



PIANO PEDAGOGY FORUM

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Australian pianist **Ryan Daniel** graduated from James Cook University in 1994 with a Bachelor of Music degree with First Class Honours and a University Medal. Whilst a student in Australia he was winner of numerous competitions and prizes including the Great Barrier Reef Piano Competition, the Douglas Smith Prize in Music, the Hugh Brandon Memorial Scholarship, and the North Queensland Concerto and Vocal Competition. In 1995, Ryan was awarded a postgraduate scholarship to study with Lamar Crowson at the University of Cape Town. Whilst in South Africa, he was a finalist in the Oude Meester National Music Prize, the ATKV Forte competition, and he recorded and broadcast for the SABC. For four years he was employed as a part-time teacher of piano, aural training, basic materials and harmony at the South African College of Music, University of Cape Town. Ryan holds a Master of Music degree from the University of Cape Town, with distinction for both practical work and his dissertation on the Beethoven Cello Sonatas. In 1999 Ryan returned to Townsville to take up a tenured position as lecturer in Music at James Cook University, where he is now responsible for the performance and professional studies subjects within the Bachelor of Music degree. Since returning to Townsville, Ryan has given numerous solo and ensemble recitals and was official accompanist for the Australian Festival of Chamber Music masterclass series in both 1999 and 2000. In 1999 and 2000, Ryan was invited to present masterclasses at the International Music House in Kuching, Malaysia. He is currently artistic director of the

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Challenging the Conservatives: Rationale for the Trial and Development of a Group Teaching Model at Tertiary Level

by **Ryan Daniel**

Since early times, people have been influenced by music of a variety of genres and styles, with its effects reaching across all ages, races and nationalities. Music today exists in a myriad of styles, including classical, jazz, indigenous, popular and others, and it continues to have a profound effect on human existence. Part of the cultural life of a nation is defined and shaped by its musical heritage, be it in the preservation of its traditional musical culture, the creation of new individual styles, or the eclectic development of alternative and new music. In the twenty-first century, all forms of media are saturated with music, the boundaries between traditional musical 'styles' continue to be eroded, and its influence continues to percolate. Music infiltrates homes, shopping centers, public transport, social activities and, indeed, is rarely absent from people's lives. In the western world in particular, the majority of people have access to or experience of learning a musical instrument, in either one or often many styles. Many study an instrument at school, whilst others take on the challenge of musical training later in life. Music has a prominent place in the world's cultures and the artistic output and education of its people.

Scientific research demonstrates the fact that music has a positive effect on the development of intellect, co-ordination and problem solving skills. As a result, many parents see it important for their children to engage in music lessons. Consequently, there exists a strong music lesson 'culture' in Australia. Thousands of private studio teachers operate throughout the country, in a distinct industry concerned with music teaching and the music lesson. The music lesson is now firmly entrenched as integral to arts education, and teachers, parents and children accept the basic tenets of the music lesson as standard. Whilst teachers vary in approach and method, the basic premise of the one to one lesson as being the most effective form of tuition is as yet uncontested, particularly in Australia.

Whilst the content of music study and, indeed, lessons remains a focus for individual examining bodies and/or tertiary institutions, the structure and format of the traditional music lesson continues to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the one to one approach. If only for this reason - and in the absence of substantial research evidence about the efficacy of this methodology vis a vis others, there would seem to be an urgent need for arts educators to subject the format and structure of the traditional one to one music lesson to research scrutiny. It is suggested here that in Australia in particular, there is relatively little current research concerning the music lesson, its content and format, and the possibilities of enhancing this model of instruction. As Ian Horsbrugh (1998) from the London Guildhall stated in his 1998 address to the National Heads of Tertiary Music in Australia:

Where then does this leave the traditional "master and apprentice" relationship that represents so much of the core of music education? That is the big challenge for all of us. 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)

