

# The Teaching Reformation on Digital Piano Collective Class Based on Practical Piano

## A Case Study of Xinghai Conservatory of Music

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**Abstract**—Since collective class of digital piano was introduced to China, classrooms of collective class of digital piano have been established in many colleges. But it is a pity that the development of collective class of digital piano is restricted as there is no unified idea on the significance and influence of "applied talents", thus lacking of a definite direction and scientific standpoint for the development of collective class of digital piano. The purpose of teaching it and the purpose of teachers' education are distinctly in two directions. On the basis of the consideration for both students who study piano as a major and those who study piano as a minor, it adjusts the proportion of piano teaching in the whole, integrating the theoretical courses such as piano accompaniment course, solfeggio course, music theory course, harmonics course and composition course into the course of "practical piano". It adopts the mode of cooperative teaching of multiple courses to realize the close combination between piano teaching and other disciplines. It combines piano playing, basic music theory and basic composition theory by the teaching methods and characters of practical piano emphasizing the connection and application of disciplines. Creates a new situation for piano education in China.

**Keywords**—practical piano; collective class of digital piano; reformation of piano education; mode of cooperative teaching

### I. ANALYSIS OF THE PIANO REFORMATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF TALENT CULTIVATION

Since 1993, when collective class of digital piano was introduced to China, classrooms of collective class of digital piano have been established in many colleges for the purpose of cultivating music educators in middle schools and primary schools and improving learners' comprehensive music quality. Collective class of digital piano gradually took the place of traditional piano class becoming the major teaching form of piano teaching in normal universities. But it is a pity that the development of collective class of digital piano is restricted as there is no unified idea on the significance and influence of "applied talents", thus lacking of a definite direction and scientific standpoint for the development of collective class of digital piano. The purpose of college teaching is out of touch with the purpose of teacher's

education.

The author visited part of normal colleges in China and made some researches and listened to some classes, and finally made a conclusion, only to find that many advanced teaching modes still adopt the traditional teaching content. As the lack of uniformed ideas on teaching texts and methods, many colleges still put their teaching focus on the texts of piano skills and programs playing. They are engaged to cultivate "elite" piano talents and obviously they ignore the players' practical piano abilities to explore, imitate, impromptu play, and compose. The quality of practical piano is superficially understood as the supplement of skill teaching with a one-year digital piano impromptu accompany course. There aren't any actual changes. As a result, many collective classes of digital piano in China, which is thought of as "a combination of Chinese and Western elements" are neither professional nor normal. The original target isn't achieved [1]. After researching, the situation of digital piano class in China is as follows.

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- Collective class of electronic piano mainly focuses on piano skills and particular programs. It overemphasizes the importance of music knowledge and skill training and ignores the player's actual ability to play, such as impromptu accompaniment,

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singing while playing, impromptu playing, and impromptu transposition. Learning and application cannot connect with each other which results in the students' indifference to piano. As a result, they do not practice playing after class and can't react in the class. In the long run, they can't make progress at all so as to that after four years' studying, some students' piano playing is still the same as when they are beginners.

- Collective class of digital piano does not apply to the teaching of traditional refined and difficult programs. The individual differences influence the progress of teaching very much. When the students learn piano as beginners, their difference in playing is not so obvious. But after a period of learning, the varieties of their abilities to accept and practice resulted in the different levels of their playing. At that time, it is obviously unscientific to teach in the mode of group class of electronic piano with more than 20 students.
- Collective class of digital piano cannot solve the problems with students' finger skills well. The keys of digital piano are shallow. And as it is electro-phones, it has the common genre as other electro-phones. It is hard to change the timber by the changes in finger power. The students cannot feel the changes in piano's timber brought by the touch of the key. Teaching particular programs in a sweeping approach is liable to the inactivation of students' performance thus reducing their requirements of their performance. Next, different students have different physical structures of fingers. And in playing the piano, the action of pressing a key is completed by the coordination of muscle groups. So event for the same action of pressing the key, different students have different muscle tension groups with different extents of tension. Collective class of digital piano cannot solve the stiffness of muscle groups as precisely as one-to-one piano class. As a result, the students cannot receive proper guidance about the key-touching and the control of power.

It can be seen from the present situation of piano collective class that to deepen the reformation of collective class of digital piano in colleges must proceed from the purpose of college talents training. Or the reformation of collective class is just an idle talk. The purpose of training in normal colleges is to train the educators in primary and middle schools rather than piano players of high level. The requirements for them are to be equipped with the application abilities of impromptu accompaniment, impromptu singing while playing, impromptu playing, and impromptu transposition and so on. Traditional one-to-one piano teaching overemphasized the importance of music knowledge and skills training and ignores their application skills, which is helpless to the music educators in primary and middle schools. Therefore, the deepening of the reformation of collective class of digital piano in normal colleges must be guided by social needs to adjust piano teaching structures and knowledge structures thus leading the

training of piano collective class to serve for the training of application talents.

