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Group Piano Teaching

An Alternative Strategy for the Tertiary Teaching
of Piano

Imprint

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Music: Discipline and pleasure

Music is regarded by many as one of the great disciplines, alongside areas such as philosophy and science. Moreover, musical education is regarded by many as of great benefit to intellectual development. Two of the early Greek theorists Plato and Aristotle both believed that music would "discipline the mind" (Hanning 1998: 7) and that it formed an important part of a person's education. Several authors expound the positive effects of a musical training on intellectual development, including Monk (1996), North (1999) and Herndon & McCleod (1979). Consequently, in western society, many children study an instrument, at school and/or privately, whilst others take on the challenge of musical training later in life. While many engage in the study of music, others simply enjoy exposure to the sound. In the twenty-first century, all forms of media are saturated with music, the boundaries between traditional musical 'styles' continue to be broken down, and music's influence continues to percolate. Music infiltrates homes, shopping centres, public transport, social activities and, indeed, is rarely absent from people's lives.

The piano is arguably one of the most popular of all musical instruments, and holds a significant place in the cultural life of western society. Its versatility and accessibility means that it is integral to many cultural environments, i.e., it is standard equipment in concert halls, music studios, classrooms, community centres, restaurants, hotels and homes. Performances on the piano pervade our cultural life,

be it in classical, jazz or contemporary styles. As a primary vehicle for the composition of much of the world's greatest music, many of the great composers of all genres have written for the piano or its forerunners. Thus by far the largest proportion of the most recognisable music ever composed is for the piano, either as solo instrument, with orchestra, or in ensemble; indeed Kamien (2004) claims that during the last two centuries "more great music has been written for the *piano* than for any other solo instrument" (Kamien 2004: 30).

The piano is one of the few instruments that does not rely on other instruments to create a musical whole. While a violinist or flute player often relies on the piano for harmonic or rhythmic support, the piano can perform on its own. Piano players are able to present the melody, the harmonic support and bass line, as well as various elements of expression. In fact, Gill (1981) asserts that "the piano is the nearest that civilised Western man has come ... to creating the universal musical instrument" (Gill 1981: 7). Further exemplifying its versatility and adaptability, Neuhaus (1973) regards the piano as a "unique and irreplaceable instrument for teaching music, for the simple reason that it is possible to play and hear on the piano absolutely everything" (Neuhaus 1973: 197).

1.2 The emergence of the piano as dominant instrument

The emergence and rise in popularity of the piano can be identified in the 1800s and, in particular, the latter part of that century, the height of the Romantic period. As the industrial revolution took hold in the 19th century, piano makers in England, America and Europe produced new pianos at an increasing rate. By the middle of

the century, pianos were distributed by numerous instrument makers. At the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, some 102 piano makers from 10 countries exhibited 178 pianos (Ehrlich 1990). At this time, the English firm Broadwood was producing approximately 2500 pianos per year (Ehrlich 1990). Production techniques and materials continued to improve and, when the Steinway production company came onto the scene in the latter part of the 1800s, a new era of piano making began. Developments such as the cast-iron frame and cross-stringing took place, both of which led to significant improvements in the construction of the instrument. By the end of the century, the piano had been reshaped, enlarged, mechanically improved and, as a result, was capable of a bigger, fuller sound and a wider dynamic range. As the piano's design and potential improved, composers could write more challenging repertoire, concert pianists were able to give more virtuosic performances, and the public was exposed to increasingly varied programs. By the end of the 19th century, the piano was renowned as the *prince* of all instruments.

The popularity of the piano was initially restricted to the upper classes or the aristocracy. As the piano became more and more affordable, and developed as a symbol of "social emulation and achievement" (Ehrlich 1990: 9), more and more homes acquired the instrument. The democratic piano became a feature of homes and the "centre of domestic entertainment" (Ehrlich 1990: 9). Such was the social power of this instrument that "a piano symbolized respectability, achievement and status" (Ehrlich 1990: 97) and at one time, "no one set up a home without purchasing a piano, sooner or later" (Ehrlich 1990: 186). Such was its perceived ubiquity that the British author Loesser (1954) argued that "the piano has been an institution more characteristic than the bathtub" (Loesser 1954: vii).

Not surprisingly, the piano and the piano lesson soon became commonplace in western society, thus contributing to "a broadening of educational opportunities" (Machlis 1984: 63), and a commensurate need for piano teachers. The piano had thus become an integral feature of artistic life. Apart from its potential as a performance vehicle and as a teaching and learning tool, it was used for communicating new musical compositions to the general public, with the dissemination of many orchestral and other works occurring via published piano reductions which could be played by professionals and amateurs in a range of contexts.