In the standard one to one music lesson format, the teacher explains to the individual student orally and/or through demonstration various aspects of the discipline of music practice. The disciplines covered may include the techniques of fingering, articulation, phrasing, style and interpretation. In reality, a pedagogue with several students who learn via the one to one approach, will cover similar principles with each student. By taking into account the amount of information that is repeated by one teacher from lesson to lesson, the time that accumulates due to repetition is considerable, not only in terms

of the same student from week to week, but in particular from student to student during any week. Some argue that it is necessary to observe each student's assimilation of the approach and the skills learnt via approved demonstration. It is suggested here that the practice predominantly in use at present is unnecessarily wasteful, probably inefficient, and leads to the student relying on the teacher for approval of all aspects of playing.

In fact, it is worth questioning the belief of many teachers that it is essential to hear every note that a student plays. Perhaps there is not enough faith shown in music students that they can develop to the degree that they do not need to have every sound and indeed performance approved by the mentor. Many teachers feel that their students are only worthy of public performance and/or approval when the teacher themselves feel the playing is appropriate. Does this not immediately create a potentially unproductive nexus between the student and the teacher, whereby the student feels that their playing always requires approval before venturing beyond the teaching studio, and they therefore become completely reliant on the teacher? As a result of this, their self-criticism and self-reflection in respect of their own playing remains essentially dormant and under-developed, unless the teacher takes a specific course of action in their teaching which will ensure that the necessary reflective skills are developed. At the same time, one can question the validity of a teacher's strict approval of any student's performance of a work, given the fact that it is usually the teacher's interpretation and not necessarily what the composer would have wanted. Might not student creativity and individuality often be stifled by the demands and, indeed, presence of some teachers? What are the reasons for many students being unable to progress and continue beyond their lessons at tertiary level? Are teachers guilty of neglecting the nurturing of self-teaching skills needed by students so that they can progress beyond their training? Are too many teachers taking an overly controlling interest in their students which, in turn, creates a dependency which becomes difficult, if not impossible, to break?

The inherited piano teaching approach

The piano lesson first came about in the 19th century, primarily as a result of the rapid dissemination of pianos and printed music, and the subsequent need for piano teachers. The industrial revolution and improvements in piano construction and design led to the rise of the piano as the prince of all instruments of the Romantic era. It became the vehicle for the virtuoso, the solo concert, and subsequently, a much sought after skill for many of the aristocracy and the general populous. The rise of the middle class saw the influx of the upright piano into homes and the increase in the amount of entertainment centered around the piano. The result was the need for piano teachers, and they came forth in droves. Many were poorly qualified and as a result, a great body of pedagogues emerged that influenced the generations that followed. Of course, there were the 'master teachers', such as Czerny, Liszt, Leschetizky, Schnabel and others, who themselves and via their students produced pianists and pedagogues by the thousands. However, their methods remained centered on the master as the crux of the pedagogical model - most of the learning took place via the discussion, demonstration or the demands of the teacher. These pedagogues were, in fact, revered as gods, and by the middle of the 20th century, the development of a musical culture focussed on the teacher had reached its pinnacle.

These traditions have continued into the 21st century and they continue to dominate current teaching methods. Many instrumental music pedagogues have simply adopted and perpetuate an inherited approach to teaching. The staunch conservative institutions and pedagogues often refer to the traditions of the "great masters" of the European schools of the late 18th and early 19th century, and the long line of master teachers that goes back as far as Beethoven. In many circles however, methods have changed, and experimentation takes place. Why is it that music pedagogy in many institutions still exists as the dinosaur of tertiary education?

