



# PIANO PEDAGOGY FORUM

v. 12, No. 1/January 1, 2009



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Association and El Paso Music Teachers Association. In the summer of 2006, he was hired by the International Piano Performance Examinations Committee of Taiwan to conduct piano examinations for about 1,200 students nationwide. In 2006 he finished the installation of a \$250,000 state-of-the-art piano lab at UTEP. He also enjoys research activities and presents lecture recitals at national and international conferences.

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## From the Top: What Students Think About Their Group Piano Experience

report by **Oscar Macchioni**

In a time when some university administrators and colleagues are questioning the validity of including group piano in the undergraduate curriculum, we must re-examine our discipline. What we do as group piano teachers is extremely important for our students because we have the opportunity to influence the entire music student body throughout our classes. Instead of the “arm chair” approach to music, we offer a practical, hands-on performing approach, a *gestalt* of concepts students learn in other subjects. It is our responsibility to teach students keyboard skills that will be useful in their field, allowing them to understand and experience the world of music.

The motto for the 2008 GP3 Forum was “Staying Focused, Staying Fresh.” Friday was dedicated to Group Piano Teaching at the College/University level under the topic, “A Fresh Look at the Goals, Standards, Outcomes and Status of Group Piano.” The first panel session was titled *From The Top: What Students Think About Their Group Piano Experience*. We were given the opportunity to evaluate, from the students' perspective, what we are or are not doing right and what and how we can improve the curriculum of group piano. Using video interviews, this panel assessed what the secondary piano students thought and felt during their tenure in group piano classes. Three panelists from different institutions presented their students' opinions about group piano and their findings were quite similar.

Erin Bennett, currently pursuing a D.M.A at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM), interviewed five former secondary piano students, all of whom received a grade of “A” in their final semester and completed their requirements within the past two years. Erin questioned students in four broad areas and was quite surprised at some of the answers, especially the positive comments.

1. *What are we doing right?* On the subject of scales and technique, students at the CCM liked what they were doing and expressed the importance of technique to build confidence. In repertoire and sight-reading they wanted more. On memorization, although not required, one student who chose to do so, said that it gave her confidence to memorize pieces on her own instrument. Regarding connection to theory, students felt they needed more in this area, especially intervallic relationships reinforced by harmonization, transposition and score reading. Other areas they were pleased with were performing in front of the class, performing pop tunes, patriotic songs and music education songs.
2. *In what areas do they desire more comfort?* They would like to be able to navigate the keyboard more freely with less looking down at their hands. They also felt the need to play more complex repertoire, have the ability to approach a new piece on their own; play piano accompaniments pertaining to their own instruments or voice (most instrumentalist saw it unnecessary to have a stronger background in choral- style playing), and to be able to transpose at sight.
3. *Ways we can improve.* Although students were satisfied with the curriculum they thought quantity was emphasized over quality. They feel concepts should be better related to their overall musical education through a curriculum that includes more pedagogical accompaniments and repertoire for their instruments (i.e. Suzuki, band methods, art songs). Since most students take theory and piano concurrently, they need a better connection between both disciplines and more reinforcement than what we actually think. We need to provide better pedagogical instruction to multi-staff reading and allow more time to learn materials.
4. *Student ideas to add to the curriculum.* Students expressed a desire for more focus on jazz, composition, and improvisation. *Harmonization at the Piano* by Frackenpohl was cited as a good beginning resource for these activities. Graduate assistants felt they needed better direction in the teaching of these skills.

Erin's observations and responses to the interviews were the following:

1. No major changes are needed in the content. Overall, students liked the curriculum and saw it as an important part of their education. They saw an improvement in their playing but wish they were better now.

2. There is a need for fine-tuning to better reach the goals: quality over quantity.
3. Repertoire should be more related to students' instruments or voice type.
4. We need to emphasize more how they can use the piano throughout their lives.
5. We should talk to our colleagues in the theory department.
6. Work to achieve more consistency among graduate assistants.

The second panelist was Hanna Mayo, who is currently working towards a master's degree in piano performance at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL). This institution has approximately one hundred and twenty students who take three semesters of piano class. Hanna asked the students five broad questions and was also surprised at their positive comments.

1. *Did you learn to play the piano in this class?* Students responded positively to this question and cited the following abilities as important elements of this: coordination of hands together playing, breaking down of music for study; using appropriate fingerings and good practicing techniques, blocking of chords, and reading from lead sheets.
2. *What is your comfort level at the piano?* Students expressed comfort with their ability to read chords but not an actual piece of music. They stated they were uncomfortable playing for “legitimate” people.
3. *What do you wish you were more comfortable doing?* Students cited the following: playing in more keys; reading two clefs simultaneously; composing and improvising; playing with less tension; and being able to recognize and properly voice chords.
4. *What skills did you learn? What are you able to do right?* Students were satisfied that they could play accompaniments to their own instruments' repertoire, compose, understand music theory, think intervallically, sight-read more efficiently, and participate in ensemble performances.
5. *Are these skills valuable?* Hanna got a big and positive YES! Students think that these skills turn students into musicians.

As a summary, Hanna pointed out the need for a unified curriculum between theory and class piano and the importance of degree specific skills and assignments to accommodate our varied pool of students.

The last panelist was Dr. Kenneth Williams, director of graduate programs in piano pedagogy and coordinator of the class piano program at Ohio State University (OSU). A doctoral student conducted the interviews for his segment.

At OSU, students elaborated on how class piano helped them with their theory classes and how important it was to learn to play from multi-staves. Demonstration from the teachers was very valuable. Activities they enjoyed the most were practical activities and playing in duets and in groups. They felt confident “thinking on the spot” and playing easy chord progressions in different keys. They did not feel confident in sight-reading. As expressed by the other panelists, students at OSU felt they needed to learn more practical skills relevant to their degrees.

In conclusion, this panel presented the students' opinions about class piano, addressing in particular the areas of content, practicality and comfort. To the teacher's surprise, no major changes were requested but they all agreed that our curriculum should include more assignments and skills related to the students' specific area of study, instrument or education. In addition, we should work more to unify the theory and class piano

study, instrument or education. In addition, we should work more to unify the theory and class piano curriculum. These diverse panelists interviewed students who successfully passed class piano, most with “As.” Perhaps in the future it would be wise to interview students who passed with a lower grade such a “C” or who fail class piano, and listen to their experiences and ideas for improvement within the curriculum.

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