

Music Education Network - for The Visually Impaired -

An International Coalition of Parents, Educators, and Students

- MENVI Headquarters -

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- MENVI Student Member Article; Piano ensembles continued; Online Column Returns -

ARTICLES FROM OUR MEMBERS

Kelsey Nicolay is a new member of the MENVI network and we are very pleased to present her fine article from the valuable perspective of a music student. Kelsey is 21 years of age, and her instruments are voice, piano, and recorder. Student viewpoints are extremely useful for all of us, whether educator, student, or an administrator of music programs. We have decided to dedicate the opening portions of the journal to her article in its entirety, and hope that you will find it as delightful as we have. Welcome, Kelsey, and thank you on behalf of all members!

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Reflections and Advice from a Music Student

By Kelsey Nicolay

Music has always played an important role in my life. I knew from a young age that I wanted to take piano like most of my friends had. A teacher at the school where I was going to attend gave piano lessons, so I started with her. During that time, she informed me that I had perfect pitch. While this is helpful in some cases, it is not a skill that is essential. There are several lessons learned from this experience. First, while a teacher may feel that labeling the keys in braille is helpful, it is not an ideal method of learning the layout of the piano. There will not be braille available on every piano that students will encounter, so they may be placed at a severe disadvantage when they are older. Of course they can use any reference point that helps them to know where they are. Middle C is an excellent reference point because it is possible to gain an idea of where other notes are. However, some of the pieces a student plays will include notes that are sometimes an octave or more apart. This is one reason knowing the layout of the keyboard is essential.

A recent example of this occurred in a music class I took at college. The song required that I play a C major scale starting on the middle C, and ending on the C above that. I then had to very quickly jump to the next C and play a scale coming down from there. To accomplish this, I used the C that I just played as a reference, replacing my fifth finger with my thumb in order to reach the octave. Next, when playing the piano, the fingers need to be curved. This skill should be emphasized from the first lesson because it can be a difficult skill to master. Also, many teachers will emphasize theory. It is important to learn as much about the theory as possible. This includes understanding how print music is displayed, and beginning to read music braille as soon as the student is capable. Music reading helps the student learn the composition more accurately.

Finally, having good practice habits will serve invaluable. Since beginning students may learn music by ear, practice becomes even more important. If the piece is not practiced, it is possible to forget what was learned at the previous lesson, and it makes the learning process difficult.

As a teacher who is trying to teach a visually impaired beginner, there are several things to remember.

First, as my former piano teacher said: *“Every single student is an individual and learns in his or her own way. It’s vital that a teacher realizes as quickly as possible that a one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to failure, or at least won’t lead to good results with some of the students.”* She goes on to say that the teacher needs to discover what works for the student as lessons proceed. This is one of the most important pieces of advice for teachers.

Being part of a school choir is something that students should do if possible. It will help them develop their musical skills, as well as to develop socially. This too may present some challenges for the visually impaired choir member. One of the greatest challenges is having the proper guidance. Choir members need to

understand how to sing properly, including correct posture and vowel formation. It is in the student's best interest to learn these concepts as early as possible so that there is time to master them before college; also, if they desire to sing in college and community groups later in life. As stated earlier, braille music is important. Even if a student does not use it initially, it is still important to be working toward its use in later years. The student will then be prepared for subsequent singing experiences when music is more difficult to learn accurately by ear.

Some choirs will choose to incorporate movement into their songs. This will most likely happen at some point during a student's school choir. To deal with this effectively, students need to know their limits, but not to allow these limits to prevent them from participating. Instead, knowing how to modify some things will make it so that a student can still participate. For example, with footwork similar to line dancing, instead of doing a step fast, you might only do every other step. However, it is not advisable to not do the movement at all. Even if it is close to a concert, talk to the director and figure out how he or she can help you. For example, recently our women's chorus was to perform one piece where we swayed forth and back while clapping. To accomplish this, the girls on either side of me held on to me so I could feel what they were doing and then move with them.

Finally, some directors really do not understand how to work with a visually impaired member. Having good communication skills can often work to resolve difficulties. Warmup exercises are one situation where a director may not know what to do. It is the responsibility of the visually impaired student to talk with the director and explain the situation. Directors are more willing to respond if they know how to help. Not telling the director that you are confused will lead to never understanding the concepts emphasized. In a choral setting, having music prepared on time increases your independence. Although you can still learn without music, it will not help you outside of rehearsals. Therefore, requesting the music from the director before the first rehearsal will greatly help.

At some point, a student may choose to study voice – whether to participate in a choir, or simply to broaden musical awareness. While this can be good, there are some challenges that a vocalist may face. One of the biggest challenges is learning the technical aspects of lessons. A teacher may wonder how to teach the student about breathing and other basics of voice instruction. This situation can be resolved by allowing their student to use the sense of touch. As a former

voice teacher said: “As a teacher, the most important thing is to be patient and think *outside the box*. Don't just do what your voice teacher did with you, but really listen to, then observe your student while working in the way that is needed.” A recent example occurred with breathing. The teacher had difficulty explaining how to breathe correctly, so she wrapped a belt around the rib cage to more easily feel the expansion. Although singing rounded vowels can be difficult, it is not impossible for the student to master. The teacher just needs to find a way to explain so the student can understand it. For a rounded “oo” for example, the teacher might tell the student to pretend to kiss his or her finger, or some other metaphor that can be related to. This is far more effective than moving the mouth to create the shape for the student. If this is necessary, the teacher should always tell students what they will be doing and why. As stated earlier, braille music will greatly help blind vocalists. They will be able to learn music faster and more accurately than learning by ear alone.

