

RISKING AUNT RHODY

by Amy Greer

Five-year-old Sarah had been practicing the familiar American folk song, “Go Tell Aunt Rhody,” for some time. She quickly had picked out the melody by ear, but coordinating the Alberti Bass accompaniment with the melody was giving her some problems. One week a jazz pianist came to town and gave a concert. Sarah sat in the front row and watched with great concentration as the pianist played a piece called “Tiger Rag,” with clusters of notes in the bass played with his elbow to

represent tiger growls. The next week, inspired by the performance, Sarah had her own “tiger” composition to play for me. She began playing the first line of “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” and then suddenly...CRASH! Her elbow, and her entire arm, came down on the keys. She looked at me and said, “Miss Amy, the tiger ate Aunt Rhody.”

It is a widely held belief that some people are naturally creative, and some are not. Spending any time with young children, however, contradicts this notion completely. As Pablo Picasso said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” Problem indeed, for creative minds have produced the most advances not just in the arts, but in our culture in general. Creativity is at the root of our many technological developments, such as the computer and the Internet. It will most likely be a creative mind who finds cures for AIDS and cancer. It will take a person with a new perspective on the world to solve the hunger problem. Finding creativity in five-year-old Sarah is easy. The difficulty is finding thirty-five-year-old Sarahs.

It seems somewhere along the way creativity is lost along with our baby teeth.

It is no real mystery why creativity is often forgotten with age: Without nurturing, creative thinking is quickly replaced by required learning once children enter school. One’s educational jargon does not have to be current to be aware of the debates surrounding statewide and national testing. Schoolteachers face a great deal of pressure to teach so students will succeed on standardized tests. Class sizes are increasing, parental involvement is decreasing and students are arriving in the classroom with more emotional and psychological baggage than ever. As budgets shrink, artistic education is disappearing. Mere survival in classrooms with the hope of learning some basic skills is a reality, and creative thinking skills often are not allowed, much less taught. Without the deliberate fostering of natural creativity, expansive, creative and imaginative minds become buried under standardized learning.

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Obviously, basic learning requirements are not the problem. It is because subjects often are taught at the expense of creativity skills. If creativity is not being nurtured elsewhere, it should concern private music instructors not only as human beings who care about the future of the planet, but also as artists. After all, we artists are in the creativity business and therefore have an interest and a responsibility regarding our art's future. But creativity is not only for artists. Nor does it need to be forgotten with childhood. In fact, it is almost criminal to delegate creativity to such a small population segment. We need creative minds in all areas of our broken world: It is our duty to produce the next generation of not only great musical performers, but future composers, astronauts, mathematicians and painters. It is our job not only to teach technical and musical skills, but to cultivate an atmosphere in which creativity is encouraged and allowed to develop.

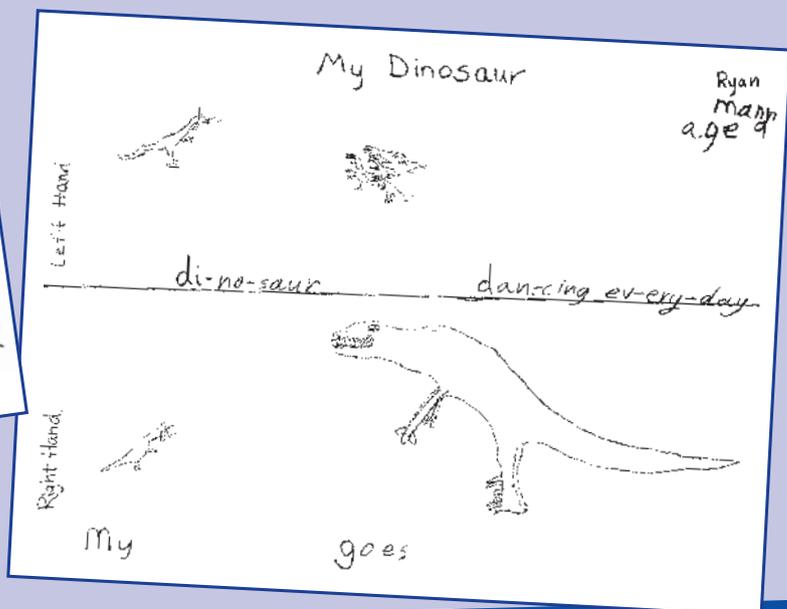
Incorporating creativity into the piano lessons I teach did not come naturally

to me. As a child, I was not allowed to be creative on the piano; "Practice a 'real' song or don't play at all," was a common statement in my house. I was in graduate school before I ever was called upon to improvise at the piano. I think it was that moment I became convinced of the need to enhance my creative skills. I was a fine pianist by all accounts, but although I could play Beethoven, my abilities to improvise accompaniments with melodies, play by ear, compose my own music or even whip out "Happy Birthday" on request were highly suspect. I had two degrees in piano performance but no real skills outside the concert hall. As I looked around at my peers, I realized I was hardly alone. And we were the next generation of musicians? This was alarming.

