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TEACHING SONGWRITING AND INCORPORATING POPULAR MUSIC
IN BEGINNING GROUP PIANO

By
SARAH WILLIAMS ANDREWS

A RESEARCH PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music in Piano Pedagogy
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Submitted by Sarah Williams Andrews in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Piano Pedagogy.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how incorporating popular songwriting is an effective way to teach keyboard skills to music majors in a traditional undergraduate music school. Basic keyboard skills taught in group piano are similar to the skills used in writing and performing a popular song. Connecting students to popular music inspires students and keeps them motivated to practice keyboard skills that are more tedious but considered necessary for learning the instrument.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I offers the history of pedagogical trends in group piano from the eighteenth century until present day, focusing specifically on practicality, improvisation, and composition. This section also discusses the need for a change in the field of group piano teaching, relying on research that suggests the inclusion of more creative assignments in music schools will better prepare music students for employment upon graduation in the twenty-first century. Part I explains how creative skills like composition and improvisation are currently taught in the group piano classroom as well as why these methods may be ineffective and suggests teaching popular songwriting to students can teach beginning keyboard skills in a creative way that keeps them motivated.

Part II of this thesis presents information gathered through an informal study in the Fall Semester of 2020 and Spring Semester of 2021 at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. Chapter Five details weekly exercises implemented alongside two

different textbooks. Each exercise is rated based on observations of student reactions and student performance. Chapter Six concludes with a review of the semester final project, suggestions for how to conduct a more in-depth research study on this topic, and other final observations about the field study.

Introduction

The idea of Group piano class is notoriously dreaded by undergraduate music majors. Students who are dedicated to advancing on their primary instrument are often nervous to learn a new instrument during their busy Freshman year. Additionally, learning something new in a group can feel especially daunting. An accurate assessment comes from Christopher Fischer in his book, *Teaching Piano in Groups*:

For some, what may begin as excitement at the prospect of learning a new instrument can easily disintegrate into an environment fraught with feelings of disinterest, frustration, and even resistance to learning altogether. Group piano courses can become yet another hoop through which students must pass on the way to fulfilling degree requirements and thus are often relegated to the bottom of the student's list of priorities. (Fischer 2011, 216)

This account from Fischer is less grim than a student's testimony posted on an online forum when asked the question, "What to expect as a freshman in music school?":

Lots of late nights banging your head on a piano in a practice room wondering why they are forcing you to learn this stupid instrument when you can already play the violin. (Gomez, May 28, 2010)

Seconding this sentiment, Gabriella Haas in her how-to book about being a music major says this about piano class:

This is where Education majors learn all those warm-ups and stuff that teachers play in lessons and where non-Education majors how to take the ability to use the world's second most common instrument. Practice or you will once again Have A Bad Time. (Hass 2017, 3)

Literature is continually published with the hope of solving the problem of motivating students in the group piano classroom. Parallel to this discussion is another ongoing conversation that focuses on integrating popular music into traditionally classical

higher education music schools and the benefits this has for students from motivation to practical skills to the prospect of employment upon graduation. There is a movement in academia to incorporate more composition and improvisation in the curriculum, often informed by popular music and inspired by popular culture (Larson 2019). This discourse has gained momentum over the last decade as music educators acknowledge the benefits of creating music alongside interpreting music.

Inspired by the movement to integrate popular music, I decided to examine if student motivation in the group piano classroom, herein referred to as group piano, could improve by introducing creative exercises with a focus on popular songwriting. I immediately noticed that my classical music students expressed a strong sense of desire to connect with the current music of their culture. The motivation needed to develop their keyboard skills was in abundance not only for practicing the required technical material, but also for refining their songwriting talent. Teaching popular songwriting in this setting gives beginner keyboardists a practical way to approach piano that will be long-lasting to them.

Part I

Chapter One: A History of Group Piano Trends

Teaching piano in groups has an established place in music history. It was first popularized by Johann B. Logier in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. Logier cultivated method books and training programs centered on group teaching through his invention of the Chiroplast¹. Much more significant than the Chiroplast was the pedagogy Logier used in his group teaching. He would frequently write out ensemble pieces in different parts for grouped students based on their level, leading the keyboardists in group playing and coaching them simultaneously. He also authored a text on thorough bass and would often combine theory and composition into group piano lessons by having students improvise over a figured bass. Ensemble playing, composition, and improvisation undergirded with music theory and harmony are facets of his teaching that continue to be included in group piano method books today (Jackson 2006, 234-239). A brief survey of method books from the early twentieth century onward reflects this history and shows how these components have been valued differently in accordance with changes to teaching philosophies over the years.

In the early nineteenth century, teaching philosophies generally focused on technique, finger strength, counting, and repetitive practice sessions. During the twentieth

¹ The Chiroplast was a device made of horizontal boards that stayed above and below the hands and forced fingers to only play intended notes in order to develop keyboard technique. An attached metal piece with holes inside kept young fingers in place but did not allow for fingers to cross over and under like they needed to do to play scales or lengthier passages. Progress in students' playing was therefore minimal and the Chiroplast quickly went out of fashion (Rainbow 1990, 195).

century, this philosophy shifted toward student-centered teaching² that catered to the amateur and to developing a broad musical understanding (Sturm et al. 2000a, 1). Other early group method books contained little, if any, music for students to read and instead functioned as theory tutorials for the older beginner or lesson plans for the teacher of young beginners. J.F. Burrowes published the first American class piano method book in 1820, titled *The Piano-Forte Primer*. In 1919, Thaddeus P. Giddings published a more substantial text, *The Public School Class Method for the Piano*. Raymond Burrows, Ella Mason Ahearn, and Dorothy Graynor published *Adult Explorer at the Piano* in 1937 for class instruction and then Burrows published his own method book, *Elementary Piano Instruction in College* in 1944 (Hirokawa 1997, 155).

All these methods place an emphasis on practicality and usefulness at the keyboard in keeping with their goal toward a well-rounded music education. The prologue to *The Public School Class Method For the Piano* explains that the piano is an integrated instrument on which students can learn harmony, melody, and musicianship while concurrently training their facility (Giddings 1919, III). The first chapter provides an anecdote of a teenage boy wanting to learn piano and already reading music proficiently but not being able to accompany himself while singing popular songs. Under the section titled “Better Piano Teaching Necessary,” Giddings stresses that a more practical and applicable teaching method should be adopted to motivate the student to work harder and with more interest toward goals in mind. Just as students are not taught

² Child-centered teaching is often called whole-child teaching and refers to meeting the needs of each student individually, rather than following a method book so rigidly. This practice began in the late nineteenth century by education experts such as John Dewey and Dr. Maria Montessori (Patton 2014, 3-5).

spelling through Shakespeare, Giddings argues that teaching students through the classics, or classical music, teaches good phrasing but may be too advanced and not appeal to their recreational taste, thus decreasing the student's motivation to practice. He lays out the example of a pianist that can play the latest popular song for people wanting to dance at a party as a successful contribution to the pleasure of the party and a use of keyboard knowledge in an applicable way (Giddings 1919, 22). *Elementary Piano Instruction in College* is geared toward both students with no background in keyboard and to those with a background in other instruments (Burrows 1944). Similarly, the focus on practical musicianship is mentioned, claiming that the text supports the goal for a well-rounded musician and that keyboard harmony helps students with their theory classes. Burrows suggests that studying the keyboard will help students to excel beyond other instrumentalists without a keyboard background (Burrows 1944, 5).

The next trend in group method books can be seen in texts published from the 1950s to the 1970s when electronic keyboard labs helped facilitate the addition of group piano in college music schools. These books were written with collegiate group teaching in mind, taking into consideration the varying levels of keyboard ability in each classroom. The learning goals were also coordinated with standard music school curriculum and include introductory theory, aural training and harmony. Nonetheless, the method books continued to stress the importance of practicality at the keyboard and included a broad range of skills for the music major to master. The first edition of *Keyboard Harmony and Improvisation* by Maurice Lieberman (1957) states in the Preface that students rarely achieve the practical use of their harmony knowledge citing improvising in any key, harmonizing a short melody, and transposing a song or piano

piece as examples of what would be considered adequate transferable skills (Lieberman 1957, xi). This method book does not include much repertoire for students to play but gives them examples, usually in one clef, that help them start understanding how to build chords, invert them, and play accompaniment patterns unassisted. Because there is no reading on the grand staff until the middle of the book, students are forced to constantly improvise in one hand in order to play two-handed, helping them be more comfortable with the practical skill of improvisation on the piano early in their studies.

Robert Pace's *Piano for Classroom Music*, originally published in 1956, is another model of a group piano method book that embraces the piano as a tool to express other aspects of musicianship (Pace 1971)³. From the beginning of this process, students are presented with images of one-handed melodies on a single staff and asked to observe the shape of the melody. Although the introduction says this book is for any student of any level, terms like "in any key" or "the third" are used prior to their explanation, showing that the text is designed for students with an existing understanding of music theory (Pace 1971, 16-26). There are more notated improvisation prompts and repertoire in the Pace book than in the Lieberman text. However, Pace makes a concerted effort in using the repertoire to relate chord progressions to other pieces, focusing on the function of transposing the chords and playing chord shapes rather than on sight-reading. The chord exercises in Pace's book start with two-chord progressions moving from the I to the V⁷ chord. It then exhausts simple melodies that use this same harmony. Soon after the IV chord is added to the progression. The student is then expected to be able to read basic I-IV-V⁷ progressions and to create an original melody using the chord progression as the

³ I could not locate a first edition of this method book.

harmonic guide (Pace 1971, 51). A repertoire section of more advanced pieces appears at the end of the book.

Piano method materials for the older beginner became popular in the 1970s. These books continued to focus on presenting harmonic material coinciding with first year theory and aural skills classes (Uzler, Gordon and Smith 2000, 351-354). The main difference between these texts and earlier publications was the addition of substantial repertoire with the goal of enhancing music reading. Sight-reading began to be considered a practical skill to be gained from group piano along with comfort and facility at the keyboard. In the Preface of *Keyboard Musicianship*, Guy Duckworth explains that the repertoire in the text aids students with keyboard topography which is cited as the first and foremost way to acquire technical skill at the keyboard (Duckworth 1970, ix). Keyboard topography refers to memorizing where the black and white keys are on the piano in order to move fluently between hand positions while playing. Sight-reading helps students with the second way to achieve technical skill, which is described as relating the concepts of musicianship to the keyboard (Duckworth 1970).

The repertoire pieces in Duckworth's method book start in pentascale positions. A pentascale is the first five notes of the major scale and often called a five-finger pattern. It is comprised of a series of whole step and half step intervals—whole step, whole step, half step, and whole step. The pieces in these method books progress into more difficult positions that require extending the pentascale patterns by crossing fingers over one another, thus helping students with their scale technique. The improvisation instructions that preface most of the sight-reading exercises direct students to add to the existing piece, stating that after the piece is practiced, they can add countermelodies or substitute

basslines to fill out the assignment (Duckworth 1970, 11). The end of Unit 1 finishes with pieces from Anton Diabelli's *Melodious Pieces for Duet*, Op 149, which Cameron McGraw rates as elementary to lower immediate in the Secondo parts (McGraw 1981, 65). These pieces are a large advancement above what students are reading at the end of the method books from the 1950s. Additionally, *Keyboard Musicianship* does not offer much guidance to the teacher, focusing more heavily on repertoire and less on transferring practical keyboard skills despite what Duckworth intended.

Another group piano method published in 1976 by Elyse Mach displays a heavy focus on sight-reading. On almost every page, examples work through good transposition habits and feature topics such as harmonization and technique (Mach 1976).

Contemporary Class Piano (Mach) is organized progressively with each subsequent unit focusing on a more complex aspect of the keyboard, covering intervallic reading, harmonization, improvisation, repertoire, and more. In contrast to some of the earlier method books, Mach thoroughly explains everything she presents in terms of both the theory and facility as it applies to piano playing. The text could be used by the experienced musician as well as the amateur and likewise both experienced and amateur teachers. Christopher Fischer says in his book *Teaching Piano in Groups* that sight-reading is “perhaps the most central, most vital element, of any group piano curriculum.” The origin of sight-reading becoming a valued skill in group piano is clear in these examples of 1970s method books (Fischer 2010, 220).

Current group piano method texts fully support the student-centered teaching philosophy, asserting piano study as an individual process and a tolerant discipline that gives attention to each facet of musicianship—technique, repertoire, theory, and

performance—in conjunction with meeting the interests and needs of the person, not just the player (Sturm et al. 2000b, 3)⁴. This philosophy is referred to as Comprehensive Musicianship (CM) according to the Contemporary Music Project (CMP). The Project received funding in 1968 by both the Ford Foundation and the MENC for ten years of curriculum development in three major areas, one of which included the teaching of CM to educators at primary, secondary and higher education levels. Current group teaching models are showing the benefits of this cycle coming to fruition. Facets of CM programs encourage students to look at music as a performer, a listener, and a composer. Method books that were written especially with CM in mind combine the forementioned facets of musicianship with creative and practical skills like composition and improvisation in hopes of creating more well-rounded musicians (Choksy et al. 2001 117-123). This final trend in the twenty-first century is seen in method books like Karen Krieger's *Group Piano* (2019). The index prior to each chapter in this book categorizes skills based on keyboard technique, rhythm and ear training, improvisation, transposition, harmonization, sight-reading, repertoire, ensemble, theory exploration, and keyboard topography (Krieger 2019, 1-13). These indices attest to the variety of skills that the keyboardist is being encouraged to accomplish.

Canvassing method books shows that group piano has continued to follow patterns in piano pedagogy and alter its values based on technological changes in the music industry and trends in teaching philosophies. This has allowed group piano to stay

⁴ Other common group piano method books currently being used include *Ensemble: Keyboard Proficiency for the Music Major* (Anderson 2001), *Piano for the Developing Musician* (Hilley and Olson 2006), and *Piano Lab: An Introduction to Class Piano* (Lindeman, 2008) (Oxford University Press n.d.).

an important and relevant part of the higher education music curriculum. Looking at guidelines of reputable accreditation programs can also be an indicator of the values in the group piano classroom that are important today. Keyboard skills are recognized as a necessary component of musicianship training when pursuing a higher education in music, which is supported by guidelines in the National Association of Schools of Music Handbook of Accreditation (NASM 2020, 64). The NASM is very specific about the types of keyboard skills needed for different degree programs. For example, those who wish to hold a Music Therapy degree need to be able to accompany, improvise, transpose and sight-read (NASM 2020, 118). The NASM lists less rigorous requirements for less specific degree programs, such as the guidelines for a bachelor's in music. For this, the handbook states that there needs to be "keyboard competency" without any further details (NASM 110). Likewise, teacher certification bachelor's degrees also list "keyboard competency" under the heading Common Body of Knowledge and Skills (NASM 109). The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards was recently revised to include more creating and not *recreating*, stating that composition is essential to the growth of musicians and their ability to thrive in the twenty-first century (NCCAS 2016, 20). It begs the question as to what practical skills musicians need to acquire in order to be successful in the twenty-first century and if the current curriculum guidelines for group piano are aimed at supporting this goal.

