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Piano Lessons

Adolfo Pesquera - EXPRESS-NEWS BUSINESS WRITER

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GONZALES -- Mayron Cole even has a name that sounds like she should be running a music conservatory. America's grand dame of the group piano teaching method now has a spiffy 21st century electronic keyboard with an instructional CD-ROM that is debuting for Christmas in three area Wal-Mart Superstores -- in Seguin, New Braunfels and San Marcos -- at \$89.99.

Colleen Cole, Mayron's daughter and organizational guru, calls the debut a test run. "After Christmas, we plan on taking over the world," she said.

The product, Piano Made Easy®, is available online, but once the Coles get a better feel for demand, they want to pursue wider retail distribution.

The educational, 49-key electric piano received special consideration recently from The National Parenting Center. Just in time for the holidays, the center gave them permission to display its Seal of Approval on the piano. "It's a pretty big deal because we were up against big national toy companies," Mayron Cole said.

David Katzner, president of the National Parenting Center, noted in his congratulatory letter to the Coles that through the end of this year, more than 500,000 parents will visit its Web site to read product reviews.

Based in the historic town of Gonzales, The Mayron Cole Music Conservatory, Inc. has built its reputation over 32 years as the premier developer and publisher of The Mayron Cole Piano Method®. It grew into a regional company in the 1980s and a national company in the 1990s.

Mayron Cole positioned Piano Made Easy as a toy, but she does not consider it that. The pitch-perfect keyboard is manufactured by Medeli Electronics Co. of Hong Kong, which also makes Casio keyboards. The CD-ROM provides a zoo-themed animated graphics game that guides beginners through the piano basics of rhythm counting and site reading.

Cole, 66, made her first attempt at a computer-assisted learning system in 1990. But the program required 11 CDs and had inferior graphics. Realizing the existing technology was inadequate, she shelved the project and continued publishing.

By 1994, the music conservatory had developed a national base and was the preferred teaching method in schools and among group method teachers. Based at the time in Houston, the company revisited the CD-ROM project when Colleen Cole decided she was sick of being a production coordinator in Hollywood. She worked on such feature films as "Fried Green Tomatoes," "Spy Hard," "Kalifornia," and "Citizen Ruth." But her six-year career was in the unglamorous trenches; she scheduled flights and hotel reservations for actors, dealt with their agents, got equipment to the set, and handled an endless assortment of other tasks that eventually brought on burnout, Colleen Cole said.

When she returned to Texas, her mother approached her about the computerized piano teaching package. Confident that technology had caught up with her concept, Mayron Cole found a willing business partner in her daughter.

Houston-based MobiusDV, a software design company, wrote the program code, while Chris Mayes, a renowned Houston artist, created the graphics. Well into the five-year project, Mayron Cole moved the company to her hometown of Gonzales when her husband Bill Cole retired from his career as an orthopedic surgeon.

Mayron Cole didn't bother haggling with regional retailers. She went straight to Wal-Mart via the local district manager's office. To her surprise, the district manager had a daughter learning the Mayron Cole method and was thrilled to have "the Mayron Cole" on the phone.

Tanya Ulsh, the New Braunfels instructor who was teaching piano to the Wal-Mart manager's daughter, said the prestige of Cole's name on anything to do with piano music has drawing power.

Like most piano teachers in the 1970s, Ulsh taught children individually. When her student list grew to 40, Ulsh was working day and night and searching for a better method. She went to a Texas Music Teachers Association convention in 1988 to hear Cole speak.

Ulsh said Cole talked about being a private piano teacher in Houston. She wasn't satisfied with the materials on the market, so she developed her own and came up with the group teaching method.

"Students were more enthusiastic about piano because they enjoyed working (on their lessons) with their friends," Ulsh said. "They stick with it longer. And because they start in a group, they're comfortable in front of crowds."

Cole's groups competed well, especially in ensembles. That led to demand for her books. In recent years, she has been putting the publishing profits into developing Piano Made Easy.

"If we make enough money on this," Mayron Cole said, "I'm going to write the next CD."

Even though she's at an age when most people are planning their retirements, Cole isn't thinking of slowing down. In addition to growing her new product, Cole is sponsoring the first-ever Group Piano Teachers National Convention, which will take place in July at the Marriott Plaza San Antonio Hotel.

Ulsh hasn't gone to conventions for years, but she doesn't want to miss this one. "Mayron has such a network," Ulsh said. "After selling her music for so many years and gathering together so many teachers, I'm sure there are many new teachers who haven't seen her, that want to find out what she's up to next."
apesquera@express-news.net

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