A Study on the Practice of Piano Pedagogy—the “Core Tasks”
Teaching Model Aimed at Ability Cultivation

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In order to put right some long-time deficiencies in the professional piano education of Chinese colleges and cultivate the comprehensive music abilities of the students, this paper appeals to the emphasis on the cultivation of “comprehensive ability of music,” as well as attaches the importance to piano playing and performing skills. It proposes a specific operation scheme, a “comprehensive” piano teaching approach, namely, the “core tasks” teaching model. This model underlines the subjective initiative of the students. It also has demanding requirements for the teacher’s ability of active inspirations by merging situations, relative knowledge, and professional qualities into the teaching process.

Keywords: music ability, piano pedagogy, comprehension, teaching model

Introduction

The definition of music ability means a kind of characterized mental state and mental ability revealed during the practice of musical display, which is indispensable for those who take part in the professional music activities as a special ability. As a learner of music, music ability is not only an essential proposition of absorbing knowledge and skills, but also an important quality to put the knowledge and skills into practice, and a significant way to improve the general artistic sensibility of the students while fostering their sound personality. It is far more important to get fair musical application abilities than to have limited music knowledge or a single skill.

It is true that music ability does have an outstanding impact on the students majoring in music. However, the reality in music education is the lasting ignorance of the cultivation of music ability. Neither are there any more systematic nor efficient approaches. Music instrument teaching ought to be “people-oriented” and stress the importance of cultivating students’ comprehensive abilities. Therefore, we should change its unchanging and boring teaching methods and look for a teaching approach that help widen students’ knowledge range and develop their practical ability (Dou, 2009). Therefore, the “comprehensive” piano pedagogy is conceived as one of the methods to improve the teaching situation and to cultivate the music ability of the students.

The “comprehensive” here is a borrowed word, but it does not simply mean the mechanic addition of all these artistic disciplines. This pedagogy gets rid of the rational thoughts prevailing among the advanced music education, which claim that the teaching should be based on the obedience of the regularities of discipline development. On the contrary, it insists the core role of humanism. Proceeding with the natural, comprehensive, directional, and adaptive development procedures, this teaching approach uses the multiple-level and themed
teaching contents and various flexible teaching methods, which can activate different sense organs and push them into the teaching and learning interaction. In order to meet the ultimate goal which requires the development of music ability and comprehensive quality of the students, it sets developing evaluation methods from multiple angles.

The “Core Tasks” Teaching Model

The “core tasks” teaching model discreetly selects the humanistic and disciplinary themes simultaneously as the target tasks of the teaching. Thereby, it urges the students to think about actively and explore forwardly the solutions of the problems once they have comprehended the main target of the teaching subject. In this model, students always take part in the active party while the teachers are always the guiders. It emphasizes on the cultivation of the learning abilities and other comprehensive abilities required in music and piano education. The practical exploration of the “comprehensive” piano pedagogy focuses mainly on the following aspects of “core tasks” teaching model.

Features of the “Core Tasks” Teaching Model

It is a model with powerful conformity. The realization of both humanistic and disciplinary themes demands the students to connect their disciplinary knowledge, humanistic knowledge, artistic knowledge, and even their life experience with each other. During the comprehension of various knowledge and experience and the mutual inspiration, the requirements of the theme can be achieved.

This model is closely attached to the context. It prompts students to connect the theoretic or skill learning process with the real living scenes out of the class. The students get a major transition in the learning method from the pure absorbing of knowledge and skills to the text-based learning.

This model is closely related to the teaching materials and aims. Besides, it also has abundant connotations. It is the combination of the study inside and outside the class that ensures the students to be able to understand clearly the correlation between the disciplinary knowledge and their lives. Thus, they can be aware of their learning aims explicitly and enrich the meaning of learning.

This model is appealing to the students. During the process of learning, they can recognize how the different knowledge is organized together by the “core tasks.” What is more, since they could make discoveries all by themselves, they will enjoy their role as a free learner and display their creativity. Creating is a process of fulfill students’ imaginative faculties and thinking abilities, and so, it is of great significance for cultivating talent with practical and initiative abilities (Ministry of Education of the State, 2001).

