

Music for a Lifetime

You're Never Too Young or Too Old for the Student Teachers in the Piano Pedagogy Program

By MARGARET FRENCH

They are an irreverent group, sitting at the pianos in Carpenter Hall where the stereotypical music majors ought to be. As their fingers attack the keyboards, the walls reverberate not with the accustomed sounds of the classics but with the somewhat hesitant chords of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Camp Town Races." Their music books are adorned with bunnies and ladybugs, and they'd as soon color in the whole notes with crayons as play them. Yet these first graders at their third piano lesson are an integral part of the University of Oklahoma's efforts to promote the enjoyment of music for a lifetime.

The piano pedagogy program in the OU School of Music has very simple but definite goals: to teach its majors how to teach others, to instill in their

pupils an appreciation and love of music along with performance skills. In accomplishing these purposes, the youngsters who begin their music educations with OU's faculty and student teachers are the program's most valuable teaching aids.

The architect of the piano pedagogy curriculum is a youthful professor who shows every sign of becoming one of the University's "super pros." E. L. Lancaster arrived in Norman in 1979 and was given the task of creating a viable training program for would-be piano teachers. One of his most successful innovations has been the community piano program, which he established in 1982 to provide supervised teaching situations for piano pedagogy majors. Enrollment from the community is restricted to young-



A thoughtful Katherine Kershen tries to apply the musical alphabet learned in her group lesson to the electronic piano keyboard in the pedagogy laboratory.

sters who have never before studied piano. This year there are 24 pupils, ranging in age from 6 to 12, who are in their first, second or third year of study. They come to the University campus twice weekly, once for a 45-minute group lesson and again later in the week for a 30-minute private lesson.

To bring their children to the campus twice a week, Lancaster admits, "the parents really have to be committed to this program. We interview the parents, just as they interview us." Interestingly, most of the parents aren't necessarily seeking great musical prowess for their children, he says,

only an ability to play for their own enjoyment.

"They tell us, 'I took piano a long time ago, but I didn't follow through,' or, 'I quit after a year, and I'm so sorry I did.' So it's our job to design a program that teaches the children to enjoy music for the rest of their lives. Not everyone can be a music major; not everyone can make a living performing or teaching. But we can educate society to perpetuate music."

The number of Norman children participating is purposely kept small. "We've tried to build in quality control and offer first-rate teaching," Lancaster explains, "and, of course, the

last thing we want to do is compete with the private piano teachers in the community."

Cost of the program, which is offered in the spring and fall, is \$212 per semester and includes both weekly lessons. In addition, the parents pay a \$30 enrollment fee to cover the cost of class supplies and music for the year.

Another Lancaster innovation, "Music Images," is an eight-week program in the spring for 5- and 6-year-olds. A "basic introduction to music," the class piques the interest of the younger children, and is resulting in increased piano enrollment when the children reach age 6. "The last two years, our 6-year-old classes have come from the 'Music Images' program," Lancaster says. "They get turned on by coming to 'Music Images,' and then they want to go right into piano."

How does a teacher hold a 6-year-old's attention during the 30- and 45-minute weekly lessons? Lancaster claims that the class period slips by before the aspiring pianists know it has happened.

The class times are artfully divided into segments which introduce the basic musical concepts through a combination of practicing at the electronic and the larger acoustic pianos, playing games and ensemble music and learning to sight read. At the private lesson later in the week, the ground-work laid in the group sessions is reinforced by a student teacher in a one-on-one setting.

"Average kids are what we want in here, not a whole studio of super-talented kids," the professor insists, "because that wouldn't be a realistic situation for our college students to expect when they leave here. Ideally, we would like to have a balance of slow learners, average learners and fast learners. We'd like to present a model realistic program and not a model exceptional program."

Lancaster has structured the tutelage of the younger group to match the curricula of the OU student teachers. Initially, a faculty member, either Lancaster, Gayle Kowalchuk or Jane Magrath, teaches the group lesson, while a student teacher conducts the private lesson. Everyone in the

Student teachers are phased into the group lessons. "We give them a list and say, 'You come up with your own creative lesson plans or activities.'"

program, student teacher and piano pupil alike, is given a weekly assignment sheet. While supervising the progress of their pupils, the student teachers in turn are monitored by faculty members.

Several times during the semester the student teacher submits a cassette tape of the private lesson, which the faculty members critique before offering suggestions to improve the student teacher's instruction technique. Recently the students have been able to videotape one another's teaching for further scrutinization by their mentors with video and computer equipment contributed to the department by Ruby Grant of Norman.

As the semester progresses, the student teachers are phased into the actual teaching of the group lessons. "We give them a list and say, 'You teach these things and come up with your own creative lesson plan or activities,'" Lancaster says.

"We're preparing them to do a variety of things—to open a private studio at home or work in a piano program, perhaps through a music store. For example, we have a graduate who is the director of a Baldwin Music Education Center in Toronto, where she supervises three or four teachers and carries on a program very much like this one, but larger. They have 185 students. She was hired directly out of our master's degree program to supervise the whole operation.

