

A Reevaluation of the Overall Function and Role of the Collegiate Group Piano Class in a Comprehensive University in China

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Abstract: Music education has been established in China for a long time. However, many people believe that the best way of teaching and learning a musical instrument is through one-on-one lessons with a teacher. This essay re-examines the fundamental keyboard courses offered in a four-year comprehensive university, and how the program fits in the curriculum of the music department and how to implement it more economically while maintaining the effectiveness.

Key words: group piano; comprehensive university; music education; music curriculum

1. Introduction

In China, being admitted to a music specific school in higher education such as Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and Xinghai Conservatory of Music, music students are required to go through auditions, which means students must learn to play musical instruments prior to college. On the contrary, many comprehensive universities that offer music studies only require students to take written exams on fundamental music theory without having students perform in an audition. In that case, many students enter the music programs without any knowledge or experience in playing an instrument. Piano often serves as an initial instrument for the music beginners because of its versatility and comprehensiveness. Hence, the piano becomes a mandatory course in the music department of a comprehensive university. However, with entrees of fifty to one hundred or more freshmen every year, no music department can afford to employ as many piano teachers to teach each student individually. As a result, group piano course become necessary. However, many schools fail to recognize the functions and the role of the group-piano class in the overall curriculum of a music program, and still teach piano in the traditional sense in terms of class settings, teaching methods and teaching materials. To have more effective teaching and learning outcome, the purposes and the operation of piano classes for college beginners must be redefined.

2. The Reevaluation

Although many music departments in Chinese universities currently have group piano classes, it is observed that the size of the class is rather large. Taking College of Music and Dance of Baise University in Guanxi Province as an example, a class would consist of approximately thirty to forty students, each play on an electronic piano that is not connected to a digital console without a headphone set. Students have to practice with their sound playing out loudly, which creates a chaotic class environment. The teaching materials used by the teachers are the same as the one-on-one lessons, but they are

taught to 40 folds of individual student, and often students are learning different level of music pieces in one class. The teaching context and focus are completely in accordance with the abilities and preferences of each teacher without a set standard or common goal. In this case, the primary one-on-one method of "teacher teaches-student emulates-teacher correct and guide" was forced to be carried out only in the form of "academic lectures". The teachers teach, but without students' immediate reaction and imitation, the teachers are not able to confirm whether the students have "learned" it. The acquisition of piano techniques requires a long period of practice, and only with teacher's guidance and validation, students are able to have more effective practice. Therefore, before students practice independently, a certain degree of supervision is required, which is difficult to achieve in group piano lessons. Teachers are unable to provide proper guidance and correction for each student's mistakes if the number of the students exceeds twenty. In addition, if the group classes are arranged the same as the one-on-one piano lessons, it will not only make students unable to make good use of the group activity and peer learning opportunity, but also cause teachers to struggle with class management including class prepping, time management, progress tracking and assessment.

Several factors contribute to such class arrangement. The first one is the lack of experience and knowledge in group piano teaching. Second, musical texts in Chinese written specifically for group piano are nonexistent. And lastly, the presumption of a piano lesson outcome is usually technically oriented. Students are expected to learn the necessary techniques to move their fingers effortlessly on the piano. However, compared with professionals, from the perspective of word technique, there are obvious differences in the eyes of amateurs. In the eyes of a professional pianist, playing piano not only involves moving fingers fast on the piano, but also understanding the musical language including musical phrasing, forms, harmonic progression, compositional background, historical context, sound quality and balance, tone color, voicing, pedal techniques, and so on. Hence, performing music is an art form that synthesizes intellectual and physical activities. The aforementioned "techniques" require years of training, practice, and studies in order to reach the adequacy in performance. For group piano, especially for adult beginners, expecting students to come out of the program and become a semi-professional pianist is unrealistic. But to what extent do we expect students to learn and master piano techniques is the real question in this discussion.

To design an effective course, one must first define the word "effective" in the context of the group piano class. Only by understanding the purposes and functions of "group piano" in the overall curriculum of the music department in a comprehensive university, can a clear and reasonable expectations be set for it. Thereupon, a systematic blueprint of curriculum and progressive plan can be drawn out accordingly.

3. The Function

What is the purpose and function of group piano lessons then? Piano often is the first choice for a music novice because of its availability. Since it is also the only few musical instruments that can manifest multiple parts such as melody and harmony at one time, and has a wide range of fixed pitches, it is the most useful tool for learning music fundamentals. The basic piano course has a practical purpose, that is to enable a comprehension of musical language by applying the learned theory to real practices. To this end, group piano lessons should focus on "practicality" rather than on mastering the virtuosity itself. For group piano classes in music departments of American universities, "keyboard skills" are generally defined as "functional piano performing skills", which include the ability to perform repertoire, harmonization, transposition, sight reading, score reading, playing by ear, improvisation, and accompanying. A systematically planned syllabus would be resonant with the above teaching objectives, step by step guide students to achieve reasonable goals, and enable students to effectively apply what they have learned into their music performance and creativity. These are the ultimate goals of the collegiate group piano course.

4. Conclusion

There are different forms of piano teaching in group setting. For serious piano students, the most familiar group class is in the form of master classes, that is to learn by watching a teacher teaching and other students with only one or two instruments at present. The model of master class as well as the individual one-on-one lesson has been employed for centuries. As opposed to the master class model, the group piano class is to let the involved students operate a piano, not necessarily at the same time, but in one classroom. In the old time, this wasn't possible due to the size of the piano and its high-cost. Nevertheless, this practice was enabled by the invention of electronic piano in the 1950s. In the U.S., group-piano classes were first seen in elementary schools, and it was established as a college course by Raymond Burrows in the 1930s while the first electronic piano lab was assembled at Ball State University in 1956. Nowadays, many music schools, either in public or private sectors, are facilitated with a piano lab that is equipped with a dozen or more of the 88-key electronic pianos. With the piano lab set-up for running, the fundamental keyboard class that used to be taught in one-on-one or one-to-four fashion can be replaced by a group piano class that accommodates 12 to 16 students. It is relevant to bear in mind that the function of the group-piano class is not for training piano virtuoso, but to establish music foundations. Therefore, subjects taught in the class should not be limited to repertoire or finger exercises, and the integration of functional skills such as harmonization, transposition, improvisation and accompanying should better serve for the course objectives.

In fact, group piano is a more economic and effective way of teaching music fundamentals and training functional keyboard skills since the teachers are able to avoid unnecessary repetitions of the same ideas and instructions while utilizing the advanced technology for interactive activities to promote collaborations and team work. According to Dr. Robert Pace, a renowned piano educator, learning piano in a group setting can foster and facilitate music literacy, better communication skills, positive attitude, self-confidence, and independent thinking. The only disadvantage of the group piano class is that each student can only get a certain amount of individual attention. However, with the understanding of the functions of the group piano and with a mindfully deliberated curriculum, learning piano in a group setting can encourage a higher level of music achievement and music appreciation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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