



Nine Biggest Myths About Piano Lessons

article by Michael Smolens ©2010

Myth #1

“I’m Just A Beginner, I Don’t Need A Really Experienced Piano Teacher.”

On the contrary, the biggest impact a very experienced teacher will have is on a “beginner”. In the long-run, this kind of teacher is actually more economical. You’ll develop a better foundation, more creativity, and the ability to become both musically independent and “your own teacher” as you take on bigger challenges. That teacher would be able to breakdown each area that you want to study, clearly and patiently, in an approach that is designed specifically for you. You’d get set-up physically at the piano so it feels very natural and efficient, and begin improvising early on. That teacher would also expose you to many artists who will inspire you and broaden your view of what you think is possible on the instrument.

Myth #2

“Regular Piano Practicing Is Next To Impossible With My Schedule.”

This is a frequently heard lament from the Modern Urban Dweller. Dealing with scheduling should be a first-lesson topic for any adult piano student. Yet, very few people coming out of our educational system (or private instruction) are equipped to powerfully design, observe, and acknowledge their piano practicing over a sustained period of time. When you can take note of your practicing distractions, create an effective Pre-Practice Routine, and identify your Optimal Practice Times, your progress at the piano will immediately shift into the “fast lane”.

Myth #3

“It’s Too Late For Me To Take-Up (or Return-To) Piano Lessons.”

My oldest student was 91 and he did great! (I didn’t start playing piano seriously until I entered college). The notion that you have to start at a very young age to be good is just nonsense. Exploring the music that YOU want to play right now will make a huge difference in the Motivation Dept. All of your musical experience — playing other instruments, singing, dancing, and listening — as well as your varied life experiences, will inevitably enrich your piano playing.

Nine Biggest Myths About Piano Lessons - page 2

Myth #4

“I’ve Studied For Years And My Rhythm On The Piano Is STILL Terrible.”

You probably weren’t ever told where rhythm is actually experienced in the body, how to keep a “subpulse”, or how to train each hand to do different tasks. You might not know how to breakdown ideas into manageable “subgroups” yet, or how to feel truly grounded at the keyboard. Or very likely, there are some fundamental aspects of your playing that never got addressed in all of those years of studying. Well, all of these techniques and concepts are all completely learnable with a seasoned coach.

Myth #5

“What If I Put In All Of This Time On The Piano & It Doesn’t Pan Out?”

First, consider this -- different people learn different aspects of piano playing at different speeds. In over three decades of teaching I have almost never seen a student learn each aspect of playing at the same rate. This is because music involves several different types of intelligences (seven to be exact) and everyone has a natural head-start in a couple of these, while one or more intelligence has typically been under-developed or nearly avoided. Secondly, we all carry lots of “baggage” that encourages us to compare ourselves with other piano players. 9 times out of 10 these comparisons will leave feeling frustrated and disempowered. When you compassionately uncover these unconscious patterns you will be amazed at how much easier it is to practice with creativity and clarity.

Myth #6

“Lessons Cost Too Much.”

Compared to other activities that will further your well-being such as bodywork, skiing instruction, or therapy, piano lessons are a good value. Students generally feel much more alive when they’re really getting into their playing and feel like they are expressing something very essential about who they really are. From an academic standpoint, the improvement in students’ skills in foreign languages, mathematics, and fine motor coordination are well documented. Making music with other people who you would not likely be in contact with is still another perk of furthering your musical skills. Lastly, students frequently notice how their musical creativity spills over into other aspects of their daily lives. All in all, piano lessons with an experienced coach is a true bargain!

Nine Biggest Myths About Piano Lessons - page 3

Myth #7

***“I Won’t Get Really Good Because I Only Have A Keyboard
(and not a real piano) At Home.”***

Consider that Tone on the piano is created by the balance of Speed (how fast you strike the key) and Weight (how much mass you bring to the key). You could think of the quality of sound being determined more by the speed and the volume more by the weight. Well, at this point of our technology digital instruments cannot yet accurately register (and therefore replicate) that subtlety of Tone, or dynamic graduation — though they are definitely getting closer. A well-maintained console or upright can do this, and a grand piano does this even better.

So, yes, you will learn more about the sound and tone you’re creating on a real piano. For some piano students this can make the difference between being excited about practicing or not. Many students find a way to balance their keyboard time with real pianos found in schools, churches, friends, family, or inexpensive practice studios (the vast majority of the pianos at any given time are not being used!). And many students find lots of enjoyment playing a modern digital piano.

Nowadays there are keyboards that not only features a nice “weighted action” like a real piano but offer a “graduated action” that replicates the sense of lower notes feeling heavier and higher ones feeling lighter. Models that come with built-in speakers will also give the player a sense of the sound vibrating through your body, just like an acoustic piano. Yamaha has several models that have both of these features.

Digital keyboards DO have important advantages over traditional pianos: they never go out of tune, can be used with headphones (very important for apartment dwellers or parents of youngsters), take up very little floor space, are generally very portable, offer a wide variety of sounds, and can easily be integrated with a computer set-up. (These last two items are very useful for composing and songwriting). And for a variety of reasons, some performers only use a keyboard rather than a piano.

The bottom line is that you can make consistent progress with your music using either type of instrument!

Myth #8

“I Don’t Have Enough Background To Write My Own Pieces.”

All too often music is taught in a very hierarchical or rigidly linear fashion. The assumption is that you can’t write your own pieces until you’ve studied: technique on your instrument, theory and analysis, the history of whatever style you’re writing in, and, of course, how to read and write music out using traditional notation. No wonder so many people are turned-off to mainstream attitudes about learning how to compose! (“Hey, my friend just sits down with his guitar and out pops a new song...”)