Chapter Two: Modern Core Curriculum

If Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, and Liszt were alive today, their musical lives would more likely resemble today's creative jazz artists (and other improvisers-composers-performers) than the interpretive performance specialists whose repertory was created in and for another time. (Campbell et al. 2016, 1)

Undergraduate music schools have recently made a concerted effort to examine how the common core curriculum can more accurately prepare students for purposeful, practical, and worthwhile employment upon graduation. Studies such as the Comprehensive Music Project (Chapter One), the Young Composers Project, the Multicultural Music Education Symposium, and many more have attempted to put forth data that urges educators to revise music education programming (Campbell et al. 2016, 9). More recent studies have shown a progressive trend in academia that seeks to train students for creative work that includes genre cross-over, diverse styles, and a constantly evolving relationship with new technology. Schools have added newer programming including a larger selection of survey classes of popular genres, basic audio engineering, and recording. This is a departure from the conventional method of preparing students to teach at universities, manage private studios, or to play in orchestras. The new programming reflects twenty-first century career paths more accurately (Myers 2016, 293-295).

However, without changing the undergraduate music school philosophy nationally, these additions only have a surface level effect. Patricia Shehan Campbell, former President of the College Music Society, formed a task force in 2013 to investigate

what skills a working musician in the twenty-first century would need to be successful, hoping to achieve a deeper and effective solution to the problem of preparing music students for employment. The Task Force for the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM) published their findings in November of 2014 in a report entitled, “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors” (Campbell et al., 2016). Significant findings from the eighteen-month review led the TFUMM to recommend complete reform in undergraduate music programs. They recommended that future curricula come from three pillars—creativity, diversity, and integration—in order to continue to keep the academy relevant to the working musician (Campbell et al., 2016, 7-10).

The TFUMM report defined creativity as the art of composing or improvising new material as opposed to the study and mastery of stylistic interpretations of existing material. They suggested separating creative practices from existing curricular framework, where they are often used as supplemental material and easily overlooked. The Task Force recommended an extremely broad study of music to fulfill the suggestion of diversity and to think of musicians as contemporary improviser-composer-performers engaging in the surrounding present-day musical culture. Lastly, the TFUMM called for integration of curricular material that would support students in developing a deeper understanding of musical knowledge and become better equipped to successfully transfer skills in the modern work climate. According to a panel that presented at the 2016 CMS conference shortly after the report by the TFUMM was published, the ability for students to transfer the skills learned in school to life and work in another situation is the most important benchmark for success (Mantie et al. 2017, 7-9).

It is relevant to note some of the resistance to the TFUMM's report since The Manifesto was central to the inspiration for this thesis. Altt Patricia Sheehan Campbell claimed that the Manifesto was employed to start conversations between colleagues to brainstorm ways in which changes could be made to the academy, it was perceived to stifle discussions because of the tone with which the report was written (Campbell 2015, 3-4). Critics felt it was voiced in an authoritarian way that presented itself as falsely representing the College Music Society. The Task Force using the word *manifesto* in the title furthered the feeling of it battling a position rather than adding to existing research on similar matters (Sayrs 2016, 3).

Critics of the Manifesto felt that the TFUMM narrowed the definition of creativity considerably and that while improvisation and composition are creative endeavors, there is also an art to interruption. Additionally, interpretation will often lead to creative composition and improvisation (Chenette 2016, 3). The TFUMM's recommendations for performers to develop a "genuine global artistic identity" were criticized for being less than genuine, as scholars wondered if diversity should be valued for more than artistic reasons (Sayrs 2016, 2). Criticisms of the integration pillar worried that diluting core subject areas, not necessarily integration itself, would jeopardize the integrity of the music academy at large (Sayrs 2016, 2-3). In conclusion, scholars in the academy employed the proposed Task Force theories be tested with the same rigor with which the traditional music program had been modeled. Additionally, they suggested extending the study beyond undergraduate music majors to a wider group of music students (Sayrs 2016, 2-4). It was my intention in this thesis to allow the TTFUMM's report to be

inspirational, but also examine it critically when looking at how creativity, diversity, and integration can be applied to group piano.

Aside from group piano other core components of an undergraduate music program such as music history, theory, and aural skills are being modified at many institutions based on this research. Some music history programs are tackling this change through individualized education plans that enlist student involvement to keep students engaged and on track with their goals. A panel in 2014 at the American Musicological Society conference titled “The End of the Undergraduate Sequence” skims the surface of changes being made to the undergraduate music history sequence at the Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music (Lowe 2014). To better equip students with the skills they need the ability and confidence to find information in the “information age,” the Blair School of Music substituted their former twelve-hour chronological sequence of music history with a six-hour two-class series—Music as Global Culture and Music in Western Culture—with the requirement to choose another two courses on more specialized material such as Haydn and Mozart or Brahms and the Anxiety of Influence. While speaker Dr. Melanie Lowe, Associate Professor of Musicology at the Blair School of Music, admits that it has challenges—namely graduate school entrance exams—she thinks the success of the students’ learning to write and talk intelligently about music outweighs their gaps in the literature. Without the pressure of having to cover all of Western music history in a short four semesters, the students have time to develop more modern skills. In addition, the non-chronological organization can better cater to students’ interests, allowing them to learn subjects in more in depth sooner in their college careers. Peter Burkholder, editor of the renowned and widely used *History of*

Western Music: Norton Anthology, spoke immediately following Lowe at the 2014 American Musicological Society conference with an opposing view. Burkholder supported the philosophy of a traditional music history survey course that would continue to give undergraduate music majors a universal framework running parallel to, and not necessarily integrated with, the rigorous requirements of other creative subject matters. Burkholder stated that the standard way a survey of Western Classical music is taught gives students an irreplaceable background that enhances their creativity. He acknowledges that a wider array of available music and an effort to include underrepresented groups of composers provides a challenge but would rather include more history without changing the course format (Burkart 2014).

Aural skills and music theory programs have also changed over the last fifteen years to include a more realistic application of core components. Resources like Nicole Biamonte's book *Pop-Culture Pedagogy in the Music Classroom: Teaching Tools from American Idol to YouTube* offer detailed examples of how incorporating popular music can be used to teach music theory. An appendix at the end of one of the chapters in her book lists over one hundred examples of popular songs that use various forms of meter: simple, compound, complex, polymeter, changing meter, and even multiple meters (Biamonte 2011, 64-69). Biamonte conjectures that classical music professors may not know how to introduce this material and gives numerous ideas on how to use popular music to guide them. In 2017, Harvard replaced their introductory classes on music history and music theory with Critical Listening and Thinking about Music (Gutierrez 2018, 2). In a 2018 Reddit community study with recent music graduates, comments expressed that while a traditional music theory class positively impacted participants

current music careers, improvements in integration, diversity, and creativity could certainly be made (Gutierrez 2018, 1).

To date, changes to group piano pedagogy specifically have largely been absent from these conversations. However, it was noted in the TFUMM report that group piano was in the conventional core curriculum and did have a place in the revised requirements if a careful consideration of the practicality and usefulness of the learned skills was studied (Campbell et al. 2016, 18). Group piano has always been considered an aid to the core music studies in collegiate programs, supporting core courses in theory and aural skills. If core curriculum is changing, group piano will need to change as well. The goals and requirements of merited keyboard skills will need to exist in a space of creativity, diversity, and integration in order to best yield the desired practicality that helps students succeed in a viable music career path.

Chapter Three: A Need for Change in Group Piano

Incorporating creativity into the group piano classroom necessitates thinking of popular and classical music as equally important. Traditionally academia has considered popular music inferior to classical music; the realities of musical life in the twenty-first century prove this attitude misguided. Such an attitude perpetuates an environment that threatens students' preparedness for their careers after college and ignores the reality that popular music has historically had a strong influence on the classical music world, even more in post-modern times (Campbell et al. 2016, iii). On the surface, creativity seems to be an important value in the group piano classroom where composition and improvisation have held a permanent place in the pedagogy since the twentieth century. However, there are three reasons the current commonly used methods of incorporating composition and improvisation into group piano continue to contribute to the deficit of creativity that can be found in traditional music schools.

The first reason is that skills like composition and improvisation are usually presented in connection with classical repertoire as extra-curricular to learning to read and perform a piece. In an article discussing strategies for incorporating popular music in the classroom, Randall Allsup encourages creating what he calls "two-way bridges" (Allsup 2011, 2). He gives an example of comparing Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament" to Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused," introducing the Purcell piece first and then using it to connect to the more modern, rock and roll lament. He concludes with a homework assignment to compose an original lament using Garageband, a computer-based home

recording software. Introducing the classical piece as a gateway forward to the Led Zeppelin composition reverses the common practice of first finding a relatable example and then sending students backward to reinforce a Eurocentric music history.

Composition and improvisation need to be introduced into the classroom differently in the twenty-first century to ensure their study is effective and impactful (Allsup 2011, 3).

The second problem with the current methods of including composition and improvisation in group piano is that the instructors—while versed in the classical canon—are sometimes not familiar with popular music repertory, making it more difficult to teach modern practices of composing (Farish 2009, 1-2). A recent study reported that even though composition and improvisation exercises are frequently encouraged in music curriculum, many teachers do not have the confidence to teach them and often avoid incorporating them into their classroom (Hicket, Maud and Schmidt 2019, abstract). Educators are aware of the narrow canon mentality in music programs and are trying to include popular music in teacher training. Randall Allsup created ad hoc garage bands at the Teachers College at Columbia University by putting together groups of teachers to compose popular music. By assigning them into groups at random, he hoped to not only diversify their musical palates but also to have them experience the democratic model they sought to create in music schools (Allsup 2011, 3).

Finally, because of their inexperience in teaching creative and subjective skills, teachers who do include composition and improvisation in the classroom tend not to break down the process into small enough pieces for students, resulting in lack of interest and a poor retention rate. This is the third reason why the common methods of incorporating creative tasks in group piano are ineffective at preparing students with

practical and transferable knowledge. For example, improvisation is a beneficial tool for both playing keyboard in a practical way and starting a composition (Higgins and Mantie 2013, 2). However, it usually develops after students feel more comfortable at the instrument, unlike most beginner keyboard students.

A teacher can design scaffolding to better encourage beginner keyboardists to improvise at a slower pace. Scaffolding in this case refers to the temporary structure that aids students in the learning process before they are ready to attempt the skill without the assistance, after which the scaffolding is no longer needed (Lajoie 2005, 2). An example of scaffolding commonly found in keyboard study is when an author of a method book includes the note names or finger numbers on every note in the beginning of the book. This typically transitions to the author only giving the student the starting pitch and finger number. The next level would maybe show a blank line next to the first note, prompting the student to notate the note name or finger number. These forms of scaffolding help students to learn their notes and fingering and recognize the process by which they accurately find their hand position at the beginning of a song. Students need creative exercises with a lot of scaffolding, as Keith Sawyer explains in his compilation about improvisation and teaching. He goes on to highlight the balance between structure and creativity in the classroom for both the teacher and the students (Sawyer 2011, 12-17).

Two important early scaffolds to implement are understanding and trust. Teaching beginning composition and improvisation to classical music majors is meant to undo preconceived notions of these endeavors. Inspired by the TFUMM's report, French horn professor Dr. Jeffrey Snedeker designed four years of projects for his major students in an attempt to teach improvisation (Campbell et al. 2016). It is telling that the first-year

project is titled *Just Play* and seeks to help his Freshman students with beginning improvisation by encouraging them with regular exercises. These tasks are paired with an end-of-semester performance, performance opportunities in lessons, and journaling assignments that go along with given exercises (Snedeker 2020, 12). This gradual introduction to improvisation helps his students work their way into a more rigorous project during their Senior year.

The second scaffold, trust, is built by acknowledging that these exercises are subjective endeavors, and it encourages educators to take assessment into account accordingly. Assessment has always maintained a difficult relationship with creativity, yet educators—particularly in the collegiate field—are tasked with ensuring each student is accurately assessed. Self-assessment like that modeled in Snedeker’s journal component of his improvisation projects can benefit a student as much if not more than other teacher-centered models (Black and Wiliam 1998, 1-7).

In conclusion, it is essential that the incorporation of creative skills such as composition and improvisation be revised in the group piano classroom to better fit the growing practical needs of musicians in the music profession. Integrating popular music into traditional group piano repertoire, educating teachers, and making students feel comfortable in the genre of popular music will help ensure that creativity in group piano will be more successful and long-lasting.

Chapter Four: Songwriting as a Solution

In the eyes of some administrators, it is not enough to prepare musicians to be musician-specialists; they must receive training as recording engineers, songwriters, small business owners, producers, as well as performers. (Larson 2019, 7)

Songwriting is an effective way to incorporate creativity and master practical keyboard skills in the classroom. Including this practice in group piano curriculum can keep students motivated and have a positive impact on their participation and success rate in other areas of the class. Songwriting is the common thread that binds all popular music genres and musicianship skills together, thereby naturally being a diverse and integrated craft.

The connection between songwriting and learning piano may not be apparent at first to the instructor or student. While separating these subjects may give students more depth of knowledge on each, combining them may encourage a different way of thinking that is just as useful. Research shows that by encouraging divergent thinking, or thinking about something irrelevant, teachers can boost a creative response and encourage students to think more abstractly (Zmigrod, Zmigrod, and Hommel 2019, 18). Recruiters in the current job market are in search of diligent but also creative employees that are able to think innovatively. Applicants displaying proficiency in divergent creative thinking are in a better position to succeed upon leaving their university as overthinking in one area may limit creative function (Corgnet, Espín, and Hernán-González 2016). The social and emotional benefits of studying songwriting in group piano will better prepare students

for employment upon graduation and for the changing music climate while also resonating with students in a way that helps them stay motivated to practice and achieve a higher level of learning.

Creativity

Sylvia Coats' book *Thinking as You Play* asserts that an important goal in early music development is creative self-expression. Even technical skills such as reading music and symbols on the staff should direct students to this goal. Furthermore, while the connection of emotions to music is intuitive, it can always be furthered with encouragement. Coats suggests approaching students in a professional manner starting with global properties of music, such as high, low, fast, slow, loud, and soft to increase critical thinking and discussion (Coats 2006, 19). Treating students like creative songwriters can elevate the level of self-expression coming from the class. This type of approach is similar to that in Robert Duke's book *Intelligent Music Teaching: Essays on the Core Principles of Effective Instruction* which inspires and challenges the reader in his chapter on assessment with regards to older and more experienced musicians, such as undergraduate group piano students (Duke 2005). When trying to decide successful goals and assessment criteria, he suggests starting at the "competent person," or professional, and demonstrating the skills that the teacher is intending to teach. He encourages teachers to imagine their students as accomplished learners from the outset and says that performance will increase by "having them do the very things that competent professionals do, but with contextual limitations that are appropriately gauged to learner level of experience and expertise" (Duke 2005, 78).

