

Learning from Kara:

Reflections of Three Friends

by Fay Barss, Melissa Marrion and Joanne Haroutounian
with Kara Benham



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Kara is a very special student to the three of us who have been fortunate to teach her. Eight-year-old Kara arrived at the studio door of Fay Barss, blind from birth and eager to receive guidance in learning the skills to play the sounds she found so captivating. Fay decided to meet the challenge of teaching Kara and thrived on what she learned in the process through these crucial developmental years. Under Fay's guidance, Kara blossomed into a talented musician.

Sending any student to college is always difficult for an independent teacher after working together for years. For Fay, finding the best teacher for Kara was especially challenging. She turned to Melissa Marrion, a dear friend, who taught at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. By sharing teaching strategies and ideas with Fay, Melissa furthered Kara's development and helped the young woman blossom as a college musician. A tug at the heartstrings and marriage to a blind sweetheart whose job took him to Washington, D.C. led Kara to George Mason University and Joanne Haroutounian, a close friend of both Melissa and Fay. Joanne rounded out Kara's musical journey as a student, preparing her for a career as performer and teacher.

Fay & Kara

In 1982, Kara's parents approached me to see if I would teach their eight-year-old daughter, who was blind. With trepidation, I arranged an interview. When I interview potential students, I try to assess their attention span, personality, musicality, intelligence, creativity, and most importantly, interaction with me. I'm the "captain" in charge. After all, I am the teacher. With Kara, the position was reversed. I had to evaluate not only her personality, musicality and so forth but also what I must do to interact with her. I felt a loss of control and some helplessness. I was no longer the "captain" but was on someone else's boat being asked to chart a course that I had never before ventured. Should I do this? With the gentle understanding of Kara's parents, I said "yes."

To say I truly remember all the details of teaching Kara would be stretching my memory, for a lot of my teaching comes from the creativity of the moment. One always works with the tools with which one is presented. In Kara's case, the tools included her eagerness to learn, strong tactile ability, innate musicality and imagination. Mixed with my eagerness to teach, my verbal ability, imagination and musicality, I hoped we would make a good team. I think we did.

From the very beginning, I determined that I was not going to fall into the easy trap of “monkey see-monkey do.” I realized that with Kara’s innate musicality, when I played a note or simple melody, she could easily play it back accurately. I wanted logic to rule. Although the sighted lead and guide even in Kara’s world, eventually she would have to take her part in leading and guiding the sighted, for it became evident very early that music would be a big part of her life.

I soon found that communicating with the blind was different than with the sighted. Black and white keys did not exist; raised and lowered keys did. Kara learned to identify the lower key names by feeling for sets of two or three raised keys and by direction—left, right or middle. Now I introduce the piano to all my students in this way because it allows them to become intimately familiar with the keyboard.

To Kara, manuscripts, staff and stems meant nothing. Math did, and so quarter and eighth values were understandable. I considered it unfair to ignore what she would never see, so Kara learned what the sighted see. For example, I “drew” a staff, clefs and notes with elastic bands and then showed Kara how sighted children learn their notes, explaining the symbols as she traced the elastic with her fingers.

Although Kara has a wonderful memory, I taped the crucial parts of the learning process of each piece. This I still do with all my students. We learned a piece through her developing knowledge of theory. I walked her through each new section much as one does when sight reading. On the tapes, I used a layered form of teaching:

- ◆ Basic information establishing contexts: meter and key
- ◆ Theory connections: interval, chord inversion and scale/arpeggio passages
- ◆ Rhythm: note values and tapping
- ◆ Technical/Physical: play hands separately, including appropriate fingering and articulation

- ◆ Musicality: dynamics, nuances and ritardation
- ◆ Putting it together: playing the piece hands together

The most difficult aspect of teaching Kara was the physical playing. I learned to compensate by placing Kara’s hand over mine, curving her fingers so she could feel the arch, the buoyancy of the wrist, the gentle lift at a slur. In music requiring leaps or difficult positioning, we would locate octaves by touch or utilize a finger already on the keys as a directional guidepost.