"Our students also are prepared to go into a college or university and perhaps run a program similar to this. The way our pedagogy degrees are designed, our graduates can experience teaching at all levels, because if they're here for a master's program and stay two years, they have experience with 5-year-olds in 'Music Images,' they're in the children's piano program and they teach piano classes and private lessons for college students, both music majors and hobby-



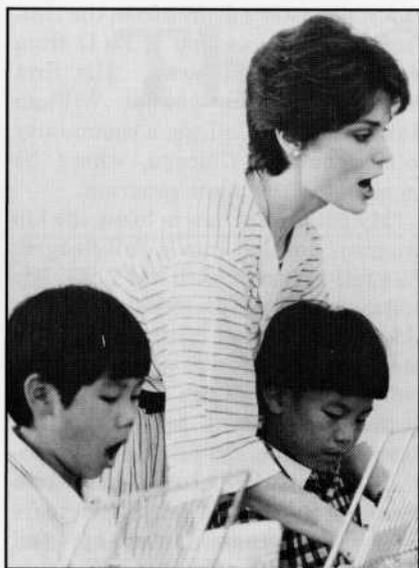
In the top photo, six-year-old Amy Lehr, a first-year pianist, listens intently before attacking a new assignment from group lesson teacher, Gayle Kowalchuk. In the bottom photo, Kowalchuk, right, moves a giggling trio of 10-to-11-year-olds, Kyra McPherson, left, John Fagan and Kari Higgins, to the acoustic piano.

type non-majors. They have almost every conceivable experience that they might encounter."

Such a well-rounded program exists largely because of Lancaster, who serves part-time as assistant dean of the College of Fine Arts. Before he joined the OU faculty, the piano pedagogy program consisted of an undergraduate class for piano majors and an occasional seminar. Now there are degree programs at the undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels; a two-semester master's sequence offered yearly; three seminars that rotate every other year; internship and teaching courses which offer the students actual teaching experience, some in the children's laboratory program; and workshops conducted by the students themselves.

"My main interest is seeing that teachers are trained to work with students at all levels. It's important that they're as comfortable with 4-year-olds as with college students or senior citizens. Nationally the piano instruction markets include both pre-school and what are now called 'leisure time' adults, ranging from our college students all the way up through senior citizens in the elderhostel programs."

Lancaster plans for expansion of the community piano program to accommodate approximately 75 youngsters, still small enough to maintain the present quality, but reaching down to preschool students. *Continued*



Benjamin Wu, left, and Paul Kim sing along with Gayle to master new music.



Student teachers Julie Welsh, left, Jeanine Faircloth and Susan Armstrong check the progress of their third-year private pupils in Kowalchuk's group session.

"My main interest is seeing that teachers are trained to work with students at all levels . . . 4-year-olds, college students or senior citizens."



As part of the first-year group, Sarah Magid works on basic knowledge of the keyboard, which will be reinforced later in the week at her private lesson.



Talia Karim gets down to some serious music in her first-year group, most of whom came from pre-school "Music Images."



Katherine and Talia look on as Paul uses a card game to learn the musical alphabet, which he will transfer to the keyboard.

"Preschool is the coming area. The National Conference on Piano Pedagogy this year focused on preschool, using an American and the Japanese Suzuki and Yamaha teaching methods, starting with 4-year-olds. We will probably go into one of these methods by next fall."

Lancaster feels that the Yamaha system is a good one to develop the student's ear, and coming variations will "Americanize" the techniques somewhat. The Suzuki method teaches the children to play by rote, delaying for quite some time the instruction in reading music.

"We don't know what method we'll use just yet. When you get under age 6, you need to teach in a group, and not all sitting and playing the piano. It's music readiness, using the keyboard as a medium," Lancaster says. "They're not going to be able to play that much, but if they start at age 4, by the time they are 6, they'll know a lot about the keyboard, music and clapping rhythms."

This year Lancaster began performance classes, in which the youngsters played for each other in an informal

recital situation. He also is considering the addition of a separate class time devoted solely to music theory instruction.

Lancaster's reputation as an innovator in piano pedagogy is spreading beyond the OU campus. He is the author of a two-volume textbook for first and second-year college instruction and some materials for the younger classes, both of which are used at OU. In current professional periodicals, he has contributed an article on computers in the studio and reviewed the Yamaha instruction method. In addition, he and his wife, Gayle Kowalchyk, operate a private piano studio in their home.

A 1984 OU Regent's Award for Superior Teaching winner, Lancaster also serves on the advisory board to the Baldwin Piano and Organ Company and the National Piano Foundation, for which he has established pedagogy classes throughout the country, produced three editions of the new music review library for music teachers and organized classes for senior citizens in community colleges throughout the country. The NPF

board members also supervised the offering of grants to schools that included piano in their elderhostel programs, for which Lancaster edited a teacher's handbook.

Originally from Tennessee, Lancaster received a bachelor's degree from Murray State University in Kentucky, a master's degree from the University of Illinois and a Ph.D from Northwestern University. His first teaching position was at William Rainey Harper College, a community college outside Chicago, where he coordinated the piano program.

"My pet project now is to see the lab program develop into a full-fledged, 75-pupil program with our pedagogy majors teaching preschool on up to older kids as they continue on with their instruction.

"I go on goals. When I was teaching at the community college, they didn't have a group piano or pedagogy program, and I had to build basically from zero. By the time I left eight years later, the program was thriving; I had finished there and was ready to do something else. I haven't completed this program at OU yet." 