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Living

Kindred souls on the piano

By June Chan Swee Lin

HOMELIFE

Julia, my nine-year-old daughter, was asked by a gentleman from the music industry whether she could play the piano before a dinner crowd of five hundred.

Without hesitation, she replied, "I can!"

After that casual exchange, a chain of events took place very quickly: an audition followed by numerous practice sessions, then rehearsals and finally, the big day itself.

The occasion was the "Save A Life with Music" charity concert in aid of the National Kidney Foundation on June 10 at the Crystal Crown Hotel in Petaling Jaya.

Altogether, some 20 "Play By Ear" students from Music Talentech Services took part in the concert. Interestingly, Julia was one of the youngest among the participants whose age ranged from six to 45 years old.

All played a significant role in helping to raise about RM20,000 for the foundation.

When I talked to the participants, I was pleasantly surprised to find that they have something in common with Julia; they can also play a song on the piano just by listening to it.

Some, like students Wai Khai Juinn, 12, and Teh Vee Vien, nine, are self-declared "drop-outs" from conventional piano courses.

Others like physician Dr Toh Foh Fook, 45, and information technology professional Siew Chin Kok, 38, are adult beginners with no previous piano training prior to their participation in the "Play By Ear" course conducted by Music Talentech.

On the other hand, Julia has being attending a conventional piano course for the past two and a half years. Her participation in the "Play By Ear" course, and eventually the concert, is the result of a recent chance meeting with Raymond Peter, a music consultant with Music Talentech.

"Your daughter has the natural ability to play by ear," he declared enthusiastically after hearing Julia play My Heart Will Go On, the theme song of the movieTitanic, before she saw the notes of the song.

"Can you play other songs?" he asked Julia.

"I can!" Julia said confidently.

Raymond's response took me by surprise. He was simply exhilarated, and I was bemused. The fact is being Julia's mother, I am so "used" to her tinkering on the piano and picking out tunes at random that I don't pay attention to it anymore.

When asked when she started to play songs on the piano, I was flabbergasted. She had been hammering on the piano keys since a toddler.

In our home, the piano cover is almost never closed. Besides, I never minded the occasional marks left by little sticky fingers on the piano keys. Perhaps, this encouraged my daughter to treat the enormous musical instrument as her toy.

To Raymond's question, Julia brightly remarked that she could already play songs before she started any formal piano lessons.

Really, I thought to myself. Now I wished I had paid more attention to her "playing."

During the charity concert, Julia played Aqua's Barbie Girl as her main piece based on the fact that she likes the Barbie Doll.

I can declare that she has never seen the music notes nor the lyrics of this song. Hearing it on the CD player for the first time, she immediately picked up a few bars of the song and added in the chords for harmony.

To prepare for the concert, she listened more carefully to the song and improvised on it by playing different parts of it on different octaves. It was the same with Richard Marx's Right Here Waiting.

Talking to other participants and some of their parents, I began to gain some insight into this play by ear phenomenon.

Some people have the ability to find the tune on the piano and reproduce it after listening to it. Others seem to do it after a concentrated and prolonged period of studying.

This ability, however, can be enhanced through proper guidance to improve the musicianship and pianistic facility of the individual.

Information technology professional Siew knew he could play by ear since a child, but he had never got around to doing something about it until he enrolled as a student with Music Talentech a year ago.

In less than a year with the "Play By Ear" course, he was confident enough to render his favourite song at the charity dinner.

He said that even though he is an adult beginner at the piano course, he still feels immensely happy because he has found a means of emotional self-expression as well as aesthetic fulfilment. "It is very self-satisfying," he said.

Together with the other "Play By Ear" students, Julia had a good time making music both at the rehearsals and the concert. They were like kindred souls; communicating via the tinkling sounds of the piano keys. One student would begin a tune and the others would pick it up. They had lots of fun just "playing."

If you happen to see them together at the studio having a jam session on three pianos simultaneously, you may be able to understand how a mother's heart can swell like a sail caught in a billowing wind.

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Music Talentech is having a Play By Ear/Casio Exhibition at Subang Parade from June 23 to

July 2. Julia will play her songs on June 25 (Sunday) from 4-8pm.