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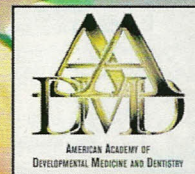
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Right: Riverbrook Music Class  
– The “Piano Huddle”

Below: Jessica Roemischer  
with Riverbrook resident,  
Susan Booth

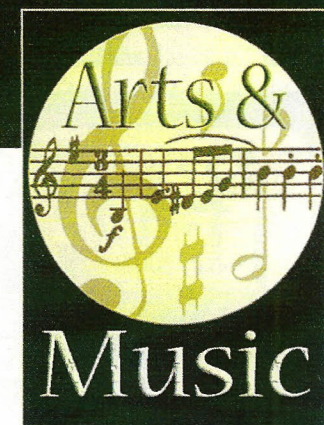


# The Transformative Power of Piano Improvisation

By Jessica Roemischer

Early one morning in 2008, I was driving along an idyllic tree-lined road in Stockbridge, MA, and I realized—I'm nervous! I was on my way to Riverbrook Residence, home to 23 women with developmental disabilities. Joan Burkhard, Riverbrook's executive director, had just hired me as the new piano instructor and on that beautiful fall day, I was scheduled to give my first lessons.

While I had taught piano to dozens of individuals over the course of nearly three decades, this was my first experience working with people with disabilities. I knocked on the front door of the stately Berkshire cottage and, as if they had known me all their lives, several Riverbrook women ran up to me with huge smiles and hugs. I



entered the living room and was immediately struck by the sense of love and relaxation. At the far end of the room stood a grand piano bathed in morning light.

My first student was a young woman named Tanny Labshere. Unlike the residents whom I had just met, Tanny said little. She seemed to begrudgingly accept the fact that she had to have a piano lesson. We sat together on the black bench. Tanny had studied music previously, and so I asked if she would begin by playing one of her favorite pieces. She mechanically placed her thin

fingers on the piano and started to press the keys of a song she'd learned years before at the Perkins Institute for the Blind—"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

As Tanny played, I began to improvise an accompaniment in the bass. "Let your fingers relax," I suggested. "Feel my shoulder next to yours." The music became freer. Soon our notes were enhancing one another, becoming a single piece of music. The beauty of the melodies began to dissolve the distance between us. A sudden realization struck me: we share the same language. It was inconsequential that Tanny was blind and had profound hearing loss and I did not. I knew without doubt that music would connect us. In that first piano lesson at Riverbrook, I sensed that an entire world of possibility lay ahead.

Established a half-century ago, Riverbrook is the oldest facility of its kind in New England, and perhaps in the country. As my time there unfolded, this nurturing environment would become a second home. Indeed, Joan Burkhard's vision, together with the care and dedication of the staff and the women's families, have created a rare and special place where women with disabilities such as Down syndrome, autism, and cerebral palsy, can trust and let go, supported in every dimension of life. One afternoon, I found myself contemplating how extraordinary it is that women such as my Riverbrook students have been relegated to the fringes of society for most of human history.

In fact, the aesthetic principles I bring to Riverbrook, and to all

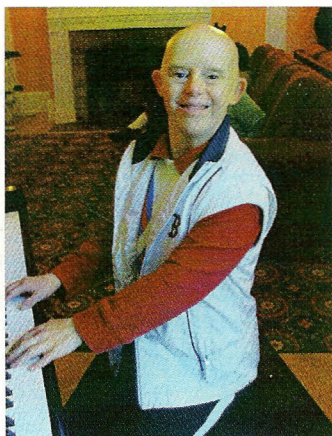
my students, have been reserved traditionally for a very few. Before I can remember, this musical sensibility was transmitted to me by my mother, herself a pianist and dedicated teacher. The love of transcendent music—and an understanding of how to create it—were imparted to her by a Polish piano teacher named Leopold Mittman. Recently, in a book on piano pedagogy that she found at a garage sale, my mother discovered that Mr. Mittman's lineage linked directly to Frederic Chopin and Ludwig van Beethoven. As I was growing up—listening to classical records with her, or hearing my mom play our Steinway grand, or going to performances together in New York City—she helped me recognize true artistry. “Did you hear that phrase, that last note?” she would ask intently. “That’s music!”