In the collegiate group piano setting, creative exercises that acknowledge the artistic mastery of the students who are at a high level of achievement on their primary instruments are critical to the success of the course (Fischer 2010, 217). Introducing beginner pianists to global concepts and combining them with useful experience and tools gives them a connection to the piano that answers the question of *why* they are playing a secondary instrument. Studying popular song and songwriting offers a wide range of these broad concepts, from form to lyrics to prosody and advanced or obscure harmony.

Motivation

When engaging in popular songwriting, students have the opportunity to relate to their own experiences. The connection between students and their creative work is what drives motivation both to practice and to succeed. Intrinsic motivation plays an especially important role in students reaching their potential (Hennessey 2010, 253). Exercises involving popular songwriting also offer an opportunity for professors to connect with students in the classroom about their own taste in music (Kratus 2007, 47). An article from the 2016 March issue of *Music Educators Journal* entitled “Songwriting: A New Direction for Secondary Education” supports that *song* and *music* are perceived as synonymous by middle school and high school students and that advanced vocal and instrumental arrangements commonly taught in secondary education music classes are not connected to what the student is listening to in their free time. To close this gap, the author suggests using curriculum materials that focus on composing and performing songs in tandem with traditional, possibly outdated music. By including more relatable topics, they hope to engage more students in music classes (Kratus 2016, 60-62).

There is also ample research on how popular songwriting is being used in other non-music related fields as a motivational tool. It is becoming popular in the corporate sector with companies like Pfizer, Verizon, and WaltDisneyImagineering to explore creative ways to motivate employees by bringing teambuilding exercises into their business retreats (KidBilly Music, 2021). Correctional centers have begun to supplement creative activities with songwriting in hopes that the benefits of self-worth and self-confidence along with expression will aid the prisoners once released from prison (Cohen and Wilson 2017, 542-544). Undergraduate music majors taking group piano are typically not keyboardists and would experience similar macro-level benefits from songwriting, especially considering how the foreignness of a new instrument can make group piano feel almost non-music related.

Diversity and Integration

The Task Force for Undergraduate Music Majors suggested in The Manifesto that music educators reform undergraduate curriculum to better reflect the growing interest in how music interacts with human life (Campbell et. al 2014, 19). Songwriting, in addition to being a creative and motivating discipline, has added benefits of diversity and integration, two of the other pillars for successful course material as suggested in the TFUMM's report (Campbell et. al 2016).

Presenting thoughtfully curated course materials can give a teacher the best chance at reaching all the audience and promoting diversity in the classroom. Including varying genres is one way to illustrate the different types of music in songwriting that could promote various creative works. It is also important to think about how students may relate to performers and their platforms along with the content they

sing about in their music. Several articles in an issue of the *Music Educators Journal* from 1990 devoted to creativity proposed student-centered approaches to help teachers choose material that would best fit student needs (Senko 1990). A response by Peter Webster in 2016 confirmed that students continued to not be as concerned with the immediate sonic display, noting that other factors such as gender, identity, social context, and youth culture played a larger role in student analyses (Webster 2016, 28). Teachers can support the pillar of diversity by carefully choosing content for their classroom that reflects these values, disrupting the “single story” narrative (Dodge and Crutcher 2015, 95). This is not only helpful to the students who feel unrepresented but also to the students who may be highlighted in these less diverse examples.

Disrupting the single story is not only important to the group or groups whose identities and experiences are silenced but also to those students who may be represented in the single story. Building empathy and understanding among all students in a classroom is crucial in moving toward socially just schools and curricula. (Dodge and Crutcher 2015, 95)

Music history reveals that classical music, jazz music, poetry, and literature can all be one-story canon-making operations that sometimes isolate or insulate students. Composer and author David Schiff suggests that if we must have a canon then we should have many canons, listening lists, and groups of music that we use to categorize and understand history (Schiff 2007, 216-222). Furthermore, popular music offers a different range of emotions than classical music. The importance of lyrical content in a song and its positive or negative effect can change the listener’s perception, and idea that can be taught through studying songwriting. Exposing students to different types of music is imperative to continuing creative learning in the modern age.

Songwriting was recently studied as a means to targeted outcomes in literacy at The Community Music School in partnership with Michigan State University. They launched an after-school songwriting program called The Verses Project in 2016 to teach literacy to students who could then inform traditional reading and writing exercises with their non-traditional experiences. Programs like The Verses Project are working to expand the definition of literacy from not only the technical skill of reading but also to comprehension, taking into consideration diverse narratives (Community Music School-Detroit, 2016). Songwriting in the group piano classroom could reach students in the same way, diversifying the homogenous narrative that classical music often brings to the table.

Integration is defined in the TFUMM's report as the cross-lateral teaching of music theory, aural skills, keyboard skills, performance, and music history (Campbell et al, 2016). There are techniques in songwriting applicable to all forms of music and all music careers that can strengthen the pillar of integration. Requiring students to compose chord progressions and write melodies that fit inside a harmonic progression integrates both their theory and aural training. Writing lyrics to music allows students to practice the text-painting they have been studying in music history or invoke styles of some earlier music they may have studied in their music survey classes. Performing their song either live or recorded helps students integrate performance methods from their private study. Lastly, students can use their music history knowledge to better inform their stylistic choices, hoping to make them either as historically accurate as possible or intentionally breaking from tradition.

Keyboard Skills

While there is research showing songwriting as a tool for motivation and creativity, diversity and integration—referred to in this paper from now on as emotional learning outcomes—there is little in the way of formally verifying songwriting as a creative option to teach keyboard skills. However, the keyboard skills needed to convey a popular song are attainable even for beginner keyboardists. In order to justify incorporating songwriting exercises into the already rigorous material of an undergraduate group piano course or more importantly in lieu of other well-tested composition or improvisation assignments, students must demonstrably fulfill standard keyboard requirements. Popular songwriting books are filled with advice on how to articulate a song on an instrument, usually focusing on piano or guitar, the two most common instruments used by songwriters (Watson 2003, 110). Songwriters benefit greatly from learning piano and a review of standard keyboard requirements proves that pianists benefit from songwriting.

A list of keyboard skills that are required by a traditional undergraduate music program may include all or some of the following: technique, chord progressions, sight-reading, harmonization, transposition, improvisation, composition, playing by ear, open score reading, multi-clef reading, reading from a lead sheet, realization of figured bass, and performing repertoire (Fischer 2010, 219-220). In beginning levels, commonly taught skills include technique, chord progressions, sight-reading, transposition, improvisation, composition, and lead sheet reading. Studies show that group piano teachers tend to focus on performance-based goals and highlight repertoire, since that is the method by which they were taught when they received their degrees (Chin 2008, 2). New research suggests

that teachers instead focus on a handful of pieces in the repertoire each year in order to develop the previously listed comprehensive functional keyboard skills in order to better prepare students for the changing music profession (Crum 1998, 17).

Technique

Hand coordination, keyboard topography, playing major scales, triads, arpeggios, chord inversions, and playing in all twelve major keys are all techniques commonly incorporated into both beginner group piano classes and in popular songwriting. Playing popular songs with both hands involves hand coordination and can be an easier path to success than complicating the skill with staff reading. If a song has words, students receive the added benefit of coordinating singing and playing. Songwriting specifically helps this goal because it often limits the beginner keyboardist—possibly overwhelmed with other aspects of the song such as meter, chords, and lyrics—to playing mostly root position chords. While this may not be helpful for improving their voice leading or chord inversion practice, it is extremely helpful for keyboard topography as they move their chords up and down the keyboard.

Playing major scales and sometimes a few of the easier minor scales is beginner technique as well. Knowing scales is important to composing melodies that fit over harmonic progressions, and this can be motivating for students involved in songwriting. Likewise, in order to best fit a student's song to their voice they may need to transpose the piece and should be comfortable in all twelve keys in order to have as many options as possible. Lastly, playing chord inversions and arpeggios not only makes students more comfortable on the piano but also can help them choose better chord voicing for their songs. Many popular songs have a limited and uncomplicated chord vocabulary. Steering

students toward these types of examples can help them structure their original songs the same way and invert the fewer chords more easily.

Chord Progressions

A notable requirement of the group piano curriculum is being able to play two-handed chord progressions and cadences. Typically, introductory and first level sections start by learning the I- IV₄⁶- I- V₅⁶- I chord progression and then the same progression in a minor key, i- i₄⁶- i- V₅⁶- i. More advanced levels may integrate the ii⁷, V⁷/V, or the vi chord. These progressions help with reading assignments where the left hand is often playing chord inversions and the right hand is playing a melody that outlines those same shapes. In addition, they help the student better differentiate between the sound of the IV and V⁷ chords, integrating their aural training. By playing the chords in inverted shapes, the student's theory knowledge is being both tested and applied. Primary chord progressions are helpful to keyboard students because proper fingering in each hand uses different fingers for the same keys in different chords. For example, in the key of C the right hand of the IV₄⁶ chord uses the third finger on the tonic note, F, but the fourth finger on F when playing the V₅⁶ chord. This type of coordination strengthens students' finger dexterity.

The value of chord progressions for students' musicianship is clear to educators but is often tedious and less interesting to beginner students. Because chord progressions are typically learned in quarter note patterns that sound nothing akin to the music that students are listening to, classical or popular, it is challenging to convey the importance and value they are offering. Furthermore, introductory level students are not usually reading music that immediately applies the sight-reading benefit yielded by chord

progressions and it will take almost a whole semester for them to be fluent with the chord progressions in all twelve keys. Therefore, they must be introduced as soon as possible. Learning chord progressions alongside examining chord progressions in songs, playing along to popular music using chords, and using chord progressions to fuel improvisation are ways that songwriting incorporates this skill. Therefore, including songwriting in the curriculum could aid in learning these concepts in the classroom.

Sight-Reading

Sight-reading is a keyboard skill that, while not often used in the act of composing original songs, can be used to teach original songwriting and to give students ideas and examples. If there is a sight-reading piece with an arpeggiated chord pattern, like “Café Vienna” in Example 1 below, the teacher can create an assignment to compose a new melody in the right hand over the left-hand accompaniment. Students are then able to use their sight-reading skills to learn the accompaniment and their songwriting sensibilities to compose a melody that follows the chord progression (Example 1). Combining these creative activities with sight-reading makes the objective more fun and therefore more attainable for students. Barbara Fast, piano chair at the University of Oklahoma, stresses that “fun” music is what students need to be motivated to sight-read (Blickenstaff 2017,1).

Transposition

Transposition is an important skill for both keyboard playing and songwriting. Since most popular songs feature vocalists and lyrics, finding a suitable key is a common task that regularly incorporates transposition. Students are likely to have an easier time thinking of chords in different keys using Roman numerals or the Nashville

Number System (Watson 2003, 123). Traditionally, transposition is used in group piano to reinforce intervallic reading, which strengthens sight-reading ability. Since popular songs are not typically written in staff notation, transposition becomes more about thinking in different keys and adjusting the chord progression accordingly. Teaching transposition this way in the context of songwriting gives it a more practical application and can show students the importance of the skill.

Example 1. Measures 1-8 “Café Vienna,” *Alfred Basic Adult Piano Course Lesson Book, Level 1*.

The image shows a musical score for the first eight measures of "Café Vienna" from the Alfred Basic Adult Piano Course Lesson Book, Level 1. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is marked "Moderate waltz tempo" and includes dynamics *p* and *f*. The second system is marked *mf*. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes.

Improvisation

Songwriting offers many ways to thoughtfully include improvisation in group piano. Every composition begins with experimentation and improvisation, so this is a natural step in writing songs that can be easily encouraged. Teachers can use chord progressions as the harmonic material to teach basic improvisation focusing on note choice, rhythm, and phrasing. The four-measure call-and-response type of composition structure is extremely prevalent in early intermediate piano repertoire to teach phrasing. A piece may begin with a four-measure phrase that ascends and end with a four-measure

descending line. Another example would be a piece that repeats a four-measure melody but ends differently the second time. Students are likely to sight-read material in group piano that is consistent with this pattern. Improvising in four-measure phrases—sometimes called “trading fours”—helps students to hear and experience what they will encounter in written music. Similarly, students can take melodies from familiar songs and experiment with improvising alternate rhythms. When students feel secure in the other factors of the exercise like the chord progression or melody, the improvisatory element is usually not as daunting.

Lead Sheet Reading

Reading lead sheets is also a practical keyboard skill for all pianists. Often in popular music the performer is not reading grand staff notation, so it is imperative that students learn to be comfortable reading chord symbols. Group piano texts often contain lead sheets that provide excellent examples for teachers interested in reinforcing these tools through songwriting. By extracting chord progressions from textbook examples, teachers can ask students to improvise or even compose their own song using the chords as their harmonic guide.

Creative Listening

While creative exercises like songwriting are beneficial in the group piano curriculum, educators should also consider incorporating creative listening to maximize comprehension. Playing examples of popular music allows students to have individual experiences within the group setting, share their thoughts, and create a more diverse listening experience that can better inform future creative endeavors. Listening to popular music in the classroom in a specific way that is intentionally opposed to the classical

repertoire that students are used to sight-reading can foster creativity (Zmigrod, Zmigrod and Hommel 2019). John Kratus begins his article “Music Listening Is Creative” with an imaginary app he calls ListeningCheck that reads a listener’s mind and buzzes every time they are listening incorrectly, often times ruining the joy of listening:

As you drive home you are listening to a country radio station, tapping your thumb to the beat on the steering wheel. You think, “I love these sad minor songs.” ListeningCheck buzzes louder, drowning out the music. The app tells you that the song is in in (sp.) Dorian mode, not minor, and that you missed tapping the last hemiola. Regrettably, you turn off the radio to avoid any further mistakes. (Kratus 2017, 46)

Most musicians who have formally studied music can relate to the idea of overactive analyzing that both hinders and helps in becoming a professional musician. By listening to music that is not typically used in classical settings, students can more easily turn off the “ListeningCheck” app in their brains, therefore returning listening to its creative state. This produces a positive relationship with the assignment and the teacher since there are no wrong answers to divergent-thinking questions (Kratus 2017, 48).

Incorporating listening to popular music into group piano curriculum also introduces students to viable career paths such as arranging, recording and advertising, all of which utilize popular music listening in immeasurable ways. Since the early 2000s, there has been a shift in the songwriting community of Nashville, Tennessee to include the performing artist in the writing session. Classically trained performers who have prior experience cowriting songs have a professional advantage over those with little to no experience, making it even more important to include this practical training in traditional music schools (Reuter 2020). Introducing students to this craft through exercises and creative listening provides an environment for students to experiment not only with

potential career options, but also creatively express themselves and diversify their knowledge.