The problems of one to one teaching

The emphasis on one to one teaching, accepted as the norm in most music circles, can lead to significant problems. The most common of these is the reliance of the student on the teacher, and thus without the teacher, the student is not able to operate as a self-directed learning entity. Thousands of music graduates leave tertiary institutions after years of expert training, only to find that they cannot cope on their own, that they are unable to continue playing without the guidance and motivation of their "guru". The subsequent drop out rate is extremely high, with thousands of students left floundering or pursuing different careers. The one to one approach is often based around spoon feeding, demonstration, repetition, and the pedagogue supplying the answers and the direction by which the student should practise and perform. What is being done to promote independent thinking, self-appraisal and self-teaching techniques, and the internal processes towards performance, so that the student can become an independently operating entity on leaving their teacher? These issues seem to be neglected amongst piano pedagogy circles.

The antipodean approach

Australia in particular retains a conservative attitude towards music pedagogy, particularly at tertiary level, where the majority of instrumental instruction for first-instrument majors takes place via one on one lessons. This is partly a result of the history and development of Australian tertiary music schools, which for many years was based on European models and on the pedagogical attitudes of England in particular. For the majority of its relatively short history, Australia has looked further afield for the formation of its cultural training grounds. In fact, it is only recently that severe economic rationalism has forced the refocus and revision of many tertiary music institutions courses and offerings. There is no better time to investigate the most pedagogically valid, time and cost effective methods of instrumental instruction.

Many other parts of the western world are experiencing and engaging in alternative approaches to the one to one model. This is most noticeably the case in the United States, where a great deal of experimentation as to the most effective means of teaching is taking place. Australia is lagging behind in pursuing similar investigations, clinging instead to the traditionalist model. Perceptions of the history of piano pedagogy are often misguided - it is interesting to note that the great "master" teachers are often thought of as having only taught in the one to one setting. However, history documents the fact that Liszt, Leschetizky and Schnabel, all formidable pedagogues, taught in both small and large groups, in addition to their work in one to one settings. There is also a great paradox in existence in the attitudes of many parents with regards to musical instruction, with many complaining of the high cost of instrumental instruction, but at the same time maintaining the attitude that to learn "properly", their son or daughter must go through this traditional process. Many educators in a variety of fields have engaged in thorough investigations as to the most effective means of dissemination of skills and information - it is time for musicians in this country to break free of traditions, to experiment and to explore alternatives.

New research in practice

My research focuses on alternative strategies for the teaching of piano at tertiary level. As a result of background research, literature review and initial data collection via interview which reveals significant shortfalls of teaching via the one to one method, the methodology has involved the rationale, design and trial of a new pedagogical model based around small group teaching. The focus of the small-group method is on developing the independent thinking, self-critical and reflective skills required by students for the ongoing development of performance skills. Piano majors in groups of three engage in weekly sessions lasting a maximum of an hour. The students are grouped according to their skill level and students are encouraged to attend other groups' sessions. For every student, each weekly session is mapped out in terms of requirements for background reading, research and/or listening, technical work and repertoire, in addition to sight reading or the presentation of quick studies. Students are thus able to prepare work well in advance

and set themselves goals, The students are encouraged to work and practice together; they study similar repertoire at an appropriate level, engage in critical appraisal of their own and their colleagues' work, and actively pursue written documentation of their skill development by means of a practice journal. Potentially, this pedagogical model has the capacity to break the traditional reliance on the teacher for direction and approval. The priority is to make students learn to think for themselves, to teach themselves, and develop a musical independence that will serve them well on leaving tertiary study.

The pedagogical model has now been tested for one year and demonstrates enormous potential. The model is currently being revised and analyzed for its benefits and implications for music pedagogy in the 21st century, with the intention of implementing this teaching model more broadly across the instruments within the Bachelor of Music program at James Cook University. The entire project thus far has generated considerable controversy - it has rocked the traditionalist music boat, irritated the conservatives, and bamboozled those students that have relied on one to one teaching for many years. It has been extremely surprising to encounter such conservative attitudes amongst students, other pedagogues, and especially musically untrained parents, who assume that pedagogy can only be effective using the one to one format. Whilst in its initial phase, the preliminary research proves many of the current attitudes wrong and students are beginning to see that there is more than one way to achieve high level performance skills.

Reference List

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