Individual piano lessons at Riverbrook are enhanced by the women’s participation in a weekly music class. I begin every group session with a “Piano Huddle.” As we place our hands together in the center of a circle, I holler: “Where does beauty come from!” The women yell with gusto, “From our hands and our hearts!” “And how do people feel when they hear us play?” “They feel happy!!!” That spirited initiation is followed by piano improvisations. Through playing in duet with me, each woman is finding in music a source of identity, expressivity and joy. Joanne King, whom I have dubbed the “Queen of Tone” because she produces an exquisitely resonant sound, remarked to me one day: “When I close my eyes and play, it comes out perfect.”

Jessica Sternick loves our Monday morning class. As I call on her, she springs off the couch, runs to the piano and gives me an exuberant hug. Jessie has no ability to

express herself through spoken language. And yet, the sensitivity she brings to her music is extraordinary. I begin by playing a series of chords on the white keys, in C major. She rolls up her sleeves with a flourish. Placing two fingers on the keyboard she also starts on the white keys, proceeding to create phrases of striking nuance. The quality she brings forth exemplifies beautiful music. As we near the end of the improvisation, I tell her, “Now let’s get quieter, slower, even softer.” Her focus increases. We are completely together. “Hold the very last note with me,” I say. “Let the sound fade away. Hold....” Everyone in the room is captivated.

Our debut performance, enti-



**Above: Joanne King.**

**Right: Governor Deval Patrick, Tanny Labshere, Jessica Roemischer and Paula Labshere.**

tled, “Flying Free: Music without Limits,” took place at a small concert hall in Pittsfield, MA. On a snowy afternoon in December, just fourteen months after the Riverbrook women and I had begun improvising together, people braved the inclement weather to see us play. In fact, the place was packed. On a beautiful Steinway grand, six of the women performed semi-improvised pieces to

which they had given the titles, “Rain Dance,” “The Waltz and the Sun,” and “Wildflowers.” Tanny played three duet arrangements with me, capping the hour-long event with “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

The entire audience was spellbound. Many were in tears. One older gentleman, a philosophy professor, said, “This performance completely deconstructed my sense of what it means to have developmental disabilities.” The event was co-sponsored by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the internationally acclaimed theatre company, Shakespeare & Co, and the Riverbrook board of directors. It was underwritten in part by a grant from Caroline and James Taylor, who are Berkshire County residents and generous supporters of local arts initiatives. After the performance, we celebrated by doing our “Piano Huddle.”



“Flying Free” turned out to be the first of many performances we would give throughout Western Massachusetts and beyond—at historic inns, houses of worship, graduations, and fundraisers. In June, 2009, Tanny and I played a special piano duet for Governor Deval Patrick. In his honor, we developed a medley of “We Shall Overcome” and “America the Beautiful.”

Tanny Labshere had changed enormously since that first lesson months earlier. Her music was blossoming and she was becoming a beautiful, outgoing young woman. At the outset of the performance, however, we were both nervous. As the piece unfolded, I could feel that our self-consciousness was holding us back. But in the final verse of “America the Beautiful,” something shifted.

While I played the familiar refrain, Tanny began the descant—a soaring counter melody high in the treble. Our notes melded together and the duet became pure music. I could feel the Governor watching, listening. Everyone in the room was held in rapt suspension. All of a sudden there was no distinction. Governor Patrick was not the governor; I was not the music educator; Tanny was not blind. At the final chord, the Governor came immediately to the piano and pressed Tanny’s hand in his.

Days later, I received an email from Tanny’s mother, Paula Labshere, which expressed so well the transformative power of music: “The joy I hear in Tanny’s voice is unbelievable. I had always hoped that my daughter would find peace in her soul. And finally, it is happening.” •

For information about Riverbrook Residence: [www.riverbrook.org](http://www.riverbrook.org).

Jessica Roemischer is a pianist and music educator. Her work is based on the conviction that the ability to express beauty through music is our inherent human birthright. Roemischer teaches privately as well as at Riverbrook Residence for Women. She also conducts innovative performances and music workshops throughout the United States and internationally. For more about Jessica Roemischer and to see videos of the Riverbrook women, visit: [www.pianobeautiful.com](http://www.pianobeautiful.com).