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September 2006 \$3

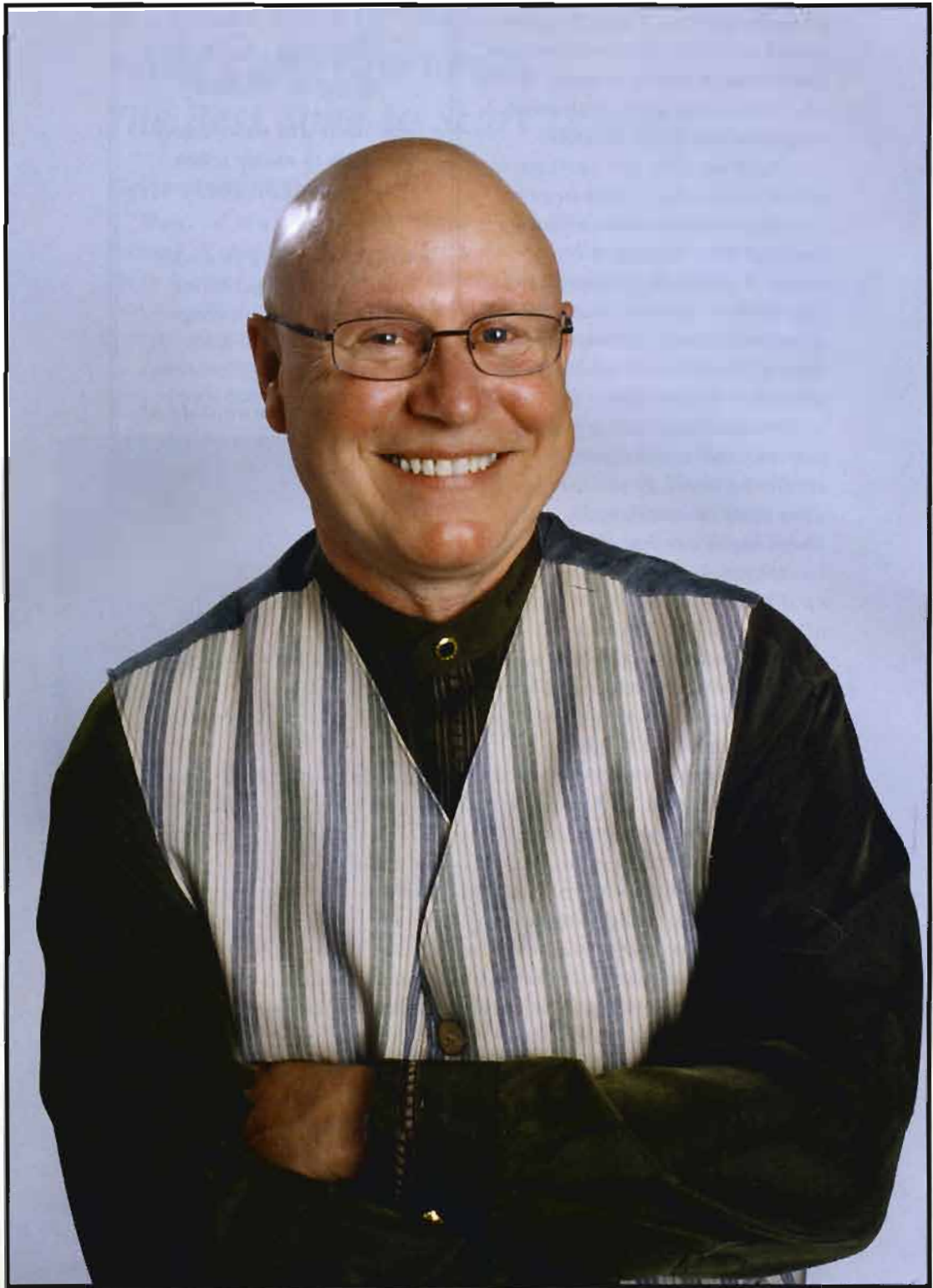


Justin Kolb

Music Crusader Justin Kolb

Joyful Children's Lessons

Gaby Casadesus Teaches Ravel



Justin Kolb – Crusader for Music

BY ELYSE MACH

Pianist Justin Kolb is a very different kind of teacher. Instead of guiding the fingers and repertoire of students, he travels to schools throughout the country to explain the value of studying music to administrators, music teachers, school boards, and most important, to music students themselves. “Most adults do not realize how many benefits there are from studying an instrument or voice, and neither do students,” he begins. “I want young people to understand how much the skills they develop through studying music will help them later in life. This applies to their ability to learn in all areas, no matter the career someone chooses.”