I realized I needed to teach Kara to read music by Braille notation. This was a formidable step for me and one that I did not rel-

ever, with Braille notation you are constantly transcribing. You cannot play hands together because one hand is always “reading.” Reading Braille music is a painstaking task, requiring patience and concentration at an optimal level. It is understandable if a student becomes discouraged, especially if he or she has not gained the rewards of success before beginning Braille.

I made a conscious decision that Kara, in spite of her inability to see, would be treated as any other student. I established goals of performances, auditions, theory examinations and eventually competitions. Kara flourished during her years of musical training. She completed

ten levels of the Virginia Music Teachers Association theory examinations, which were given to her orally. Theory was easy for Kara because she was blessed with absolute pitch. In later years, she enjoyed composing her own music and won several competitions. She created the music on tape, and I notated it for her. She was actively involved in her school music programs as pianist for the jazz ensemble and a member of the marching band. She played music at the mall, at church and even performed for weddings. Indeed, music was a large part of Kara’s life.

One summer I interviewed Kara, wondering what aspects of music had impressed her. She described her reactions to music as similar to waking up to feel the sun on her face or sensing the sounds of rain and thunder. She loved the warmth she felt holding a candle while singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” at Christ-

mas. She dreamed through sounds, talking, Braille, smells, touch and emotion. Her first impression of me was of a “nice little lady” whose guiding arm was shorter than her mother’s.

The experience of learning is shared by both teacher and student. What is wonderful about teaching any challenging student is the need for the teacher to devise new ways to reach that student. In doing so, new ways are found to share with all students. The most important lesson I learned from teaching Kara was to never



Kara Benham enjoys teaching Mario Bonds, a sixth-grader who is blind, through MTNA’s LESSONLINK program.

ish, for I knew nothing about the system. In retrospect, I am glad we did not start Braille until Kara already had achieved a modicum of success in her performances and examinations. I prepared for this teaching challenge by obtaining Braille material from the Library of Congress. What the eyes take in at a glance, the finger has to translate via a six-celled alphabet technique. Sighted musicians can absorb a great deal of information and then perform it with eyes, feet, two hands in unison, and nuances at once. How-

take things for granted. What seems to be easily understood by one person can be a tremendous obstacle to another.

In 1992, I received a note from Kara that began: "I don't know how to repay you for all of the years that we have worked together. I learned a lot from you in these nine or ten years, and *I bet you learned a lot from me.*"

Yes, I certainly did, Kara. Teaching is a constant creative challenge. There are as many ways to teach as there are obstacles to overcome. Not only have my horizons

been widened by students who are blind, but by all students. So much knowledge can be gained from students when the teacher is open to learning.

Melissa and Kara

Kara came to me in the spring of 1994. I was apprehensive about teaching her because I had never taught anyone who was unable to see. I quickly went to Fay for advice. Fay assured me that Kara would be a joy to teach, and she was correct. I learned that Kara liked loud, fast, happy pieces

and that she loved Tcherepnin's Bagatelle in C Minor, Opus 5. I learned she was well grounded in music theory and technique and had been taught to analyze what she was hearing and playing. She had worked on all the scales in three and four octaves in parallel motion, cadence patterns and arpeggios. She found her way around the keys by "silently changing fingers." Basically, this meant that she kept in physical contact with the keys and would find a new position by substituting fingers to actually link the intervals. For example,

READING BRAILLE MUSIC

Braille music notation uses the same six-cell structure used in literary Braille notation. Braille music uses a keyboard orientation rather than a musical staff. The Braille example below describes the single notated chord circled on the staff in measure 133. A Braille score places the right-hand notes on one page and presents the left-hand notes on a separate page or section. The musician plays with the right hand while "reading" with the left on the page and vice versa.

As you read the notation, you see guidepost symbols indicating the function of the next symbol: a number (meter), word (forte) or articulation indication (slur). Chords are first described by the top note for the right hand or bottom note for the left hand followed by intervals from these notes to the other notes in the chord.

