

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

Pianist Lorie Line charms listeners, sells music to the tune of \$1 million

Lorie Line

Claim to fame/ Pianist at Dayton's and recording artist who probably will sell 250,000 recordings and gross \$1.5 million this year

Born/ June 20, 1958, Phoenix, Ariz.

Residence/ Lives in Excelsior with husband, Tim, vice president for sales and marketing of Time Line Productions, and daughter Kendall, 4

Education/ Bachelor's degree in piano performance from University of Nevada at Reno

Career/ CEO of Time Line Productions, 1989 to present. Pianist for Dayton's, 1988 to present. Did marketing work for ManaDyne Inc., a property-management firm, 1987-88. Director of marketing for Borson Construction Inc., 1986-87. Previously was backup pianist for clubs in Reno, Nev., and secretarial and marketing worker for a construction company.

Most often requested tunes at Dayton's/ Selections from "Phantom of the Opera"; her signature piece, "Threads of Love." During the Christmas season, "Jingle Bells," "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "The Holly and the Ivy." From kids, songs from "Aladdin."

License plate/ TKLIVRY

Staff Photo/ Jeff Wheeler

LEFT/ Lorie Line played at Dayton's in Rosedale as shoppers checked out a nearby table of her CDs and tapes.

By Jon Bream/Staff Writer

There is a razor blade, but no sheet music, atop Lorie Line's piano at Dayton's. She doesn't need sheet music, she plays mostly by ear. She does need the razor blade, in a wooden handle, to slice open the shrink-wrap on cassettes and compact discs so she can autograph them.

Line sells lots of cassettes and CDs at Dayton's. Whenever she serenades shoppers at one of Dayton's department stores, her goal is to move 100 recordings an hour, which she can do on a busy day. This year, Line figures, Dayton's has already sold more than \$1 million worth of her recordings and sheet-music

Line is fond of figures. She's proud that her business, Time Line Productions, has grown 750 percent this year. The CEO has expanded her staff from 1½ to five people. For her current holiday concert tour, eight of the 11 performances — including two at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis — are sold out. Her privately held business, making and selling piano music, will gross more than \$1.5 million this year, when she expects to sell 250,000 recordings. And she pockets more money per re-

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Staff Photo/ Tom Sweeney



Line/ Pianist is accessible, and so is her music

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cording than probably any artist in the recording industry except country superstar Garth Brooks.

What is Lorie Line selling?

First, the music: It's instrumental piano music, combining the familiarity of Muzak with the feel-good spirit of New Age, performed with the enthusiasm of a piano-bar player. It's ideal background music for Middle America, or for a yuppie dinner party.

Second, accessibility: Not only is her music accessible (she plays mostly tunes from Broadway and movies, pop classics and Christmas favorites) but she is accessible herself. She performs at a Dayton's twice a week (more often during holiday season), developing one-to-one relationships with thousands of customers. She figures it takes her 30 seconds on the piano to hook a listener and make a sale. She autographs the recordings, talks to the shoppers and accommodates song requests. There's no distance between the performer and her fans.

Hooked on Line

Perry Jurgens of West Bloomington got hooked on Line three years ago at Southdale.

"She has a unique capability to play pieces that are familiar to each of us, but she's able to wear her own style. She transitions from piece to piece more seamlessly than anyone I've ever listened to," Jurgens said. "She can satisfy both spectrums of moods — if I need to become stimulated or motivated, her music can lift me up. If [her music] can bring you down and give you a calmness or peace.

"I use the music in my car. Our daughter uses it at the university when she's studying with all the pressures of finals. Lorie Line has really become a companion."

Jennifer Whiting of Maple Grove saw a report on Line on local TV news and checked out two of her recordings from a library, renewing them for several months. Finally, last week her mother in Utah sent her three Line recordings for her birthday.

"I like it because it's more than soothing music; it speaks to my heart. She evokes feelings rather than just pleasurable listening," said Whiting, who has never seen Line perform in person. "She makes my three daughters dance — they're 9, 5 and 1; my 13-year-old boy doesn't dance to her. When things are crazy, I can put it on and it doesn't feel crazy."

Antidote to mall syndrome

Minneapolis fiddler-mandolinist Peter Ostroushko has played with Line in concert and on recordings for two years, but he has performed with her only once at Dayton's. He marveled at her magic in the department store. "What amazed me most is that it was packed with people; they could hardly walk. They had mall-breath-



Staff Photo/ Tom Sweeney

Lorie Line, in her living room: "I really believe in the quality of the musicianship and the arrangements I put across to the people. And then I bring in a creative show that's not like George Winston. . ."

