

3. STRATEGIES OF TEACHING AN ELECTIVE PIANO COURSE TO THEORETICAL MUSIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The present article highlights the peculiarities of the elective Piano course in music colleges offering theoretical, not instrumental, study programmes, since this is a course which, upon completion, certifies bachelors to subsequently teach piano in music schools. The author presents the various problems specific to this subject and proposes various methods and strategies for solving them.*

Key words: *piano technique, undergraduate music students, music programmes, technical difficulties, piano pedagogy*

1. Introduction

The elective Piano course included in the Music undergraduate programmes for students that opt for theoretical, as opposed to instrumental, music studies is a valuable opportunity and, at the same time, a major advantage in their professional development. The completion of this Piano elective results in the students' certification as piano teachers to pupils up to the 8th grade in the Romanian education system (~ year 9 UK, pupils' age ~ 14) in vocational (music) schools, and pupils of any age in private schools. This chance to complete a second major, apart from their specialisation in Music Pedagogy, Composition, Conducting, Musicology etc, has proved to be very popular among Theoretical Music students. In the present paper we would like to highlight the specificities of teaching this course as well as the challenges that may occur during classes, and eventually to suggest certain methods of approaching and resolving these issues.

2. Premises

As an elective instead of a core subject, this Piano course is specially designed for first-year students who have a thorough pianistic background but who have decided, for whatever reason, not to enrol in the Music Performance programme. Any first-year undergraduate may choose to take up this course, but their acceptance depends upon their passing a preliminary examination which consists in playing one or two classical pieces in recital. It is the piano professors who decide, following this recital, if the applicants display the minimal prerequisite skills to complete this course successfully.

The necessary requirements to pass each end-of-term examination are quite strict, as the syllabus specifies a repertoire nearly identical to that of the Piano Performance academic programme. It stipulates that students must be able to perform from memory four distinct pieces pertaining to different periods: pre-classical, classical, romantic and modern / contemporary. And we are not referring here to Bach's *Inventions*, but rather to the *Fugues* and *Preludes* from his *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in the same way as we cannot choose sonatinas or extremely

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facile classical sonatas but must approach more complex sonatas by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven. The only differences between this Piano elective (for Theoretical Music students) and the Piano core course (for Performance undergraduates) lie in the latter's requirement to perform concertos and in the former's freedom to choose a slightly less difficult repertoire which correlates with the students' technical, stylistic and interpretive level.

As a pianist and piano professor for many years, I can say that generally (though not always) the repertoires in the Piano elective are slightly less complex than those studied in the Piano core course. Taking all this into account, after the initial examination the professors may admit, besides good and proficient students, even less-skilled pianists who are keenly interested in this instrument and are determined to complete the course while acknowledging their own level and pledging to practise thoroughly to level up.

3. Problematics

We may say that the main issue in teaching this course lies with the professor's adjustment to the level of each student (since all classes are one-on-one). Occasionally, the initial testing that includes the above-mentioned recital may not be conclusive and, consequently, once we start the course we may realise there is much more to be done than was initially expected. Thus, during this three-year Piano elective our mission as teachers is to help students to reach their highest potential and develop at least to the point of being academically and musically adequate to teach piano according to the requirements.

Unlike the peculiarities and purpose of a core Piano course where we focus mainly on the students' musical proficiency and their developing into talented instrumentalists, in the Piano elective our focus must be twofold – on the students' growth as musicians as well as future teachers, since many of them show gaps in various respects. It is vital that the professor touch upon all aspects: the piano technique, the pedagogy of piano teaching and the development of the future teacher from a stylistic, aesthetic and instrumental viewpoint. The completion of this elective should see students, for instance, have a solid piano technique, be able to better sightread, possess knowledge of the history of the piano, be acquainted with various teaching methods, know most of the piano literature for the age segment they are going to teach – in brief, become more complex musicians.

