The MusicStart® Learning System Philosophy and Curriculum Sample

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Suitable course titles:
MusicStart®: Learn To Read Music and Play Tunes!
MusicStart®: Learn To Play Music! Intro to Keyboard

Objective:
Using the MusicStart® Keyboard and this curriculum, to give each child a foundation in basic music concepts and practices, and to instill in him or her a love of music through playing familiar songs. This experience focuses on reading music and will prepare the student to go on to study any traditional instrument. As we also know, the study of music has many goal-worthy developmental benefits reaching beyond music itself. Specifically, MusicStart® teaches step-by-step problem solving.

Who will teach it?:
Excellent instructors with strong music backgrounds. We have Ivy Leaguers, PhDs, Berklee, Ithaca, and University of Michigan Music graduates, for example. The key is to be good with children this age. The class needs to be exciting and dynamic, and appropriate discipline (when necessary) delivered in the right way must be balanced with giving children freedom to explore.

Who will take it?:
MusicStart® is especially targeted toward elementary aged children 5-9. These children are too old for the "baby" music programs, and may benefit from musical preparation before joining the school band or orchestra… or just taking private lessons. MusicStart® classes range in size from approximately 4 to 17 children.

Essential concepts:
Note
Rest
Rhythm
Octave
Scale
Key Signature
Time Signature
Sharp
Flat
Natural

Counting
Staff
Treble Clef
Tie
Tempo
Beat
Chord

How the System Works:

The MusicStart® Learning System makes use of a patented, portable, electronic, educational musical instrument called the MusicStart® Keyboard (manufactured by the Music Path Company). It runs on one 9-volt battery. This instrument was designed by Ethan Fiks and Peter Sippach from the ground up for learning. In actuality, it was developed as a reaction to the difficulties of teaching music on the recorder, and to try to improve on that approach. On the recorder it was hard for the children to produce a clear sound or understand the logic of the organization of notes. (They were also a bit too useful for "sword-fighting," among other problems.)

The MusicStart® Keyboard illustrates many of the above foundational musical concepts intrinsically through its design. It is a one-octave keyboard that can be shifted to the next higher octave by pressing the red square button "Octave Up" (which also turns the unit on). Naturals are in white and sharps/flats in black just like on a piano keyboard. The red round "Mute" button cuts off sound when a note button is pressed, allowing for some interesting rests exercises.

Most important to the MusicStart® method are the four educational overlays, called "Attachments," that are part of each instrument. The instrument ships with colored Attachment 1 affixed, because for many kids, color-matching with color-coded sheet music will be the place to start. The rest of the Attachments are stored inside the Keyboard, and all four Attachments will *not* fit in the Keyboard at once! Attachments 2-4 work with standard black and white sheet music; the music we provide at www.beginmusic.com has a symbol for when the Octave Up button should be pressed, but otherwise any standard sheet music is useable (if it falls within the Keyboard's two-octave range).

The Attachments:
Attachment 1: colors
Attachment 2: note names and notation
Attachment 3: notation only
Attachment 4: note names only

The songs:

A growing collection of sheet music in both color (for use with Attachment 1) and black and white (for use with Attachments 2-4) are available for free download at www.beginmusic.com (perfect for making handout packets).

The songs and scales that are integral to this curriculum are
C major scale
F major scale
G major scale
Mary Had A Little Lamb
Old MacDonald Had A Farm
Jingle Bells
This Old Man
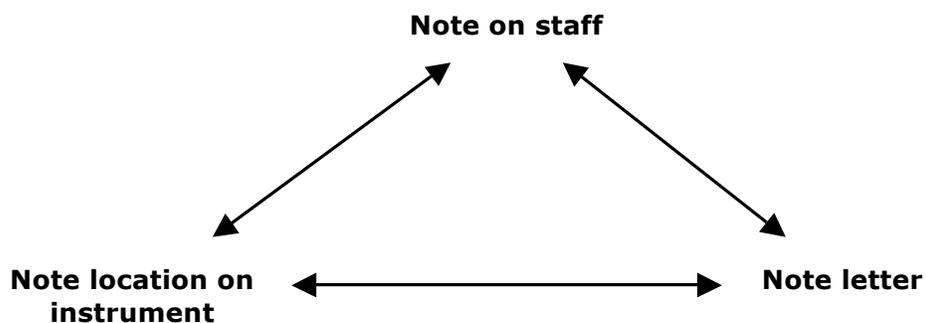Love Somebody
When the Saints Go Marching In
Red River Valley
Aura Lee
Shortnin' Bread

Twinkle Little Star, Row Your Boat, Three Blind Mice, and an original melody ("You Don't Know") are extra available tunes.

