

“Music is all around us – whether if you play or not, people love to listen to music.”

–Dianne Hellert

Dianne Hellert recently opened one of only three of New York State's Yamaha Music Schools.

## COVER STORY

# Dianne Hellert Music is All Around

By Jenna E. Caputo

“I can’t imagine what I would have done if I didn’t play music.” Dianne Hellert’s whole life is music – literally. The oldest of three children, Dianne was born and raised on a poultry farm in Mt. Gilead, Ohio. Her mom was a classical pianist, teacher, performer and accompanist to several Hollywood stars (including Phyllis Diller), so music was around Dianne from the day she was born. Dianne started the piano at age 3 with perfect pitch and quickly excelled. Her mother was an integral part in her education, and Dianne began playing in talent shows

and competitions, often winning. At only 8 years old, she performed once a month on WMVO radio in Ohio. At the age of 10, she studied with teachers at Otterbein College and Ohio State University. By sixth grade, she was the church organist. At 15, she played Tchaikovsky as the soloist with the Mansfield Ohio Symphony Orchestra.

Interested in all music, Dianne joined her high school select choir, which went on to tour Europe. At the time, it was rare for high school choirs to have that honor. But despite her love of music, Dianne thought she would go

into art instead and was worried about telling her mom. She didn’t want her to be upset. However, Dianne quickly realized that music was her destiny and went on to obtain her degree in music education/piano pedagogy at Capital University. In her “spare” time, she was the assistant director of the 350 voice All-Ohio Youth Choir.

To help pay for school, Dianne modeled and entered beauty competitions. She made it as far as Miss Ohio runner-up in the Miss America preliminaries. These experiences resulted in increasing her confidence



The Hellert Studio is located at Clark Music at the Clifton Park Center Mall.

– confidence that she would need to succeed in her future music career.

Dianne met her husband John during college and moved to New York when John landed a new job. She completed her graduate work at SUNY Potsdam and began her new life. Teaching K-12 in various school districts for many years, while also still performing with organizations like the Philadelphia Orchestra and the ASID convention in Washington, D.C., she saw an ad looking for teachers for the Yamaha School of Music and decided to become certified.

While out on maternity leave, she changed her focus to just piano lessons and since has taught close to 2000 students in Clifton Park so far. The walls of her studio are covered with pictures of old recital programs and her past students, some of whom have gone on to graduate from Julliard, Berklee, the Royal Academy of Music and many others.

Dianne didn't want to just teach piano; she wanted to instill the love of music into her students as well. She couldn't understand why a student wouldn't enjoy a song from a new composer that she was very excited about. She started noticing a pattern as to which songs students liked based on if they were more adept at Math or English. She decided to do some study on the brain and found out that there was indeed a correlation between right versus left brain people and what composers they enjoy. Dianne is a right brain person, so once she figures out which way her students are, she gives right-brained students predominantly composers that she herself likes, and left brainers things she doesn't enjoy. It works. "Every student has to have a balance, though, so I will give them about 75% of what they like and we'll study the other composers the rest of the time."

She also encourages parents to always make piano the winner. She first learned this technique from her father. He would ask her if she

needed more time to practice (lessons were 90 minutes away, one way). If she said yes, she didn't have to gather the eggs that day. "Piano shouldn't be a punishment – 'If you don't practice, you can't go to football.' It should be a reward – 'If you practice, you don't need to mow the lawn today.' Make it a choice where it will always be a winner and a positive experience."

As much as music is her life (Dianne also plays clarinet, saxophone, pipe organ and writes original compositions, as well as serving as the church choir director and organist), her life isn't all about music. Dianne still loves art, and when time allows, works on her painting, woodcarving and sewing. She has a passion for sports cars and was the proud owner of a Porsche 911 until dealing with winter driving became too much. She also never listens to music while she's driving. It is her time to take a break and clear her head so she can really pay attention to it while she's working.

A resident of the Capital District for over 30 years now, Dianne likes to travel around the region with her husband to the many local attractions for day trips. Her son and daughter both attended Shen schools, and Dianne often was the accompanist for the musicals. Her music studio, The Hellert Studio in Clifton Park, has recently opened a Yamaha Music School program.

The Yamaha School has been in the U.S. since 1961 and has over 600,000 students worldwide, but what really makes it prestigious are the teachers. Each prospective teacher has to go through a brutal music test before they can be offered the job. The program doesn't just teach the student to play



Teacher Daisy Lin with Clifton Park Yamaha Music School students (Left to right): Alexander, Age 5; Qishuo, Age 6; Robby, Age 6; Jason, Age 4; Nimarika, Age 4; My-Xzao, Age 6.

music, but also teaches the foundations of music in general. "Music is one of the earliest ways to communicate," Dianne says. "Any child will gravitate toward a piano – it is a natural instinct. Music stimulates the brain and is a stimulus to move." Some of her prior students are now teachers at her studio, which currently teaches over 250 students a week. There are programs for adults and children of all ages.

Dianne has a long list of accomplishments, but when she's asked to pick her favorite, her answer is the most simple and pure of them all – "I get to sit down and play whatever I want whenever I want. I feel very proud that I was able to take that to the next level. Piano can be very lonesome – you are often stuck practicing in a remote corner of the house by yourself. Going from that little single piano teacher, to having others work with me and be able to watch everything blossom in size and continue to grow is so fulfilling. I was able to make this into a full studio and I get to watch my students of all ages enjoy many aspects of music and succeed because of it!"

Dianne's New Year's resolution? "Be happy. Think positive. I believe in the law of attraction – keep good things in your mind, so good things can continue to happen." ■

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