● ○	○ ●	● ●	○ ○	○ ●	○ ●	○ ●	● ●	● ●	○ ●	● ●	○ ○	● ●	○ ●	○ ○	○ ○
○ ○	○ ●	● ○	● ○	○ ○	○ ●	○ ●	● ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	● ●	○ ○	○ ○	○ ●	○ ○
○ ●	● ●	○ ○	● ●	○ ●	● ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ●	○ ○	● ○	○ ○	● ●	● ●	● ●
1 flat	Number 6	8	R	H	Word	F	Sharp	fifth octave	F eighth note	dot	slurred	4th below	6th below	8ve below	

○ ●	○ ●	● ○	○ ●	● ●	● ●	○ ○
○ ●	○ ●	● ○	○ ●	● ○	○ ○	○ ○
○ ●	● ○	○ ●	○ ●	○ ●	○ ○	● ●
L	H	Flat	third octave	E quarter note	slur	octave above

Reading Braille music is tedious work, requiring great concentration and immediate memorization. This eight-measure excerpt of the Chopin Ballade below required approximately 1 1/2 hours for Kara to learn.

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if she had an interval of a twelfth, she would very quickly get her thumb on the bottom key, reach up an octave, substitute the thumb for this fifth finger and then find the new key with whichever finger was needed for the new tone.

Armed with this information, I began planning Kara's instruction. For repertoire, I chose Tchernin's Bagatelle Opus 5, No. 2 because she loved the other Bagatelle she had studied; Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 309 and Debussy's *Golliwog's Cake-walk*, since she liked jazz and had never played Debussy's music.

My next steps were to number the measures and edit the fingering, taking into account Kara's "silently changing fingers" technique and making sure I selected fingering that was useful for a person without sight. To do this, I closed my eyes and became sightless, always asking myself which choices were the easiest and most appropriate for the passages' articulations. With some repertoire, I rearranged the distribution of notes between the hands. I also used another ploy in the first piece of Copland's *Four Piano Blues*. I had the left hand silently place a finger over a key that the right hand had to approach by a large descending leap. That made it easier for the right hand to jump to the correct key.

For the first lesson, I made an audiotape of myself, teaching the exposition section of the first movement of the sonata. I gave a brief overview of the movement, discussing the form, key and meter signatures, tempo indication, spirit of the piece and so forth, and then went into specific details of the exposition. One hand at a time, I played and discussed small sections no longer than one phrase. I always gave the beginning finger numbers and any unusual fingerings, and talked about articulations and slur groupings, tied notes and any unusual rhythmic figures. I analyzed the construction of the composition, describing intervals, broken chords and dynamics. I did not have to tell Kara the name of the notes. Her sense of pitch took care of that.

After working through the right-hand part, I played the piece from beginning to end, under tempo, with all dynamics and articulations in place. Then I repeated the entire process with the left-hand part. So now I had the taped lesson of the Mozart exposition ready to give her to take home and learn on her own. Next, I fingered and made a lesson plan of the Debussy to teach during the lesson time. I felt ready

for our first lesson, although I was still a bit nervous.

When Kara arrived, I taught her two warm-up exercises, the formula pattern for her scale work and how to play the scales in thirds and sixths. These patterns were new to her. I assigned a major scale and its tonic arpeggio in root position and the inversions. Then I taught her "live" the first line of *Golliwog's Cake-walk*, using the same procedure as in the taped lesson of the Mozart piece. In person I could ask her questions concerning the rhythmic values, chords, inversion and so forth. We taped that lesson for her use during the week.

At the end of the lesson I gave her the Mozart tape. When Kara returned the following week, I was astounded when she played the Mozart perfectly, hands together and up to tempo. The Debussy was in the same condition, and the scales and arpeggios were played without error and very fast. Not only was Kara a diligent worker, she was a quick learner. I realized I would have to hustle to prepare enough material for her weekly lessons.

At one of the MTNA National Conventions, I saw an exhibit by the music division of the Library of Congress. I had the opportunity to learn about its catalogs of Braille music, available at no cost to blind musicians. I established a policy to regularly assign compositions from its lending library for Kara to learn on her own. We would then refine her work in the lessons. We learned that the accuracy of the editions was not always dependable; occasionally a few notes or rhythms were transcribed incorrectly.