Each year in addition to performing 65 solo recitals with repertoire by Beethoven, Liszt, and Samuel Barber, Justin presents music programs at about 15 universities and 30 schools, speaking to small groups of elementary-age children who have never studied an instrument as well as classes of students in band, orchestra, and choir programs. “I like to tell young people that music study is a physical, intellectual, and spiritual activity; it is something everyone can aspire to.”

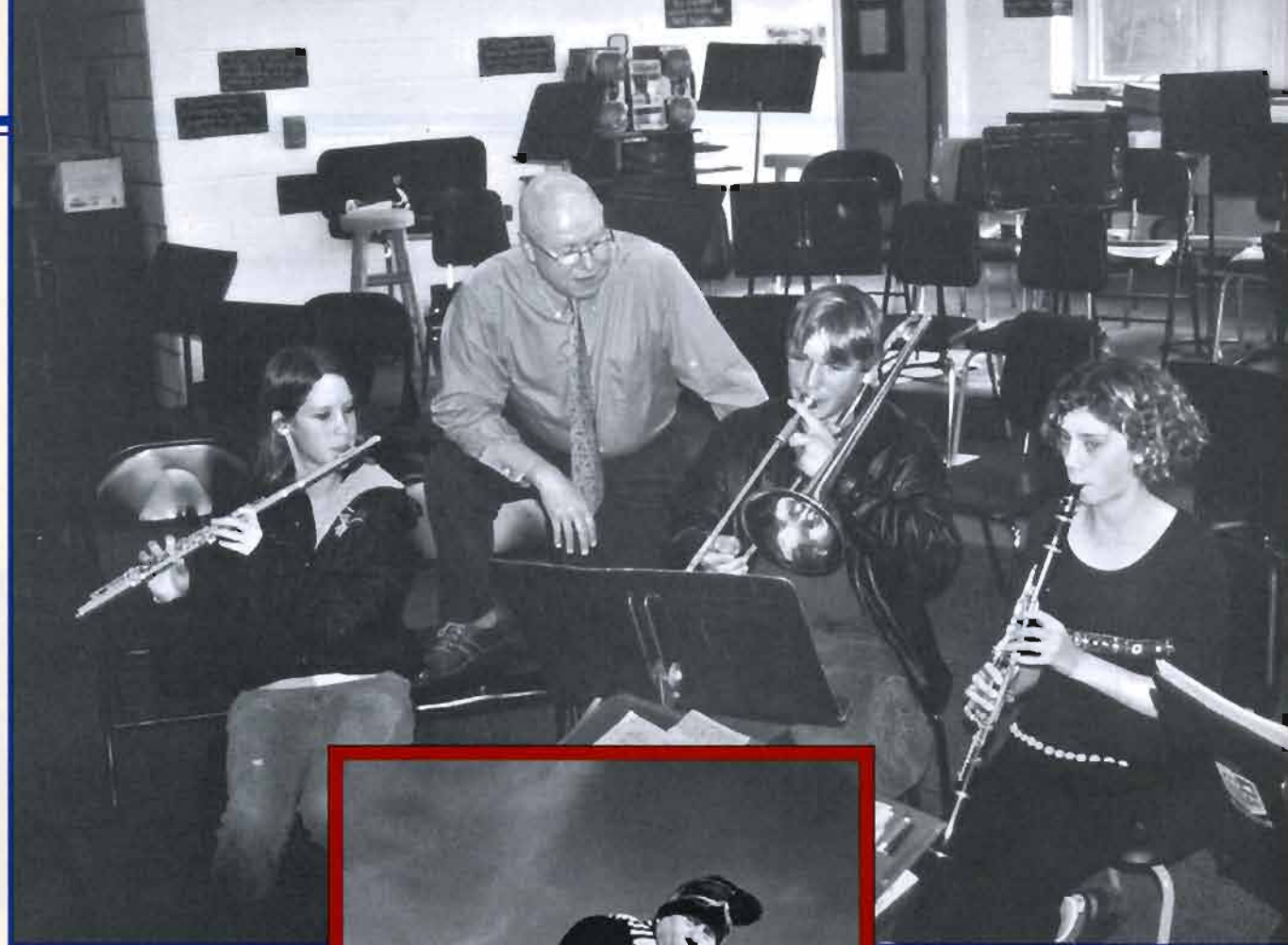
Justin developed a series of 40-minute school programs in the late 1980s to supplement his income as a recitalist because many communities