The Humanistic Themes in the “Core Tasks” Teaching Model

As mentioned earlier, humanistic themes are topics or concepts designed according to human beings and their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and activities, with relatively concentrated connotations and extensive outskirts. Here, the core of humanistic theme is “man,” which is divided into two categories: the social man and the individual man. That is, the “mankind” is in a broad sense and every “single man” is in a narrow sense. From both perspectives, there are three basic relationships related to man: the interpersonal relationship, the relationship between men and society, and the relationship between men and nature. Therefore, there is a wide range of humanistic themes to be chosen from. For example, the interpersonal themes may include: love, joy, lofty, appreciate, amusement, anxiety, sorrow, fury, family members, celebration, and tragedy. Themes about men and society may include: friends, family, worship, ritual, and religion. Themes about men and nature may
include: animals, plants, mountains and rivers, sun, moon and stars, the seasons, and environmental protection and conquest.

In a word, humanistic themes reflect and generalize the reality from different aspects through the subject of human beings. What is more, the ultimate goal of piano pedagogy is to recreate the music piece by performing it, where the comprehensive quality, such as skills, capability, comprehensive ability, controlling force, and many other aspects of the performer can be reflected. Learning to play the piano is not only to master the mechanical piano-playing techniques, but also to ultimately express the music artistically, which requires a deep understanding of the music pieces and their composers. Therefore, musical cultural becomes an important issue. The “comprehensive” piano pedagogy proposes to take the learning and exploring of musical cultural knowledge as a premise and preparation of piano education.

During the teaching, students should be encouraged to seek inspirations from the musical cultural knowledge. Otherwise, the learning of piano will be drove into a dead end and becoming water without a source. In order to meet the need of piano teaching and the integrated development of humanistic comprehensive quality of the students, students must be familiar with the characters in the music piece, the author who wrote it while appreciating the human thought, mentality, and behavior in the work. Therefore, the humanistic themes related to all ranges of human activity should be treated as one of the core tasks in piano pedagogy. This paper appeals to the widening of visions and liberating of thoughts in piano teaching. That is, teachers can intersperse some painting or dancing themes in their courses in order to innovate the understanding of the emotional realm of certain music pieces.

For example, when instructing the students to play the Chinese piano work Flute and Drum at Sunset, teachers may show some master pieces of ancient and modern Chinese artists to the students at first, such as landscape paintings painted by Dong Yuan and Ju Ran in the five dynasties, those painted by four masters in the Yuan Dynasty, or the modern artist Wu Guanzhong. Thus, the students can have a visual recognition of the music piece. After having a primary impression of the work, the students can make a giant leap on the playing. More experiences and inspirations can be achieved while appreciating these paintings for another time, as long as the students become thoroughly familiar with the skills used in playing the music piece. Then, these new experiences and inspirations can be of assistance to the improvement of the playing skills in return. There is also another example—while playing works written by Bach or Handel from the Baroque period, the first thing to do is to look up the music history and social history at that time, comprehending the social background and the prevailing music styles.

Furthermore, the creation background and personal style of the composer should be studied. In this way, we can find that the religious forces still had a powerful influence, and then, the human dispositions were tend to be sincere and restraining. Therefore, the performer should be implicit while playing these pieces, avoid exaggerating. Restraint requires disciplines while connotation renounces explication. Rigorous and solemn styles shall be maintained even when playing some emotional pieces. It is likely to present an enthusiastic Bach if the knowledge were ignored.

The Disciplinary Themes in the “Core Tasks” Teaching Model

Disciplinary themes are a categorized and standardized generalization of knowledge and skills, which can embody or represent the inner regulation of a discipline. In the traditional piano education, disciplinary themes are limited inside the skills domain. In fact, the real disciplinary themes of piano pedagogy should include at
least piano performing skills, piano performing artistry, and theoretical piano knowledge. In teaching process, the teacher should analyze the musical work theoretically and gradually introduce students to the wonderful experience and conception of all kinds of musical elements, including rhythm, mode, tempo, harmony, styles, and so on (Fan, 2001).

For example, classified by the form of the work, there are learning themes, such as letude, invention, nocturne, rhapsody, partita, prelude, and impromptu. Classified by the structure of the work, there are one-part form, ternary form, complex trilogy, sonata form, rondo form, and so on. Classified by creative measure, there are themes like polyphony, homophony, and modulation. Classified by the technique of key-touching, there are themes, such as a quick run, legato, granularity, and breath. These disciplinary themes, as an important portion of piano education, guarantee the specialty of the piano discipline from a scientific perspective. Full-scale, reasonable disciplinary themes are one of the indispensable targets in piano teaching design.