Kara had a very facile technique when she started lessons with me. Her speedy fingers easily negotiated scale-like and chordal passages. It took some persuasion to convince her to add flexible wrist motions in order to delineate phrases and shape tones. She was afraid she would lose contact with the keys. She relied on her "silently changing fingers" technique of constant key contact. I assured her that her finger tips could maintain contact using the undulating gestures of a lateral or rotating wrist. The most difficult passages for her were those with leaps. She had trouble with spatial distances, so I devised exercises for her using the "visualization" of the keyboard's geography to get the feel of distances in her arms and hands. These were not her favorite; she preferred practicing scales and arpeggios.

During the five semesters I taught Kara, she learned and performed a prodigious amount of repertoire. She completed the Mozart Sonata, a Prelude and Fugue and the *Italian Concerto* by Bach and several Chopin etudes. In addition, she learned several pieces from Debussy's *Image Book I*, Khachaturian's *Toccata*, Copland's *Four Piano Blues*, a Schubert Impromptu and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

When a piece was ready, Kara would perform it for a weekly master class or convocation. She was an inspiration to the other students, motivating them to practice more. By simply setting an example and by the discussions we had in the master classes about practicing, memorizing, performing and so on, Kara's study at Virginia Commonwealth University culminated with her very successful junior recital.

One thing I learned from teaching Kara was that preparing materials for lessons always took more time than anticipated, but it was time well spent. I learned to try to put myself in her situation and become "blind" as I worked out the easiest fingering or arrangements between the hands for each piece of music. I learned to verbalize more in the lessons and on the tapes because I could not simply show her how to play a passage. I learned to have my students with sight use the "geography" of the keys by touch rather than relying on vision. I learned to try to make sure that they know, as fully as Kara did, the construction and spirit of their music. It is easy to fall into the habit of thinking that because students can see, they apply the knowledge from theory, music history and other classes on their own. I keep reminding them that the information from these classes is to be used in the study of piano so they can play with a fuller understanding of the composer's intentions and not just mechanically reproduce the score. I learned that Fay had been right. Kara was a joy to teach.

Joanne and Kara

Kara entered my studio with a solid musical background and an amazing determination to improve and learn. Several months before our first lesson, she called to inquire about appropriate repertoire and technical requirements. That was a first for me! By the time she reached my door Kara had learned several works through Braille music and had technical suggestions well in hand.

I soon realized that my role in Kara's development was to prepare her to fly on her own as she completed her musical education and prepared for a teaching and performing career. My goal was to develop self-sufficiency in learning and to nurture teaching skills in the process. These goals required more reliance on Braille for music learning rather than on taped explanations and guidance through self-critique and exploration of different interpretive and technical possibilities in lessons. At first, it was tough for Kara because she learned so much faster through taped explanations. Initially, she balked at the tedious work involved in Braille reading, but after several months she no longer asked exactly how many measures to prepare. She was able to set her own weekly goals. Periodically, she listened to different recordings of repertoire and compared performances. Each listening focused on progressively fine-tuned details, mirroring work done at lessons.

Each lesson with Kara was a workout that I relished because of my fascination with how talented students think, perceive and learn. She was quick to question and ask for further explanation when she did not understand. We spent a great deal of time developing touch and tonal details; it was an extraordinary experience for me to work with someone so acutely "tuned in" to sounds. I described each movement with words by piggy-backing hands and having her stand behind me touching shoulders and arms to realize how to produce the sounds and touches. Her ability to concentrate and focus was far above most students, even during concentrated technical explanations. I constantly stretched myself to find ways to describe sounds and movements. This reflective perceptual awareness allowed my teaching vocabulary to grow by leaps and bounds.

My teaching approach emphasizes the development of interpretive decision making by students. We experiment with an array of dynamic scopes, phrase lengths and touches to determine which is appropriate for the style, structure and mood intended by the composer. Kara was like a kid in a candy shop, carefully molding each idea and evaluating why it did or did not work. She became very excited when an interpretive decision "clicked." I was amazed at the consistency and defined focus in the performance of chosen interpretations. For a master class, she picked up a Prelude and Fugue from an earlier semester, and the subtle details were still there, as though we had drilled them the day before.

