time. A partner is a built-in ensemble friend. Playing with a partner is not like playing with the teacher who never makes mistakes and who can even cover up student errors. Neither is playing with a partner like performing with a background midi file. The midi file is a tool that offers absolutely no assistance for student error; neither does a midi file make unexpected mistakes that can throw a monkey wrench into a performance. The give and take that is an integral part of ensemble playing is a performance skill of listening in real time with the consequent development of being able to recover from errors as well as maintaining composure when the partner makes a mistake.

#### 5) Learning Styles

Piano study is a process of ups and downs. Even the most enthusiastic student has days or weeks when other activities are more important and piano practice assumes a lesser role. The enthusiasm of a partner can be contagious. A slump by one student can show a partner that 'down' times happen to everyone – it's normal! If both students are in a slump, it's much easier for the teacher and the students to cope in a productive manner. Student guilt or elaborate excuses are easier to handle. The unpracticed lesson is less intense, since the students share the unwanted spotlight. Two unpracticed students are less nerve wracking than one unpracticed student for the instructor as well.

Sometimes, it is more productive to partner students based on differences rather than similarities. The student of 'extremes', enthusiastically tackling challenging pieces one month and ready to quit a few months later, is easier to handle with a partner who is a more 'level' learner. Both benefit from each other's differences. Each student learns to identify and accept his/her own learning style. The more balanced student may not be as enthusiastic at times and benefits from experiencing his friend's excitement; the extreme student can benefit from the steadiness of his partner and not react to his own 'yo-yo' style of progression.

#### 4) Student Initiative

Many times, partners want to learn each other's repertoire; and after listening to one student's performance with attention to detail, the piece is already half-learned. This is a very different phenomenon than a sibling or a parent playing "your piece". The sense of accomplishment that comes with learning a piece without teacher/parent help is a major factor in keeping a student engaged in piano lessons. Ownership of the skill is mandatory. Ownership is an internal process and cannot be forced by the teacher or the parent. From 'owning' their skill, a student comes to love playing. And from this comes the joy of being able to play. And that's what all of us are trying to foster. One of the strongest ways to gain ownership is in listening and watching a friend play a piece and then learning it without help. The private lesson does not afford this opportunity at all.

#### 5) Peer Support

How many times has a student made a mistake and berated himself for a 'poor performance'. When this happens in front of a friend, the typical response is for the friend to relate a similar experience of when he did such and such in his piece. It is these shared experiences with peers that reinforce student's confidence in themselves in spite of their mistakes. Remember, the teacher and the parent are limited in their influence. Teachers are the epitome of perfection and never make stupid mistakes. The parent who has never tried to play the piano truly has no conception of what is involved in performing. This immediately makes any statements they have about piano totally irrelevant as far as the student is concerned.

The parent taking lessons and making mistakes is one of the best models for a child. Piano study in the family is a leveling experience for everyone, one of the few opportunities where the child and parent become "peers". Parents are not immune to playing wrong notes, getting frustrated, and not remembering what the teacher said. In this way, the parent becomes a 'comrade in arms' and the child readily recognizes the equality in their shared role as 'students'. The parent who has made a mistake in a performance can, in fact, become a tremendous support system for their child. But only those parents who dare risk time, money, frustration, and embarrassment are allowed this special place in the lives of their children. Ask any adult piano student what happens to them when they perform and you will get a surprisingly different view of a recital experience!

## 6) Friendship and Camaraderie

My most successful 'rescue' of two students this year has been two fourth grade girls: one underachiever (with an older sibling who excels and a parent who plays) and the other presenting herself in the lesson as a model student, organized and enthusiastic but telling her parents she hates piano and wants to quit. In a situation like this, my goal is to match personality, hoping to achieve a bond that goes beyond the piano lesson. My analysis of the personalities was 100% on target – the two girls are an incredible team. In fact, in looking over their worksheets this year, I find hearts drawn in each of their folders with "I love .....; she is my best friend." Now, we can get down to the business of piano and each of the girls will survive longer and better weather the ups and downs of piano lessons because of each other. We, as teachers and parents, cannot touch this element that is the core of a well-matched piano partnership.

The partnership lesson is a 'team' experience. Inherent in a team is responsibility. Students feel obligated to do their best and try their hardest when they are members of a team. Any student who has participated in an Ensemble Event can tell you about the 'team' effort it takes to play with twenty other students. Two seventh grade girls from different schools loved the piano lesson time because it was their weekly time to catch up on news from a different school. Incidentally, they were having loads of fun playing duets with each other. One wanted to join the basketball team; unfortunately, practices were on their lesson day. "Oh, but I can't leave my piano partner," was the comment when a new lesson time and partner was suggested. Basketball was placed on hold. Responsibility and obligation to the 'team' effort is yet another buffer for the many choices and conflicts that face our students today.

## 7) Team/student Teaching

- a) The most efficient use of a teacher's time is to have an opportunity to explain a concept once, not twice. This leaves time for more in-lesson drill and questions.
- b) The partnership provides a unique opportunity for a student to demonstrate and/or explain a concept to a peer. Playing 'teacher' reinforces a student's understanding of a concept and playing 'adjudicator' develops listening skills.
- c) The partnership provides an opportunity to observe self-directed practice habits. What happens when a student is left on his/her own for two minutes to 'warm-up' and practice a piece? The partnership lesson is a perfect way for teachers to become the proverbial 'fly on the wall' and passively evaluate a mini practice session of Student No. 1 while actively interacting with Student No. 2. We can evaluate what is truly happening during 'practice'. Our bird's-eye-view of bits and pieces of weekly practice habits during the partnership lesson becomes a golden opportunity to directly intervene and rework the student's understanding of 'practice with intent'. This 'in lesson' focused mini practice session becomes the model for self-directed at-home practice.

Our goal is to make the student self-sufficient. It is mandatory that a student 'own' his/her accomplishment. We, as piano teachers, have a unique opportunity to help students develop this critical study skill of focus with intent and the resulting pride of ownership that arises from accomplishment.

Not only can we passively watch the mini-practice session, but these few minutes also diffuse the intensity of the lesson. Students have an opportunity to breathe and regroup during these two or three minutes of 'warm-up' practice when the focus is on the partner.. The classic comment of the out-spoken adult student goes something like this: "Leave the room while I have a chance to remember what my fingers are supposed to do!" or "Quit hovering!" or "Go get some tea or go to the bathroom so I can think!" I believe all students feel this way at moments during the lesson.

As piano teachers, we are given a unique opportunity to work with your children in a special learning environment. We present a weekly challenge to gain mastery over elements that make demands on patience, encourage frustration, and require focus. Matching students will similarities or differences for a recognized goal gives us a unique opportunity to enhance self- esteem, build confidence and change behaviors while learning how to play the piano. Where else can your children receive a one/two teacher/student ratio, combining the benefits of peer and teacher-directed learning?