Lorie Line tour

Midwest schedule/

- Monday and Tuesday at Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie
- Dec. 9 at Benedicta Arts Center, St. Cloud
- Dec. 10 and 20 at Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis
- Dec. 13 at Jeschke Fine Arts Center, Sioux Falls, S.D.
- Dec. 17 at Chester Fritz Auditorium, Grand Forks, N.D.

Tickets sold out except for Dec. 17 in Grand Forks. Call (701) 772-5151

Band members/

- Eddie Robinson, vocals
- Marc Anderson, percussion
- David Bullock, violin
- Merilee Kemp, oboe, English horn
- Bruce Kurnow, harmonica
- Sarah Lewis, cello
- David Livingston, recorder, sax
- Dean Magraw, guitar
- Peter Ostroushko, mandolin, fiddle
- Ray Smith and Ralph Schwartz, trumpet

get this glow.

"I've been in this business for so long I can be jaded," said Ostroushko, best known for his frequent work on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show. "But some people stand there for three hours, like they are at a concert watching Tina Turner; people are blown over by it. Remember, this is instrumental music; this is not Prince, Janet Jackson or Neil Diamond singing."

Minneapolis harmonica player Bruce Kurnow, who does 40 performances a year with Line and has made five albums of his own instrumental music, believes she has found a way to make the familiar different to all age groups can re-

"For her market, I wouldn't play one more note or one less note," said St. Louis Park pianist Steve Anderson, who plays everywhere from Timberwolves games to Nordstrom department store and works for Mill City Music, which distributes Line's recordings to gift shops. "More than anything, she puts emotion and feeling into it."

You can hum the tunes

Line, 35, has her own theories about why her music sells.

"I have these clear melodies, very flowing music, not so complex that you cannot hum to it. Not too jazzy, not too classical. It's very — everybody says this word — very accessible to the public. I think I write highly emotional music, whether it's happy or sad," she said the other day in her Excelsior home.

Sitting on a couch in her expansive, modern white-on-white living room, she didn't seem as bubbly as she does at the piano. But there's an unrelenting upbeat drive, combined with warm-hearted calculation, about her whether she's giving an interview or conducting a rehearsal of her band at a church.

"I really believe in the quality of the musicianship and the arrangements I put across to the people," she continued. "And then I bring in a creative show that's not like George Winston. He just plays solo piano and you just sit and relax. Mine has ups and downs."

To put it succinctly, Lorie Line is carefully packaged, shrewdly marketed, middle-of-the-road entertainment performed by a charismatic pianist surrounded by first-rate accompanists.

"She has a knack for marketing," said Katie Erickson, Dayton's special-events director, who works with Line and Dayton's 13 other pianists. "She's wonderful with customers and responds to them. She interacts with them, she's not just background music."

Said Ostroushko, "I've been busting my butt trying to make it as a musician for 20 years or more, and she's doing things I'm not able to pull off, like selling out Orchestra Hall. She's doing things business-wise that I should've figured out a long time ago."

Said Anderson, who has put out his own piano instrumental album, "It's like an engine and she's hitting on all eight cylinders — marketing, distribution, live performance. She does her research in terms of picking out what to play — not 'Ice Castles' and the ones that have been done a million times. Her packaging is attractive: She has good [album] titles for the gift-shop market; her name alone is effective, and she has played off it: 'Out of Line,' 'Storyline.'"

Anderson calls her "the 'Jurassic Park' of the gift-shop market" because she has achieved "astronomical sales with untraditional methods" and without radio exposure or newspaper writeups.

she's more like Harvey Mackay, the slick suppersalesman who wrote "How to Swim with the Sharks," than like the entertaining pianist Peter Nero — that she's more bottom line than melody line.

Line sees herself as 50-percent business, 50-percent music. She said her orchestrator tells her she's "the Mozart of the '90s" and her lawyer calls her "his most business-savvy client." Says the piano-

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playing CEO: "I do what seems to be common sense."

When she was in grade school in Reno, Nev., Lorie Porter was obsessed with playing the piano at school, at church and at a neighbor's house. Her parents eventually bought her a piano; she took lessons for a decade and then majored in piano performance at the University of Nevada-Reno. She realized she could never play in a classical orchestra because she preferred to play by ear, that being "a concert pianist is a lonely job," and that she couldn't stay up late enough to play in a piano bar, plus the fact that she doesn't sing.

