

# *Piano Lessons for Preschoolers*

## *By Warren Burger*

There are a number of advantages to teaching preschool-age students over waiting until they are older. Consider the following:

1. Parents who enroll very young children in music lessons are often more serious about the importance of a music education, and more likely to continue their child's lessons for an extended period.
2. Young children learn a new language, including music, more easily than older children. Their ability to memorize is at its peak, their aural skills are still in the development stage, and they are open and willing to learn new things without unreasonable expectations or resistance.
3. Preschool students can often be scheduled earlier in the day, well before the after-school hours.
4. Young children are not yet overwhelmed by all of the activities that demand so much time from their older counterparts.
5. The overall quality of your class improves by starting students earlier. Children who began lessons at an early age usually play with a fuller sound, stronger sense of pulse, higher degree of musical understanding, and greater security in performance.

With continuing budget cuts, we can no longer count on early childhood musical experiences to take place in school: preschool, kindergarten, or even first grade. Basic skills such as rhythm clapping, tone matching, and singing have become more and more the responsibility of the private teacher.

I have found preschoolers respond very well to activities in the following areas:

- ear training - high and low sounds, matching pitches, echo responses
- keyboard geography - high, low, middle; two and three black key groups
- rhythm - rhythm activities such as clapping back rhythm patterns and also reading simple rhythm notation
- reading readiness - cluster notation, right hand and left hand identification, interval recognition, pre-reading notation, and when ready, staff notation
- technic - hand position and freedom of movement over the entire keyboard
- creativity - free improvisation and improvisation based on word patterns

It is important for the teacher to keep in mind the child's limitations. Their large motor muscles are more developed than smaller muscles, so activities should involve the entire body, allow for free movement, and not require as much concentrated finger motion. Also, imperfect eye-hand coordination with this age group means that the teacher should minimize activities that require concentration on small muscle responses. Their attention span is also limited, so be prepared to plan many different

activities for each lesson. The teacher needs to be alert and prepared to be flexible as to what activity should be next.

Consider the special skills of the preschool student. Their imagination and inventiveness are at a peak, so they will enjoy any chance to express their imagination musically in the process of learning related skills. Their responses to rhythm and sound are also at a high level, so be sure to spend adequate time engaged in activities that use these skills. Young children also love repetition, which is ideal for using familiar songs and activities, and they will not mind variations on the same songs as a means for the teacher to introduce new musical elements.

The young child is open to feelings, and the piano teacher who is friendly, relaxed, and accepting of each child will receive in return an enthusiastic, affectionate, and cooperative response. Mistakes will be seen not as failure but rather as a reflection of what the child really understands. A sensitive teacher can find ways to incorporate the child's interests and skills into the lessons, and music-making will become a natural part of the child's life.

Should every teacher take on preschool-age children? Probably not, if you are not comfortable with the noise, activity, energy and patience (and more patience!) required to work with these children. But those who do take on the challenge, take the time to prepare, and relish observing the early learning processes will be greatly rewarded.