1.3 The contemporary piano

Since the 1900s, the piano has continued to hold a significant place in the cultural life of western society. In the first half of the twentieth century, the great pianists such as Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) and Horowitz (1903-1989) travelled the world, drawing packed houses to their recitals. The piano recital or piano concerto with orchestra was seen as one of the features of musical life, and the great pianists provided artistic enlightenment for many. With the advent of the recording era in the first half of the 20th century, piano repertoire and performance were made even more accessible. In a similar way, printed piano music was disseminated at an increasingly rapid rate. In the latter half of the 20th century, the piano remained a popular instrument at all levels of musical life. Noyle (1987) refers to a Gallup survey taken in America in 1985, where one in four people, or fifty-seven million

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people, played a musical instrument, and approximately twenty-one million of these played the piano.

Advances in technology have led to greater exposure to the piano and its partner instrument, the electronic keyboard. With ongoing improvements in design of both the traditional piano and its electronic counterpart, the world's cultures have increasing opportunities to listen to or study the piano. The sheer number of concerts involving the piano as chief or ensemble instrument, and the compositions and recordings in today's society cement its dominance as a musical instrument. In university or conservatoire training, non-piano majors are routinely expected to develop keyboard skills.

The piano continues to operate in a wide variety of roles today. It can be the vehicle for solo recitals, concertos, chamber music, or other ensembles. It provides the means for accompanying vocalists, choirs, instrumentalists, or as a tool to assist such tasks as training opera singers, or teaching students aural skills. It serves as the means for providing background music at social functions, for amateur musicals or shows, old-time dances, or music halls. It is an appropriate musical instrument for satisfying numerous musical needs and settings.

1.4 Acquiring instrumental skills

With increasing access to music, there was a commensurately greater need for tuition. Many composers (e.g. Bach [1685-1750], Mozart [1756-1791], Beethoven [1770-1827]) began to teach those within the court family and the aristocracy in

general, and thus a pattern of specialised and private musical training was established. Outside the aristocracy and upper classes, a private teaching profession also emerged, albeit more slowly, and with considerable variation in standards. This has continued to the extent that the private teaching profession occupies a prominent part of the current music teaching and learning domain.

Music thus remains an important part of western society and the education of its people. In Australia, arts education is recognized as fundamental to the development of a child's skill development. Artistic creativity is profoundly important for the growth of intellectual skills, and it is well accepted that all students should be exposed to the arts whilst in the crucial developmental years. Research has demonstrated that arts education

> assists in the development of such high level skills as handling complexity and ambiguity, problem-solving, communication skills, self-discipline and team work (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 8).

Demonstrably, music and the music lesson play a fundamental role in today's arts education. Numerous children engage in music lessons, and many of these have lessons on the piano, Booth (1971) arguing "many parents like their children to learn piano" (Booth 1971: 116). Consequently the majority of today's children have had the experience of learning an instrument, playing for a music exam, performing in a community concert, eisteddfod, or for friends and relatives; alternatively they have been listeners.

As early as 1877, Trinity College London established an examining system in the British Isles (Bridges 1970). The development of music examination syllabi during the twentieth century in particular has had a significant impact on the study of music,

and on the growth and necessity for the music lesson. In Australia today, several examining bodies exist, including the Associated Board of the Royal Schools, Trinity College London, Australian Music Examinations Board, Australian Guild of Music and Speech, and the Australia New Zealand Cultural Arts. All offer graded examinations accessed by thousands of students each year.

The focus and direction of the majority of private music teaching studios revolves around preparation of candidates for these examinations. Thus these examinations operate as a *carrot* system for many students, as indeed they do for many teachers, who move to a higher level following each successful examination and thus progress up the graded syllabus ladder. In a report to the National Heads of Tertiary Music, Carroll (2000) refers to the Australian Music Examinations board as offering

> a learning and assessing structure for students and teachers alike. The graded levels of syllabuses and musical materials have been used as virtual courses of study by teachers who did not have access to music libraries nor the knowledge and materials of music with which to design their own graded courses for each student. This is still the situation for many teachers (Carroll 2000: 2).

The various examination boards evidence a strong presence in Australia. Carroll (2000) describes the impact of the AMEB in Queensland thus:

> As an example of the geographic extent of service, the Queensland office provides annually over 120 examiners to examine over 20 000 in the 42 syllabuses in 97 examination centres for both practical and theoretical examinations in Queensland alone. This is a service and a presence across the state which stimulates and supports music development (Carroll 2000: 2).

Whilst some studios train candidates who are not studying an examination syllabus and there have been developments in 'music for leisure' and more contemporary music style examinations, the traditional music examination syllabus is still

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dominant. Hence the music lesson retains a dominant place in artistic training in the twenty-first century.