And so, incorporating creative thinking techniques became an integral part of my teaching method by teaching compositional skills, ear training and using other creative mediums such as art and literature. We have to value creative learning enough to be willing, in spite of the normal time restrictions on music lessons and in our students' lives, to give up a little "real music" time for some imaginative and creative learning. We can do this by having students learn not only assigned pieces, but to create their own compositions using a variety of imaginative tools. One

winter I tried to make use of winter themes, although we have no real winter in Texas. First-grader Shelby's composition was titled "Ice Skating." Since his very first lesson, Shelby always has narrated his compositions while playing them. "This is when they are skating around," he explained while he ran his hands up and down the keyboard. "This is when they are jumping." His hands jumped up and down on the piano, landing in random places. "This is when they are skating around," back to the glissandos across the keyboard. Suddenly, he landed in the middle of the piano and held down a handful of keys. "This is a little girl who fell down and she has a little short skirt on and she is getting cold so OH!!" his hand flew off the piano, "she jumps up."

In addition to teaching students traditional musical notation, I allow them to explore unconventional notation in their compositions using colored pencils, pictures and geometrical shapes. Standard musical notation teaches students theoretical concepts, while unconventional notation requires consideration of visual aspects of their musical gestures and allows creation of their own musical symbols and language, producing a piece of visual artwork. Ten-year-old Casey brought me a highly interesting Middle Eastern-looking piece of artwork, with snakes symbolizing one motif—a modal scale. She did not have the theoretical knowledge that such



Students explore unconventional notation in Amy Greer's classes.

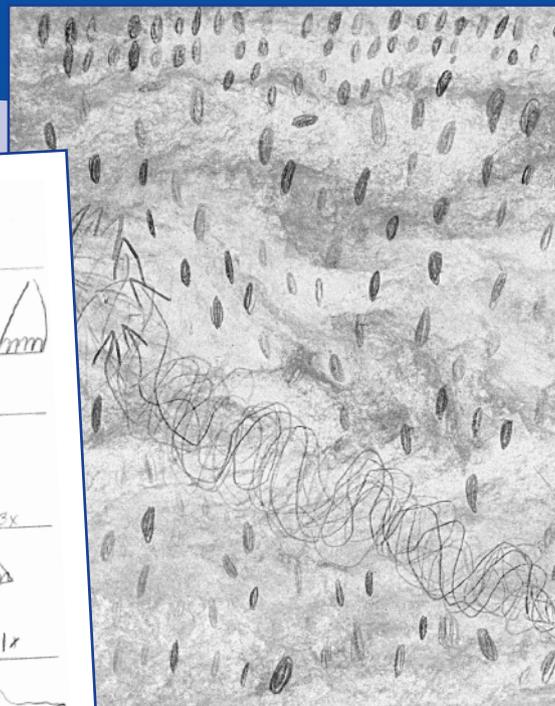
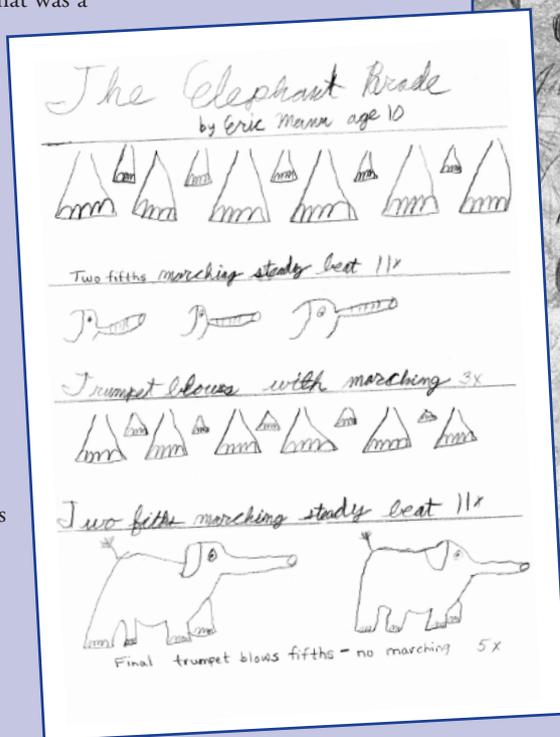
a scale often is associated with the Middle East, but she instinctively knew that was a “snake sound.” Also scattered throughout her artwork were colorful sun-like medallions, some having no musical purpose but to “look good.” In other words, they made her visual composition symmetrical. She was not finished with the composition, so I gave her a few words of encouragement and praise, and assigned her to finish the composition for the next lesson. The following week the first thing she announced was, “I figured out what the sun symbols are for.” Sometimes music inspires the artwork; sometimes the artwork inspires the music.