Parents can help their children in music lessons by offering plenty of encouragement. They can also help to find the right teacher for their children, and with specific areas of their musical development. Some examples include helping a child with the learning of scales on the piano, or by simply encouraging more practice. If necessary, they can even advocate for their children in public school situations. For example, if the choir is required to learn choreography, they can either talk to the school choir director about how to teach it, or perhaps tutor their children themselves. A parent can also assist a voice student. This can include talking to the teacher beforehand to explain the student's visual impairment, and to offer suggestions and help after lessons have begun. Some ways to help include assisting the student to braille out song lyrics, encouraging practice, or if necessary, helping with technique should the teacher request it.

In conclusion, the benefits of braille music cannot be overemphasized. Students enjoy their lessons more knowing that they can play or sing anything they desire. Having good communication skills is also very important. Many problems in music lessons and in school can be solved with open lines of communication. Finally, parents should always be involved in music education for their children. Parents can teach them to advocate for themselves, whether or not they wish to continue studying music. These skills will serve a student for life, and can always help in a given situation whether it is specific to music or any other aspect of life.

TEACHING EARLY PIANO FORMATS TO A BLIND STUDENT ... Continued

Article adapted from *CTEBVI Journal* (formerly *CTEVH*), Winter 2010 – with permission

CTEBVI stands for *California Transcribers and Educators of the Blind and Visually Impaired*. It is open for membership to all who are interested in the educational welfare of blind individuals. www.ctebvi.org

You will find it quite fun to combine students into trio and quartet groups. Well before solo music is ready to be performed, these combinations can produce very impressive results even when using only one hand for each individual part. It is an ideal first training for exposure to band music, and for the experience of performing in an orchestra on any instrument. Following is an introductory trio composed by Stephanie Pieck taken from her book, *“Creative Ensembles for Beginning Musicians”* (www.dancingdots.com). The music is simple in nature, but strives to train students in rhythmic independence; thus the title, *“Rhythmical.”*

(Used here with permission)

RHYTHMICAL

Stephanie Pieck

The image displays a musical score for a three-part ensemble piece titled "Rhythmical" by Stephanie Pieck. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three systems of music. Each system contains three staves: a treble clef staff (top), a bass clef staff (middle), and another bass clef staff (bottom). The first system starts with a treble clef staff containing a sequence of quarter notes (C4, D4, E4, F4), followed by a bass clef staff with a sequence of quarter notes (G3, F3, E3, D3), and a final bass clef staff with a sequence of quarter notes (C3, D3, E3, F3). The second system continues with similar rhythmic patterns. The third system concludes the piece with a final cadence. The notation is simple, focusing on rhythmic independence for each part.

The braille for each of the three parts is shown separately. Following is a print facsimile for the braille version of the trio, *“Rhythmical.”* Simple notation is used in order to allow focus on the special skills of ensemble practice. You may even choose to make a student project of dictating the music for each part. The braille version for the complete collection can be obtained from the Library of Congress free of charge for your blind student. Print is available from Dancing Dots (www.dancingdots.com).

JUST FOR ONLINE MEMBERS

What's New at MENVI Web Services?

By Jared Rimer

There have been several changes here at MENVI Web Services within the last few months. I'd like to discuss those items that have changed, and what is new.

The first change is the Downloads section. MENVI web has removed this service, as it was not updated regularly and did not seem to be of popular use.

This service allowed users to receive copies of the rosters through a secure location that only they had access to. A notice about the service was posted in the news journal; those who had used the service did not respond, therefore, it has been discontinued.

Next: MENVI web is at a new home. No one would have noticed any interruption, but we were forced to change providers due to internal problems of a technical nature. There were several behind the scenes issues that required serious attention. The only way to solve them was to move to a new provider, which has now been completed.

Your network is growing, and MENVI Web Services strongly encourages members to keep contact information updated. One shining example is that of a member who is working on a special project. He required contact information for a member he needed to reach. He was forced to resort to extensive outside research, as the information in our members' roster was badly outdated. Please remember that MENVI web service does not include tracking our users down. If our members should find you in ways other than through the network, it then becomes their responsibility. We advise all members to contact MENVI web if there is a question about your information. We can even help you to update by filling out an application on your behalf so that all necessary channels are updated accurately.

Braille readers: Since MENVI can no longer provide braille rosters due to costs, our web team is on standby to assist you from 7 am to 10 pm Monday through Friday Pacific time. Give us a call, at 866-824-7876, and someone can assist.

I think that's about it for this issue. I'm working to save space here, and will go into more detail for our next issue.

Sincerely,
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