The addition of songwriting in group piano can bring deep, fundamental change to the undergraduate program. Creativity and keyboard skills can continue to be anchors of group piano pedagogy but would be more effectively reinforced through songwriting. Students will likely stay more engaged and motivated with assignments if given the opportunity to practically apply their learned skills. By combining European traditional composition practices with those of popular songwriting, students can expand their knowledge of the creative process and apply it to any genre (Campbell et al. 2016,11)

Part II

Chapter Five: Summary of Sessions

In Chapter Five, I summarize ten sessions of songwriting exercises that I created for beginner group piano classes. I designed each exercise to fulfill the social and emotional learning goals of creativity and motivation while also focusing on required keyboard skills as listed in Chapter Four. The exercises were created for seven sections of group piano at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University in the Fall of 2020. All students enrolled were undergraduate music majors participating in group piano to fulfill core curriculum requirements. Three of the sections included introductory students enrolled in Introduction to Piano and working from the textbook *Alfred's Basic Adult Piano* (Palmer 1996). The remaining sections were comprised of first-level students taking Keyboard Harmony I and working from the first half of Karen Krieger's textbook *Group Piano: Proficiency in Theory and Performance* (Krieger 2019, 1-146). Although these exercises are adaptable to most group piano textbooks and I myself adapted them to the Alfred text, they were designed to pace alongside each chapter in the first half of the Krieger method book. All the sessions were in preparation for a final songwriting project that counted toward the final exam grade (See Appendix A-C). For the final project in the Fall semester of 2020, I allowed students to submit either a live video recording or a programmed rendition of their piece through Finale, Garageband, or any other music software program to which they were accustomed; however, I discovered that many of the students submitted pieces that were far too difficult for them to play (Appendix A). I amended the Spring Semester Final Project in 2021 to require students to

play and sing their pieces and submit a video in addition to their chart and lyric sheet (Appendix B). This reinforced the class goal of utilizing their keyboard playing through the exercise of songwriting.

These classes were taught in a piano lab equipped with a central teaching station and seven student stations, each with a full-sized fully weighted keyboard. Each student station had the capability to hear their own playing through headphones and to hear my controller as well, both inside their headphones and aloud in class.

The session summaries are divided into two categories: those that focus on keyboard skills while also incorporating qualities of social and emotional learning (Keyboard Skills Exercises) and those that primarily deal with creativity, motivation, diversity, and integration through creative listening assignments (Creative Listening Exercises). Several of the sessions in Chapter Five *only* use creative listening to discover aspects of songs that are creative, diverse, and integrate well with students' other classes. As previously explained in Chapter Three, incorporating these ideas into the classroom helped students stay engaged and be more motivated to practice. This also helps to guide students along the songwriting process as a form of scaffolding (Chapter Three). Listening is a way to prompt questions that will help the students prepare for their projects. Stimulating class discussions on what the songs will be about, what styles they want to incorporate, or how they will construct their song form are all equally valuable to the creative process and final product (Hickey and Webster 2001, 2).

Each session summary of the Keyboard Skills Exercises includes an explanation of the exercise followed by a list of the keyboard skills utilized that correspond with those discussed in Chapter Four. Next, each session details general observations that

include body language, facial expression, initial success or failure in executing the assignment, verbal feedback from students, and retention of the skill in the following classes. A rubric, Table 1, was applied to each exercise. Ratings of both the Keyboard Skills and Creative Listening exercises can be found on Table 2 and 3 on the following pages.

The Institutional Review Board at Belmont University did not grant permission for graduate students to conduct in-person research in the 2020-2021 academic year due to the coronavirus pandemic, which prohibited the collection of subjective data directly from the students⁵. I have therefore limited this thesis to observations from normal course activities and evaluations, some that compare current class outcomes with that of previous teaching years⁶. These observations are in no way suggesting a quantitative study was conducted and instead can be read as a proposal of creative approaches to teaching group piano that can help students stay motivated and engaged. The rating of each exercise, while not scientifically derived, helps to accurately convey my experience and is helpful in proving both why I recommend this approach and why a mixed-method study would be important in the future.

⁵ Students were frequently required to quarantine throughout the semester at random, changing the class size and format (in-class to virtual). This unknown factor had the potential to skew findings in a scientific study dramatically and while I was very fortunate and had the majority of students in class most weeks, this was not something I could have relied on at the start of the academic year.

⁶ I have served as an Adjunct Artist Teacher in the Keyboard Department at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University since Spring 2017. In that time, I have taught Introduction to Keyboard Harmony, Keyboard Harmony I, and Keyboard Harmony II levels and can recount my teaching experience prior to including songwriting exercises.

Table 1. Comparative Rating Rubric, 2020-2021 Group Piano Introduction to Keyboard and Keyboard Harmony I, Blair School of Music. By Author.

| RATING | DESCRIPTION |
|--------|---|
| 5 | Most students understood the exercise and demonstrated high levels of Interest Upon Introduction (or Transfer, Mastery, Retention). |
| 4 | Most students understood the exercise and some students demonstrated high levels of Interest Upon Introduction. |
| 3 | Some students understood the exercise and demonstrated low levels of Interest Upon Introduction. |
| 2 | Some students were confused by the exercise and demonstrated a low level of Interest Upon Introduction. |
| 1 | Students were confused by the exercise and showed no level of Interest Upon Introduction. |

The rubric used for measuring the success of each exercise applied a rating in each category from 1 to 5 with 1 being the least amount of success and 5 being the most. The four categories were: Interest upon Introduction, Transfer, Mastery, and Retention. Interest upon Introduction gauged the initial reactions to the exercises in the initial observation period. In the book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, Dr. L. Dee Fink, a consultant for teaching and faculty development, used student engagement to gauge the success of different teaching methods (Fink 2003, 161-219). Separately, The University of Washington, ranked thirteen in the country in the *U.S. News & World Report* for their overall education program, is following this same engagement trend (U.S. News, 2021).

Their Center for Teaching homepage reads:

Research has demonstrated that engaging students in the learning process increases their attention and focus, motivates them to practice higher-level critical thinking skills, and promotes meaningful learning experiences. (University of Washington, 2021)

The second category, Transfer, rated the success of the exercise once the students turned away from the discussion and toward the keyboard. Transfer requires a practical execution of learned skills as opposed to memory-based learning (Fink 2003, xi). The concept of teaching for transfer has been researched in all fields of education and directly preparing students for their work ahead is a continually debated topic. Some research in transfer argues that in certain domains, students who are challenged by the cognitive task will have a difficult time performing their skill unless they have been taught both the concept and the transfer (Alexander and Murphy 1999, 3).

Mastery rates the effectiveness of the exercise in teaching the keyboard skill. If students had the same amount of dexterity playing a chord progression using inversions in a blues song as they did when playing the chord progression from an assignment in their textbook, the exercise would receive a high rating. It is important that curriculum in the group piano classroom move the student toward a goal of mastering the keyboard.

The fourth category, Retention, rates the retention of each exercise and how easily the skills they developed were incorporated into more advanced exercises as the course progressed. A high score of retention would mean that the student was able to retain previous information and use that knowledge to better absorb a different concept, often at a higher level.

Table 2. Comparative Table of Keyboard Skills Exercises, 2020-2021 Group Piano Introduction to Keyboard and Keyboard Harmony I, Blair School of Music. By Author.

| EXERCISES | Cumulative Rating | Interest Upon Introduction | Transfer | Mastery | Retention |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Session One: CeeLo Green—Playing in Root Position Triads | 4.5 | 5 | 5 * | 3 | 5 |
| Session Two: The Beatles and a Drone Bass | 4.75 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Session Three: Boogie with Inversions | 4.5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| Session Four: Trading Fours | 4 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 5 |
| Session Five: Improvising with Lyrics and Rhythm | 4.5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 |
| Session Six: Accompaniment Patterns | 4.5 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 5 |

*In the Fall 2020 semester, this exercise received a 2 in Transfer, lowering the overall rating to 3.75. It was amended for the Spring 2021 semester. All other ratings were for both semesters.

Keyboard Skills Exercises

Session One: CeeLo Green—Playing in Root Position Triads

This exercise was used in Keyboard Harmony I. The keyboard skills utilized were technique, chord progressions, transposition and lead sheet reading.

Beginner keyboard students at the collegiate level often do not know all of their major and minor triads, particularly if they have never played a harmonic instrument. At the beginning of this session, I expressed the importance of feeling comfortable playing triads in any key. I then moved the students as quickly as possible to their pianos to try a few pentascales. Major pentascales aid in knowing which notes to play in a major triad. I showed my students how to play a pentascale in C major; we then played a root position C triad, playing first the tonic and the dominant together, making a fifth, and then adding the third to build the triad. I had students go up a whole step and play a major pentascale starting on D by ear, noticing that our third finger needed to play the black note F-sharp. We followed the same steps of playing the triad, first with the fifth and then adding the middle note. Then I had students go to F and repeat the process. Next, I had them play the three triads as a progression in whole notes: C, D, F, C while I sang the radio-edited lyrics of the CeeLo Green Song, “Fuck You” (Green 2010). After singing the whole chorus, I turned to the board and wrote the interval pattern of the pentascale. I followed by notating the C, D, and F pentascale, circling the triad tones. For homework, I assigned that students play all of their white-key major triads in root position, prepping each chord with the major pentascale (Krieger 2019, 18). We then tried this in class together in several keys before dismissing for the day, drawing their attention to the page in the book that notated the assignment.

Once I began playing the CeeLo Green song, I immediately noticed signs of recognition through head nods, smiles, and occasionally students singing along with me. By connecting chord learning to a recognizable popular song, I was able to achieve a greater level of interest in the class assignment and the students were visibly engaged. My previous semesters had lacked this strong introduction and students lacked focus on this important skill.

In the Fall 2020 sessions, I noticed that turning to the board and notating the C, D, and F pentascales interrupted the flow of the session. In the Spring of 2021, I went straight from singing the CeeLo Green song to turning the students loose to experiment on their keyboards. This was far more successful, as most students continued to play the CeeLo Green song before moving on to trying other triads. Seeing them continue playing the popular song prompted me to scribble “F, G, D” on the board and have them do an impromptu transposition. This was successful in trying new triads and incorporating aural training and transposition.

This exercise scored a 5 for Interest Upon Introduction, largely because of the song recognition at the beginning of the session. The way the exercise was constructed in Fall of 2020 with the interruption of notating the pentascales on the board resulted in the Transfer rating of 2, as students seemed confused as to whether they were supposed to be playing the CeeLo Green song or practicing their pentascales. When I edited the exercise for Spring 2021, I scored the Transfer rating as a 5, noticing that once the students turned to the pianos, they were having fun figuring out the different chords using their ears instead of looking at chords notated on the staff. In previous semesters of teaching group piano, I have had to change lesson plans when the class is having difficulty with a

concept. The impromptu addition of transposition to the lesson plan because the students were *enjoying* the exercise is something that had never happened before in my recollection. Some of the students were extremely proficient at playing their chords and I felt that aurally describing how to play the chord as a fifth and then add their third finger helped advance the students at a challenging pace. This pace kept them engaged and working through the technique obstacle more effectively. Some of the other students did not catch on as quickly and it is possible the aural-based method did not work for them. I gave this exercise a 3 in Mastery to account for the different lengths of time the students took to play the triads well. Most of the students came in the following week with their major chords prepared in all of the white keys, with some continuing to link C, D, and F together to play the pop song we had studied. Therefore, I rated the Retention as a 5.

Session Two: The Beatles—Drone Bass with Fifths

This exercise was used in both Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I. The keyboard skills utilized were technique, sight-reading, transposition, improvisation, composition, and creative listening.

One of the biggest challenges for beginner keyboard students at the collegiate level is learning how to read proficiently in both treble and bass clef. Students have experience reading staff notation on their primary instruments, but most instrumentalists read single clefs and not grand staff. Early sight-reading melodies and bass lines that are structured in pentascales are commonly used in keyboard study to allow the student to focus on technique and staff-reading without having to also change hand positions. Sometimes a fifth is shown in the bass line to minimize movement in the left hand, which simultaneously works to teach the harmonic method of a drone bass. A piece with a drone

bass can reinforce many skills to the keyboard student such as playing fifths, determining key signatures, possibly playing on the black keys, playing with two hands, playing different rhythms, and improvising. Indeed, the *only* way to improve these types of songs is to show the student a practical application of the skill. Songs that use a drone bass are usually fun to play on the keyboard since the left hand behaves like a drum and the student can exaggerate the motion of playing the fifth. However, titles like “Highlander Tune” and “French Canadian Round” can occasionally halt the energy in a young college student and make the song appear too rudimentary; adding a songwriting exercise elevates the accessibility for undergraduate and older beginners (Mach 2016, 56-57).

In search of a more practical and relatable example, I turned to The Beatles for inspiration. I opened the session by playing “Tomorrow Never Knows” and asked students to put their headphones on only one ear so that they could hear both the recording and their own keyboard. I then asked them to find the fifth in the left hand that the Eastern instruments were playing on the recording (The Beatles 1966). I announced that this was a great example of a drone bass and encouraged them to continue playing the fifth on their keyboards while they listened to how it worked under the whole song. As the song ends, the lyrics repeat, “of the beginning, of the beginning.” I assigned the students to improvise a quick song at their keyboards playing a fifth in the left hand in the key of C, the same key as “Tomorrow Never Knows,” and using notes of the C major pentascale in the right hand.⁷ After this improvisation/composition exercise, the students returned to their texts to transition to an existing repertoire piece that used the drone bass.

⁷ I was hoping to have the lyrics trigger awareness in the students of the newness they were experiencing in their life outside group piano to better connect with their assignment.

In *Introduction to Keyboard Harmony*, I assigned “Brother John” from the Alfred text and had the students play the opening fifth in the left hand throughout the entire song (Palmer 1996, 19). In *Group Piano*, the drone bass is first introduced with two short pieces notated in grand staff, one in the key of F and one in the key of D, with repeated fifths in the bass clef (Krieger 2019, 35). Students attempted these two pieces from their text in their original keys and transposed them up a whole step.

When I played the latter example for the class, almost everyone was moving to the music and some were jumping right into playing on their keyboards with the track. As I listened around the room through the teacher headset, I heard a mixture of students who were more confident improvising on the piano and those that were hesitant and nervous. However, *all* students were using both hands and composing. Improving hand coordination in the second week felt like a major accomplishment. Once the students moved to the pieces in the text, I observed a comfort level in the students as they transitioned from playing fifths by ear to reading fifths on the page.

In previous semesters, teaching drone bass had always elicited boredom and feelings of frustration from students because they are so accomplished on their primary instruments and yet studying something so basic. I rated this exercise a 5 in both Interest Upon Introduction and Transfer. The initial observations showed the students were excited and engaged with The Beatles song, and many of the students took the initiative to play without being prompted into the application portion of the session. The hand and finger coordination were the additional keyboard skills being mastered, so I gave this exercise a 5 in the Mastery category. The students were comfortable playing fifths by the end of the class as well as improvising a two-handed composition assignment.

Traditionally students derive hand coordination from two-handed sight-readings but were more energized in approaching this skill creatively. I never had to revisit the skill of playing fifths but obviously still had to help students in playing two-handed, since that is a skill that becomes more difficult with each passing week in the semester. This informed my rating in the Retention category, which I evaluated as a 4.