Nine Biggest Myths About Piano Lessons - page 4

Obviously, the above mentioned areas can be helpful—they can bring breadth, depth, and variety to any composer—but that’s missing the point. No amount of academic background can produce a decent song because nothing can take the risk (and excitement) out of composing! Simple as that. Beginners can actually have more access to their basic creativity in the absence of ‘training’. The object is to approach composition study so that the amount of new information (or input about a student’s piece) never overwhelms the creative impulse.

Myth #9

“My Hands Are Too Small (or Too Big) To Play The Piano.”

This is a concern I hear from people who think their hands aren’t big enough or that their fingers feel too wide for the keyboard. Though the range of notes you can play and the height of an electronic keyboard can be adjusted, it is one of the very few instruments where the size of the key (your point of contact with the instrument) is one size.

Let’s start with a comparison of some other popular instruments. Virtually every other instrument has options to make it more comfortable to play. The guitar is a perfect example of this. You can choose the overall size of the body, the width and length of the neck, the height of strings from the neck (the “action”), the density of the strings, and even if you want to play it upside down or left-handed. The modern drum set goes one step further. You can not only pick the size and style of each component, you can also place each piece of hardware anywhere within reach and create a completely novel configuration. (Some of the most innovative drummers like Trilok Gurtu and Marilyn Mazur have done just that). Other instruments may not have quite that flexibility, like a flute, but instrument makers are finding ways to make them more comfortable, including reconfiguring their basic design as seen with the new “bent flute” models.

So why are the keys of the piano stuck in a “one-size-fits-all” model? Eighteenth-century instruments have smaller keys than the modern piano, namely clavichords, harpsichords, and organs. The size of the key, most importantly the width, was likely created for the ease of the typical European of that era. In my teaching practice I find that 90% of the time that there’s a problem it’s due to crowding when playing in the spaces between narrower black keys.

Modern Americans are, in fact, generally a little larger than 19th-century Europeans and this has not been taken into account from a design standpoint. According to a 2004 study from the Federal Centers for Disease Control, the average American has grown one inch taller and 25 pounds heavier from 1960 to 2002 (SF Chronicle, p.G7, 4/15/07). Think about the difference in finger width given a span of more than three centuries!

When I tell my students about this inflexibility I remark that any bass player suddenly left without any choice of their instrument’s strings, action, neck, etc. would probably haul off and punch me out! I have half-jokingly threatened to start a piano company that specializes in slightly larger keys and if someone would fund such a venture

Nine Biggest Myths About Piano Lessons - page 6

I would probably make a fortune. (Steinbuhler & Co. in Pennsylvania already makes a 7/8 size keyboard, see www.steinbuhler.com). Actually, the cost of creating alternatively-sized electronic models would be a tiny fraction of the cost of re-tooling a traditionally constructed acoustic piano. This is due to the relatively inexpensive key parts of an electronic instrument versus the elaborate key mechanism and string-and-harp construction of a traditional piano that has developed for over two hundred years. And while the re-tooling of such an acoustic instrument might be significant, so too would the potential profits!

In the vast majority of cases that I've seen a larger or smaller hand can be accommodated at the keyboard with careful supervision. Setting up an optimal height and making sure that the hands are parallel with the arms will go a long way to making any hand more comfortable. The actual span of the hand, though, does have bearing on how passages are fingered and how the hand is balanced. And there are certainly cases where a small hand will not be able to play things exactly as written and adjustments would have to be made to prevent twisting or collapsing of the wrist and possible injury. For example, chords that span more than an octave could be 'broken', or arpeggiated in a variety of ways and very involved single note patterns could be distributed between both hands. Those who focus on improvising or composing, this seeming limitation can actually inspire new sounds and solutions to compositional challenges.

Though history is replete with keyboardists who had very long and slender fingers, there are plenty of modern masters who have small hands (Keith Jarrett) or plump hands (Kenny Werner) and it doesn't seem to get in their way at all. Contemporary pianist/composer Myra Melford actually takes advantage of her small hands by incorporating the Indian reed organ, the harmonium, into her performing. This instrument uses keys that are only slightly larger than half the size of normal piano keys and for many keyboardists extremely difficult to play without twisting the wrist.

Since the keyboard's inception, there have been alternative solutions to the keyboard design. There are several contemporary inventions using a non-traditional keyboard. One is the Axis 64 MIDI Controller, which uses a hexagonal grid based on the 'harmonic table'. The instrument's inventor, Peter Davies, describes the harmonic table as "... a map of musical structure where visual pattern translates into sound pattern and vice versa." Its keyboard resembles the button layout of an accordion, in the size of a pizza warmer. Like traditional keyboards, the size of the 'buttons' (or keys) is fixed, and therefore possesses an inherent ergonomic limitation. Another idea is the Dodexaphone, invented by Jason Martineau, which is a keyboard design based on the dodecahedron, one of the five regular solids (which somewhat resembles a soccer ball). The advantage to this design is that it fits neatly into the hands like a fruit, variably sized, and has one face for each of the 12 notes in the Western equal-tempered scale.

Centuries ago the piano replaced the lute as the instrument that was expected to be a part of any 'cultured' upbringing throughout the Western world. There is mounting evidence of how piano playing many different kinds of learning, including fine motor skill coordination, foreign language absorption, and mathematical reasoning. Through the

Nine Myths About Piano Lessons - page 6

advent of recordings, film, and live performances most of us have been exposed to large amounts of piano music — from Beethoven to Billy Joel to boogie-woogie.

And this has all come at a price in terms of what we think anyone should sound like on the piano. Consider that someone who has never been exposed to this tradition might not be encumbered by such expectations, like the Filipino musician who treats the piano more like a rapid-play series of gongs or the Western-trained composer who requires ten musicians to literally bow a grand piano in a myriad of different ways.