

Published September 16th, 2009

Unique Method Teaches Local Children Music through Immersion

By Jennifer Wake



Xiomara Di Maio works with student Chase Severson, 9, on piano while Ian Shields accompanies on percussion Photo Jennifer Wake

Music is a natural element in the lives of millions in the world. In the United States, however, music for many families has become as natural as the polycarbonate CDs upon which it is recorded. Music teachers Xiomara Di Maio and Ian Shields are working to change that at The Di Maio-Shields Music Studio in Lafayette.

For Shields and Di Maio, music is part of life. "Music is not a hobby," Di Maio says. "It's part of everything." Both experienced professional musicians, Di Maio and Shields teach the Suzuki method of music. The Di Maio-Shields studio focuses on developing students' musical ear, before teaching them the rudimentary skill of reading music.

According to the International Suzuki Association, the Suzuki Method is based on the principle that all children possess ability and that this ability can be developed and enhanced through a nurturing environment. "All children learn to speak their own language with relative ease and if the same natural learning process is applied in teaching other skills, these can be acquired as successfully," it states on its Web site.

Katherine Austin of Orinda, who has taught the Suzuki method for nearly 20 years, says, "Dr. Suzuki's contribution to the world of music has been monumental because he has shown us a way - almost a Zen-like path - to develop each child's natural talent for expressive, eloquent, fluent and musical playing."

Lafayette resident Pam Severson's 9 year old son, Chase, has been working with Di Maio and Shields for the past three years, and now plays piano with ease. Even Severson's four year old daughter Kelsey is drawn to the piano. "It's very interesting. Every once in a while she'll go to the piano to tinker," Severson says. "When she hits the right note, it 'clicks' and she gets so excited."

"Sibling participation is important," Di Maio says. "They are also part of the learning process."

Like other families who participate in the Suzuki method, Severson's family listens to tapes all the time to facilitate interest and learning.

In addition to individual lessons, which are piggy-backed so students support each other, Di Maio and Shields facilitate group sessions and have guest artists such as Stanley School's Bob Athayde on Jazz Piano, master Latin percussionist/bandleader John Santos, and other luminaries who visit, teach, and inspire the kids.

"We're like the world's smallest music conservatory," Shields says.

Richelle McClain's 14 year old daughter Simone (who attends Bentley) has been going to the Di Maio-Shields Studio for the past 10 years. In addition to playing piano, she also plays the guitar.

"The method is very holistic," McClain says. "Because sound is so important, you listen to the tapes to develop vocabulary and syntax for how music is developed. Simone hears music in a much different way than I do."

"What we're doing is training the ear from the beginning," Di Maio says. "Sound before reading, sound before writing. We work on posture, back, feet; it's a beautiful sound they're going for. What happens in a performance is they are thinking ahead. They know what's coming and they play the music, rather than the notes."

"I majored in piano in college and I'm still nervous about performing," McClain says. "And after all my training, I

could not play by ear. Simone is just comfortable. When she was seven, she started bringing a guitar to piano lessons. She now plays piano and guitar by ear."

"The confidence factor is so amazing," Severson says. "That's something I never thought would translate."

"What's great is the fact that they want to perform and play," said Lafayette resident Danielle Gallagher, whose 9 year old daughter Claire has been coming to the studio for the past three years.

For Shields and Di Maio, it's not about talent - a word Shields hates and believes is a barrier - it's about doing. Their goal is simple: "I want them to love it," Di Maio says. "And to learn that music is a beautiful process."

Reach the reporter at: jennifer@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA