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A NEW APPROACH IN PIANO TEACHING: WE TEACHERS CAN COMPOSE REPERTOIRE IN MINIMALISM FOR STUDENTS

Statement and grounding of the urgency of the problem. Minimalism is a style by using simple musical materials and repetitions. It was a novelty in art music. Minimalists widely employ patterns and repetitions in music. In piano playing, patterns and repetitions can technically lead hands into an inertia. It is very useful to train fingers for dexterity and forearms for flexibility. Piano learners can benefit from practicing patterns and repetitions, so piano teachers can use this kind of music in teaching. Further, teachers can even compose easy piano music in minimalism for their students.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Traditionally, piano teachers were also composers, like J. S. Bach, Mozart, Clementi, Beethoven, Czerny, Turk, and Liszt. They wrote exercises and etudes for their students. Nowadays, in the United States, there are many collections of pedagogical piano music. Editors selected pieces of music from old but famous repertoire, like *For Elise* by Beethoven. In the meanwhile, many piano teachers keep the tradition of both teaching and composing. They compose new repertoire for their students. Recently, I browsed a couple of music stores in town, and I found a great number of piano music

for pedagogy. The pieces were composed by piano teachers. Among others, William Gillock was one of the piano teacher-composers. The piano pieces are categorized into different levels, styles, purposes. The styles are Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionistic, and jazzy. The levels are from very beginner to advanced. The purposes are for practice, theory, lesson, and performance. Browsing new repertoire of piano pedagogy is very inspirational. These piano teachers keep and promote the tradition of classical A New Approach in Piano Teaching 2 music and piano teaching. As a piano teacher, I was strongly motivated to compose piano music for my students.

The purpose of the article is to investigate the problem of formation of value orientations of future students-vocalists during their studies at universities, taking into account the peculiarities of the students' contingent and the specifics of education.

The main material of the study. As a pianist, though, I have enjoyed playing and listening to music in minimalism. With this special interest and curiosity, I browsed widely in newly composed pedagogical repertoire for piano. I found out that there was not quite much

music in minimalism, despite other different styles in there. Of course, minimalism seems to be irrelevant to piano teaching. However, I have found the overlaps between traditional repertoire for piano pedagogy and minimalistic music. They are pattern and repetition! Thus, minimalism can probably become a new way that piano teachers can develop further. It is worthwhile exploring and experimenting with this approach, especially the ones who are dedicated in teaching and passionate in contributing compositions for students. Let me explain why.

In western music history, Carl Czerny (1791–1857) was a remarkably well-known composer for piano studies and treatises. He was one of the most renowned students of Beethoven, and Liszt was one of Czerny's most successful students. Throughout his life, Czerny composed over 800 works; among them were exercises, studies, and etudes for the piano. There are some works by Czerny that piano teachers in different countries have been using for more than a century, such as Op. 599, Op. 849, Op. 299, Op. 636, Op. 553, Op. 718, and Op. 740. He used patterns and repetitions very often in his pieces, especially in the accompaniment parts. For example, I cannot even remember how many times I played repetitive broken chords like C-E-G or C-G-E-G; the latter one is called Alberti bass. (See example 1) Other composers who wrote piano music for pedagogical reason also frequently employed patterns and repetitions to achieve perpetual motions. (See example 2) As a result, it is technically easier for pianists to play patterns and repetitions than other constantly changing figures. At the same time, it is also easier to listen, because patterns and repetitions can provide people time to think and reflect until something new happens.

Example 1: Czerny Op. 599 No. 14

Example 2: Tchaikovsky «Winter Morning» from *Children's Album*, Op. 39 No. 2

As mentioned previously, patterns and repetitions are essential and iconic in minimalistic music. However, musicians have been using both in music for centuries. Aesthetically, as Alex A New Approach in Piano Teaching 3 Ross put, «Repetition is inherent in the science of sound: tones move through space in periodic waves. It is also inherent in the way the mind processes the outside world.»¹ Minimalism is a type of modern classical music that thrived in New York in the early 1960s. Among minimalism composers, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley are representatives. The definition of minimalistic music is as following: A minimalistic piece of music usually takes a short idea, which is a melodic or a rhythmic pattern. This pattern is then repeated many times, through which it changes slightly.

(See example 3) 1 Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise* (United Kingdom: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 556. Example 3: Philip Glass Etude No. 2

As a piano teacher, sometimes I tried to write easy patterns for fun. I also intended to compose music to address technical issues of my students, such as reading, hand position, and fluidity. In addition, having been inspired by the pedagogical pieces I browsed, I was passionate to write pedagogical pieces for my young students. I was determined to give a try: I wanted to compose some pieces in minimalism. First, I started drafting from a single and simple idea, which was from one of the problems my students encountered in playing. Then, I made a motive out of that and let it repeat. My pieces are mostly targeted on solving the problems in playing. Thus, after repeating the motive, I transposed it to other places on the keyboard. Afterwards, I can continue my piece by writing new patterns to tackle other problems in my student's playing. Of course, young students usually have some common issues, such as collapsed fingers, low wrists, and sight reading. In my piano lessons, I circled those spots on the music scores. Then, I composed my own music based on the places to solve those problems. However, you might ask how I manage harmonic progressions in my pieces. Here, I have two approaches, which are amazingly easy and practical. The one is that I use common chordal progressions in classical music, such as V-I, IV-V, or IV-V-I. The other is free style in harmony, because modern and contemporary music do not necessarily obey the rules of traditions in using harmony and often contain a great deal of dissonance and chaos. In addition, regarding music form, easy piano pieces are usually in simple binary, rounded binary, or simple ternary. We can think about some minuets by J. S. Bach. It is efficient for us to write our own pedagogical pieces in binary forms. It is also a choice that for each section we can simply put a double bar with a repetition marking.

Here is an example that I used my compositions in teaching piano. One of my students, Drean Szablewski, is a fourteen-year old boy. When he worked on the first movement of the Beethoven «Moonlight» sonata (See example 4), he faced some technical difficulties. First, reading is not easy for him. Also, it is a challenge for him to achieve softness and evenness of the triplets in the right hand. Moreover, the forearm rotation for the triplets is hard for him, A New Approach in Piano Teaching 4 especially when the right hand is taking multiple tasks—the melody and the accompaniment (in triplets).

Example 4: Beethoven Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2, «Moonlight», the first movement

Then, based on the three technical issues

above, I composed a piece in minimalism, *A Night Sky* (See example 5), to help Dreaan iron out these problems. In my piece, the first half is in C major– I avoided complicated combination of black keys and white keys like that of the «Moonlight» sonata. In the second half, the music is involved with black keys by being transposed to C-sharp major. Also, in this piece I employed triplets for the right hand, which are patterned and repeated, but I did not write a melody above the triplets, Harmonically, I mostly used common progressions, such as IV-V, IV-I, and IV-V-I.

Example 5: Liguang Zhou *A Night Sky* I encouraged Dreaan to practice my piece as an experiment. After he practiced that, we both were surprised because when he revisited the «Moonlight» sonata, these three issues were almost solved. Thus, my approach of composing piano pedagogical music in minimalism was approved very beneficial for the student. The music, *A Night Sky*, is not only an individual piece, but a «buffer» to the first movement of the «Moonlight». Consequently, I continued this practice in my piano teaching. I wrote more minimalistic music for my young students, such as *A Sunny Day*, *Sunrise above the Clouds*, *The Energy of Clouds*, and *Harmonious Nightfall*. I have enjoyed composing for my students and seeing their rapid progresses. Further, I dreamed of publishing my compositions like other piano pedagogues. (See examples 6-9) *A New Approach in Piano Teaching 5*

Example 6: Liguang Zhou *A Sunny Day*

Example 7: Liguang Zhou *Sunrise above the Clouds*

Example 8: Liguang Zhou *The Energy of Clouds*

Example 9: Liguang Zhou *Harmonious Nightfall*

Many piano teachers composed music for their students, which was a convention in piano teaching in music history. They contributed huge amount of repertoire to piano. In the meanwhile, they were dedicated to teaching as well. Nowadays, this practice is still shining in *A New Approach in Piano Teaching 6* piano pedagogy. There is a great number of piano teachers who compose music for piano pedagogy. They naturally make the music collections and published them.

Undoubtedly, music composition is a specific major study in music schools and conservatories. However, the twenty-first century is an era of free style, like you can mix drinks of different flavors from a beverage machine. Further, minimalism naturally brings a solution for achieving your own piano pedagogical pieces. You can have a try! It is so fun and joyful, when

you teach your students your own pieces and then enjoy progresses your students make. Ultimately, this practice will bring you such happiness when they can even memorize and perform your music. Of course, it will be fantastic if you publish your music for piano pedagogy.

Conclusions and prospects for further researches of directions. As I advocate this practice – the combination of teaching and composing minimalistic music for students, I want to reach out to music teachers in general (instrumental and vocal teachers). You can easily try this idea, and the same time You are making contributions to pedagogical repertoire.

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