Session Three: Boogie-Woogie Music with Inversions

This exercise was used in both Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I. The keyboard skills utilized were technique, chord progressions, transposition, and lead sheet reading.

One of the first technical skills I assigned Keyboard Harmony I students was to learn their major chord inversions in all twelve keys. These students had placed into this level because of their prior keyboard experience. Students in Introduction to Keyboard Harmony learned their chord inversions in white-key triads: C, G and F major. I used the following exercise with both Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I students in the key of C as to accommodate the difference in skill level.

Moving between chords up and down the keyboard helps with keyboard topography and hand coordination, making sight-reading, repertoire, and popular keyboard playing easier. I opened Session Three by demonstrating that playing inversions of the same chord as we would be doing as a technique builder was not extremely helpful in composition when isolated. I played a C major triad up the keyboard in inversions for several octaves, broken and blocked, showing how students may have heard chord inversions as an introduction or an ending to a flamboyant section of a song. I then explained that learning our inversions is *most* helpful when moving from one chord to a

different chord that shares common chord tones. I quickly played a C triad to an F triad in root position, demonstrating with audible errors how sometimes moving your hands into new positions on the keyboard may produce wrong notes. I led them to discover nearby inversions by asking them to find the common tone between the chords. We practiced going from the C to the F second inversion chord with our left hand on the keyboard. I highlighted the intervallic movement they were doing and asked them to transpose the chord progression to both the key of F and G.

I next wrote a twelve-bar blues form on the white board using popular lead sheet style notation with letter names instead of roman numerals. I combined this with elements of the Nashville Number System and omitted bar lines, using a time signature at the beginning and then assuming one symbol per measure (Watson 2003, 123). I wrote a whole note above the first few chords on the white board and explained the meter concept to the students, who picked this up quickly. I explained that I-IV was not only a chord progression but also a piano accompaniment pattern often found when playing the blues. Students lit up as I pointed to the symbols with one hand and played the blues pattern with the other, walking them through the chart. I used a boogie-woogie swing style rhythm as my choice of accompaniment styling and kept the tempo at a medium pace. They practiced the accompaniment pattern in C, F and G on their own in their headsets and then we played the twelve-bar blues together while I enhanced the arrangement with some right-hand blues notes and rhythms. Lastly, I had them work through the same chords in their right hand and if they were feeling particularly enthusiastic, two-handed, playing the same chords in both hands simultaneously.

I altered this exercise for the Introduction to Keyboard Harmony class and extended the boogie exercise over the course of two sessions, the first session just playing an accompaniment pattern with a fourth and fifth interval and the second session graduating to playing the triads. In the second session, we transitioned to playing the I-IV₄⁶-I-V₅⁶-I major chord progression and cadence. I erased the blues and re-wrote I-IV₄⁶-I on the board in the bass clef, this time adding the V₅⁶ chord and finishing with a final I chord. I played the I-IV₄⁶-I-V₅⁶-I chord progression in its entirety in the key of C. We went through the intervallic movement between the I and the V₅⁶ chord and added the finger numbers. The class caught on quickly and began practicing at their keyboards as I listened around the room on my headset.

By introducing the assignment to play chord inversions with a practical exercise that used chord inversions, I was able to keep the students interested throughout the duration of the session, which took up most of the class. The students smiled when I launched into the blues, so relieved to practice a relatable and fun exercise. All the students jumped right into playing the accompaniment pattern in C. When they tried to move it to F some students had a little trouble with the progression, most likely due to the black note (B-flat). A lot of the students added rhythms of their own and those who already had chord progressions under their fingers were incorporating their right hand too. All the students regardless of their aptitude at the keyboard understood that accompaniment patterns sometimes use inversions. Afterward, I showed Keyboard Harmony I classes how they could play the blues in other keys to practice their I-IV₄⁶ progressions; many of the students understood how to do this immediately. The students

continued to remember the second inversion chords well but struggled to remember or play their first inversion chords until after two weeks.

In the Introduction to Keyboard sections, I observed the students transposing this to other keys and noticed they would play I-IV₄⁶- I- IV₄⁶- I- IV₄⁶- I- IV₄⁶ and then eventually add the V₅⁶-I. It was as if they could not get the boogie out of their fingers! They seemed to love the feeling of playing the I-IV₄⁶ several times back-to-back in the dotted eighth rhythm. Not only were they enjoying the sound but also exhibiting their comfort level after practicing their homework assignment. This showed me that they had been motivated to practice and were only hesitating on the V₅⁶ chord because it was new.

I gave the exercise a 4 in Interest Upon Introduction because of the positive reactions to the blues accompaniment. Previous semesters had shown me that students loved learning about blues scales and forms in group piano. However, most of that feedback was from Keyboard Harmony II students, and rarely would earlier levels learn the blues. An improvement to this rating could potentially result from showing them how to play a C root position chord to an F chord in second inversion with no explanation at all and seeing if the student can integrate their aural training before hearing me explain the concept. I rated this exercise a 5 in Transfer, as the students were guided step by step along the first few parts of the assignment, making it easy for them to transfer when the time came for them to do it on their own. I rated the exercise a 4 in Mastery because some of the students were not initially successful in playing the IV chord in second inversion with the correct finger numbers. This detail of the assignment took several weeks to solidify and while important, was very difficult to incorporate in a fun way during the creative introduction aside from a small mention. In many ways this creative

approach to experiencing chord inversions was helpful because I could correct their fingering as they played without looking at the page. Also, having them try a different fingering that felt better helped them understand the reason behind the fingering.

However, because this exercise only used the IV_4^6 inversion the students had mistakenly used the second inversion chord fingering while practicing their first inversion chords throughout the week.

I rated this a 5 for Retention for several reasons. The students were not taught the first inversion chords that day, so it felt unfair to rate the exercise in a way that would reflect what was lacking in the overall technique. They continued to be strong in their I- IV_4^6 progressions and continued to remember the accompaniment pattern for the entire semester; many of them used it in their final projects scoring their blues songs. In the Introductory to Keyboard level, students who had the chord progression with the repetitive I- IV_4^6 sequence demonstrated they had indeed been practicing and retaining the accompaniment pattern.

Session Four: Trading Fours

This exercise was used in both Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I. The keyboard skills utilized were sight-reading, improvisation, and lead sheet reading.

Improvisation in four bar phrases between two or more soloists is commonly called “trading fours,” referring to switching to a new improviser after four measures. I began this session in Keyboard Harmony I by writing the chords to the first four measures of “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho” on the board using lead sheet style notation with the chords in letter names. By this time in the semester the students had

practiced their pentascales and triads in all twelve keys, so playing this set of chords with their left hand in root position was not difficult. I let them play on their headsets to practice the chords and set a medium tempo for them to consider. I then challenged them to try their chords in the right hand. Next, I proposed that they play the left-hand chords and make up a right-hand improvisation. I suggested they stay in the same chord shape with their right hand and break out the notes of the chord during the measure. Having the students practice this over the headset allowed them to feel less nervous about the task and feel better prepared for the group improvisation to come. After they had a minute or two by themselves, I asked them to unplug their headsets and explained the concept of “trading fours.” The first thing we did was play the left-hand chords together as a class. We traded improvisations with one another in four bar phrases taking turns as we went around the room. I gave the students permission to play their right-hands only during their solos but instructed them to continue playing the left-hand accompaniment while other people were soloing. After this, I had students turn to “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho” in their text and practice the melody and chords using the lead sheet (Krieger 2019, 58).

I altered the exercise for the Introductory sections. In the Alfred text, the students are shown a I chord and an abbreviated two-note V^7 chord that oscillate back and forth in the song, “Merrily We Roll Along” (Palmer 1996, 21). I asked the students to play the left-hand parts as written but to use their right-hand trying notes in C position over the I and V^7 chords to see which tones fit where against the harmony. We did not improvise together through the speakers; instead, I listened around the room over the headset to

hear how each of them were doing, taking turns improvising with them in four measure phrases.

The students benefited from this improvisation exercise, the more advanced groups being able to improvise and start compositions using the chord progression of the familiar tune. I drew the parallel that using a chord progression from another song and creating a different style, melody, and/or form was a great way to think about starting their final projects. The Introductory students had a firm sense of what the song *could* sound like because “Merrily We Roll Along” is very well-known. Having this information informed their improvisations and sometimes I heard them trying out the melody in double time or playing a bar of the melody and then trying something new on the next three bars. Both classes benefitted from practicing prior to having me listen or playing aloud. This is something I have slowly changed in my teaching. I used to use improvisation as an ice-breaker exercise and before anyone had a chance to warm up in class, I would have them turn their piano volume aloud and begin. My thinking was that it gave them less time to be nervous and dread the assignment since there is often a sense of nervousness in first-time beginner students when performing an improvisation aloud in class. In this case, I gave students individual practice time to prepare for the assignment before pulling them into a group activity. The time they had prior to the improvisation exercise was crucial to the success of the improvisation keyboard skill.

I rated this exercise a 4 for Interest Upon Introduction, primarily because I was still observing some noticeable nervousness from a few of the students when we moved from the chord progressions on the board to the improvisation part of the exercise. In the

category of Transfer, I rated this exercise a 5. The students transitioned seamlessly between playing the chords on the board to improvising over them to reading the music in the book as it was written. For Mastery, I rated this exercise a 2. While these students were certainly putting their best effort to the assignment, it takes a very long time to master the art of improvisation and I would say that most of my students were not comfortable with this skill. The students retained this process and could apply it to songwriting and other improvisation assignments in the future, thus I awarded the Retention category with a 5.

Session Five: Improvising with Lyrics and Rhythm

This exercise was used in Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I. It utilizes the keyboard skills of chord progressions, sight-reading, transposition, improvisation, composition, and lead sheet reading.

As discussed in Chapter Three, scaffolding is important for the success of creative endeavors and should not be overlooked. I chose to work with “Mary Had a Little Lamb” in Session Five for both levels of the class. The Introduction to Keyboard Harmony class had improvised with this song in Session Four, a week prior to when I introduced Session Five (Palmer 1996, 21)⁸. In the Keyboard Harmony I class, the students had just completed “Mary Had a Little Lamb” by ear for a harmonization assignment (Krieger 2019, 70). Knowing this song and having practiced the chords, the students were more prepared and open-minded toward doing an improvisatory assignment.

⁸ In Session Four, I refer to the song “Merrily We Roll Along” as it is titled in *Alfred’s Basic Adult Piano Course*. In Session Five, I use this same song, but refer to it as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” (Palmer 1996, 21). These songs have the same melody but different words and the lyrics to “Mary Had a Little Lamb” were more optimal for my exercise.

I focused the exercise on teaching the students how to use what they already had in their songwriting toolbox. I suggested they start with the song “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and write new lyrics, keeping the same melody, harmony, and rhythm. I demonstrated by playing a bluesy version of the song I had written:

*“I’m so glad that it ain’t rain, it ain’t rain, it ain’t rain
Oh I’m so glad that it ain’t rain, rain pouring down”*

I allowed everyone to stay on headphones and experiment with this individually for a minute or two, then suggested they try to now alter the melody or the rhythm. I demonstrated by singing my version of the song with the alternate lyrics but changing the rhythm so all that remained were the melody and harmony. Everyone was playing in the key of C and I encouraged them to go up to the key of D or E, suggesting that sometimes moving a melody to a new key can bring inspiration for how to make a song their own. I continued to let the students work individually and ended the assignment by asking if anyone had anything they would like to share. In Keyboard Harmony I, since they had been using their lead sheets from their ear training assignment as a reference instead of staff notation, I then had them turn to a reharmonized version of the song in their text and do some sight-reading to close the exercise (Krieger 2019, 63).

I observed that the students were very engaged in this assignment. None of the students were singing which was not unexpected since it was a classroom with sometimes as many as seven students and would have been difficult to do this without distracting everyone. I did see a few students making notes on their pages while they were using the notated music as a guide for the assignment; however, I observed that most students were doing this assignment completely by ear. When I asked students if anyone would like to share, I had two students—both from the Introduction to Keyboard Harmony

sections—offered. The first student shared an instrumental version of the song which he had titled “Mary Lost Her Lamb.” The student had changed the song to minor mode, lowering the third a half step in the right hand in the melody and changing the tonic chord to minor mode. The second student played and sang “Mary Had a Little Lamb” keeping the original lyrics but altering the melody. The first note of the melody held a whole note and then the subsequent notes of the phrase were in eighth notes and descended rather than ascending back to the starting pitch.

I rated this exercise a 4 in Interest Upon Introduction. I have always struggled to get students interested in this song because it is a nursery rhyme and I think they feel too mature to play the song. By putting a spin on it from the beginning of the exercise with the newly composed lyrics “It Ain’t Rain,” I was able to grab their attention more than I had in prior years. I rated this exercise a 4 in Transfer because there was no assessment after the exercise. An improvement to the exercise—while still giving the student space to work individually—would be to have students write down alternate lyrics on music for me to walk around the room and examine while they practiced. In Mastery, I rated the exercise a 5 for two specific reasons. In my observations, the students were working at their keyboards very diligently, showing that they could play two-handed and work on improvisation. I noted again that many of them were not looking at the music. When I asked them to change keys, a quick scan of the room showed me they could easily transpose this song and continue to improvise now in a key that incorporated both white and black keys on the piano. I rated this exercise a 5 in the category of Retention because when we did improvisation exercises later the semester, I noticed the students would be

more drawn to using the melody and rhythm as a starting point for their turn improvising than in past years. I had always suggested students do this; focusing an exercise on bringing imitation into improvisation and composition helped them to put that suggestion to practice⁹.

Session Six: Accompaniment Patterns

This exercise was used in Keyboard Harmony I. The keyboard skills utilized were technique, sight-reading, improvisation, composition, and listening.

I wanted to show students that they could change the sound of a song by manipulating the left-hand texture. The class had learned two lead sheets in the first half of the semester that were used to play blocked triads in the left hand while their right hand played a melody. In the textbook, there was an example of how to change blocked chords in the left hand to different accompanying patterns (Krieger 2019, 95). I pointed them to the page and showed them how a blocked accompaniment pattern could take the shape of an Alberti bass, using the same chord progression and inversions. I then demonstrated the same exercise using a more rhythmic bossa-nova pattern, breaking up the chord into the root and third being played together with the fifth of the chord being played on the alternating off beats.

Turning to a popular music example, I then played Alicia Keys “Falling”, which opens with a two-chord progression going back and forth in an arpeggiated texture. Both chords are second inversion triads (Keys 2001). I played the Kacey Musgraves song “Rainbow” afterward as an example of blocked chord texture (Musgraves 2018). Inspired

⁹ I did review with students that while imitation is a great way to start their own compositions, it is important to not plagiarize a melody or lyrics.

by Nicole Biamonte's book, *Pop-Culture Pedagogy in the Music Classroom*, I invited the class to open their respective phones or iPods and suggest some examples of what else they may be listening to that had an example of an interesting accompaniment pattern (Biamonte 2011). Biamonte insists that student-chosen repertoire is essential to the success of integrating popular music into the traditionally classical classroom. Teacher-chosen repertoire, while thoughtfully diverse in genre, may lack the time-sensitive trends that popular music offers and thwart maximum engagement (Biamonte 2011, 47-49). This is helpful in solving a main critique of incorporating popular music: because of how often trends in popular music change, a professor's knowledge would go out of style all too easily, rendering the point of the class useless (Miksza 2013, 48). By putting these choices in the students' hands, the professor does not risk being outdated and in turn learns about current popular music culture. I had the students then turn to their keyboards and work on their final projects, encouraging them to experiment with different accompaniment patterns that we had discussed in class and to reference their textbook (Krieger 2019, 95).

