



# The Design and Implementation of the Curriculum for the Collegiate Group Piano Course at the Comprehensive Universities in China

**Chialun Chang**

College of Music and Dance, Baise University, Baise, Guangxi, China

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**Abstract:** The music education in China is unevenly distributed. Well known music conservatories in cosmopolitan cities offers high quality training both in theory and performance. On the other hand, general comprehensive universities, especially in the rural areas have limited resources and qualified teachers, and often require students a minimum of music training prior to college admission. Piano is the most versatile instrument to train music fundamentals, consequently, piano become mandatory course for a music degree in a comprehensive university. Many music departments offer group piano course to accommodate as many students. This essay will evaluate the course design of the collegiate group piano in China, and offer suggestions for implementation.

**Keywords:** group piano, music education, curriculum, implementation

## 1. Introduction

Music has long been established as a major in higher education, and a well-established university would offer studies for different musical instruments, music compositions, music theory, musicology, music education, and even music therapy. Depends on the entry requirements of each university, students possess different level of proficiency upon their admissions to the collegiate music study. For many comprehensive universities in China, the admission requirements only include written exam on basic music theory. As a result, many students enroll in a collegiate music program without prior experience in piano playing and a few are even musically illiterate. Piano subsequently become a mandatory course for every enrolled music student and serves as a mean for training music fundamentals. In the United States, students are required to take two to three years of group-piano course (piano teaching in a group setting), while the piano majors take Applied Piano for one-on-one piano lessons in addition to the group piano. This practice and course design can be applied to the curriculum planning for the music programs in a comprehensive university in China as well.

## 2. The curriculum

The objective for the group piano course is a practical one, which is to train students to obtain a competency in “keyboard skills.” “Keyboard skills” is generally defined as functional piano performing skills that includes the ability to perform repertoire, harmonization, transposition, sight-reading, score reading, improvisation, and accompanying.[1] With these objectives in mind, the group piano course must not center its teaching on technical fluency but rather focus more on theoretical practices and functional skill that would allow students to use piano as a tool to further their music study in general. The group piano class is set up to establish the foundation of piano playing and music learning in general. A minimum of two-year/four-semester program offers enough time to cover the basic music knowledge and to train necessary keyboard techniques. However, depending on the students’ initial level and the objectives of each collegiate institute, the course work can be expanded to three years/six semesters long. As aforementioned, the function of group piano is not to train virtuosic pianist, but rather to facilitate students with fundamental music literacy and practical keyboard skills. Below is a suggestion of subjects and activities that can be introduced within a two-year program of a collegiate group piano course.

### 2.1 First semester

- (1) Introduction to the keyboard and fingering (black keys and white keys, high and low)
- (2) Rhythm: pulse and rhythm, note value, improvisation with black keys, playing by ear, time signature, simple meter, bar lines.
- (3) Staves: treble and bass clefs, ledger line, middle C, Bass F and treble G, notation and solfège.
- (4) Dynamic signs and musical terminology
- (5) C position: five finger scale, major scale theory and intervallic pattern, five finger melodic improvisation.
- (6) Intervals: reading by intervals, recognizing up and down and respond on the keyboard’s right and left, playing by

ear.

- (7) Five finger transposition (all 12 keys)
- (8) Music phrasing and form
- (9) Articulation
- (10) Collaboration and ensemble

## 2.2 Second semester

- (1) Extended interval (exceeding fifth)
- (2) Triads: major, minor and diminished triads. Sing along with solfège
- (3) Primary chord: I, IV, V and V7, progression and cadence
- (4) Harmonization with I, IV and V (V7).
- (5) Broken chord pattern and accompaniment
- (6) Moving positions
- (7) Minor five finger position, improvisation and harmonization.
- (8) Minor key primary chords: i, iv and V (V7), progression and cadence
- (9) Minor key transposition.
- (10) Collaboration and ensemble
- (11) Compound meter

## 2.3 Third semester

- (1) Pedal
- (2) Turning fingering
- (3) Major keys and key signatures. Circle of fifths.
- (4) Major scale in one or two octaves, arpeggios and cadences.
- (5) Extended chord, broken chord pattern and accompaniment
- (6) Minor Key, key relationship, and key signatures.
- (7) Minor scale in one or two octaves, arpeggio and cadences.
- (8) Music periods and style, notable composers and their works.
- (9) Collaboration and ensemble

## 2.4 Fourth semester

- (1) Seventh Chords other than dominant seventh
- (2) Harmonization with seventh chords.
- (3) Sonata form (Sonatina)
- (4) Absolute music and abstract music.
- (5) Pentatonic scales, improvisation and harmonization.
- (6) Blues scale, improvisation and accompaniment patterns.
- (7) Church modes, improvisation and harmonization
- (8) Other rhythmic pattern and styles (tango, bossa nova and etc.)
- (9) Collaboration and ensemble

## 3. The implementation

A Group Piano Lab must equip with 88-key electronic pianos and microphone headsets that are connected to a central console on the instructor's piano. This allows the instructor to control audio input and output of each students' piano and communicate with individual student without shouting or leaving his/her seat. In addition, students can each practice at their own station without interfering each other.

It is recommended for the students to start the group piano program from their freshman year and finish at the sophomore year. Students who become interested in piano performance can then choose piano as their main instrument and go on to take one-on-one Applied Piano in their junior and senior years. It would further serve as a reinforcement if the materials covered in the group class are in accordance with the music theory classes such as harmony, music history and analysis, which would enhance student's comprehension and develop to become a lifelong skill.

A suitable size for the group class would be set around ten to sixteen students (20 should be considered maximum), and an even number would serve better for grouping students for two-piano/four-hand or other ensembles. As same as in

general academic classes, the two-hour class per week gives students time to learn a concept and put it into practice during the week. The number of students per class determines the amount of time the teacher can give individual attention to each student. When the number of students is limited to 10 to 16, not only does it allow teachers some time to pay attention to each individual student, the combination of even numbers is convenient for students to split in groups for class activities, as well as group exercises, four-hand or two-piano ensemble, echo play, or accompaniment. In a group setting, students are able to practice collaboratively with others, to listen and communicate with each other more closely, which encourages the development of independent thinking, communication skills, leadership, and problem-solving skills.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although the development of music schools and conservatories in China is relatively late started, piano teaching in China has shown a long history of development and progress. However, most popular method of teaching is still one-on-one and teachers place great emphasis on finger velocity and technics. Group piano teaching was born to accommodate more students in one lesson, and it does have several advantages that a one-on-one lesson cannot achieve. To increase the efficacy and efficiency of group piano teaching, the objectives of a collegiate class piano must be re-evaluated. Subjects and activities such as music appreciation, harmonization, improvisation, and collaboration must be brought into the curriculum to train students the "functional keyboard skills," and to help achieve keyboard competency that can last for a life time.

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