Kara's conviction to play metronomically exact and up to tempo from the start was a challenge for the repertoire chosen for her senior recital. She learned practice techniques that stretched time to allow secure placement for leaps, gradually adapting back to the pulse with poised breathing spots where needed. Her self-discipline and persistence were put to the test when doing slow practice, working notch by notch upward on the metronome to secure Chopin's *Black Key Etude*. Through comparative listening of both live and recorded performances, Kara finally realized she was allowed to bend musically with poised placements and stretching of rubato effects in her Chopin *Ballade*.

There are many insightful slices of experiences with Kara that will linger with me over the years. For example, the day I came to pick her up for a studio master class and thought she was not home because there were no lights on in the house; the many times she would laugh at me when I asked her to start at the top of page forty-eight in the music; how she instantly could start at our designated practice places in a Bach fugue, like an indexed CD tuned to each practice session starting point. Then there was the time I had to break the news to her that she had mislearned a polytonal piece within a single key because of an error of key signatures in the Braille notation and the "eureka" moments we shared at lessons when she got so excited hearing sounds that truly described what she was after in an interpretation. Her innocent trust in the perception of the world around her was so refreshing in this age of cynicism.

The transition from the safe haven of school and supportive teachers to a career and marriage is especially challenging for someone like Kara. We encourage our young adult college students to take the initiative to seek out opportunities that will help prepare them for a future career. This includes observations and student teaching, as well as seeking career advice and information on job opportunities from counselors at the college. The final year of college can often be a bureaucratic nightmare for any senior and is even more so for students with disabilities. Obstacles such as walking to the other side of campus for an appointment, riding an elevator with no Braille markings above the buttons or finding a driver for transportation to a neighborhood studio are everyday ob-

stacles for Kara. She has coped with such complications all her life, and her determination to succeed will help her through the final college year. As independent music teachers, we all realize the trusting relationship between the private teacher and student. Kara's everyday frustrations often spilled into our studio conversations. She has taught me to appreciate people who face daily obstacles and confront them with courage. She also has made me realize that colleges must assume responsibility for providing appropriate experiences for visually impaired students who seek a music teaching career.

While developing this article, I asked Kara to record herself practicing on several occasions, verbalizing what she was planning as she worked. She relished the experience and couldn't wait until I heard her practice process. When I listened to the tape, I heard echoing voices of Kara's teachers, past and present, as she directed herself in the next practice strategy. As she developed her interpretation, she made up a story line that described the mood of a section of a piece. She constantly reminded herself to relax and move her wrist, demonstrating the difference it made when she rotated weight in a melodic passage. She described finger switches and drilled leaps until they were secure ten times in a row, explaining her visualization process on the tape. Voices—Fay, Melissa and me—meshed with Kara's musical perspective.

Kara is ready to pursue a career teaching music to students with and without vision. I know Kara will continue to learn through music and will share her love for music with others. She will be a remarkable teacher and will reach students who grow and flourish through music as she has. As we worked toward Kara's senior recital, I realized my role in honing her talent was coming to an end. Fay, Melissa and I were at that graduation recital, giving each other big hugs and agreeing that we have learned so much from Kara.

Kara: To Help You Learn How to Help Me Learn

Frequently, I am asked how teachers should teach me. I am not surprised, embarrassed or offended by that question. In fact, it gives me an opportunity to help teachers.

Q: How do you learn Braille music?

I begin by ordering music from the Library of Congress. It is amazing what I learn from ordering the piece—its title, whether it

uses imagery such as Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* or a genre like Beethoven's Sonata in C Major, Opus 2, No. 3. Before the music arrives, I try to find a recording of the piece to see what I am in for. I get a general idea of the piece—fast, playful and energetic, or slow, serious and romantic. I listen for tempo and for places that allow a flexible tempo. It is sometimes useful to research the composer, not only to shed light on his or her life but on other types of music by the composer and background on the piece as well.