All the students agreed that when I changed the accompaniment pattern in the first example from the *Group Piano* text it significantly changed the feeling of the song (Krieger 2019, 95). The students also all recognized and identified the arpeggiated chord pattern in the Alicia Keys song and immediately noticed "Rainbow" as being different because of the blocked chord pattern. When I requested examples of popular music the students were listening to, they had wonderful ideas and the room took on a very enthusiastic and engaged energy. One student who primarily listens to classical music suggested an aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with sparse accompaniment. While

listening, I was reminded of opening to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" and promptly cued up the song on Apple Music (Queen 1975). We then had a nice off-topic discussion on the four-part harmony utilized in avant-garde popular music. One student suggested "Moral of the Story", a song by Ashe (Ashe 2019). It was not a traditional chord-based accompaniment but had a melodic piano line that underscored and accompanied the lyrics throughout the introduction, verse, chorus, and transitions. It fit so well with our theme that I consequently shared it with the other sections of the class. The classes throughout the week were unusually pulsing with energy and several times students visited me after class to find out the names of different artists and songs to which we had listened that they enjoyed. The final projects I received demonstrated that students had mastered arpeggiated bass lines, pulsing chords in quarter notes, pulsing eighth note chords, and broken chords.

I rated this exercise a 5 in the category of Interest Upon Introduction. Because the final projects showed a variety of accompaniment patterns, I rated this exercise as a 5 in Transfer. While there was no direct keyboard skill immediately applied with this assignment, I rated the exercise a 3 in Mastery. When the final projects were submitted, I found that most students underscored their original songs with block chord accompaniment. Some of those students did use a pulsing pattern and only few students were able to successfully apply a more advanced accompaniment pattern. This exercise relied on former knowledge of accompaniment patterns and at the same time required students to build their repertoire of available options, so I rated this a 5 in Retention. I can say assuredly that in previous years the group piano classroom was not nearly as vibrant as it was in these sessions toward the end of the semester. Promoting class discussion and

participating in creative listening together as a group was energizing for the students. I observed them being eager to take class time to work on their original songs at the end of class.

Table 3. Comparative Table of Creative Listening Exercises, 2020-2021 Group Piano Introduction to Keyboard and Keyboard Harmony I, Blair School of Music. By Author.

| EXERCISES | Cumulative Rating | Interest Upon Introduction | Transfer | Mastery | Retention |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Session Seven: Production and Prosody | 5 | 5 | 5 * | 5 | 5 |
| Session Eight: Candy's Boy verses Candy's Room | 5 | 5 | 5 | N/A | N/A |
| Session Nine: Queen Tribalism | 4.5 | 5 | 5 | N/A | N/A |
| Session Ten: Hotel California | 3 | 3 | 3 | N/A | N/A |

Creative Listening Exercises

Session Seven: Production and Prosody

This exercise was used in Keyboard Harmony I and uses the keyboard skill of creative listening.

Prosody describes the patterns of rhythm and sound in poetry. Jack Perricone defines this term more broadly in relation to songwriting, saying that prosody is the “relationship of words to music” (Perricone 2018, 70). During this session, I opened class with the Doobie Brothers classic “Here To Love You,” the first track on *Minute by Minute* which was released in 1978 (Doobie Brothers, 1978). The music is lively and danceable and the message in the song is very direct: “I came to love you, no more loneliness, no more emptiness, I’m here to love you.” Next, I played Kacey Musgraves’

2018 song “Rainbow” (Musgraves 2018). A very simple, quarter-note, pulsing piano introduction opens the song. I asked the students the following creative listening questions:

1. “Does the Kasey Musgraves song make you feel differently than the Doobie Brothers song? How?”
2. “What are some of the differences between these two songs sonically at first listen?”

The funky piano rhythms in the beginning introduction of the Doobie Brothers song had students bobbing their heads and tapping their feet instantly. Everyone agreed that music like this made them want to dance. Likewise, I saw many smiles of recognition when I played the Kacey Musgraves song. When I asked the class how “Rainbow” made them feel differently than “Here to Love You,” they responded that it made them more reflective and calmer, and that the quieter music made the listener more in touch with what the singer was saying in their lyrics. I praised them for their observations and encouraged them to think about the concept of prosody while working on their final projects. I then shared with the class how Kacey Musgraves had dedicated this song to the LGBTQ community and cited how it had been adopted as an anthem, surmising that the production and accompaniment pattern of the song had been specifically chosen to highlight this message (Houghton 2018). I hoped to not only include all music lovers by choosing different genres with my two examples but also to connect with students of all genders and gender identities by choosing to present this song. It was a dynamic week where the students engaged with the message of their music. When the students submitted their final projects, most of the songs paired

traditionally pensive music—minor or slower—with a less busy accompaniment pattern and more thoughtful lyrics. Some of these songs were love songs while others pertained to the holiday season when the Fall 2020 semester projects were due. Songs that had tongue-in-cheek lyrics about the pandemic or a lighter love theme tended to be more upbeat, in major keys, and have more pulsing and busy accompaniment patterns.

I rated this exercise high with a 5 for Interest Upon Introduction. The connection the students had made from Session Seven to their projects was strong, so I rated the exercise a 5 in Transfer as well, along with Mastery and Retention. While it could be argued that prosody is not a keyboard skill, it certainly is a practical skill in songwriting that requires a musician to have versatility in different keyboard stylings.

Session Eight: Candy's Boy Versus Candy's Room

This exercise was used in Keyboard Harmony I and used the keyboard skill of creative listening.

Toward the end of the semester, I would often ask the students how their projects were coming along and if they had chosen their song form, despite my awareness that I could be possibly hindering the editing and/or discovery process. Teacher-student relationships are essential to encouraging motivation in the classroom and I wanted to make sure that I was meeting the needs of those students who had not yet decided on a song form while also continuing to encourage the sometimes-lengthy creative process (Nugent 2009, 1-5). To make sure that the class knew it was okay to change to a different song form after they had already started composing their songs, I geared a class meeting toward explaining the importance of editing and discovery. Paul Zollo stresses the

importance of the editing process and how it can lead to new paths inside the song. In an interview with Paul Simon, Paul Zollo recounts Simon saying:

I'm more interested in what I *find*, as opposed to what I'm planting. I'm more interested in what I discover than what I invent. So I let the songs go this way and that way and basically what I do is be the *editor*. (Zollo 1993, 56)

I played "Candy's Boy," a B-side from the 1978-79 sessions Bruce Springsteen recorded to fill his fourth major record release, *Darkness on the Edge of the Town* (Springsteen 1978). "Candy's Boy" was eventually released in 2010 on *The Promise*, an album containing twenty-one unreleased recordings that never made it onto the critically acclaimed *Darkness on the Edge of the Town* album (Itzkoff "New York Times" 2010). While *The Promise* is filled with earlier versions of songs that are more subtly different, like "Racing in the Street ('78)," "Candy's Boy" is an obvious full departure from "Candy's Room," the version on the *Darkness on the Edge of the Town* album (Springsteen 1977).

Students' mouths gaped open when they heard the rudiment drumming patterns of "Candy's Room" after listening to the 50's piano triplet soft rock accompaniment in the "Candy's Boys" recording (Fricke 2010, 65). When I asked how the two recordings differed, some students answered specifically, noting the different drum patterns or the different tempo. My favorite response was from a student who shrugged and replied, "everything", because it indicated that they understood how wildly opposite the two versions were and prompted me to reiterate how drastic the editing process could be.

I noticed even more tangible results from this exercise when the final projects were submitted. One student stayed after class asking me to work with him on substitution chords for the 12-bar blues turnaround. The same student did write a blues

song for his final project but changed from an instrumental blues to a blues song with clever lyrics lamenting the online nature of the 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Another student had mentioned they would also be doing a blues but ended up instead incorporating a poem his late uncle had written while stationed in Vietnam. The student finished the poem and created a melody and jazz styled accompaniment.

I rated this exercise a 5 in both Interest Upon Introduction and the Transfer category. Because this did not include a specific keyboard skill, I have rated it a N/A in Mastery and Retention.

Session Nine: Queen Tribalism

This exercise was used in Keyboard Harmony I and used the keyboard skill of creative listening.

The World in Six Songs is a book by the acclaimed author, neuroscientist and musician Daniel Levitin. This book suggests that music and songs are experienced similarly by all different types of people because of the peoples' shared evolution. In an effort to bond the class together, I suggested that students consider their final projects with this concept in mind. Two of the six categories that Levitin writes about in his book are Joy and Friendship. Joy songs are those that make you feel happy, enlivened, and often sympathetic to whatever commercialized product may be using them in an ad campaign. They are purposefully "disarming" (Levitin 2008, 87). Levitin explains in detail the evolution of finding something objectively pleasing in terms of human survival and adaptation while also acknowledges that the very real and present emotional properties of music are yet to be fully discovered by scientists. In his chapter about Friendship, Levitin references the evolution of tribes and their use of drums to connect

with one another, particularly when marching to attack another village. The drum sounds and synchronized movements bonded the tribes together (Levitin 2008, 87-89).

I chose the song “We Will Rock You” by Queen to show a song that combined the elements of friendship and joy. I showed a clip from the biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* where the band was composing the call and response part of “We Will Rock You.” The character of Brian May explains that the motivation to include the audience was so they too become part of the show and bond with the band members on stage (Singer 2018, 1:05:56-1:09:19). I then played a live performance featuring Queen’s lead singer, Freddie Mercury, from the Knebworth Festival (August 9, 1986, at the Knebworth Festival in Knebworth, England) doing his famous operatic call and response, “Ee-oo,” with audiences to give the class context for some of the bonding exercises Queen had been incorporating in their shows. I then paused to have the class notice how they felt watching these videos and asked if they felt the surge of energy that was coming from the bond the band was attempting to create.

Despite *Bohemian Rhapsody*’s inaccuracy in parts, the film does a particularly wonderful job of combining the elements of joy and friendship (Greene 2018). One such instance involves using the motif “Ee-oo” in a very personal scene where Freddie Mercury is diagnosed with AIDS. As Freddie is leaving the hospital, another AIDS patient is alone in the hall with him calls out after him, “Ee-oo.” The scene shows Freddie as he stops, glances back, and replies “Ee-oo.” (Singer 2018, 1:43:30-1:45:56). I used this to show how powerful a universal message can be when it is applied to an individual and encouraged students to think of concepts that bond them to others.

The classes enjoyed seeing Queen perform live and watching scenes from the film. I had several students who had never heard of Queen and thought was a nice introduction to their music. Likewise, I had die-hard Queen fans in the class who had seen the biopic multiple times and knew all the scenes I played. This session was omitted in the Fall 2020 semester because the semester was shortened due to the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, I had one class run out of time when I did the exercise in the Spring 2021 and we were unable watch the second scene where Freddie gets diagnosed with AIDS. I certainly felt more engagement from the students in the other classes that had watched this powerful scene as it reinforced the importance of connecting personal experiences with the audience.

I rated this exercise strong in all applicable areas with a 5 in Interest Upon Introduction. I rated it a 5 the Transfer category because several of the students included universal messages in their projects that demonstrated they were able to apply the lessons learned from studying the Queen song into their projects. I also rated this exercise N/A for Mastery and Retention since no keyboard skills were directly being taught. I had never used a video to illustrate points in my lectures in any previous semesters. I was apprehensive that the students may feel they were wasting their class practice time; however, as the students were leaving class after the video, I saw several engaging in discussion about the movie and the music. Some students stayed after to talk about how they loved the scene that I played. Student engagement was profound in this instance and the experience inspired me to seek out further examples of media other than music to use in my classes going forward.

Session Ten: Hotel California

This exercise was used in Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and used the keyboard skill of creative listening.

In the final session of the Introduction to Keyboard class, I chose to focus on lyric-writing. I knew some of the students were more lyric-driven in their songwriting and I wanted students to know that there are lyricists who do not compose music but still rely heavily on their advanced music understanding when writing. I opened the class with my favorite Nashville story about my meeting the famous lyricist John Bettis and being starstruck, unaware at the time that some musicians only wrote lyrics¹⁰. I then played “Hotel California” by the *Eagles* for the class. We listened to the complete recording and then discussed some of the lyrics and how they depicted sentiments of the Midwest band’s hesitation with Beverly Hills to which they had moved (Eagles 1975). I paused and asked candidly if anyone knew this song or had ever really thought about the lyrics. No one had taken the time to understand them—including me—and yet everyone knew and loved them. I made the argument to the class that “writing what you know” is always a good start. Drawing from one’s own experiences and values is one of the most important ways to begin fiction writing (Walker 2012, 96). The process of writing a song is similar to writing fiction or telling a story and the principle of writing something familiar is likewise applicable.

¹⁰ John Bettis is an American songwriter known for his hits with The Carpenters, Madonna, Michael Jackson to name a few. He was inducted in the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2011 (The Songwriters Hall of Fame, n.d.).

There are many different styles to choose from when writing a lyric. Another approach is to have a focused style where all the lines really support the hook—or the main argument—as if in a research paper. I played a song penned by the famous lyricist couple, Alan and Marilyn Bergman, along with composer Michel Legrand, called “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?” to show the class and example of this method (Springfield 1999).

In addition to the importance of writing what you know, this session asked students to connect with the music user—whomever he or she may be—in the future (Adams 2016, 2). This can be specifically important to budding music educators in the room because knowing your room is an extremely valuable tool for teaching. Facilitating group discussion about how music makes us feel and what we notice about it helps students not only accomplish this for themselves but also helps them have conversations like this with others in their future careers. Mark Adams calls this the “Converser/Educator” role of the music user in his research on connecting with the music user (Adams 2016).

I rated this exercise a 3 in Interest Upon Introduction. My example of “Hotel California” really resonated with the different classes. One student brought up that Jack Johnson uses nonsensical syllables or lines that do not read clearly at times yet still sound great and are also fun to sing. Alternatively, my second example of “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?” was not a classroom favorite. The dramatic rendition by Dusty Springfield bored the students and I found them easily distracted, seemingly not paying attention, checking their phones, or otherwise looking down with their eyes (Springfield 1999). I also rated this a 3 in Transfer, as most of the lyrics turned in at the

end of the semester lacked these more advanced concepts. The categories of Mastery and Retention were not applicable.