So the outgoing Porter worked for a Reno construction company for 10 years, marketing poured-in-place concrete frames. It would prove to be on-the-job training, however, since she hadn't studied business or marketing in college. When they were newly married, her husband, Tim Line, was transferred by Josten's to the Twin Cities in 1986. She continued to do marketing for construction companies until, in October 1988, she auditioned for Dayton's.

Dayton's is where Lorie Line practices. (She works with a small ensemble during the holiday season, solo the rest of the time). Dayton's is also where she researches what her fans want to hear and how they react to new material. Despite her calculated approach, she takes a modest view of what she does at the department store: "I'm a modern-day street musician," she said.

Except she plays for plastic, not pennies.

Selling parking ramps

"Lorie is always in motion," said her husband, Tim, who this month quit his job as a Josten's class-ring product manager to become her full-time vice president for sales and marketing. "When I met her, she was putting all that energy into selling concrete parking structures," he said.

Just about everyone who works with Line says she's motivated, enthusiastic and positive.

"She knew what she wanted and how to do it. She came to us with an entire plan," said Mary Bearden, who worked at Dayton's for 11 years before becoming general manager of Time Line Productions 11 months ago. "We [at Dayton's] just had to execute it."

Line pays attention to details, such as having her own staff put Dayton's price stickers on her recordings so the stickers don't cover up any of the cover art. Even though she no longer performs at weddings, Line's phone number is listed in the white pages in case someone wants to book a concert or order a quantity of recordings.

Line has tried to expand her musical horizons with each of her seven recording projects. She has enlisted suggestions for musicians from recording engineers at Studio M of Minnesota Public Radio, where she usually records, and she has ended up with some of the finest Minnesota players on her records and in her ever-expanding band: Ostroushko, percussionist Marc Anderson, guitarist Dean Magraw, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra trumpeter Gary Bordner, gospel singer Robert (Eddie) Robinson (who sings vocalise rather than actual words).

Ostroushko, who has played with such stars as Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Chet Atkins and Willie Nelson, acknowledges that playing with Line is not the hippest or most prestigious gig in town.

"There's a lot of great piano players in this town, and there are a lot of people technically a lot better than Lorie," Ostroushko said. "But it's one thing to be a great, talented musician and sit at home. Lorie Line is one of the few piano players gigging. She's got good chops. . . . With her material, she is catering toward a common denominator. But she surrounds herself with great musicians, and it's great to play with them, whether it's in Orchestra Hall or Dayton's."

Rejected major labels

Line's success as an independent entrepreneur is no secret in the music industry. She has received overtures from major record labels, turning down offers from the now-defunct Virgin Classics and from a new label being started by the Musicland empire.

Line believes in doing business her own way, however, not necessarily the established way. Nonetheless, this month she hired for the first time a promoter to try to gain radio airplay nationwide. In addition to the current "Sharing the Season II," Line has a new album scheduled to hit stores in January.

For next year, the pianist is thinking about doing a summer concert tour in addition to her third annual holiday tour, which will grow by four or



To listen to the music of Lorie Line, call 673-9065. Then select one of these four-digit numbers to hear a 45-second sample of the song:

"Threads of Love"	4430
"Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"	4431
"Deck the Halls"	4432
"Prince of Tides"	4433
"Queen for a Day"	4434

The bottom line

Album (year)	Sales as of Nov. 23
"Out of Line" (1989)	37,823
"Storyline" (1990)	26,563
"Sharing the Season" (1991) ..	119,764
"Threads of Love" (1992)	84,686
"Beyond a Dream" (1993)	63,035
"Sharing the Season II" (1993)	49,013

five concerts. She's also planning to record a piano album of hymns for the mainstream, not the Christian-music marketplace. And she'll take January through March off at Dayton's.

She'll go on a skiing vacation for a week and also devote considerable time to her 4-year-old daughter, Kendall, who doesn't get much attention from Mom during the fourth quarter of the year, her busy performance season.

Cosmetic commotion

"It's a big to-do when Lorie plays here," said Jill Samuelson, a beauty adviser at the Estée Lauder counter at Dayton's Rosedale. Line puts shoppers in a good mood, Samuelson said, but her burgeoning crowd often obliterates the cosmetics counter, inconveniencing some Estée Lauder customers.

As Line begins each selection, two or three people stop to watch and listen. By mid-song, a couple dozen people are watching. Line performs with enthusiastic body language, no matter what the tempo of the piece she's playing — but she's not a ham. She signals her sidemen when to take solos; they have sheet music to show them the melody, but they're mostly winging it.

Shoppers talk to her as she plays. At song's end, there's a smattering of applause. Most of the people move on. Meanwhile, Line has sold another handful of cassettes and CDs.