We can teach children to be sensitive and observant of the music around them—movie music, cartoon sound effects, rain falling—by reading storybooks, picture books and poems and allowing students to compose their own background music, sound effects and character motifs. Six-year-old Elizabeth and I were working together on character motifs to accompany a storybook. One of the important characters was the hunter. Elizabeth did not like hunters because “they were mean and killed animals.” Her musical motif was two clusters of notes in the bass representing the scary hunter walking through the forest. “But, Miss Amy, what about the gun?” “Can you make a gun sound?” I asked. “Hmmm...” She looked puzzled and then, all at once, her face lit up. “I know. A balloon popping.” We restrict ourselves if we assume piano compositions are limited to the piano.

Furthermore, literature can be used to inspire not only sound effects and character motifs, but entire compositions or suites. I have worked with students to identify themes and ideas from stories that could be interpreted musically, giving each idea to a different student. Each student wrote an individual composition. We put them together to form a suite and performed it; I read the story first, then the musical “story”

was played. Poetry also can be used to inspire compositions and, often, students are required to memorize poetry in school. We can use this to our advantage—students are eager to show off their memory skills and willingly will recite poems for their piano teachers, who can then assign compositions to be written to accompany the poems. Just as having the students create artwork and their own musical languages can sometimes inspire their compositions, so can actual works of art. Assigning compositions to portray in sound a real painting or sculpture offers visual and imaginative stimulation for students. It also presents us with an opportunity to explore relationships between musical styles and their parallels to art.

We can use rhythm instruments, or balloons or wineglasses filled with water, to create group and duet compositions. Compositions also can teach duet skills. Five-year-old Lindsay’s composition during Christmas vacation was titled “The Three Wise Men.” Lindsay’s inspiration for this composition frustrated her, though, because she discovered she did not have enough hands; she wanted a constant “star”—a trill on the upper part of the piano—to guide



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the wise men but she needed two hands to do the camels. One of my objectives as a teacher is to teach children to recognize and use all their resources. Lindsay had apparently learned that lesson well. She persuaded her mom to play the star while she played the camels.

One of the most successful recitals my students have ever given was a recital of all original compositions. In it they performed solo compositions, duet compositions and compositions accompanying stories and poems that were read or recited. We also had a visual display of both traditional and nontraditional musical notation, poetry and artwork supplementing the compositions played. Both students and parents announced this was their favorite recital. Students were freed from normal fears of playing their pieces incorrectly or forgetting their music (After all, who would know?), and one parent remarked that she had never giggled so much in a piano recital. Even more remarkable was the realization by all—parents, students and teacher—that the quality of music was not lower just because these were original pieces. In fact,

Resources For Creativity

Although there are countless resources for incorporating creativity into teaching techniques, ultimately there exists no single formula for producing creative and innovative students. Ideally, the act of merging creativity with music teaching happens spontaneously, when the individual teacher brings his or her own wealth of interests, passions, curiosity, and artistic and cultural resources to each lesson. In other words, our teaching becomes more authentic and original as we, personally, become more creative and innovative. Therefore, we owe it to our students to develop our own creativity as deeply and fully as possible. Below is a sampling of the many resources from authors, educators and artists. Some are intended to inspire readers to develop their creativity. Others are writings and musings on the roles of art and creativity in our lives. Still others are resources for educators about developing and encouraging creativity in the classroom, which I have found to be helpful both in terms of giving my teaching new and interesting ideas and angles, as well as grounding my teaching in the historical and current thinking on creative learning. Here is to the courage to risk the Aunt Rhody in all of our lives!