## II. TO UNIFY THE TEACHING CONCEPT OF "PRACTICAL PIANO" IS THE KEY POINT OF REFORMATION

The teaching system of "practical piano" was proposed in China by Cindy who is the Master from music college of American Duquesne University and Professor of Xinghai Conservatory of Music, and then it started to take shape as an education system of certain scale [2-7]. Practical piano education points that piano teaching should be public-oriented and served for people's life. It advocated to inherit traditional piano teaching while breaking the single mode of elite teaching. It proposes the teaching concept of 8 firsts and 8 seconds, namely, big education comes first and small education comes second; big class comes first and small class comes second; public comes first and elite comes second; amateur comes first and profession comes second; emotion comes first and reason comes second; application comes first and tradition comes second; interest comes first and skills training comes second; growing comes first and success comes second. It also concludes four learning methods, namely, "learning piano with happiness, interest, efficiency and creation", aiming to let amateur piano learners quickly improve their piano level and be able to play their favorite program in the shortest time. It aims to enlighten students' music imagination, widen their thinking space, strengthen their operational ability and intensify the connections between disciplines by exploration, imitation, impromptu action, creation and other activities of the students in order to level up the students' abilities of impromptu accompaniment, impromptu singing while playing, program transposition and modulation, and program composing so that the students could not only improve their comprehensive music qualities, but also enjoy the happiness brought by music. Practical piano advocates flexible teaching methods, such as playing left-hand accompaniment while singing right-hand melody, playing right-hand melody while singing left-hand accompaniment, zweiklang or quartet group singing, impromptu program adaption and so on. It breaks the traditional teaching regulations and inspires creative thoughts of students. For example, in the book *Playing Piano While Learning to Compose*, the teaching concept of adapting melody according to bass is creatively proposed. It advocates to quickly play right-hand melody according to harmonic progressions and voicing of left-hand. It also proposes to test adaption subject by ears rather than restricted to the correctness of traditional theoretical knowledge. It overthrew the academism theory of reverse function from grade 5 to grade 4 and the theory of prohibition of parallel fifth and octave chords configuration with actual examples. Students can gradually form their own harmony configuration modes and consciousness of melody composing through large amounts of practice.

Thus it can be seen that practical piano with the purpose of improving students' abilities for practical piano playing to realize the combination of teaching theory and practical playing thus strengthen the connection between college piano education and social needs. As a result, the deepening

of reformation of collective class of digital piano in normal college must unify its piano teaching concept with "practical piano" [8].

### III. THE ANALYSIS OF "PRACTICAL PIANO" TEACHING REFORMATION IN XINGHAI CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

Based on the education concept and guiding ideology of cultivating creative and applied students with strong practical abilities and high comprehensive quality, Xinghai Conservatory of Music introduced the concept of exploration-imitation-impromptu-creation into college piano teaching emphasizing the connection and unification between different curricula of music. It advocates to inter-spread the skill training of composing and impromptu abilities and modeled training in piano teaching. It widens students' thinking patterns and cultivates students' ability to think and apply through flexible training methods so that the students could learn basic knowledge of piano, at the same time they could also learn common sense of composing and create their own melody.

Since September, 2011, Xinghai Conservatory of Music has renamed its piano basic courses in ten majors as piano course uniformly. On the basis of the consideration for both students who study piano as a major and those who study piano as a minor, it adjusts the proportion of piano teaching in the whole, integrating the theoretical courses such as piano accompaniment course, solfeggio course, music theory course, harmonics course and composition course into the course of "practical piano". It adopts the mode of cooperative teaching of multiple courses to realize the close combination between piano teaching and other disciplines. It combines piano playing, basic music theory and basic composition theory by the teaching methods and characters of practical piano emphasizing the connection and application of disciplines. Students can improve their comprehensive music abilities and practical piano abilities by exploring, imitating, improvisation, composing and other learning processes. For the seven majors of piano teaching, namely, pop music, orchestra music, folk music, vocal music, national vocal music, dancing and instrumental arts, originally Xinghai Conservatory of Music had required the students to play at least one or two sonatas for each semester, but now the students are required to learn practical piano practices, solfeggio and piano impromptu accompany, chords music playing and transposition. The number of music programmes the students skim through is far more than one hundred. Quartet solfeggio playing practices and impromptu piano accompany practices are added to composition major, modern music major and musicology major.