When it finally arrives, I get acquainted with it by looking at the key signature, time signature, mood, tempo, dynamic markings and the length of the piece. I approach the piece measure by measure, beginning with rhythm. First, I tap the rhythms hands alone until they are learned. Then I keep working until I know the rhythms well enough to tap hands together, with right-hand rhythms on my right leg and left-hand rhythms on my left.

When learning notes, I play the right-hand part on the keyboard and read the Braille notation with my left hand. Then I reverse the process, playing the left-hand part. While reading with my right hand, I play a single measure hands separately until I have mastered which notes to play, how to finger them and how to get to them with no hesitation, even if it is not up to tempo. I play both hands separately without reading the music until it becomes firm in my mind and then I finally play both hands together. If I find a passage difficult to remember, I repeat the process of working each hand alone with music, from memory, and then hands together until I've mastered it.

When I work measure by measure, I always include the first note of the next measure rather than stopping at the bar line to secure connections between measures. To avoid stopping between measures, I may drill half of one into half of the next until I can connect them without a problem. I use this measure-by-measure process as many times as needed until I've memorized the entire piece.

I always memorize from the start because it is extremely inconvenient to stop playing to look at the music. I am surprised how many times I have to remind people of this, but most teachers do not consider the simple fact that while sighted people can read with their eyes and play, I need my fingers to read Braille. Once I was asked to learn a large section of music

in a week. I protested that I could not memorize it all in a week. My teacher said, "You don't need to memorize it; just learn it." I became frustrated and said, "What do you want me to do—read the music with my toes?" When the teacher realized she had forgotten about the Braille, first she was speechless and then we both broke out in laughter.

Q: How do you learn music if it is not available in Braille or its arrival is delayed?

Teachers make a tape of the piece or section of the piece they want me to learn. If it is a new piece, any background about the composer or the work at the beginning of the tape is helpful as well as some men-

doubt as to what the notes are. Even if intervals are played harmonically, it is a good idea to spell out the notes, play them in single notes or use intervallic terms such as perfect fourth and major seventh. If I can hear the interval clearly, it confirms what I heard and reinforces it better. If the notes are in extreme registers, learning note names is helpful. For students who know music theory, it also helps to describe what you see in theory terms. Instead of saying E, G, C, you can say "first inversion C major chord." If some notes are held while others are not, it helps to state the value of the held note because if the teacher is playing under tempo, the note may fade away be-



Three friends celebrate Kara's senior recital. Standing, left to right: Joanne Haroutounian, Melissa Marrion and Fay Barss. Seated, Kara Benham.

tion of the key and time signature. Mood, tempo and dynamic markings are read as the teacher approaches them. The teacher plays each hand separately in rhythm, so I get an idea of the counting. The teacher can play measure by measure. If the notes and rhythms are the same or in sequences, I'll pick up on the sequences if the teacher plays the whole pattern and does not stop until the sequence changes.

Next, the teacher goes back and plays the measure or section again, stopping to spell out blocked chords or play them in single notes. Sometimes overtones are hard to detect, so this method leaves me no

fore its proper time. If a passage includes difficult fingerings, finger numbers are mentioned as each note is played, including any silent changes on notes.

Q: How do you deal with hand crossover passages?

I try to avoid crossover passages, but sometimes it is a fact of life. In an ascending or descending passage, I try to avoid crossovers by dividing the notes so the lowest parts are for left hand and upper for right hand, even if it is notated as left-right-left-right in the music. There are two types of crossovers—implied and intermingled. On tape, an implied crossover has left hand de-

scriptions clearly jumping from low register to high. The teacher needs to clarify that this is a left-hand crossover for the student. I learn these passages by isolating the jumping hand first and working out the distance from one note or chord to the other, as I do in leaps. Sometimes it helps to put the fixed hand in place while I practice the jumping hand because it helps me gauge the distance between my fixed and jumping hands. I learn the distance by moving my jumping hand from its first note to my fixed hand and back several times. Then I move it from my fixed hand to the second note. This puts the distance of my arm movements in my muscle memory and eliminates the need to feel the keys with my hands when these passages are in a fast tempo.

