



Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive

article by Michael Smolens ©2009

How many times have you been told that some idea you've had wasn't "practical" or wouldn't catch on? That's exactly what a young teacher in the Bay Area was told when he created a piano ensemble class for kids, by another music school no less! After all, it's hard enough to keep a child's attention for more than 15 minutes, right?

When Robert came to work with me, he had already attracted a fair number of students within a year of graduating with a Master's degree in composition. Because he was teaching privately through two different music stores (a good avenue for becoming well-known quickly in a particular area), he had access to a sizable number of youngsters, some of whom already knew each other. The idea of teaching an ensemble piano class came up early on when I asked him about his vision for his teaching.

Creating The Vision

(Michael) "Robert, when you looked around, did you find any piano ensemble classes for kids?"

(Robert) "No. I was very surprised because it seems like such a natural grouping. There's something about multiple keyboards that, well, inspires me."

(M) "So, you didn't have any local role models to draw from?"

(R) "No. In fact, I was told by a well-respected school that a piano ensemble for kids was a 'bad idea'."

(M) "Really? Maybe their teachers didn't accurately assess the students' skill levels, or couldn't capture their imaginations, or both."

About five months into our work he said that he felt stuck in his ensemble class. When he showed me some of the scores he was using, things got interesting.

Refining The Vision

(R) "I'm having problems keeping my kids focused and in tempo."

(M) "From what I'm seeing these scores are pretty typical of music for kids."

(R) "How do you mean?"

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 2

(M) “Well, the first thing I see is how much of the music is *on the beat*, and on the strong beats of classical music, meaning beats one and three.”

(R) “Isn’t that helpful for keeping all the players together?”

(M) “Of course there needs to be a good balance of material on the beat and off. The problem is that it’s so heavily weighed toward being on the beat, it doesn’t represent what kids are actually exposed to in their everyday listening. It might have been true a century ago, but not in the age of Beyonce and Eminem. There’s also the issue of density. The melody in the top line is pretty relentless in its motion. That tends to give the impression that the busiest line is always the melody, which as you know, is not always true. It also reinforces a hierarchy of the most technically advanced students playing the melody most of the time, which I feel is very limiting for everyone.”

(R) “Hm,” he replied, tapping his pen.

(M) “Why don’t you find a melody that has some more space that you could arrange specifically for your ensemble. Kids like pentatonic melodies, they can be very memorable like ‘Amazing Grace’. Have you considered writing your own piece? This could be a great opportunity for you to explore a different yet simpler facet of your composing. Here are a couple of examples of pentatonic pieces that have been arranged very creatively.”

Looking At Role Models

I then brought out two landmark jazz/world music recordings to illustrate my point: “Hidden Voices” by Brian Whistler (Eartrek 101, 2001) and “Native Dancer” (Columbia Records, PC 33418, 1974) by Wayne Shorter featuring a piece by Milton Nascimento. We listened to the first song on each CD. Both works have playful and evocative melodies, surrounded by interesting background layers.

(M) “What do think?”

(R) “Very different approach. Even though there’s a lot going on, they’re both very buoyant.”

(M) “Right. It’s not an accident that each of these pieces are opening tracks. But let me address the question of the background parts. If your melody has space, then the accompanying parts can be more interesting and independent. Then your kids will actually *want* to play those parts because they’ll feel that they’re in the ‘engine’ of the piece rhythmically. You can create your piece first either with the melody, or a cool vamp background, but you’ll want to make sure that they support each other with complementary points of emphasis. Try not to fill up every space – you’ll want room for other supporting parts, including percussion.”

(R) “That’s pretty different from what we’re playing now.”

(M) “The instrumental ensemble pieces for kids that I think work generally have some non-Western element, either in the melody or accompaniment, or both. Their rhythm and/or phrasing tends to be different because they’re not concerned with the need for constant

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 3

functional harmonic motion. Pieces coming from a typical classical piano pedagogy standpoint tend to be very boring rhythmically and turn off kids who are not in love with that style of music. Mind you, the background parts should be tailored to the level of your kids. That's your job as teacher/composer – to observe where the line is between challenge and chaos.”

