



Alan Merriam

EDUCATION EXCELLENCE MERRIAM MUSIC

# COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

After a week of intensive harmony and music theory training, students gather to learn from and perform with a professional musician. While this could be the setting of any university master class, the students, in fact, are 12-year-olds participating in Merriam Music's Enriched Studies program.

Alan Merriam, owner of the Toronto-based company, said he launched the Enriched Studies program this year as just one piece of his ongoing effort to accommodate more than 3,500 students in his lesson program.

Other steps Merriam Music has taken this year include opening a second retail and school facility in northern

Toronto this past April. The new location has an additional 5,000 square feet across the street to handle the overflow of new students. Merriam Music has also expanded its Oakville, Ontario, facility with another 5,000 square feet. For both locations, Merriam invested in new technologies to reinforce students' educational experience.

For instance, computer sta-

tions have been installed in every classroom along with acoustic and digital pianos. "The computer systems are all linked to a server that allows the teachers to access over 2,000 MIDI files," Merriam said. "We've also published quite a few new books. We now have theory companions that go along with our Keyfest curriculum." (Keyfest is



Merriam Music's priority curriculum, developed by Merriam himself over a five-year period.)

It's the theory portion of Keyfest that has been critical to expanding Merriam's Enriched Studies effort as a music immersion experience for students. Merriam explained that the program consists of two separate concentrations, jazz and classical. The jazz students receive a more rigorous regiment of harmony, ear-training and theory.

"It would definitely be at college level for 12-year-old kids," Merriam said.

Currently, the Enriched Studies program accepts 40–50 students starting around 8 years old and up. While general lessons are open to all, the Enriched Studies program has an audition process to determine the student's skill set. The highlight of the program is a private lesson with a top Toronto-area musician.

Despite the challenging college standards, Merriam upholds a fun, encouraging environment. He said the difficulty level of this type of program does not discourage young students from learning.

"It's the application of the material that keeps them inspired and excited, and creates a cycle of success and engagement," Merriam said. "They can actually apply the things that they are learning in the classroom."

And while the guest teachers aren't household names, that doesn't diminish students' enthusiasm. "It's one of the most exciting things for them because they know that they are playing with the very best," Merriam said. "That's why we do it. It's a very inspirational program."

Students typically get to play in a rhythm section with the pro jazz master and participate in a variety of festivals, competitions, ensembles and public performances. Merriam said he's able to find these performers and venues through his working relationships with various jazz clubs and The Living Arts Center, the city's performing arts venue.

Last year, Merriam also organized a performance at The Living Arts Center where his students had the opportunity to play in front of 300 people. Of the performance, Merriam said, "There is nothing like it in the country right now." **MI**

— Jenny Domine, photo by Diana Piruzevska

## EDUCATION EXCELLENCE WEST MUSIC

# GROWING GOOD IDEAS

There's no patent on good ideas when it comes to music lesson programs, according to Robin Walenta, president of Coralville, Iowa-based West Music.

"Whether it's through NAMM or peer groups that we belong to or going to the trade shows or just sharing stories with friends, we're not afraid to steal a good idea," she said.

West Music's plethora of education programs include nationally known initiatives, such as Kindermusik and Weekend Warriors. However, its home-grown programs are what put it ahead of the game.

"We have 192 associates that work hard every day on that," Walenta said. "Our whole company is built in teams, and it perpetuates the collaborative environment."

### WEST UNIVERSITY

One initiative that has emerged from these collaborations is a brown-bag lunch program that caters to business executives in the Coralville area who can't fit regular lessons into their busy schedules.

"They come over during their lunch hour and have a group piano lesson," Walenta said. "They've become a tight-knit group."

West Music also holds many lesson-promoting events outside the store to spread awareness about music making. "Every idea is a good idea, especially when it's implemented," Walenta said of the laundry list of programs and outreach efforts West Music has to build its program.

The company holds summer festivals, recitals in the regional malls, and drumming events at local schools and businesses. It has even partnered with organizations like the Adult Education Association and held educational days for regional teachers.

"We work very hard to get everybody experiencing the power of making music," Walenta said.

Sometimes getting outside the store only means going as far as the parking lot. This past June, West Music's Moline, Ill., location hosted its fourth annual Parking Lot Jam with record-breaking attendance — more than 425 spectators and 65 performers.

### PROMOTING EDUCATION

West Music has become successful at bringing in large numbers of students and enthusiastic audiences through years of extensive outreach and the store's tell-a-friend program. "Word-of-mouth really perpetuates the growth," Walenta said.

She also credited West's educational road reps for spurring high student-participation levels. "They are out there not only helping recruit for the school music program but also maintaining the students we already have" Walenta said.

## West Music's brown-bag program teaches piano to business executives at lunchtime

A dedicated school rep team works closely with local music directors to bring in clinicians and programs that help kids play music, often for multiple instruments. "If they get involved in the school band program, we like to get them in to learn how to play guitar or piano," Walenta said.

West's greatest challenge hosting events is coordinating them with the educators' and students' tight schedules. According to Walenta, music retailers have to be sensitive to school events and other activities in order to put on their own successful, well-attended events and programs.

"It's about finding that right time of the year and the right time of the week to host an event," Walenta said. "We work to find the perfect opportunity to increase participation."

"When you see 10- and 12-year-olds walking around with outlook planners, our biggest challenge is making them understand that learning to play music is a time commitment, but the rewards that it offers are lifelong." **MI**

— Jenny Domine