A Revolution in Piano Study - Conceptual Teaching Through American Music

Justin Krueger
Faculty: Sylvia Coats

School of Music

Abstract. The musical literature available to piano teachers and students is vast. However, over the past several decades, the body of repertoire taught and played has become significantly narrower. Certain composers and pieces monopolize the piano world. A survey of American classical piano music presents teachers and students with a new body of piano literature to explore universal concepts while learning fresh and exciting pieces. Concepts learned from these pieces can then be transferred to other well known works in the repertoire. Conceptual teaching is central to this study in that it allows students to move from dependence on a teacher to independent musicians.

1. Introduction

When surveying the standard piano literature used for teaching, only a fragment of all composed literature is often considered. Compositions such as Beethoven’s “Für Elise” have become staples in the teaching repertoire and are frequently requested by students. A quick internet search on YouTube yields nearly five-thousand performances of “Für Elise.” However, in seeking out performances of the American work, Excursions for Piano by Samuel Barber, there are fewer than fifty results. Further investigation on RILM Abstracts of Music Literature yields over eleven thousand search results for Beethoven and just over one-hundred for the American composer, Samuel Barber.

I do not wish to say that as teachers we should avoid the most popular classical pieces. Rather, I propose we explore new repertoire together with our students so composers who are beyond Beethoven or Mozart do not disappear and become forgotten in the annals of history. As teachers, we have a responsibility to introduce our students to and to guide them through unfamiliar concepts and repertoire. An exploration of unfamiliar American piano music will allow piano instructors to teach both technical and expressive concepts and at the same time refresh and revitalize their own teaching.

2. Discussion

To see the real value in incorporating American music into a curriculum, one must be willing to first accept the value of all music. American music often seems to be overlooked because of personal preference to the sound or style it exhibits. Once the structure or idea that these works are founded on is revealed, it is necessary for the educator to look at the conceptual value of a given work. This includes finding how a piece by a composer like Aaron Copland or Charles Ives, both American composers, might be incorporated into the overall objectives of the lesson. For example, if a teacher has a student who struggles with phrasing, the objective of the subsequent lesson then becomes the development of this student’s understanding of phrasing. As phrasing is a concept which occurs almost universally, it should not matter if that student looks at phrases in a sonata by Beethoven or a character piece of Liebermann. Thus through conceptual teaching, a teacher is able to focus on specific musical concepts such as phrasing or scalar passagework. As these concepts are not unique to one specific piece, a lesson is able to focus on a variety of repertoire while only introducing a limited number of concepts. This allows a student to be exposed to a varied number of works while developing an understanding of how to take learned concepts and transfer them between different pieces.

Sylvia Coats, author of Thinking As You Play, breaks musical concepts into three categories: basic, aesthetic, and technique. In the basic category she places the concepts of pitch, rhythm, texture, scale, form, and tension/release. The aesthetic category consists of dynamics, articulation, and tempo. Finally, the technique category includes topography (the feel of the keyboard under the hand) and technique – use of fingers, hands, and arms.[1] If a teacher begins to base lessons on these concepts, the pool of literature available to teach those given concepts seems to increase exponentially.

In seeing how this type of teaching can be incorporated, I will explore how a teacher can examine American composer, Lowell Liebermann and his music and incorporate it into his or her teaching. Liebermann is a living composer born in New York City in 1961. He began composing at an early age and even made his Carnegie hall debut with his own composition nonetheless while he was in his mid-teens. Many of his compositions are of significant difficulty, but one set of works is at a level
accessible to the intermediate piano student. This set is entitled *Album for the Young*. It is a collection of twenty short pieces with fanciful titles including, “Dance,” “Funeral March for a Pet Rat,” and “Ghost Waltz.”

Each of the pieces features several musical concepts which can be extracted. “V. Ghost Waltz,” for example may be used to develop several musical concepts including intervallic reading, two-note phrase shaping, and the use of very soft touch. The right hand includes primarily alternating melodic fifths and sixths which can be used to help expand a student’s recognition of intervals. The beginning measures illustrate this.

Lowell Lieberman, “Ghost Waltz,” measures 1-6[2]

This excerpt also highlights Lieberman’s use of the two note articulation which continues throughout almost the entire selection. Finally, from this brief sampling, the soft dynamics of piano and pianissimo are noted which require a student to have good control over these soft ranges. The piece even concludes with a pianississimo marking in the last few bars of the work.

The selection, “Broken Heart,” also merits use for students. Again, several teaching objectives might be noted in this work as well, but three that stand out deal with the musical concepts of rhythm, dynamics, and articulation.

Lowell Lieberman, “Broken Heart,” measures 1-5[3]

The first concept immediately apparent in this sampling is the cross-rhythms used in the eighth notes over the triplet figures in the left hand. This is one area in which teachers can assist students in learning tricky cross-rhythms. Another concept to be introduced revolves around dynamics. Lieberman is very specific with his markings in this area noting several crescendos and diminuendos, not only in this excerpt, but throughout the work. A final dimension of this piece is the articulation. The piece is definitely legato, but the addition of the word *cantabile* stresses the importance of shaping the phrases in the right hand, allowing it to sing. This is a feature required of many Romantic works and is a concept that can easily be transferred to other literature.

3. Conclusions

These examples highlight a very unique composer and style of music in the American repertoire. However, the concepts which they can help one to understand remain universal. This small sampling of American literature does not even begin to skim the surface of the variety which exists in the entire body of American piano repertoire. However, it is my hope from the examples provided and the discussion about conceptual teaching, that a spark might ignite a fire which will help fuel one’s teaching in whatever ways each individual might be moved. Whether we as teachers are looking at new American piano music, examining other lesser known composers, or experimenting with conceptual teaching, I wish we can all take Scott McBride Smith’s words to heart, “It is time for a revolution!”

4. References