Justin introduces students to exciting rhythms in a classical piece.

paid only small fees for concerts. “For some of those first school programs, I felt like a fish in the middle of an ocean with 40 children looking at me. One day by chance I opened the top of a spinet and asked the class to come up to look inside.

“Everyone wanted to see how fast the hammers moved and hear the length of time a sound could sustain with only one hammer depressed and the pedal held down. I really enjoyed interacting with young people and found they were just as interested in modern music as traditional music.”



"Some of the older students who did not study an instrument were fascinated when I suggested they were missing out on a lot by not participating in music. Afterwards I sat down and thought about skills students develop as they study music and the additional skills they learn in preparing to perform in public. From past business experiences I knew that I could listen, speak clearly, focus on details, and work well with others; all of this I attributed to my music background. From those ideas I developed clinics for music students.

"At the next high school orchestra program, I looked at the students and said, 'Every student in this school is special, but you are more special because you study music. Before I leave the classroom today, you are going to convince yourselves that I am correct.' Then I worked with the students to create an inventory of skills they developed by studying music that would be helpful in areas outside of music. The first idea came from a trumpet player, who said, 'I'm a good



listener because of music.' I went to the blackboard and wrote, 'Good at listening,' and asked him to explain why.

"After everyone in the class came to a consensus and agreed with the student's remarks, I returned to the blackboard to add other ideas from the students to the list: attention to detail; time management; the discipline to finish a job – all skills developed through music." Justin remembers the students came up with a dozen skills that day, and in subsequent programs

the list grew and changed with ideas from different groups. The record is held by a class of juniors and

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seniors at a school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who once came up with a record number of 32 skills.

"My goal is to show the students that music is critical to learning in other areas. Good listening skills develop because of close, one-on-one work with teachers, who guide practice and inspire performances. In lessons they share solutions to playing problems and help young musicians to avoid mistakes in the future. Serious music students learn to work with other musicians by cooperating in ensemble performances, perhaps deciding if entrances are sloppy or whether a passage is *forte* or *fortissimo*. This prepares them to collaborate with others later in life and share ideas outside of music.

"From an early age music students develop analytical skills by interpreting notes on a score; this includes understanding meter, the duration of notes, and knowing how to articulate and interpret them at the right dynamic level. Analytical skills also develop through analyzing scores to understand musical form. Music students routinely digest large amounts of information using analytical skills and the ability to integrate any number of musical concepts to learn a simple piano sonatina.

"Music also develops discipline, whether it is the discipline to sit and practice, review troublesome measures, or play fingerings correctly. For me discipline translates to mean doing something I may not wish to do. As a student I had to develop the discipline to practice as well as pay attention to a teacher, the notes on the score, and the advice of a composer."

Justin says that serious athletes have wonderful self-discipline, but they develop it in a way much different from music study. "If an athlete errs, a coach may have him run an extra lap around a track, but I've never had a music teacher tell me to take an extra lap. Music teachers correct me, which may hurt my feelings, but they immediately offer a solution to a playing problem. This is the healthiest, most resilient, and most productive type of accomplishment possible in the area of self-discipline. Early on, music students learn to accept helpful criticism."

