Please Don’t Play the Piano

Steven Morrison

I was recently sitting in the lounge of a hotel in Austin, Texas, sharing a glass of wine with several fellow music education teachers. Swirling around us was the excitement of the state girls’ high school basketball tournament, many of whose participants were staying in our hotel... though, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that we were staying in their hotel, as we were decidedly outnumbered and definitely out-enthused.

From all I could observe, these were polite, excited young women and men. (A number of their schoolmates had come along to cheer on the teams.) They were enjoying a visit to the state’s capital and were investigating every amenity this particular hotel had to offer. The pool was clearly a hit, as was the fitness center, the café, and the unique opportunity to visit each other via elevator.

As my colleagues and I sat in the lounge enjoying a conversation about the health of school music in our various parts of the country, I noticed a lone high school student sizing up the shiny, black baby grand piano resting unoccupied in the hotel atrium. Within a minute, he planted himself at the keys and began to pick out a tune. Perhaps it was a song he knew or maybe even a tune he was making up on the spot. The instrument responded elegantly, sending its perfectly tuned pitches rolling softly across the marble floor, up and down the grand staircases leading to the other parts of the hotel.

In no time, a group of friends — at least they appeared to be friends — had gathered around the piano and were listening intently. A couple minutes later, I saw that this impromptu concert had turned into an audience participation event with many of the other students singing along, each moving in his own time with the evolving musical idea. None of my colleagues noticed this, as they were facing away from the piano, a testament to both the considerable restraint being demonstrated by the students and the competing din of a professional basketball game being broadcast on the bar’s television. The music had listeners; the basketball game could not muster any interested viewers.

It was not long before a crisply uniformed hotel clerk quietly sidled up to the small crowd of young people. Something was said, the keys were covered, the students went off to places unknown and, just that quickly, the musical event was over. As a coda, the clerk returned several minutes later with a freshly printed page pronouncing in large, bold letters, “PLEASE DO NOT PLAY THE PIANO.” He neatly taped this message to the front of the now closed and silent instrument. The sign was still in place, undisturbed, when I checked out two days later.

The breaking out of an informal, participatory, performance-based music event is something that seems to occur disturbingly infrequently. The separation of American society into the few performers and the many listeners has been decried repeatedly by educators, performers, and community musicians alike. The nostalgic among us may conjure images of the “old gang” gathered around the piano and lament the passing of such a grand old tradition. Indeed, MENC conveys a certain wistfulness for things past when it encourages us to step up and “get America singing... again!”

In the case of these students in Texas, I suppose one does not entirely wish to blame a hotel for attempting to protect its assets. On the other hand, there seemed to be a clear message that this instrument was to be reserved for those (presumably few) who knew how to use it.
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it properly. A question arises, however, when we are asked to define “properly.” I would submit that the latitude given to music performance is far narrower than that given to many other things.

We can assume that the array of swimmers in the hotel pool included everyone from extreme novices to skilled athletes, with probably a fair number of swim team members on this particular weekend. While individuals would likely be asked to leave if, through their actions, they put themselves or others in harm’s way, I would guess that no one was escorted from the premises simply for being a bad swimmer. Similarly, I can honestly report that I have never been asked to leave a golf course due to my less than “Tiger-esque” form (far less, actually). In fact, poor shots are typically met with extra doses of encouragement, sympathy, and helpful advice.

With music, however, tolerance is in short supply. The most spontaneous and jubilant outburst of music-making can receive an icy reception if it is not CD quality. (The sarcastic comments that Bob Costas heaped upon the USA Olympic women’s soccer team as they sang the national anthem at the gold medal ceremony spring immediately to mind. And the success of “American Idol” appears to be as much from the disparagement of not-ready-for-prime-time performers as from the encouragement of advanced skill.) When it turns out that an individual does have a particularly fine voice or does know his way around a piano keyboard, this situation is often met with great surprise… and then attributed to talent.

“Amateurism” is a word often spoken with disparaging overtones. Yet it is precisely musical amateurism that is the lifeblood of the world’s most thoroughly musical cultures. Amateurs are not would-be professionals who just didn’t manage to get quite enough talent. Rather, they are stark novices who were given encouragement, advice, and reinforcement for trying. At the very least, they were left to explore and experiment when the situation arose. One just never knows when that situation will present itself. So, by all means, please go on playing the piano.

Steven J. Morrison is associate professor of music at the University of Washington, Seattle. At the UW, his teaching includes ensemble rehearsal methods, classroom management, and college music courses. He is also the faculty adviser for the UW chapter of Collegiate MENC. In addition, he is an active researcher, investigating neurological responses to music listening and perceptual and performance aspects of pitch-matching and intonation. He has presented talks on music education throughout the U.S., as well as in Europe, Australia, and Asia.