Although, in order to become certified piano teachers, students are required to enrol in the Teacher Training Programme as well as in a specialised Instrumental Teaching Course, it is necessary that the Piano elective course bring supplementary information that complements the above-mentioned subjects. Thus, if we review all the issues stated so far, we can see that teaching a Piano elective to theoretical music undergraduates can be more complex and problematic than teaching a Piano core course to piano undergraduates. The fact that the former must acquire technical and performing skills as well as methodological and didactic abilities makes us approach our lessons from a variety of different angles and adopt a much wider perspective.

Another important issue that must be taken into account when preparing for and teaching this course refers to the students' different majors. If we want to help them to a greater extent, we can draw comparisons / analogies with each of these

majors: Music Teaching and Pedagogy, Classical Composition, Jazz and Pop Composition, Musicology, Choral / Orchestral Conducting. Naturally, considering each of these specialisations separately entails greater efforts for the professor's part as it involves minute preparations (ideally) beforehand in order to be able to gain that comprehensive perspective which is essential for such customised classes. In what follows we will present several ways of approaching and resolving the above-mentioned issues.

4. Possible solutions and resolutions

As concerns the first problem, namely the various degrees of pianistic proficiency of each undergraduate, we believe that the teacher has the obligation and is the only one in a position to determine the student's progress. Naturally, the student has his/her own contribution, because all our work is based on his/her psychological and professional data, but a lack of involvement, or a wrong quantification and choice of the persuasive techniques used in the relationship with the student will lead in most cases to the utter failure of the entire teaching process. My years as a piano teacher have taught me – especially when it comes to a subject such as the piano, which is done on a one-on-one basis – that a lack of good communication and compatibility between teacher and student will greatly limit the latter's progress. Interpersonal connection plays an essential role in piano lessons.

Learning relies primarily on the teacher's ability to convey information, but just as relevant as the quality of the information is the way it is shared with others. In fact, I believe that the way we present things is even more important. Thus, during the teaching process, the student must feel that our intentions are sincere, that we want to help him or her to improve in a particular area of study. If we manage to be convincing enough through a positive and encouraging discourse, the student will certainly be more willing to try to put into practice the new techniques/methods of study proposed in class.

A warm, welcoming atmosphere, tolerant of the student's own opinions and open to communication will make the student more likely to be motivated to continue practising at home. Using this approach will make it easier to persuade students to practise because they come to understand how important practice is in achieving progress and not because they merely have to. If persuasion is used in a correct and positive way, students will want to practise in the way they have been taught in class, because they are confident that the teacher is right in what s/he is saying and that they will get much better results.

Consequently, after a careful assessment and some clarifying discussions with the students, we proceed to choose the repertoire for the exam. I always try to take their preferences into account, because it is my belief that students will spend more time practising if they enjoy the selected repertoire. In order to help them to make a decision, I usually play for them small excerpts from those works or we listen to seminal recordings available on Youtube and Spotify. Occasionally, I send them links to various pieces that I expect would match their piano playing level (relying on my initial assessment), and allow them their freedom of choice. I also challenge them to listen, think about and send me some repertoire suggestions. But in this case I reserve the right to agree or disagree with their suggestions and I justify my

decision every time.

I believe it is preferable to start with works that challenge them technically and interpretively, with the aim of making visible progress but without overstraining them from the start. In my opinion, it is better to work in as much detail as possible and bring their performance as close to perfection as possible with a medium-difficulty piece rather than aim too high and find, at the end, that the student can barely cope or that s/he manages at best a mediocre performance of higher-difficulty pieces. During the first few lessons, taking into account the student-teacher interaction and aiming to discover their strengths and weaknesses, I come to know their potential better and adjust my discourse, requirements and working methods to their own individual needs. *“An important consideration is that a particular teaching method may not be appropriate for all adult learner students and it is necessary for all qualified piano teachers to tailor their teaching methods and employ practices according to individual requirements.”*⁵

Thus, relating to each student’s pianistic level, with the less competent ones I focus mainly on correcting certain bad piano playing habits, such as incorrect hand positioning, tense arms and shoulders, incorrect (and most of the times inadvertent) fingering, lack of a firm attack, superficial and uneven playing and so on. I have also been confronted with situations where I had to tackle rhythmic problems or issues related to bad posture, tense arms, hands or wrists, and I have encountered certain students who could not differentiate between modes of attack, or others who had never worked on scales, arpeggios or other technical exercises despite having studied piano for many years.