(R) “What about all of the cool jazz harmony in these pieces?”

(M) “Yes, that's certainly there, but that's what *you* can bring to the piece after the primary melody and background part(s) are established. I have found pentatonic melodies to be easiest to reharmonize – so much flexibility with the level of chromaticism and motion in the bass. So, are there any other factors that make these two songs successful?”

He thought for a moment.

(R) “Yeah, great players and great vocals.”

(M) “True, but not quite what I had in mind.”

(R) “Great Mix!” he said, smiling and pointing his index finger straight up.

(M) “Well, I'm looking for something along a more structural level.”

(R) “I give up.”

(M) “Don't both pieces have contrasting interludes between their main melody statements? Without those interludes, pieces like this won't breathe. The only way to keep it interesting would be to continually build density, which wouldn't be ideal given the probable wide range of skill levels in your class.”

(R) “Now that I think about it, both pieces did have interludes to keep things fresh.”

(M) “Let's review the key structural ingredients that made the Whistler and Nascimento pieces so compelling:

- 1) spacious, pentatonic melodies
- 2) rhythmically interesting, interlocking background parts
- 3) rich reharmonizations
- 4) contrasting interludes

Orff-Schulwerk

(R) “Thanks for that wrap-up. Now I'm hearing that there were more similarities than differences between these two songs. I'd like to go back to the issue of keeping my kids focused. Didn't you say that you did some training to work with kids in groups?”

(M) “Yes, and it made a huge difference when I was involved in elementary school classroom teaching. In the early 20th century, the composer Carl Orff created an approach for intro-

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 4

ducing music to kids that was very different from how music was taught up until then. What became the 'Orff-Schulwerk' focused on where music is first experienced – through the body, via voice, movement, and percussion. This got expanded to include recorder, tuned (mallet) percussion, and theater. Because of this background it became very flexible and readily embraced more modern developments, including 'body percussion', various world music traditions, and jazz. Speaking of world music traditions, this approach is remarkably similar to how music is taught in much of West Africa.”

(R) “What does the Orff music actually sound like?”

(M) “It does draw heavily off of pentatonic melodies, especially for beginners. They pioneered the use of ‘removable bars’ for their marimbas and metallaphones to create a safe, pentatonic environment for every player. It’s also very layered, which helps a teacher build appropriate levels of complexity, and there’s a big emphasis on rhythm, and grounding the pulse physically.”

(R) “That’s what my kids need!”

(M) “As soon you can get your kids to step in time while singing (or speaking) a part, your job is going to be a whole lot easier. This also helps to level the perceived ‘playing field’ in the classroom when different skill levels are present. It helps in the same way that asking them to make up a nursery rhyme for a difficult rhythm does – making music more physical rather than just dots on a page.”

(R) “I can really see the need for this given how much time kids spend in front of computers now. It’s scary.”

(M) “We’re living in an A.D.D. (Attention Deficit Disorder) culture and kids aren’t really in their bodies very much. Think about it. In South Korea and China there are hundreds of state-sponsored rescue programs for kids who are clinically addicted to their computers. Our country is finally following suit.”

(R) “The Entertainment Factor.”

(M) “Absolutely. You’ve got to keep that alive, or your class will tank.”

(R) “What other ways can I bring that in?”

Digital Keyboards

(M) “Given that your class is not advertised as a strictly ‘chamber music’ format (i.e. classical four-hand or two piano literature), I think you’d get a lot of mileage out of using using electronic keyboards in conjunction with acoustic pianos. How many pianos and how many keyboards do you have available on-site?”

(R) “Two pianos and three keyboards.”

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 5

(M) "Perfect. Your class is set up for six players, so everyone could have their own keyboard except for one player, and that person could either share a keyboard or play percussion."

(R) "Aren't I supposed to be creating an opportunity for kids to appreciate the sound of a *real piano*?"