Crossovers that intermingle hands in a winding way within a passage are a little more difficult. On tape, teachers need to describe which hand is playing each note of an intermingled passage. If the taped material is still confusing, the teacher can sit while the student stands near the bench and feels both hands as they move on the keyboard. Then the student can try the passage with coaching from the teacher.

Q: How do you remember what you're supposed to do in a lesson?

I often tape my lessons so I can refer to them as often as needed. Taping lessons also helps me assess my progress. After listening to my teacher's comments and assignments for a piece, I may go back and listen to the piece again as I played it at my lessons, noting where the corrections or suggestions are needed. Once I find a problem section, I immediately go to the piano and try to correct it as suggested. Some things are very clear and can be corrected at once. Sometimes I listen to the way I played it and evaluate my teacher's interpretive suggestion before deciding whether I agree with it. However, if I do not take her suggestion, I had better have a good reason why I think my way is better. That has become the "Kara standard" for musical decision making!

Q: How do you practice leaps and jumps?

Leaps rely on judging distances and knowing the keys around the note or chord I am approaching. The landmarks I use depend on the note or chord I need to locate. If I need to leap to the lowest C on the piano, I could reach for the lowest B-flat silently and play the C two keys to the right, or I could locate the lowest pair of black

keys—D-flat and E-flat—above and play the keys immediately to their left. If I have no immediate landmarks, I use the distance between where I was and where I am going and memorize the length of the arm movement or note the distance from my other hand at the time. If one hand is going to a place where the other one is leaving, I may do what I call a transfer—keeping my leaving hand in place, bringing the arriving hand to it and then letting the leaving hand go to its next destination. If I cannot find a good way to orient myself, I ask teachers to play passages with their eyes closed to see how they would do it.

Q: What is the best way to approach teaching fingering, wrist and arm movements?

If fingering is complicated and does not make sense in the lesson tapes or Braille notation, I ask for clarification at lessons. The teacher will let me put my hand on top of hers while she plays the passage slowly so I can feel what fingering is used. Usually this is done hands separately with hands corresponding correctly with mine.

Hands, arms and body motion require a similar process. I had a rude awakening one day when my teacher had me stand with my hands on her shoulders and she showed me how she leans her body to the left and right to get different registers more easily and leans forward to get more sound. She put my hand on her arm and let me feel the thrust when she wanted more arm weight in a note or chord. At each lesson, she would have me put my hands on her wrist so she could show me how I needed to rotate my wrists or move up and down to make phrases and slurs. This tactile work is very helpful to understand physical motions needed to pro-

duce musical phrasing and touches.

Q: What advice would you give teachers who have a beginning level student who is blind?

One extremely important starting point is to teach the student to get around the keyboard easily. I cannot stress this enough. If the teacher says, "Play C or F," the student needs to be able to locate the note immediately.

A person who cannot see probably can focus more on sound than someone who does see because there is no distraction. If the teacher wants that student to learn the sound of something, he or she can really hone into that. But when the teacher is seeking a certain gesture, it becomes important to have the student actually touch the hand or shoulder. Even though touching can be a sticky issue, it is an essential teaching strategy for the student without sight.

If you plan to teach a student to read Braille music, I advise waiting for at least six months after the student has learned literary Braille; a good foundation in Braille reading skill is needed, which would be grade 1 or grade 2 of literary Braille. I learned literary Braille in kindergarten and first grade, then began musical Braille three years after I started piano. Starting both types of Braille at once may confuse piano students.

The earlier the beginning student—sighted or unsighted—learns theory, the better. A good definition of chords, qualities and inversions speeds up the process of learning pieces for all beginning students. The process of learning beginning music is basically the same for all students, with the emphasis from the start on the ear and keyboard orientation.

AMT

For information on Braille music and materials:

The National Library Service
Library of Congress
Washington, D.C. 20542
(800) 424-8567 • (202) 707-5100
Fax: (202) 707-0712
(largest collection of Braille music in the country)

National Braille Association
3 Townline Cir.
Rochester, NY 14623
(716) 427-8260
Fax: (716) 427-0163
(will transcribe music into Braille)