

LOCAL EVENTS - REPORTS

Right: Amalie Brown
with her teacher,
Elza Lusher



Guildford

Piano Teachers' Workshop, 28 June 2009

Sue Gillis writes: Twenty five participants met at St John's Church Centre for a piano teachers' workshop hosted by member Elza Lusher. As a piano teacher Elza was concerned that her youngest students were struggling to progress with the piano using conventional approaches and with the help of her husband Chris developed a successful learning strategy called Dogs and Birds which is based on the principles of Kodály. She found that even those who had not yet learnt the alphabet took to the method with ease. She was able to teach all children between the ages of 4 and 7 using this approach.

Elza demonstrated her success with these young students by showing us video recordings from her lessons. She explained that one of the most important aspects of her method is that the children sing as they play. By encouraging pupils to do this at all stages they develop their inner ear leading to a much more musical approach to playing. At the heart of the method is the use of animal names to represent the notes: Cat, Dog, Egg, Fish, Goose, Ant and Bird. As the children progress they automatically discover for themselves that 'Cat' means 'C' on the piano. The animals and staves are used in a set of singing games that add variety to the lessons and develop aural skills.

Elza demonstrated how singing the animal names can lead directly to singing relative Sol-fa.

Elza's passion for her teaching was clearly evident and her enthusiasm was felt by everyone. At the end of the afternoon members had an opportunity to ask questions. More information on the Dogs and Birds approach is available at www.dogsandbirds.co.uk.

Northern Ireland

ACM and Report on WESSAR, 23 May 2009

Fiona Gormley (Centre Chairman) writes: On 23 May, several members welcomed fellow musicians and teachers to the ACM, held in Montgomery's restaurant in Ballymena, Co. Antrim.

The evening was focused on the WESSAR, an innovative tool to help with sight reading, which has been developed by Dr Chris Wiltshire. Dr Wiltshire is an examiner with Trinity Guildhall and has examined all over the world. His wealth of experience led him to investigate the potential of a teaching tool which would break the mental barrier which many pupils have against sight reading.

The WESSAR is a small battery-operated gadget which sits easily on the music stand of any piano. Sight reading tests are slotted in to the side of the machine and an in-built metronome is set to an appropriate speed. This is the speed at which the music is expected to be read but this can be adjusted to a slower tempo if necessary.

When the machine is started, the screen reveals the whole test for about 30 seconds, the length of time allowed to prepare in exam conditions. When this time is up, the screen blackens and a count-in is given. The whole test is lit again and as the test progresses, each bar is darkened as it is played through, thus directing the eyes to the next bar and forcing the player to read ahead.

It is this aspect of reading ahead that makes the difference to the success of sight reading. I know from personal experience as a piano teacher that pupils get caught in particular rhythms or motifs and cannot move on until they get it right. This gadget takes that option away and keeps the focus on progression.

Dr Wiltshire has seen great improvements in sight reading ability and over very short spaces of time. Pupils, who were previously intimidated by sight reading tests, enjoy the challenge of the WESSAR.

Further information about WESSAR is available at www.wessar.co.uk.

The Northern Ireland Centre wishes to thank the Trinity Guildhall representative for the Ballymena area, Norma Logan, for all her assistance in promoting the evening and the staff in Montgomerys for their professionalism, the wonderful meal and the pleasant ambience. Last but not least, we wish to thank Dr Chris Wiltshire for presenting the WESSAR in his clear and humorous manner and for stimulating and leading such lively discussion.