

# Learning to see music

**N**OBODY would expect a young child to be able to read and write before they could speak, but that is exactly what is required when learning to play the piano, according to Australian pianist and composer Neil Moore.

Moore, who is now based in the United States, developed his Simply Music system of learning 10 years ago based on his childhood experience of hearing music and visualising shapes and patterns.

The method is now taught by hundreds of people on three continents and Moore says it enables beginners to play contemporary, classical, gospel, accompaniment and blues piano from their first lessons. Students also learn to read, improvise, compose and arrange music.

He says Simply Music works for people of all ages and for people with autism, Tourette's, ADHD and other cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges.

In Hobart, Simply Music is taught by Helen Hull, who says everyone is musical, whether they know it or not, and no one fails using the method.

Hull's students range from seven-year-olds to those in their 70s.

She even brought piano-playing back into the life of an 81-year-old blind woman who had not been able to play because she could no longer read music.

Hull says the Simply Music method temporarily delays music reading and immerses students in the actual experience of playing.

"Simply Music begins by distilling entire pieces into simple shapes, patterns and concepts that students can clearly see and easily play on the keyboard," she said.

"With no attention on music reading, students are free to relate directly to the piano and develop a natural connection to the instrument."

The approach is vastly different from that Hull experienced as a child.

"I started learning in the traditional way when I was eight," she said.

"I was taught by nuns and had to do scales, drills, exercises and exams and was only allowed to play classical music. I had to read music from the page and got into trouble if I did it any other way. I also found it a very isolating experience."

Hull continued to study piano through school and eventually enrolled in a music education degree, which was interrupted by overseas travel.

"When I came back I realised I no longer wanted to be part of the education system and didn't want to teach people the way I had been taught," she said.

Instead, Hull completed a bachelor of arts degree and worked in the corporate sector until the birth of her son Tarshi, who is now 13.

When Tarshi was about three Hull realised he loved music and she resolved to teach him to play the piano when he was older. It was then she discovered the Simply Music program, which at the time was in its infancy.

"I initially went along just to get some ideas," she said.



**SHINING EXAMPLE:** Hobart piano teacher Helen Hull with her son, Tarshi, 13, whom she taught using the Simply Music method. Tarshi went on to win a music scholarship to Hutchins and plays in a jazz ensemble with older musicians. Picture: KIM EISZELE



"I had zero interest in becoming a piano teacher but after experiencing the program I discovered it was really what I wanted to do. It was a turning point in my life. I had discovered my passion.

"Simply Music gives anyone the opportunity to play. It's so much fun and gives people a sense of achievement and victory every step of the way."

Tarshi is an example of the success of the program. He has a repertoire of about 80 pieces, won a music scholarship to Hutchins School and plays in a jazz ensemble with nine older musicians.

Hull teaches students in small groups and brims with enthusiasm about the experience.

"During level one some of the adult students are so moved when they play an accompaniment

with both hands for the first time and fellow students start to sing along," she said.

"They get up from the piano, their eyes glistening with tears, and everyone is so excited for them.

"The lessons are not only social, with people getting together to play, but the opportunity for observatory learning is really powerful.

"People say it is the highlight of their week, that they learn from each other and it becomes part of their lives."

Teaching is also a moving experience for Hull who obviously has a close connection with her students, including a young girl with Joubert syndrome, a genetic disorder that affects balance, co-ordination and muscle control, including eyesight.

"When she first began she could hardly get her fingers to work on the piano. But I knew how much she loved music and I was convinced I could teach her to play," Hull said.

"She is now in level five of the program and has started learning the full version of Beethoven's

*Fur Elise*. She also won her category of her school's talent quest which was open to students of all abilities.

"It has been a huge boost to her confidence. She used to have to lean on her mother when she came to the lessons but when she won the competition it looked like she was walking on air."

● **To find out more about the Simply Music program phone Helen Hull on 6244 1672.**

## On show

**Saturday:** The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra's *Song of Destiny* concert, 2.30pm, Federation Concert Hall. Conducted by Johannes Fritzsich, featuring mezzo soprano Lilli Paasikivi and the TSO Chorus, the program will offer *Brahms Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn*, Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, a new commission by Tasmanian composer Maria Grenfell and the title work, *Brahms' Song of Destiny*.