#### A. The Teaching Mode Reformation

For the teaching mode of practical piano, Xinghai Conservatory of Music takes the unbalanced factors of the students' piano skills into consideration. On the basis of the consideration for both students who study piano as a major and those who study piano as a minor, Xinghai Conservatory of Music takes the unbalanced factors of students' different piano skills and divides it into three grades: high grade, middle grade and low grade with their differences in the

learning period. Students majored in piano can choose to start from high grade to learn practical piano; students majored in vocal music, instruments, theory, composing and other majors can learn according to the teachers' evaluation.

For the teaching content, Xinghai Conservatory of Music laid down different text books for different grades and majors from the easy to the difficult to improve the students' practical abilities and creativity accordingly thus leveling up their comprehensive quality.

- As for those who do not major in piano with just so-so piano skills, Xinghai Conservatory of Music aims to improve their basic abilities to play and their abilities to sing while playing, transpose and compose. With the help of the first volume of Cindy Practical Piano Basic Course, Cindy Practical Piano Playing course--Crash Course of New Pop Music Playing, the first volume of Cindy Practical Piano Singing While Playing Course, Ten Crash Courses to Understand Chords, the first volume of Play Piano and Learn to Compose, Xinghai Conservatory of Music is able to strengthen practicability of basic music theory in piano playing and train the students' ability of chord playing for tonality I—IV—V7, chord editing, and the cooperative ability of corresponding left-hand accompaniment with right-hand melody.
- As for those students who do not major in piano with better piano skills, Xinghai Conservatory of Music aims to improve their basic abilities of playing, abilities of singing while playing, transposition and composing. With the help of the second volume of Cindy Practical Piano Basic Course, Cindy Piano Playing Course--Crash Course for World's Famous Piano Programs, piano singing while playing: the second volume of Cindy Practical Piano Singing While Playing Course, piano transposition: 108 Piano Chords Impromptu Accompaniments, piano music composing: the second volume of Play Piano and Learn to Compose, Graded Text of Impromptu Piano Accompaniment and Playing and other texts, Xinghai Conservatory of Music is able to train students' abilities of chord playing and transposition and improve their recognition and grasp of the best range of chords with different tonalities.
- As for those students with a good command of piano skills who do not major in piano, Xinghai Conservatory of Music aims to improve their abilities of harmony playing and cultivate their harmony aural abilities and their abilities of sight-playing. It takes in Graded texts of Piano impromptu Accompaniment and Playing, Jazz Hanong, Jazz Piano--Harmony Part, Jazz Piano of Blues Part, Jazz Piano Walkingbass and Impromptu Playing, and Quartet Sight-singing as the complement text books for the harmony of advanced keyboard.

#### B. The Examination Content Reformation

For the content of examination, Xinghai Conservatory of Music integrates five disciplines, piano basic skills, chords

transposition practices, piano impromptu composing practices, piano impromptu accompaniment and sight singing and piano impromptu accompaniment, to test the students' abilities of practical piano and creativities and the students' abilities of piano skills, transposition, impromptu composing, accompaniment, sing while playing. For example, the test for students' basic piano skills—spot check one practice program out of ten programs to play; the test for students' abilities to play piano—spot check one song or world famous program out of ten to play the test for students' abilities to sing while playing—sing and play one song out of ten sight singing songs; spot check one song to sing while playing out of five songs; the test for students' abilities to transpose—spot check one practice song out of ten; the test for students' ability to compose—spot check one sample to play out of ten samples that are created by oneself. This pattern of test breaks the limitation of former “elite” examination that only checked one or two programs for each term and adds to the number of programs grasped by students. By combining basic theoretical knowledge and basic skills, it focuses on students' ability to practice. At the same time, it widens students' music sight and thinking abilities.

In October, 2014, Further Education College of Xinghai Conservatory of Music included practical piano into separate enrollment of college entrance examination as an independent major. It established “application piano” examination according to the direction of talents training. The content of this exam is: (1) piano playing---choosing two programs on spot from Course of Piano Impromptu Accompaniments, grade 6-7; (2) piano playing while singing---programs are optional and styles are without restriction; (3) chords transposition—within two sharps and flats at the length of 16-23 bars. This mode of examination conveys a new concept of piano teaching breaking the college entrance examination situation unchanged for tens of years. It changes traditional piano teaching concepts and “elite” thinking modes of piano teaching which focused on rigidly playing of particular programs. It makes an innovation in the training of practical piano abilities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The reformation of practical piano in Xinghai Conservatory of Music realizes the purpose of quality-oriented education and ability training of the piano educators from the root. It changes the learning mode of mechanical duplication which overemphasizes the importance of music knowledge and skills training. It strengthens the connection between piano teaching and social needs finding a new direction for the reformation of piano education in China. This method provides a basis and example for the reformation of piano education in colleges and creates a new situation for piano education in China which can be regarded as a milestone in the development of piano education in China.

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