Justin adapted his school format to create a new presentation, *Why Music*

Students Excel, after music teachers asked him to address a school board to justify money budgeted for music education. "I sat down and wrote out descriptions of the skills students develop as a result of music lessons because most adults – including school board members – do not understand why music study is important to students' development. The idea was to present the music experiences of average students in an average school in an average community." Teachers who read the report were so impressed, they approached him with the idea of presenting the same information to students.

"*Why Music Students Excel* has become popular with middle school and high school students because it reiterates the message that in addition to learning how to play an instrument, sing a hymn, or play a piano sonatina, music gives students a head start in developing skills that are important to life. Because of their musical experiences – focused practice, guidance from teachers, performing with others, and performing under stress – students become quite confident and poised at an early age. They become highly capable people."

During the program students develop a list of qualities they learned through music, which Justin writes on a blackboard. "Of course, listening is the first and most important quality, so we discuss why

Continued on page 54

Watching high school band students rehearse, opposite page, and enjoying the ski slopes. Justin at age ten, below, watching Edward Metzinger, principal percussionist of the Chicago Symphony.





Justin practices in the high school band room before a recital.

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JUSTIN KOLR, *Continued from page 22*

and how it is important to life." Next, he creates a second list on the blackboard with the names of Fortune 500 companies and explains that the employees of these companies attend special training programs to learn to listen better.

He explains that years ago American business executives started to train corporate managers to listen better; when the managers listened better, they responded by saying that employees needed to listen better as well. "Administrators found that when listening improved, productivity increased and safety on the job improved. This comparison helps students to understand how music study gives them a head start in developing skills they will use throughout their lives."

In other programs for elementary schools Justin introduces students to the world of music and shares a glimpse of his life as a concert pianist. He performs traditional pieces, often by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, as

well as music by contemporary composers, and encourages students to ask questions. His program for college students, *Know the Score: Inspiration and Motivation for Life After Music School*, focuses on careers in music.

Justin is a native of Hammond, Indiana and grew up loving to play the piano. At eight years of age he met Frances Clark at one of her summer workshops in Kalamazoo, Michigan. "I remember that she was tall, vivacious, and full of energy. When I had to prepare for a competition or an important performance, my teacher, Lillian DeCamp, would take me to Frances Clark's studio for additional lessons.

"I was ten and preparing the Haydn D Major Concerto for a performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Gary (Indiana) Symphony and went to her for help. For a section of the piece in D minor, she asked me to imagine a mother in Egypt, all alone in the



desert and very sad. The imagery ultimately altered the way I played.

"I had been practicing the solo part of the concerto with my teacher's assistant accompanying at the second piano. After a few months of rehearsing it came time to add the orchestra. My teacher explained that when the conductor pointed the baton toward me, I should begin the opening subject of eight measures. So I began the first eight bars, and the entire orchestra of instruments responded. I'll never forget the feeling; it was absolutely inspiring. Those first 16 measures of the concerto changed my life. I suddenly realized I wanted to have a career as a musician."

The performance was everything a boy could want, except that Justin's parents warned him not to get cocky about it. "In their minds performing with an orchestra was nothing special, and if other families had money for

piano lessons, their children would be performing instead of me. I did not think about becoming a concert pianist, but it was what I wanted to do. I continued to be a malingerer and disliked practicing, but my parents enforced the rule that no practice meant no time with friends. It kept my head on right."

Justin received a degree in piano performance from DePaul University in Chicago in 1964 and remembers teachers gave him the impression that if he practiced more than anyone, a New York audition or an agent would follow, along with a career. This idea, he says, still seems to filter through the universities and conservatories today; it is absolutely preposterous.

"In 1966 my wife Barbara and I moved to Europe where I was on active duty as a captain in the U.S. Army. When a commanding officer realized I was a pianist, he reassigned me to play concert recitals; over the next 18 months I performed 75 solo recitals, including 21 recitals in 21 cities in 21 nights. It was a wonderful experience, certainly greater than keeping your fingernails clipped and a tuxedo pressed.

