Teaching Piano

The winner of the 2010 China’s Got Talent was an armless pianist named Liu Wei. For the initial audition he played a piece entitled Mariage d’Amour made famous by Richard Clayderman. I watched the incredible performance and turned to my second son who also played the same piece at a middle school piano competition years ago, and asked him why someone playing with his toes did better than he did with his fingers.

Of course, I was joking, but here is the point: the goal of learning to play the piano is for enjoyment, be it for oneself, or for the benefit of an audience. If the audience enjoys the performance, then it’s a good performance. Many famed performers are also rumored to be unable to sight read (read the music notes from a piece of paper) such as the now defunct Luciano Pavarotti. My question is: does it really matter? He sang wonderfully, which, at the end of the day, is all that matters.

Though we as audience may agree to this very basic principle, piano teachers all start teaching little children by pulling out a book and proceeding to teach how to read music. Most children who beg their mothers to give them piano lessons usually do so because they fancy themselves banging away on those white and black keys entertaining an audience with their favorite songs. Well, within a month, after endless hours of trying to figure out what sound or rhythm those little black bean sprouts make, many of these kids give up and decide piano is not for them.

So, back in the mid twentieth century, a Japanese musician named Shinichi Suzuki “discovered” that playing musical instruments could be done by anyone, not just talented geniuses, just like ALL Japanese students could speak Japanese. Also, he realized that learning to play did not have to happen AFTER learning to read music. He applied this principle first to the teaching of violin, then to the piano. Western audiences were amazed by full orchestras of 5 or 6 year-olds playing advanced level music expressively and beautifully.

Despite the obvious success of the Suzuki method, the great majority of instrument teachers still use various methods, classical or modern, based on learning to sight read before playing. I stumbled upon this obvious principle years ago when my then toddler first child begged me to teach him piano. I had then been teaching piano for a number of years and thought, well, time for him to start. I clearly remember the first lesson: I, seated on his right, pointing at the notes on the book, asking him to play them on the piano, and he, playing almost everything wrong. Finally, frustrated, I looked at him, and lo and behold… the boy was not even looking at the book or at the piano keys! He had his head turned to the back, where his little brother was watching cartoons! Sometimes, it takes something close to home, like your own child, to drum the lesson home. He was not at all interested in reading music. So I closed the book and said to him, “Do like I do!” and proceeded to play Twinkle Twinkle Little Star with just the right hand. Amazingly, he picked it up immediately. I then added the left hand. He picked up within minutes. Then I explained how the hand position was to be through the song, and left him alone. He practiced non-stop the whole day. The next day, he ran to me, “Mama, Mama, I want another song!” and so, in just one week, he played by ear 7 songs, when many students older than he was took weeks to master just one.

This, actually, is no different than the Montessori principle of letting children direct their own learning. My son went on sprees of learning new pieces, then would go through dormant periods when he would practice old songs or just not even touch the piano. Then suddenly, he would be in a cycle of learning again. We see this happening for speech as well. Little toddlers sprout new words at the rate of 3-10 a day, then suddenly, nothing for a few months. Then, just as suddenly, strings of words again.

Do these children ever learn sight reading? Yes. When the teacher finds the child ready, start teaching how to read music. This can be done separately at first, and in time, be incorporated into the learning phase of instrumental instruction.