1. Amabile, T.M. (1989). *Growing Up Creative*. New York: Crown.
2. Ayan, Jordan. (1997). *Aha! 10 Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
3. Cameron, Julia. (1992). *The Artist's Way*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
4. Cameron, Julia. (1996). *The Vein of Gold*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
5. de Bono, E. (1992). *Serious Creativity*. New York: HarperCollins.
6. Gelb, Michael J. (1998). *How to Think like Leonardo da Vinci*. New York: Delacorte Press.
7. Jensen, Eric. (1998). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
8. L'Engle, Madeleine. (1980). *Walking on Water*. Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers.
9. May, Rollo. (1975). *The Courage to Create*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
10. Starko, Alane Jordan. (1995). *Creativity in the Classroom*. White Plains, New York: Longman Publishers USA.

they were probably played with much more conviction because they were authentic and personal. Students compose amazingly wonderful music, and in that realization lies an important secret: What holds students back in their progress is not musical or coordination problems, but an inability to read what they *could* play. They can, and do, compose music with much more complicated rhythms and notes than they could read or notate. Allowing them to notate their compositions in nontraditional ways—or not to notate them at all—removes these very normal restrictions. On one of my master's degree recitals I played Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations*. Afterward, someone in the audience remarked that my first piece

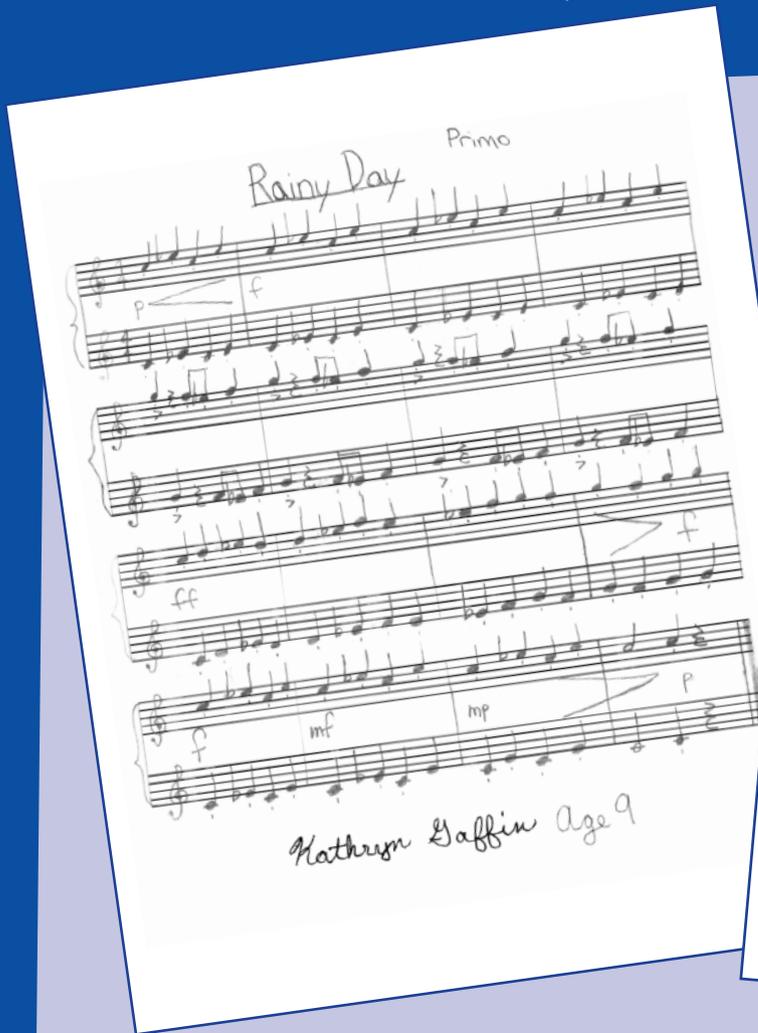
sounded like just a bunch of banging—even a five-year-old could play that. I was appalled; after all, I had spent months trying to get every note and rhythm correct. Sometimes we highly trained musicians get too focused on the precision of notes and rhythms, which certainly are important, and lose sight of the overall sound and gesture of the composer's intent. That afternoon, several of my little ones played music that was not so far from Copland's *Variations*. Only I recognized the irony.

Original compositions are not the only way to incorporate creativity in piano lessons. Nor does creative thinking have to be limited to the "composition" assignment. I sneak theory assignments in lessons by