In consideration of the development of the students and the educational regularity of piano, the “core tasks” model proposes to set both humanistic and disciplinary themes in the piano education. Several points need to be noticed while choosing and setting the specific teaching themes:

1. The humanistic and disciplinary themes should be charming enough to activate the learning interest of the students and attract their attention persistently. A relatively stable period of time should be assured for the students to actively experience, explore, and innovate. Under the teachers’ guide, students can also be involved into the choice of themes when there is a necessity.

2. There should be some connections between the two themes and among the themes and the learning and life experience of the students. Thus, the students can actively explore the organically connected network. As for the connections between the two themes, the disciplinary one should reflect the humanistic one, while the humanistic should advocate the disciplinary one.

3. The selected themes should be target-oriented in order that the independent study of the students can be clearly guided.

The Merging of Humanistic and Disciplinary Themes in the “Core Tasks” Teaching Model

Teachers must be clear about the practical meaning of “task,” while operating the “core tasks” model. That is, to give the students enough space, as long as they can think, explore, and finish the tasks independently with the teachers only functioning as a guiding, communicating, and coordinating method. As for the specific guidance, in order to set the proper role for the teachers and students, the following suggestions may be of some assistance.

Conversational approach. Teachers communicate and discuss with the students upon one specific topic or piece with a equal state of mind, during which the teachers shall learn to listen and give needful guidance. Students shall be allowed to air their opinions sufficiently in a free and loose environment, whether they are related to humanistic issues or disciplinary knowledge.

Experiential approach. Teachers shall be adept in creating environments for the students to feel the beauty and taste the beauty. Demonstrations shall be presented when the timing is good, by which the students will be guided to take part in the unconsciously communication in an affectionate and holistic way. Thus, they can acquire emotional communications and resonances from the natural views and music pieces. Turning the inner joy and fondness into the motivation of learning and thirst for knowledge, they can get deeper comprehensions and inspirations.
Exploratory approach. To begin with, teachers (sometimes with their students) set a problem context, establish a researching topic, or raise a performing task. Then, according to their learning experience, the students may sufficiently utilize the convenience of the media era. They can actively look up the materials and exchange attainments and cognition with each other, enhance their experience, and carry out creative musical activities.

Generative approach. Teachers precede the teaching according to the interests, requirements, and questions of the students. From the perspective which is of benefit to the students, they catch the opportunity, make the best use of circumstances, and give impromptu guidance. Apparently, it requires the teachers to achieve a better proficiency.

Since the “core tasks” teaching model depends on the learning condition of the students, there is no relatively consistent teaching case. Thus, living examples will not be exhibited here.

Conclusions

This model introduced above is only an elementary presumption, which not only gives play to the professional abilities of the piano teachers, but also advocates their artistic specialties and humanistic qualities. It allows the teachers to fulfill their infinite artistic ideas in the limited teaching situations and to tremendously expand their thinking of education. It is undisputed that music has a natural and close connection with other artistic forms. Demonstrations can be found in the sayings, such as “singing and dancing,” “painting-in-poetry and poetry-in-painting,” “music is floating architectures while architectures are frozen music,” and “dances are active sculptures while sculptures still dances.” Although differ in the expressive medias, all artistic forms are basically in unity by following suit the aesthetic regularities, such as symmetry, comparison, virtual essence, priority, and density and orderliness. Besides, piano pedagogy is related to many other disciplines like music theory and composition, and even some other artistic classes, such as literature, calligraphy, and painting.

All these presumptions serve a dream to present better music and foster excellent musicians with better music qualities. It is true that the integrating points of other disciplines are necessary, with the flexible teaching methods as its feasible guarantee. The subjectivity of piano, however, shall never change no matter how the model develops. Not all the contents are irrevocable and off-course, because different teaching models supported by different theories are not chaining the teachers, they are providing some suggestions and references to them. True meaningful teaching can never be assured unless the teachers purposefully, flexibly, and creatively conduct the teaching after their sufficient comprehension of the teaching theories.

References