The MusicStart® Concept: Reading music is a triangle.

Note on staff

Note location on instrument   **Note letter**

MusicStart® plays with connecting and disconnecting these three elements: notation, note name (letter), and note location on the instrument. When a piece of this puzzle is omitted, as by using Attachments 3-4, the students must fill it in themselves.

Unlike many beginning music experiences, MusicStart® breaks down the task of reading music into manageable pieces, while balancing gratification and fun with lasting learning.

For more information, see www.beginmusic.com

The lesson plans:
Note: The entire MusicStart® philosophy is based on adapting to student performance and adjusting the level of challenge accordingly, both on a class and individual level. Thus, these lesson plans should be viewed as just one possible outline. We are not be afraid to have individual students in a class working on different material at the same time, especially if the class contains multiple grade levels. Furthermore, the teacher's own creativity in responding to the class's timely needs is always welcome. One thing is for sure: There is always a clear "next thing to do."

When a song is listed, it generally means all students will practice it at the same time. Then, each will play it individually for the others, getting feedback from the instructor, which benefits the whole group. Having the students play together at once is also worthwhile, especially in pairs or small groups in the second half of the course. Pupils may return to the easier earlier songs in color for group playing, as staying together is the emphasis.

The homework component, when it exists, always covers- at least- continuing to work on what was done in class. (At some class sites we allow Keyboard take-home… please inquire.)

An ideal one-hour MusicStart® class session (!?):

Here is how a typical class might run:

0:00-0:05:
Students arrive to classroom and Keyboards are handed out (and/or in some cases taken out of backpacks).
0:05-0:15:
Warm-up time.
Students work on previous material.
Sheet music handouts and Keyboard battery changes as needed (a new battery can last a whole term).
Ideally all bathroom and water fountain visits are completed.
0:15-0:25:

New songs/scales or previous songs/scales but with different Attachments are introduced.
All students should know what song material they should be working on, usually with an idea of the farthest along "frontier" song/Attachment and also the earliest/easiest song they should still be on if necessary.
0:25-0:30:
New musical concept(s) are introduced and brought to bear on the current song material. For example, counting rhythms is explained and then applied to the song(s) of the day.
0:30-0:40:
Students continue to practice while incorporating the new concepts. Group playing is sometimes done here.
0:40-0:55:
Share time. Students play their most accomplished song of the day while the teacher and the rest of the class listen (and applaud!). Each student receives individualized feedback but for the benefit of the whole class.
0:55-1:00:
Pack-up/clean-up/wind-down time.

It can be seen how these "gear changes" keep the class from ever getting boring. During the ample time the teacher is not "teaching" (in a lecturing sense), he or she is circulating the classroom, listening, and helping students with difficulties, but without spending too much time on any single student.

The instructor may also point out issues to the whole class briefly while the students are practicing without the need for everyone to stop what they are doing. The Keyboards are by design generally quiet enough to speak over.

Realistically, the teacher will also be disciplining during these times. To use a simile: The students are like grains of sand in the wind. Hold the grains of sand in the palm of your hand. If you squeeze too tightly, they will seep out. If you hold too loosely, they will blow away. The kids should be having fun while practicing.

Of course, like most ideals, the ideal class session probably never actually happens. But it is a good framework to keep in mind without being too rigid. The weekly breakdown to follow is also idealized. Children aged five to nine is a wide range, so there could be significant differences in timeline solely based on age, to say nothing of differing aptitudes and abilities.

The Ten-Week Curriculum

Week one

Key concepts:
Staff, treble clef, note

Suggested activities:
Put in batteries and pass out instruments.
Go over the instrument and how it works.
Allow 5 minutes for student experimentation.
Hand out song packets and explain that students will be receiving the songs in color and hopefully getting to the same songs in black and white, and explain that "real music" is in black and white.
Look over Attachments 1-4 and explain that the three unused Attachments stored inside the unit.
Explain that this week's scales and songs will only use the white note buttons, and that the musical alphabet runs A to G.

Songs/scales:
C major scale (Attachment 1)
Mary Had A Little Lamb (Attachment 1)
Old MacDonald (Attachment 1)

Advanced:
C major scale (Attachment 2)

Homework where applicable:
Review

Week two

Key concepts:
Octave, rhythm (each illustrated in the songs)

Suggested activities:
Explain that the notes look different because they last different lengths. What matters right now is where on the staff they are. Find the correct notes and try to make them sound like the song. Notice that the "hollow" notes last longer and the connected notes ring

FOR A COMPLETE COPY OF THE MUSICSTART CURRICULUM PLEASE CONTACT:

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