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[DEPARTMENT]
EDUCATION

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The Key Master

Kozue Pepper shares her piano expertise with students of all ages and experience.

KOZUE PEPPER SITS IN HER MAPLE GROVE HOME-CUM-PIANO STUDIO ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON, her long black hair drawn back into a disheveled but still elegant bun. Her house is filled with students and their parents, all chattering happily. Outside, in a neighbor's yard, a pint-sized girl in a pink sweater bounces blissfully on an enormous trampoline.

This suburban idyll is not the likeliest place to find a world-class pianist—a year and a half ago she was playing regular shows in Las Vegas—but Pepper looks perfectly at home.

Though Piano Masters Studio LLC has only been open a short time (Kozue moved to Minnesota in 2010 after her husband relocated offices with Caterpillar) it has already attracted students of all ages—from as young as 4 to as old as 70—and all abilities, novice to professional.

Part of Pepper's success comes down to her pedigree. Born in Aomori, Japan, Pepper has performed as a soloist at concerts and in lounges in Las Vegas, Denver, Boston, Tokyo and Sapporo, and has studied under master pianists from Japan, Italy, Ukraine and the United States.

She also holds two masters degrees: a master of arts in music from Eastern Illinois University and a master of music in piano performance from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is both a nationally certified piano instructor and a member of the Minnesota Music Teachers Association.

But pedigree is just part of the story. What Pepper really has going for her is rapport. "When you're teaching music, personality is very important," Pepper says. "Every student is very different—I try to find the best method and teaching style to complement each of my students. A teacher has

to adapt to understand how a student plays, why a student plays, what interests them, how to motivate them. We really get to know each other well."

Sam Huffman, 13, is a quiet but intense pianist who has been pushing himself to tackle more challenging pieces. "Kozue is amazing," he says. "If there's rhythms I don't understand, she'll slow them down, count them out, explain them, and eventually I'll end up getting them. She's really helped me a lot."

Tia Kielty, 16, initially approached the piano as a way to complement her singing, but quickly found herself immersed. "Music is entwined with me," Kielty says. "It's everywhere around me. I sing, I play, I'm learning how to compose music. I see myself going really far with it—and Kozue is the best teacher you could ask for."

Her father, Rick, is even more enthusiastic. They drive 45 minutes both ways to get Tia to every lesson. "We've never been more impressed," he says. "Every lesson, Tia comes away with something wonderful and new, a new technique, a new insight. It's been well worth every minute and every penny."

An hour into the interview, I ask the students to play for me. I expect reluctance, even refusal; after all, what kid likes to be put on the spot? Instead, they are eager to show off. Huffman, Kielty and even young Lorenzo Cerda, 11, all take a turn, and though they differ in style and experience, they all play from memory with a smooth and fluid confidence. "Everyone should have a chance to perform," Pepper says. "Whether piano is your life or just a hobby, there's nothing else quite like it." Then she sits down at her Yamaha baby grand, her bare foot resting on the bright brass pedals. The room falls silent. And the master begins to play. //



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