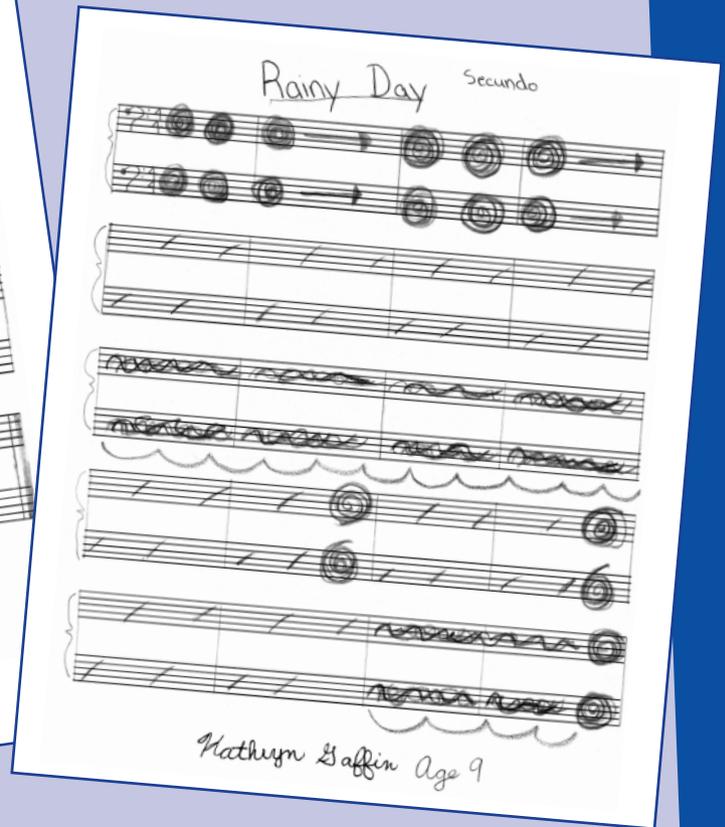
requiring the students' original melodies to be accompanied by certain chords or in certain keys. Sometimes I teach musical forms by requesting certain forms in their compositions. In addition, ear training is a further area of unlimited creative possibilities. Most kids naturally have great ears. Without deliberate attention, once again it seems to be something that disappears with age for many people. I still may struggle to pick out "Happy Birthday" correctly, but my kids can pick out almost anything. After learning familiar original tunes and basic harmonic accompaniments, these ear-training tunes can become the theme with a set of original variations. Basic accompaniment figures can be improvised upon by inventing complex rhythms or using some variation of stride bass, waltz or Alberti Bass patterns.

Furthermore, creativity can be incorporated into the music students learn from their method or literature books. Students can improvise on the melodies of pieces they are learning or add different chords or accompaniment patterns. Nothing improves understanding of the actual piece better than allowing students to change the composer's notes, rhythms and chords. It is equally valid to have students explore stories, poems and artwork, and find works describing or relating to the music they are learning. Entire suites of "real" music can be put together in strange and wildly unconventional ways to accompany books, movies or art exhibits.

Expanding our ideas about what is right, proper and appropriate in piano lessons, to include creative learning as well as other mediums of art and literature, expands minds and produces human beings who, regardless of musical talents, think creatively and artistically. Undoubtedly, it also demands more of us as teachers, requiring us to shift our emphasis away from merely producing more Beethoven players and toward creative endeavors. Concretely, this means we have to do more for lessons than passively assign the next piece in the book or teach another scale fingering. Ultimately, the best means for learning to teach in creative and innovative ways is to become creative and interesting people



Students are encouraged to compose their own music using creative imagery.



ourselves. We have to explore children's books and poetry. We need to attend art galleries, ballets and the theater. We have to read more, think more and be open to new ideas and associations outside the music world. Then we will bring to our teaching a wealth of rich, colorful thoughts and experiences.

Perhaps my students might progress more quickly from "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" to the Beethoven sonatas if I did not make time for creative pursuits in piano lessons. The reality, however, is that most students who take piano lessons never go on to master Beethoven sonatas. To assume all our students will become concert musicians is to be out of touch with the real world. Moreover, there is another truth at work here: The students who develop the kind of love and passion for music enabling them to become performers will

do so regardless of however many art projects and poems they learn with their music. Creative pursuits do not inhibit or hinder talented musicians; on the contrary, they may add depth and richness to their playing. Creative thinking in lessons does not impede talented students; instead, it increases the chance to keep more kids involved with music lessons longer because it approaches music from so many more angles and directions than traditional teaching. I have continued and will continue to push all my students to the limits of their abilities. But I will no longer do so at the expense of expanding their minds creatively. We have enough fine Beethoven players in the world who cannot create a life for themselves or for their music. We need to be about the business of developing fine musicians who can think creatively and build interesting and fulfilling lives.

Someday my students may forget every note on the piano, but they will not lose the ability to think creatively and originally if I help them foster and develop such thinking. As music teachers, we are in a unique and wonderful position. We have these students alone for the assigned time every week. We have no test scores to meet. If we are brave and courageous, we can throw out our list of "shoulds" for lessons and have some amazing experiences.

Sarah has mastered the coordination of "Go Tell Aunt Rhody," but I do not know if she will ever want to play Beethoven. However, one day she might write a novel, discover life in another galaxy, solve the transportation problems of some sprawling American city or find a cure for cancer. The tiger eating Aunt Rhody is worth the risk.

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