1.5 The music lesson: Challenging practice

A private lesson with a music teacher has been and is at the core of the music examination syllabus system and hence typical of mainstream private musical education. Why is it thus? On what basis does the music student require the sole attention of a teacher which the painting student does not? Certainly a performance is judged for itself – but then so is a painting. Both are solo artistic outcomes but why does only music require solo pedagogical input? Surely this practice should be open to question, if not to challenge. To what extent is the precept that one to one tuition is fundamental to performance training simply an inherited tradition? To what extent is it a practice based on research evidence? What research evidence is there that a one to one lesson is the most productive format for instruction? To what extent is such a strategy appropriate for all ages/stages of instrumental learning? At what point, if at all, might a music student be encouraged to develop greater independence? What alternative strategies might yet be explored?

The fact is that there is currently very little basis on which to begin to address such questions, let alone answer them. It is true that there are anecdotal claims (e.g. Keraus 1973, Gordon 1997) and that assertions of efficacy abound in the pedagogical literature. However there seems to be a virtual vacuum of research evidence about the efficacy of this methodology *vis à vis* others. Hence there would seem to be an

urgent need to subject the format and structure of the traditional music lesson to research scrutiny. As Horsbrugh (1998) asks,

> Is the one-to-one lesson with a regular teacher so sacrosanct that we cannot at least examine whether it is the most efficient way of learning? Are there choices that provide the continuation of the principles of the individual lesson but which seek out different ways of achieving the desired ends? (Horsbrugh 1998: 9).

Indeed Herndon and McCleod (1979) question the necessity of teaching at all evidencing the fact that many musicians learn without a teacher. They refer to how many jazz musicians learn by "intensive listening" (Herndon and McCleod 1979: 39). They also refer to the shamans, a culture in which there are no teachers and in which students simply go from one shaman to another to learn their trade (Herndon and McCleod 1979). However many contemporary Western music students find it impossible to progress without the regular supervision of a tutor or teacher. Booth (1971) notes that the ability to proceed unaided and independently is "the great problem that faces every [music] student who is turned loosed upon the world" (Booth 1971: 126). In this regard, Camp (1992) laments that "thousands of students will stop making music when lessons cease" (Camp 1992: 3).

To what extent should teachers be responsible for empowering students to progress from a vessel seeking replenishment to a self-motivated and self-developing entity? Should students at tertiary level need such levels of individual attention, assuming that the majority of these students will, in fact, have had many years of personal and individualised attention within the pre-tertiary one to one lesson environment? Given the fact that many tertiary graduates become teachers within schools or the private studio environment, should the priority of their training focus on performance outcomes or the processes leading towards and beyond performance?

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1.6 Rationale for and aims of the study

Perhaps the penchant for a one to one teaching environment is a reflection of the inheritance of a teaching approach that has been in existence for hundreds of years (Madsen 1988). Weidenbach (1994), for example, suggests that teachers may be hesitant to accept different methodologies because of such biases and traditions. To what extent do the majority of piano teachers have specific skills training in piano teaching? To what extent, alternatively, do they rely on their own learning experiences as a basis for their teaching method? In other words, do they teach as they were taught?

One of the major issues at stake is the rapid fall out of students from music lessons as they reach the adolescent years and the higher examination grades of the various syllabi on offer. The pyramid of music learning has existed for many years, and it has become an ongoing issue for examining bodies and educational institutions of all levels to combat this fallout. Carroll (2000) describes the situation with regards to the AMEB:

> Almost 80% of the Australian candidates are in the grades up to Grade 4 level. Another 20% are in Grades 5-8 and only 1.8% are in Diploma levels. This data shows there is a huge grass roots program of music and speech education only 20% of whom proceed to higher grades, and only up to 1800 of these undertake diplomas (Carroll 2000: 3).

Why might this be so? To what extent, for example, might the system be founded upon dependence rather than building for independence? The research aims to grasp the nettle of questions perhaps too large and too impenetrable for a single doctoral study to answer. The difficulty of the challenge and the courage required to

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challenge orthodoxy are not, however, sufficient reasons for doing so. Hence the study aims

1. To probe perceptions of existing piano teaching models;

2. To explore currently available piano models *in situ*; and to utilise the data from one and two above

3. To develop, trial and evaluate an alternative piano learning model.

1.7   Organisation of the thesis

Critical to an understanding of how the *status quo* came about is a sense of how piano pedagogy developed. Hence Chapter 2 surveys the history and development of the piano and the piano teaching profession. Chapter 3 overviews research to date, identifies the key issues in the literature, and derives the pedagogical principles underpinning the teaching/learning strategies deemed to have been successful. These principles then drive the rationale for the phase one methodology in Chapter 4. This involves the sampling and investigation of perceptions of piano pedagogies from committed learners and post-tertiary individuals, analysis of video footage, and data gathered from existing group teachers. Chapter 5 presents the analysis of these data as a basis for the research niche and identified potential for small-group methodology. The model design and implementation trials across four academic years is outlined in Chapter 6. Perceptions of participants (students, teachers) are presented in Chapter 7, while Chapter 8 synthesises students' self-reflective data and lesson interaction achieved via video analysis. Chapter 9 synthesises the research and discusses key directions and implications for further research.