Chapter Six: Final Projects and Conclusions

Final Projects

Each semester concluded with students turning in their final project. Because Introduction to Keyboard Harmony and Keyboard Harmony I were both beginner keyboard courses, I did not ask students to perform their pieces in front of their peers but instead required a video or sound recording depending on the semester (Appendix A-C). Chapter Five already shared some observations about the final projects when they made use of the different keyboard skills listed in the chapter. Collectively, the projects were outstanding and reflected that the songwriting exercises had been successful. All the students turned their project in on time and many did so weeks ahead of schedule.

The projects highlighted the students' mastery of keyboard techniques such as playing with two hands, playing triads in both root position and using inversions, playing on white and black keys, playing and singing simultaneously, and playing different rhythms with each hand. Chord progressions, lead sheet reading and writing, and transposition were similarly featured. The projects demonstrated a well-rounded group of songs that were diverse in lyric content, tempo, style, key, and arrangement. The students' use of various styles was attributed to the diversity that songwriting brought to the group piano classroom and showcased their ability to integrate other aspects of their undergraduate studies into their popular songs. There was strong evidence in other assessment areas of the class which showed that songwriting was effective in teaching creativity and keyboard skills. Furthermore, students' success in their final songwriting

projects demonstrated their ability to transfer keyboard skills in a practical way, meeting one of the core goals of modern undergraduate music curriculum.

Conclusions

Aside from the final project which made up ten percent of the students' final exam grade, conclusions were made from other assessments and observations. Students were observed performing as well or better in the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters than in previous semesters in almost all their keyboard skills. This exhibits that the use of popular music and study of songwriting positively impacted their performance in the class overall, likely keeping them motivated and improving their ability to stay engaged.

A similar rubric has been informally applied to overall student performance. In the area of Interest upon Introduction, students seemed to be more interested in group piano overall, aside from a few hard-to-reach students. In the area of Transfer, students transferred keyboard skills not only to their final projects but also to other areas of assessment like solos and repertoire. Although not featured in this paper, students had traditional group piano assignments such as weekly sight-reading, repertoire, and midterm solos. The creative listening examples and songwriting exercises worked to make the more traditional class assessments more energized and musical because of the use of four-bar phrasing and fluent chord progressions. In the category of Mastery, students proved through their grades and final projects that they had mastered their keyboard skills. Lastly, in the area of Retention there was a significant improvement in student skill retention over the holiday break from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021. This was noted as particularly important given that the winter holiday was much longer than usual

because of the coronavirus pandemic and so the students had a higher chance of forgetting their learned techniques.

I also observed a consistent strong connectedness within the sections that I had rarely seen in my years of teaching. Students in the same section were encouraging and helpful to one another, showed interest in each other's projects and ideas, and worked together well in ensembles. Creative exercises allow a teacher to foster a feeling of inclusivity in the classroom. Sylvia Coats suggests that when any group of people come together to achieve a goal, they will undoubtedly go through a process that creates substantial productivity. The five stages of growth are membership, influence, feelings, individual differences and productivity. From the start of the semester students feel like they are members of the same group, since group piano is a required course for music majors. As students enter class on the first day, the teacher hopefully greets them and steps into the role of main influencer. As the semester progresses, the teacher will highlight what each student brings to the group from their own personal and musical background. Expressing feelings openly in the classroom is the next level of growth (Coats 2006, 112-113). The group piano classroom is the perfect place to emphasize all Coats' stages of growth as proven by my observation of an increased level of productivity, sense of community, and expression among my students.

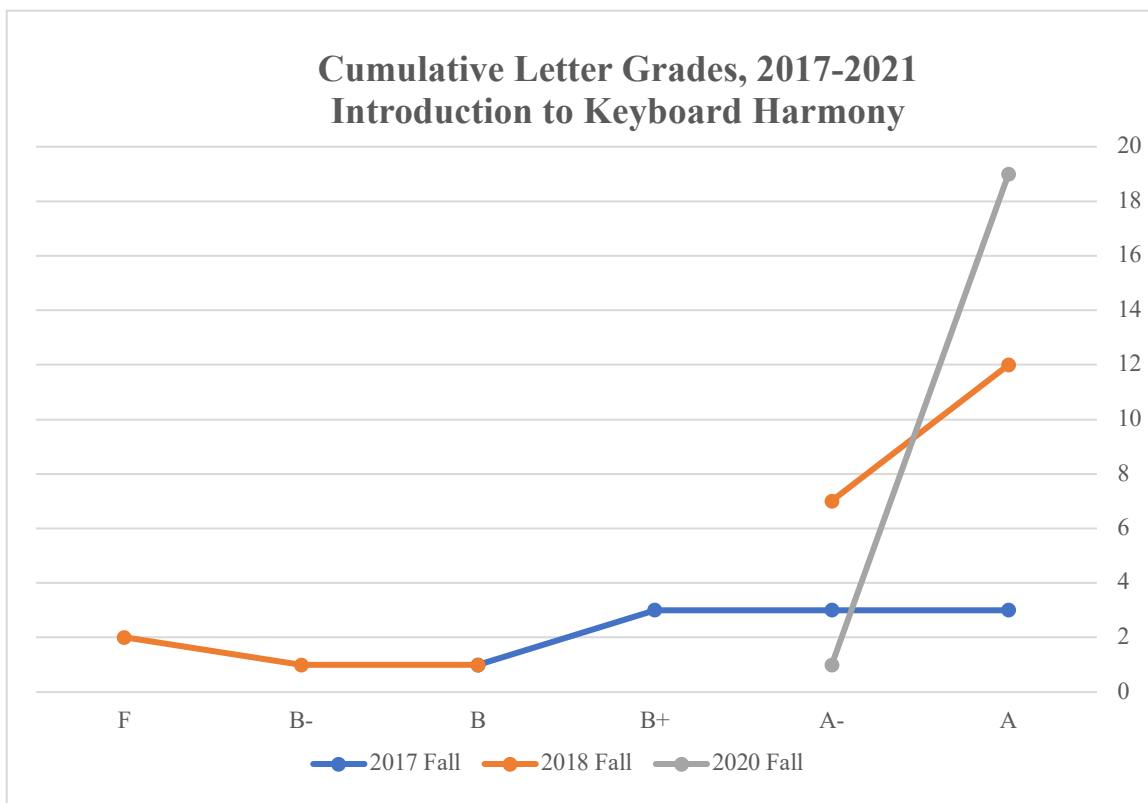


Figure 1. Cumulative Letter Grades, 2017-2021 Introduction to Keyboard Harmony. By Author.

The number of A and A- grades that the students earned in both the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters was greater when compared to that of previous semesters (Figures 1 and 2). In Figure 1, the steep increase in higher grades during the Fall of 2020 shows that students mastered keyboard skills remarkably better with the addition of the songwriting exercises. Similarly, Figure 2 shows that the Spring of 2020, Fall of 2020, and Spring of 2021 Keyboard Harmony Level I classes earned between twice and three times as many A grades as classes did in previous semesters¹¹. A student receiving an A in Keyboard Harmony would mean that the student mastered all of the keyboard skills required for the class.

¹¹ In the Spring of 2020, I began informally experimenting with songwriting exercises in group piano to gauge student interest and reception. The high level of A grades in this semester could be a result of this inclusion.

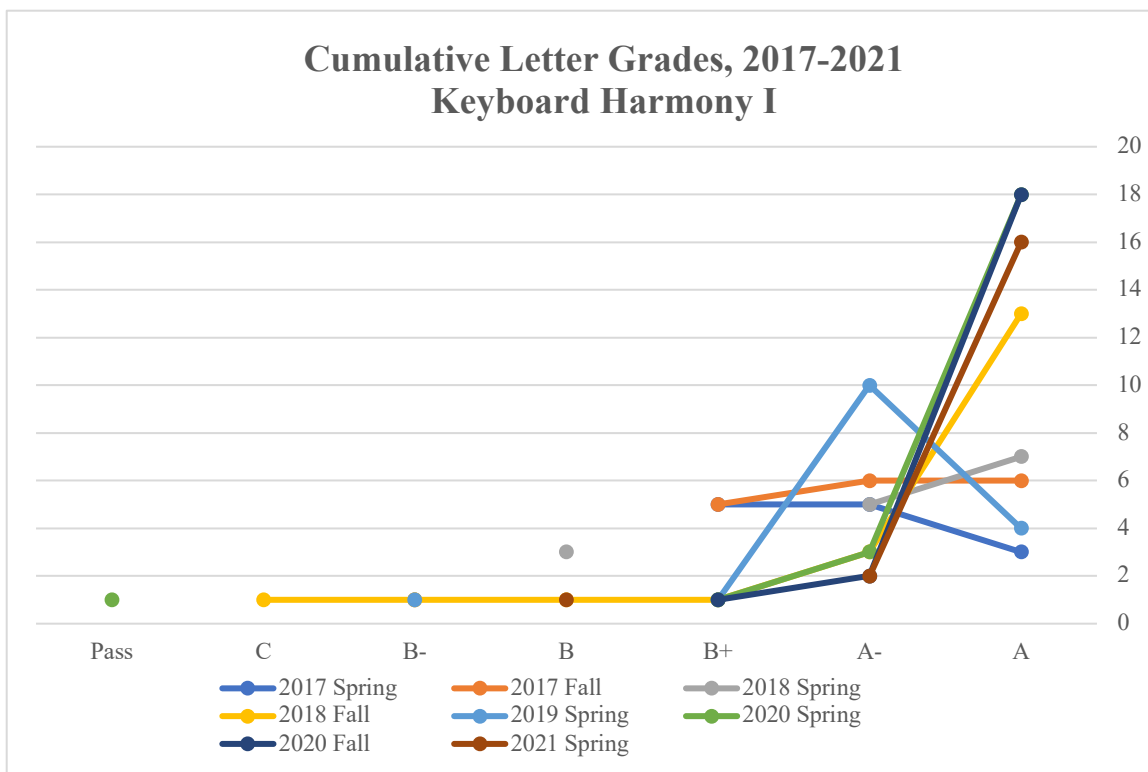


Figure 2. Cumulative Letter Grades, 2017-2021 Keyboard Harmony I. By Author.

Course evaluations at the end of the semester were also a useful tool for evaluating course success and student engagement. Course evaluations from Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 exhibited an increased rating for some of the questions that pertained to reaching the social and emotional learning goals and a decreased rating for others (Figures 3 and 4). The evaluations have been averaged between the sections of the course to show one final number in each category. Each evaluation had between three and seven people completing the form as course evaluations were only strongly encouraged and not mandatory. The standard deviation was an average of .665, with a high of 1.26 and a low of 0. On a scale of 1 to 5, students answered questions with the following rating system

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree
- N/A - Not Applicable

The four questions from the course evaluations that best measured topics in this study were as follows:

- 1) The instructor encouraged critical, original, or creative thinking.
- 2) The instructor created a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment.
- 3) The course helped me appreciate the significance of the subject matter.
- 4) This course helped me consider connections between course material and other areas of my personal, academic, or professional life.

The evaluations and final grades support the findings of the final project that students were able to effectively master keyboard skills and stay motivated through creative songwriting exercises. However, the course evaluations for Introduction to Keyboard Harmony showed only marginal improvements regarding their feelings toward the merit of group piano in the overall curriculum. Similar findings suggested that students were not connecting the information they were learning to their studies and personal lives as much as I had hoped (Figure 3).

The course evaluations for Keyboard Harmony I did not conclusively show any relevant student data. While they showed an overall higher score in all four questions from 2017 to 2021, students again demonstrated the least amount of improvement in understanding the importance of the course and integrating their other course material with group piano (Figure 4).

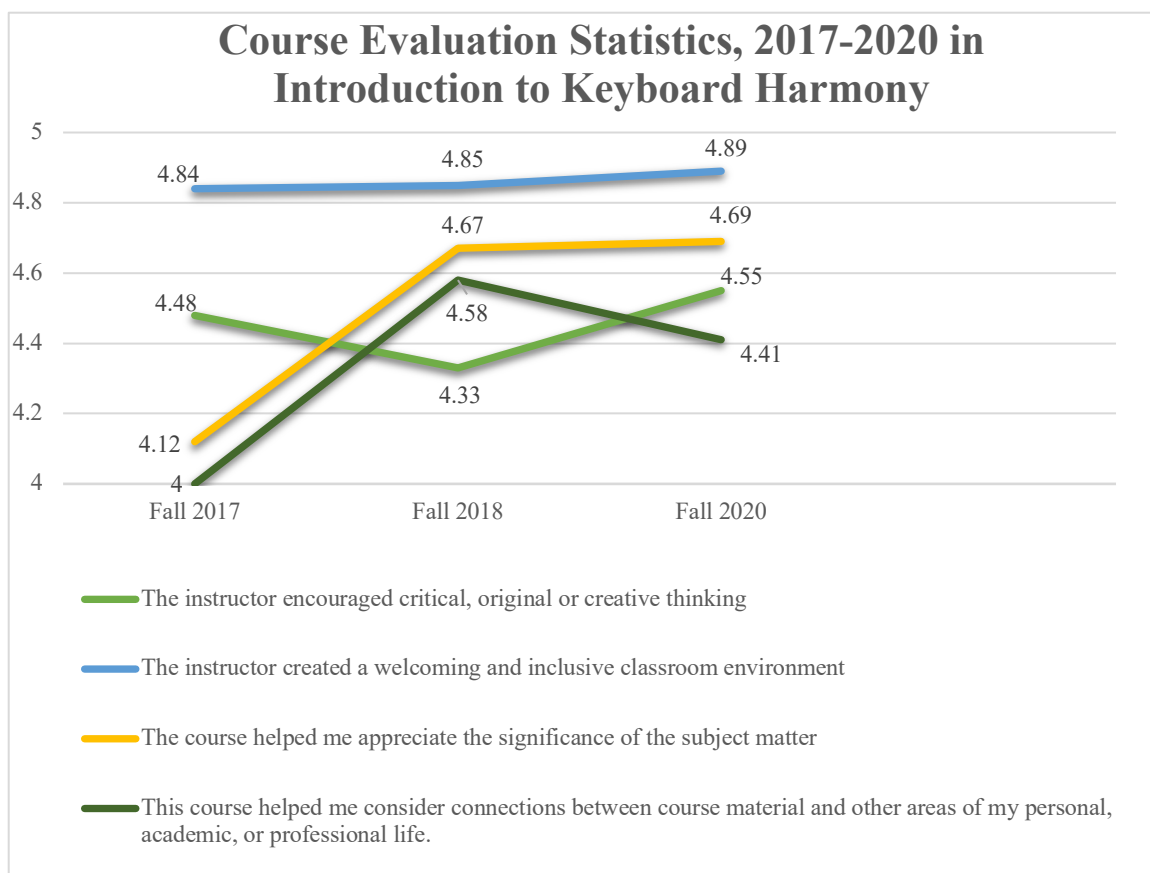


Figure 3. Course Evaluation Statistics, 2017-2020 in Introduction to Keyboard Harmony. By Author.