I would like to highlight that, unfortunately, I occasionally notice (without wishing to do so at all) a clear decline with respect to the students’ piano skills as they enrol at university. I believe the fault lies with everyone involved in our educational system – teachers and students in vocational schools – that, in turn, may be due to the world and the environment we live in. In this age of celerity, of the internet, of over-technologisation, but also of self-centredness and personal gain, the study of piano or music in general is becoming a less and less sought-after occupation. People no longer have the patience to focus in detail on a particular activity. Piano playing at the level of musical and academic proficiency requires continuous self-improvement, a constant striving to become better, to improve oneself. It is an activity that involves following certain rules, a great deal of self-discipline, endurance and perseverance, qualities that have always been difficult to find (in one person), and which in today’s society – mainly consumer-oriented and looking for immediate rewards – are even rarer.

Therefore, every time I notice various shortcomings in my students’ piano training, even though class time is very limited, I try to intervene as often as possible with explanations, with exemplifications, with corrections; I work with them on their piano technique, I give them well-chosen materials to study in addition to the pieces in the repertoire and I try not to neglect the artistic side, because in the end I want to contribute to the training of genuine musicians, not just mere performers. With the more advanced students I am much more exacting and demanding in all respects and I expect much more from them. It is a conscious and deliberate attitude

⁵ Shiran Du, 2021: 114

on my part, because by raising the minimum accepted standards I force them to consider much more subtle issues, to be more demanding of themselves, to want to study harder, more consciously, more efficiently, in order to reach a much higher level of performance of a higher level of refinement. As a general rule of thumb, regardless of the pianistic level of the students, I believe that a talented piano teacher will adapt to the needs of each student and will succeed in bringing about a visible progress in their pianistic development.

Personally, I insist perhaps almost too much on both problematizing and resolving certain technical difficulties, as well as on stylistic and interpretive aspects. But the justification for this behaviour lies in the fact that over time I have observed that it is absolutely necessary to repeat the same issues very often, preferably using different formulations and examples, because one never knows when that long-awaited “click” in the student’s mind will occur. Regardless of the context and the subject matter, the fact that they repeatedly hear various basic or more advanced information related to piano playing or musical aesthetics in general, trains and moulds them, at the same time, in a certain way which will be very useful in both positions they may find themselves in the future: as instrumentalists and as teachers.

Even if, for various reasons (some of them purely objective), they will focus mainly on a teaching career, the general musical notions learned in the Piano elective will be useful to them in any case. Finally, this course “*is not only about the popularization of piano knowledge and the teaching of piano playing style, but also about spreading the musical literacy and artistic level represented by the piano to students and helping them to develop their own unique understanding of music.*”⁶ On another note, this constant on-the-go adaptation to their specific expectations and needs is quite demanding and tiring for the teacher, but at the same time, it is the most creative part of our profession and brings us the greatest satisfaction. It makes class time colourful. It can never be a question of boredom, because we are obliged to be in a perpetual state of alert in the sense of being as quick as possible to identify existing problems, to discover their roots and then to find a solution, irrespective of their nature. “*Teachers can play a positive role in improving the piano learning motivation of young students by incorporating their preferences and choices, adjusting practising intensity and persistence, enhancing the level of engagement, and improving tangible outputs.*”⁷

