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The piano: Children stop studying from frustration

By **CONNIE RAE**
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Many children who pass their Grade five piano exams drop out in frustration because they haven't learned the basic fundamentals, says piano instructor Amy Wong, a graduate of the faculty of music at the University of Toronto who has performed in the city hall of Hong Kong.

The pianist at St. John's Anglican Church in Toronto received a three thousand dollar scholarship from Hong Kong in 1971 towards her university music training.

Wong, who has been teaching music for the past three years, observes that children, even though they pass the Royal Conservatory of Music exams, study only to learn the required pieces and have failed to concentrate on sight reading and ear training. Instruction in this area is "deplorable," she says.

Wong says children often have only half hour lessons and since they are so eager to learn and perfect new pieces, the fundamentals are neglected.

Wong points out that time spent on learning the scales, how to read and write music fluently by ear, and how to tune in to harmony and rhythm will more than double the speed at which any advanced student learns new pieces.

For Wong it's easy. Since she was four years old in Hong Kong, she says she has had perfect pitch. She can accurately sing back or play back any note she hears. When Wong hears a new song on the radio, because she understands the harmonizing fundamentals, she can go to the piano and play the song instantly. She can then write down the music so others can play it too.

Not only that, she can play several arrangements, either playing the melody with the right hand while the other harmonizes, vice versa, or a combination of both.

For anyone to get true enjoyment out of music, mastering this basic skill is necessary, she says.

There is no special school for this, even in Toronto, she says, except for "mass-produced groups," and thus teachers usually have a small repertoire of pieces to teach their students. Even the Royal Conservatory of Music has a limited repertoire, she adds.

"It's difficult to build a large repertoire if it takes hours and hours to perfect a piece, as it does without proper training," she says. Thus teachers don't often know enough music to satisfy the individual needs of their students, she says.

Wong wants to specialize in ear training and is enthusiastic about combining such methods of training as Orff, the doh-rae-me system, the Kirby tape copy-cat method and the Yamahah technique.

"Parents fail to realize that even two or three-year-olds can benefit from this very basic ear training and if they take it in the spirit of play and adventure, when they come to learn piano, it's so much easier," she says.

Some of these courses are available through Mississauga recreation and parks, she points out.

It's a hard message to get across, she says, and she has difficulty convincing parents that she cannot teach lessons in less than 45 minutes a week, because she needs time to concentrate on theory. "They think I'm ripping them off," she says. She will group children according to skill levels, but will not take more than four in a group, she says.

Piano is quite essential for singers and all other instruments, she adds.

Lessons cost \$15 a week for individuals and less for small groups.

Another bugaboo with Wong is the difficulty pianists have performing in Canada. In Hong Kong, although the people are "not as educated musically as Canadians," she has no difficulty giving concerts arranged through the Urban Council of Hong Kong. "It's because it's a very small but crowded city and there's never any difficulty filling a concert hall. In Canada, a performer who arranges her own concert would certainly lose money," she said.

"You have to be really somebody," she adds and getting to be somebody in Canada, is not easy.

Wong's students are holding a recital in Parkdale Library auditorium on Queen Street in Toronto on June 16, 8 p.m. Because it was impossible to find a grand piano or anyone who would rent a hall under \$100 in Mississauga, the recital is being held outside of our city. "The children need a place to perform," she says. "It's necessary for their training."

Wong says her course for preschoolers, adults, and advanced students, are not necessarily geared towards exams, but they are geared towards understanding and mastering the musical fundamentals that open the door to the secrets of music. For information call the Studio of Amy Wong at 823-9011. Wong is also interested in assisting with performing arts in Mississauga.



Amy Wong feels that children in Mississauga who take piano lessons are often cheated of the basic ear training and theory that is necessary for easy mastery of the piano. They get frustrated and drop out in the higher grades, says the wife of a Mississauga doctor.