There were several comments from the course evaluations that stood out in reference to the conclusion of this paper. The first read, “She created a very comfortable environment for us and it helped me relax and enjoy what I was learning.” Learning that students enjoyed what they were studying in group piano was gratifying for me as the teacher in a way that likely reflects the feelings of other teachers in similar positions. It indicates that helping students find their comfort zone keeps them motivated and on track for good results, even if they might not understand why they are doing some of the assignments. Another comment read, “Although tedious, learning the chord progressions for major and minor ultimately helped me and contributed to my learning.” This feedback

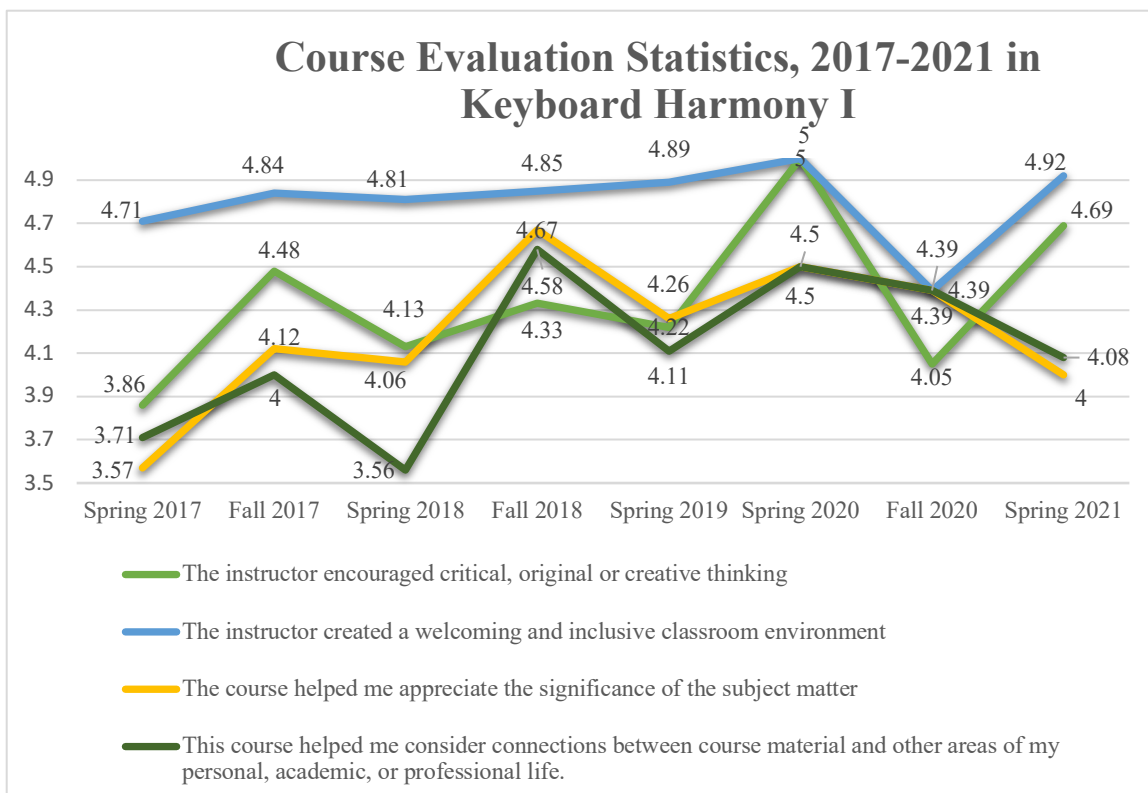


Figure 4. Course Evaluation Statistics, 2017-2021 in Keyboard Harmony I. By Author.

conflicted with my goals to manipulate required keyboard skills like chord progressions with exercises that incorporated popular music in order to make the chord learning more interesting. However, the specificity of the feedback will make it easier to revisit those sessions that taught chord progressions and reimagine how to make them more engaging. The course evaluations from the previous years during which I did not assign a songwriting project reflected the class focus and goals, to-do lists, sight-reading marathons, and skill-based class structure. Often the feedback was simply that the class needed to meet more than once a week in order to accomplish everything. In previous years, I occasionally received comments on the course evaluations that motivated me to do this study, such as these examples:

- 1) What elements of the course most contributed to your learning?

“It’s good practice and instruction, and the only class that uses the most common modern chord notation (with the letters and slashes), which is good to be familiar with.” (Vanderbilt Bluera 2019 Spring)

“Lead sheets, chord progressions” (Vanderbilt Bluera 2019 Spring)

2) What improvements could you recommend?

“More in class improvisation” (Vanderbilt Bluera 2019 Spring)

“I still don’t understand how this influences my professional life but I am getting better at it anyway” (Vanderbilt Bluera 2018 Spring)

Improvements to the Study

There are several ways to expand upon the research in this thesis. One such way would be to gain IRB approval and gather quantitative data by repeating the study. Keeping one test section of group piano students studying creative concepts like composition and improvisation in the traditional way as a control group while having another group complete the newer songwriting exercises would more accurately measure the success of each exercise and improve the study. A scientific study that examined multiple sections over several semesters would help to produce more serious conclusions about how engaged students were in the songwriting exercises. Another would be to deepen the qualitative questioning using these observations as a guideline. Student surveys and other polling methods could more accurately measure levels of motivation and engagement in the classroom.

Further research about the inclusion of popular music in higher education would enhance this study by drawing on the most recent findings of this historically contentious debate. Supporters of the inclusion of popular music in these programs want to see a parallel between what is taught in the classroom and what is happening in our current music culture. The decrease in employment for musicians trained in traditional genres

and increase in jobs available in popular music provide support for the diversification of the existing curriculum to better prepare students for realistic career opportunities. Also, popular music is a creative art form and its inclusion would have the potential to heighten creativity in traditional music schools (Larson 2019,1). John Covach supports the theory that introducing more genres which better represent the community of students will make students more adaptable in the current work climate. He insists that the separatist mentality in music school is unproductive (Covach 2015). Opponents to the idea of changing the traditional education model express concern that the institutionalization of popular music could cause impediments to the informal learning process. This is reminiscent of the criticism to the inclusion of jazz music in higher education in the 1970s (Larson 2019, 4).

Lastly, the less-than-desirable feedback from half of the questions on the course evaluations shows that I need to revise the way I demonstrate keyboard skills to be a worthy musicianship skill for students' careers. This could be done by trying different teaching methods aimed at portraying the importance and practicality of group piano throughout the semester and then tracking how valuable students perceive the class to be as the semester moved along.

In conclusion, this observational study found that teaching popular songwriting helps students to stay motivated to practice and thus perform better in assessments of their keyboard skills. Integrating popular music and discussions that foster social and emotional development in creativity and motivation while also furthering overarching goals of diversity and integration creates a healthy group piano music classroom that is connected to both popular culture and the academic community. While it is at times

difficult to grab the attention of the undergraduate beginner keyboardist majoring in music, it is possible to do so with creative exercises that engage them and work to develop their effective and practical keyboard skills.

Appendix A
Final Project Assignment Handout,
Fall 2020, Introduction to Keyboard Harmony

SONG PROJECT
FALL SEMESTER 2020
INTRO, Williams

DUE: December 8/9/10 uploaded onto Brightspace via email

GRADE: Will count toward the Final Exam

FINISHED PRODUCT: should include a recording (on a platform like GarageBand or VoiceMemo or Finale), a lyric sheet, and your song plan (paragraph or bullet point is fine).

FIRST DRAFTS welcome!!!

OPTION 1:

Plan out a Blues Song- 12 bar blues structure (p264)

AAB lyric form

Compose one of your verses

“Going to Chicago” Joe Williams

OPTION 2:

Plan out a Pop Song structure- Verse, Chorus, Bridge, etc

Choose a rhyme scheme

Compose either the chorus or a verse (both for extra credit!)

“Ocean Eyes” Billie Eilish

“Lost on You” Lewis Capaldi

OPTION 3:

Write an instrumental song that follows a popular song structure or blues song structure.

Compose one of the sections and write out your plan for the other sections in terms of melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.

“Music Dancer” Frank Mills

“Electric Worm” Beastie Boys

“Sleeping On the Roof” The Flaming Lips

Remember, if the song is going “badly,” hurry up and finish it!

Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good, or as Picasso once said, “The chief enemy of creativity is ‘good’ sense.”

HOW TO START A SONG

- Title
- Plot/scoring a scene
- Google ‘song-writing prompts’
- Chord Progression or Melody
- Imitate your favorite song form (structure or rhyme scheme)

FORMS:

1) Blues

- A line
- A line reprise
- B line

2) Pop

- Verse
- Optional 2nd Verse before Chorus
- Chorus
- Verse
- Chorus
- Bridge/Interlude/Vamp
- Chorus

3) Other

- Jazz AABA
- Instrumental

LYRIC PROMPTS:

-Word Journaling: Take five minutes and journal single words that come to mind. At the end of this you will have a paragraph or two of words. Try and connect those words into a song.

-Phrase/Title Journaling: If you have a phrase or a title in mind, spend five minutes writing down everything that comes to mind around that title and that may help jumpstart your lyrics. Repeat this process for 'stuck points' in the song

-Sentence structure imitation: Take a line from a song you like and analyze the cadence and syllable count. Then match words from your song to fit the same sentence structure. This works for instrumental songs too except please don't copyright the rhythm! FOR

EXAMPLE:

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound” contains two mini phrases and has four syllables in each. You may try:

“Take all the keys, and make a song”

Appendix B
Final Project Assignment Handout,
Fall 2020, Keyboard Harmony I

SONG PROJECT
FALL SEMESTER 2020
KHI, Williams

DUE: December 8/9/10 uploaded onto Brightspace via email

GRADE: Will count toward the Final Exam

FINISHED PRODUCT: should include a recording (on a platform like GarageBand or VoiceMemo or Finale), a lyric sheet if applicable and a chord chart.

FIRST DRAFTS welcome!!!

OPTION 1:

Write a Blues Song- 12 bar blues structure (p264)

AAB lyric form

“Going to Chicago” Joe Williams

OPTION 2:

Write a Pop Song structure- Verse, Chorus, Bridge, etc

(You can do one verse, one bridge, one chorus or even make each part only four measures long to truncate this)

Rhyme lyrics ABAB or AABA or ABBA....

“Ocean Eyes” Billie Eilish

“Lost on You” Lewis Capaldi

OPTION 3:

Write an instrumental song that follows a popular song structure or blues song form.

“Music Dancer” Frank Mills

“Electric Worm” Beastie Boys

“Sleeping On the Roof” The Flaming Lips

Remember, if the song is going “badly,” hurry up and finish it!

Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good, or as Picasso once said, “The chief enemy of creativity is ‘good’ sense.

HOW TO START A SONG

- Title
- Plot/scoring a scene
- Google ‘song-writing prompt
- Chord Progression or Melody
- Imitate your favorite song form (structure or rhyme scheme)

FORMS:

1) Blues

- A line
- A line reprise
- B line

2) Pop

- Verse
- Optional 2nd Verse before Chorus
- Chorus
- Verse
- Chorus
- Bridge/Interlude/Vamp
- Chorus

3) Other

- Jazz AABA
- Instrumental

LYRIC PROMPTS:

-Word Journaling: Take five minutes and journal single words that come to mind. At the end of this you will have a paragraph or two of words. Try and connect those words into a song.

-Phrase/Title Journaling: If you have a phrase or a title in mind, spend five minutes writing down everything that comes to mind around that title and that may help jumpstart your lyrics. Repeat this process for ‘stuck points’ in the song

-Sentence structure imitation: Take a line from a song you like and analyze the cadence and syllable count. Then match words from your song to fit the same sentence structure. This works for instrumental songs too except please don’t copyright the rhythm! FOR EXAMPLE:

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound” contains two mini phrases and has four syllables in each. You may try:

“Take all the keys, and make a song”

POEM SETTING:

-Start with a shorter poem and find a line or two that you think should repeat- make this part the chorus!

-Please choose from modern 21st century poets

<https://poetrysociety.org/about/resources>

Click on Poetry Journals to see topics you may enjoy picking from then find those journals on Vanderbilt's Online Library

You can also search former winners of reputable poetry contests!

CHORD CHART:

A chord chart is like a Lead Sheet without the treble clef written in. A chord assumes all beats in the measure unless you have noted otherwise. An example of a blues /pop song chord chart would look something like this:

4/4 G: Keyboard Blues

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| G | G | G | G |
| C | C | G | G |
| D | C | G | G |

4/4 C: A Day In the Park

| | | | |
|-----|---|----|-----------|
| VS: | | | |
| C | C | Am | Am |
| F | F | C | <u>CG</u> |
| CH: | | | |
| C | F | C | F |

Appendix C
Final Project Assignment Handout, Spring 2021, Keyboard Harmony I

KH1 Final Project
Spring 2021, Williams

DUE: May 10th

GRADE: This will count toward your Final Exam

FORMAT: Please submit a PDF or picture of your chart via email and a word doc of your lyric sheet. Do not use Finale for this assignment. Please submit a video of you playing it as well, using both hands (can be blocked chords in both hands or an accompaniment pattern). Videos can be done with your phone as long as I can see your hands! Tri-pods and cameras are available at the music library for check-out but you will need to **RESERVE THEM**. EXTRA CREDIT for playing and singing.

EXAMPLES: You will find examples of the Final Project in the Content folder of Brightspace. Please consult these and email me with any questions: sarah.e.williams@vanderbilt.edu. First drafts are welcome!

OPTION 1:

Write a Blues Song- 12 bar blues structure (p264)

AAB lyric form

“Going to Chicago” Joe Williams

OPTION 2:

Write a Pop Song structure- Verse, Chorus, Bridge, etc

(You can do one verse, one bridge, one chorus or even make each part only four measures long to truncate this)

Rhyme lyrics ABAB or AABA or ABBA....

“Ocean Eyes” Billie Eilish

“Lost on You” Lewis Capaldi

OPTION 3:

Write an instrumental song that follows a popular song structure or blues song form.

“Music Dancer” Frank Mills

“Electric Worm” Beastie Boys

“Sleeping On the Roof” The Flaming Lips

“Green Onions” Booker T. and the M.G.’s

Remember, if the song is going “badly,” hurry up and finish it!

Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good, or as Picasso once said, “The chief enemy of creativity is ‘good’ sense.”

HOW TO START A SONG

- Title
- Plot/scoring a scene
- Google ‘song-writing prompts’
- Chord Progression or Melody
- Imitate your favorite song form (structure or rhyme scheme)

FORMS:

1) Blues

- A line
- A line reprise
- B line

2) Pop

- Verse
- Optional 2nd Verse before Chorus
- Chorus
- Verse
- Chorus
- Bridge/Interlude/Vamp
- Chorus

3) Other

- Jazz AABA
- Instrumental

LYRIC PROMPTS:

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POEM SETTING:

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4/4 G: Keyboard Blues

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| G | G | G | G |
| C | C | G | G |
| D | C | G | G |

4/4 C: A Day In the Park

| | | | | |
|-----|---|----|-----------|--|
| VS: | | | | |
| C | C | Am | Am | |
| F | F | C | <u>CG</u> | |
| CH: | | | | |
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