These are the reasons that led me to bring up before the indispensable need for teacher involvement. If they do their job with indifference and without passion, they will never be willing to fight or work hard to bring about student progress, and they will certainly not get the same beautiful results. Therefore, “*very high demands are placed on the teachers of the instrument both with their specialization and about their psychological and pedagogical abilities.*”⁸ As concerns the problem arising from the fact that students are enrolled in different programmes, I would say that a course tailored to each specific specialisation would be very useful. Unfortunately, practice teaches us that because of the limited time allocated to this course (only one

⁶ Zhuolun Chen, 2022: 71

⁷ Shiran Du, 2021: 114

⁸ Maria Chmurzynska, 2012, How (not) to discourage youngsters from playing the piano. On bad and good piano teaching, quoted in Zong Ye Yang, 2020: 1812

hour per week), although we may be able and would like to provide higher-quality classes based on the idea of interdisciplinarity, reality forces us to be extremely rigorous, if not even stingy with the implementation of these wonderful ideas. However, in certain contexts, when the situation allows or even requires it, we also bring up or draw parallels with their major.

With undergraduate **Orchestral Conductors** we can discuss, for example, timbre, drawing various analogies with the timbres and colours of different instruments, or we can look at phrasing principles corresponding to the construction and the way of tensioning a musical discourse from the point of view of the conductor. The students in the **Choral Conducting** programme may benefit from reading in class various works that they will be conducting. We can briefly analyse the scores together and we can help them to understand in more depth some of the musical particularities by providing them with some starting points or giving them some suggestions to guide them in the right direction.

With the undergraduates in **Classical Composition** we can look more closely at certain compositional techniques used by composers and their relevance in the given context, we can help them to understand more clearly certain interpretive requirements by alluding to certain instrumental timbres, while with the students in **Jazz & Pop Composition** we can alternatively work on scores from their field, such as jazz arrangements of academic works.

Future **Music Teachers** might benefit from prioritizing the practice of better sight-reading, given the fairly high likelihood that they will find themselves exemplifying simple scores in class (to engage pupils) or accompanying children's choirs on the piano. It may also be useful for them to read in class some works outside the piano syllabus but which would be of real help during future Music Education classes. With **Musicology** undergraduates we can discuss some of the recitals they have been to, they can be introduced to modern and contemporary composers or simply to lesser-known composers, we can engage in debates on music history, musical forms and musical analysis, they can be asked to present certain music events or to write a few pages of music reviews of certain concerts or piano recitals.

On another note, organising group classes would be an efficient way to have wide-ranging discussions and allow students from all majors to express and argue publicly their personal opinions on topics of the utmost interest. Of course, the teacher should take on the leader's / mediator's role. Certainly such debates between musicology students, composers, conductors and future music teachers on carefully thought-out topics could become quite explosive and present a maximum learning potential. *“Practical results also demonstrated the high efficiency of group lessons (Schonberg, 1987), due to more abstract and comprehensible manner of explaining the playing technique principles and, probably, due to the competitive nature of the classes, stimulating students to achieve better results.”*⁹

Another possibility to come up with something innovative instead of individual lessons could be to prepare recital lessons, in which students present their own repertoire in front of their peers and then follow up with some constructive open discussions about each other's performance. These lessons would be welcome

⁹ Zong Ye Yang, 2020: 1815

and very useful: they would increase the students' motivation to practise because the students would realise they would experience public exposure, have ad hoc 'rivals' and would wish to confirm their own value. Moreover, these group meetings would be a good preparation for future recitals / public performances. They would certainly help to reduce the stress level and / or performance anxiety and to increase self-confidence.

By allotting 15–20% of all classes each semester to such meetings, we could really address the issue of working with students of various proficiency levels enrolled in different programmes. Naturally, there are many proposals to relate constructively to each of their specialisations, and we are aware that we have listed here only a few possibilities. The fact that the completion of this Piano elective certifies students to teach piano carries an enormous responsibility on the part of the teacher. Although nowadays this profession has been diminished, in the sense that we are witnessing a plethora of unqualified people being aggressively promoted, in certain private institutions, as capable of teaching this sophisticated instrument, I will say, in my capacity as an expert, that teaching piano as art is an extremely difficult and delicate activity that cannot be performed by merely anyone.

