

PIANO LESSONS: PRIVATE VERSUS GROUP

The piano is arguably the ideal instrument for beginning music students. By merely striking a key, the performer is able to produce a perfect tone on pitch. In addition, the piano is the perfect solo instrument because it is capable of producing a multitude of sounds simultaneously. Furthermore, there is a tremendous, readily accessible body of literature available for study. Best of all, even if a child decides to switch to a different instrument at some point, piano study provides a wonderful foundation in the fundamentals of music—note reading, ear training, and music analysis.

But playing the piano is generally a solitary activity. Students practice alone and attend lessons alone. And while private lessons provide all the historical benefits of a tutorial relationship with the teacher, piano students can sometimes feel isolated. For this reason, it is beneficial to supplement private lessons with periodic opportunities to perform for peers and to work on music theory, ensemble playing and sight reading in a group setting. This combination intensifies students' exposure to all the elements of music and provides both individual attention and group reinforcement. According to Christopher Hepp, associate professor of music at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, "Numerous research studies show that students become more highly motivated and form a more positive attitude in the presence of a peer. Students seem to learn more quickly when they are with friends and have a good outlook about their studies." 1 In addition, it is important for parents to allow their children to participate in events such as Federated Festival, GCMTA Ensemble concert, and formal recitals. Having such goals to prepare for is generally inspiring and encouraging to children, and provides them with opportunities for sharing what they have learned.

However, for first or second year students, group lessons provide an alternative learning environment which has several powerful benefits over private instruction. Christopher Hepp says, "Beginners actually learn better in groups because they have opportunities to share ideas and even teach each other." 2 Since acquiring my digital keyboards last summer, I have successfully taught two beginner groups and have definitely found that to be the case. There is a healthy competition between the students, which helps motivate them to practice, and my students look forward to seeing each other and making music together every week. Furthermore, since we begin each class with a time for student performances, performance anxiety is minimal. My young beginners are very much looking forward to performing in the spring recital and participating in other studio events next year. An additional benefit of group lessons is the fact that students must really listen to one another; musical playing is more easily achieved, and ensemble playing is facilitated. Finally, I have found that in my beginner groups there is a spirit and energy that is impossible to achieve in a private lesson.

Anyone who doubts the benefits of group lessons should know that "not a single research study exists that proves private lessons are educationally superior to group instruction for first-year piano students." 3 And after a year or two of group lessons, it is generally necessary for students to move on to private lessons. But group lessons are a great way

to get students off to a great start on an activity that can last a lifetime—a basis for musical understanding and enjoyment and a valuable means of self-expression.