"I had a fine career in Europe, performing for radio and television broadcasts with the Hamburg Philharmonic. The reviews glowed, and Barbara and I became honorary citizens of several German villages and cities. Everything was the way my school advisors had promised until Barbara wrote letters to a dozen concert agents in the United States, who responded with boilerplate letters: 'Thank you very much, but we cannot audition you because the pianists currently on our roster suffer for a lack of engagements. Stay in Europe; good luck with your career.'"

He returned to America in 1969, settling in New Jersey for a year before attending graduate school at Northwestern University studying piano performance. Instead of completing the degree, he needed a full-time job to support a growing family and worked in sales and marketing for the next 15 years. "Mentally I never left music; in fact I felt guilty about working in business. In 1988 I returned to music and moved my family to the Catskill Mountains of New York. I commuted to New York City to study with German Diez, a protégé of Claudio Arrau. With his help I was performing concerts the following year."

In addition to performing and presenting school programs, Justin is artist-in-residence for Kids in the Kaatskills, a



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Music Helps Students to Excel

The best gift piano teachers could wish for would be scientific testing that proves students become smarter because of music study. That gift may be hard to come by because there is no way to ascertain whether smart children are simply attracted to music from the start. Here are the results of two tests that will be of interest to piano teachers.

Music Students Score Higher

Music students as a group scored better on Scholastic Aptitude Test exams than students who do not study music. Test scores for the 2005 Scholastic Aptitude Test show that students who study or appreciate music scored 56 points higher on the verbal portion of the test and 39 points high on the math portion than those who do not study music. [Source: The College Board, Profile of College Bound Seniors National Report for 2001

to 2005, compiled by the Music Educators National Conference].

Music Students and Math

The journal *Neurological Research*, March 1999, reports testing that supports the belief that music study helps students with math. This particular test focused on whether music study would improve spatial-temporal reasoning in young students, which researchers reasoned would lead to a better understand of math concepts.

The study included 237 second-grade students. Data gathered from the testing showed that students who took piano lessons for four months in addition to working at a computer with a math video game scored 27% higher on tests that included proportional math and fractions than children who spent time at the computer using only the math video game.



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charitable foundation based in the Catskills that underwrites programs for children with a variety of offerings, including sessions in music appreciation.

"For the past two years an art teacher and I have collaborated to create experimental programs, such as one that featured *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The art class divided into two groups, with each one responsible for creating one or two pictures based on Mussorgsky's famous work. Once we had a competition between groups of students who created 20 different ideas for 'Baba Yaga.' The reward for each group was that I played the piece that corresponded to their picture.

"A group of elementary students had imaginations that ran wild with brilliantly colorful ideas for the 'Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks'; it was the winner. The middle school boys all loved the 'Baba Yaga-The Witch's Hut on Fowl's Legs,' while many high school students gravitated towards the 'Catacombs' with drawings of skulls and bones.

"I also played movements from *Sketches in Color* by Robert Starer and students created representations of anything that came to mind, from pink puppies to a lawn of pink grass for the piece 'Pink.' Sometimes I fooled them and played 'Orange' but they still came up with ideas for 'Pink.' The students were astounded to know it was

'Orange.' The composer once said that each piece could really be interpreted as any number of colors. This was interesting because in music, as in art, there is not always one correct answer.

Justin believes it is important to encourage students to also study voice because singing is so close to the natural phrasing of speech. "Pianists need to learn how to converse with their instrument. Music performance is a dialogue – rarely a monologue.

"For whatever reasons, pianists tend to practice eight hours a day to learn and memorize the notes of a piece. They work diligently to play the notes cleanly and with an engaging interpretation without banging; because of all this focus, they often ignore those long arched black lines above the music. If a pianist cannot tell a story in his music, then he should sit on the other side of the orchestra pit in the audience."

This fall Justin will continue to speak to music students in schools across the county, helping them to discover the value of the skills they are developing in music programs. More of his ideas are on the website, www.JustinKolb.com. "There are other ways to learn," he says, "but with music learning is so easy. Young people quickly develop wonderful skills by studying a piano, a horn, or by singing; and it is fun. It makes life uplifting." □