It is precisely for this reason, teaching at university and acknowledging the increased difficulty of this endeavour, that we must exercise a great deal of caution when selecting those students who will be allowed to attend this course and, furthermore, to give our best to teach them with the utmost patience and professionalism. *“It is not only needed to teach students the basic knowledge of piano theory, but also make students master good basic piano playing skills; students should not only be able to play the piano, but also know how to teach future students in pedagogy and other aspects of teaching methods.”*¹⁰ In order to be able to accomplish all this, we believe that a very important role is played by the way in which the teacher teaches in the classroom. We will set aside the role implicitly played by the students and refer only to those matters within the teacher's control area. As teachers, we can intervene in a multitude of ways that will benefit the learners, but the feedback and outcomes also depend, to a great extent, on them as individuals.

From my own experience as a professor so far, I can say that a vital factor in the students' development into piano teachers (but also as instrumentalists) is the understanding, efficiency and correctness of how to practise piano. I believe that if they learn correct methods of practice, they will be able to pass them on to others. Unfortunately, I have noticed that regardless of their current piano proficiency level, most students have not yet mastered an effective practice technique. They do not know how to actively listen to their playing, how to do an accurate self-assessment, and they lack the patience to practise in an organised and consistent manner.

They only seem to focus on repetition (if they even practise at all) which leads to fatigue, boredom and loss of motivation, especially due to the lack of definite results. Some of them do not pay attention to details, do not attach enough importance to the accurate rendering of the score, they were not trained to choose a fingering that suits the requirements of the music and instead play using fingers at random without being aware of the negative consequences of this bad habit. Many

¹⁰ Xiaoly Jiang, 2019: 629

of them also exhibit poor technique and, since they are not accustomed to rigorous practice, they are unable or unwilling to devote the time and energy necessary to correct those previously-acquired bad habits and are satisfied with being mediocre players.

The situation we have presented requires us to combat all these wrong approaches in class practice while also emphasizing the essential role of practising with each hand separately and only then together, or reiterating the decisive importance of practising slowly until the piece is mastered correctly and the ability to play it fluently and easily is achieved. The students are told about such crucial factors as a gradual, not abrupt, increase in tempo, the pursuit of a definite aim in their practice with the need to achieve a positive result, and they are shown various alternative methods of practice which involve a departure from a faithful rendering of the musical text (rhythmic practice, staccato practice, harmonic practice of melodic passages, voice practice, etc.).

*“Slow practice may also be understood as a self-regulatory practice behavior. Self-regulated learning is defined as the active management of one’s own learning, involving planning, goal-setting, strategy selection, and self-assessment; and is considered an important ingredient of successful music practice.”*¹¹ Our ultimate wish is to provide them, as practically and to the point as possible, with as much knowledge as needed to contribute to their rapid progress, striving to make up for any shortcomings in the shortest period of time.

5. Conclusions

The results of the present study indicate that the elective Piano course in the Department of Theoretical Music Studies involves many problematic aspects stemming mainly from the different programmes that the students who apply for this course are enrolled in. Starting from the premise that they will be certified to teach piano at vocational high schools, the author proposes various solutions that will facilitate both the achievement of real progress in terms of technique and interpretation as well as the training of future piano teachers. The work presents specific teaching methods and certain innovative teaching strategies, aspects which reveal the professor’s need to constantly adapt and diversify his / her discourse and teaching methods according to each student’s study programme. Concretely, our study presents various ways of choosing the repertoire, different manners of approaching the technical and interpretive sides, ways of practising effectively, alternatives to one-on-one lessons, options of performing in public in a smaller setting to gain more self-confidence. Overall, we show various ways of exercising persuasion over the student not only from a pianistic point of view, but also from the perspective of the student’s chosen programme. All this is aimed at increasing the student’s level of training and adaptation to the demands of his / her future workplace.

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