(M) "I don't know. Was that specifically requested by the store owner?"

(R) "No."

(M) "I'd like you to consider that this is an assumption you made long before the course started, and that you're probably seeing this for the first time. It's like assuming that all Italian cooking uses a red, marinara sauce, a natural assumption. For starters, I bet that the store owner would be just as happy to sell digital keyboards as acoustic instruments, right?"

(R) "Yes, I'm clear that part of why I'm teaching this class is to support the sales of the store. I mean, they're putting in all of the work to organize and market this class."

(M) "Do you really mean *all of the work*?"

(R) "Come to think of it, no."

(M) "We'll get into the marketing aspect of your class at the next session. For now, let's focus on your methodology. You know in 16th-century England, chamber music was written for two types of formats: a 'whole' consort that was a group of just recorders or just gambas, or a 'broken' consort that might have five musicians of different instruments, such as a recorder, gamba, virginal, lute, and vocalist. What type of consort do you think your class is modeled after?"

(R) "When I first designed the class, I didn't think of it in those terms, but if I had to choose, I'd say a 'whole' consort."

(M) "Right. A 'Piano Ensemble Class' made up of a group of pianos, all neatly lined up. What I'd like you to consider is that using the 'broken' consort model will be far more entertaining for your kids."

(R) "How so?"

(M) "The vast majority of kids in our culture are exposed to music with different combinations of instruments, usually in a non-classical setting. Even those who listen to primarily classical, they'll be listening to solo piano or works that incorporate other instruments with a piano like a single melodic instrument, string quartet, or orchestra. Two piano works or arrangements for two pianos are far more difficult for a young listener to sort out the various compositional elements. I'm trying to imagine if a kid grew up directly above a piano store they might be able to make those kinds of listening distinctions."

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 6

(R) "You're right. It even takes me a while to hear if a work is super complex, or just scored for two pianos."

(M) "Recall the format that you mentioned earlier of two acoustic pianos and three electronic keyboards. Sure, you could arrange the class like this:

- two 'real' pianos
- three electronic keyboards imitating a piano
- the sixth student could share an instrument or wait their turn to play

Or, you could treat the group like a 'broken' consort. That might look like:

- two 'real' acoustic pianos
- one electronic keyboard imitating a chordal instrument (electric piano, acoustic or electric guitar, harp, vibraphone)
- one electronic keyboard imitating a melodic instrument (string, wind, brass)
- one electronic keyboard playing a purely electronic lead voice ('solo synth')
- one student sharing a keyboard (or piano) or playing a tuned or non-tuned percussion instrument (electronic keyboards can be easily split so that one region activates one sound while another region activates a different sound)

But there's more! Modern keyboards also have 'pad' sounds which sound like slow-moving 'harmonic clouds', as well as drum set and percussion sounds. What we're really looking at is five basic groups of sounds available on a modern keyboard. There are a surprising number of inspiring and immediately accessible sounds within each group, and with minimal effort they can be combined in many different ways. Here's the overview of keyboard sound groupings:

- 1) Chordal
- 2) Melodic
- 3) Synth Lead
- 4) Pads
- 5) Drum Set/Percussion

So looking at your class from an arranging standpoint, you've got a huge number of choices that will go very far in providing lots of entertainment value. In fact, each piece could be arranged for a completely different set of instrumental colors, *including a piece that uses all acoustic piano sounds*. That could be a very nice change of pace if all of the other pieces use highly varied sound combinations. And what if one of the pieces used four players on real or electronic percussion and just two playing a unison melody? Talk about contrast!"

(R) "Wow, I didn't realize I'd have all of those different sound possibilities! But I still have this nagging feeling about having these kids on real acoustic pianos."

(M) "What better way for the kids to have a hands-on experience with both types of instruments than in one ensemble! They'll immediately notice how many different types of sounds can

Making A Piano Ensemble Class Come Alive - page 7

come out of a keyboard, and they'll come to appreciate the clarity and simplicity of a piano if it's really in tune. They'll immediately sense the greater dynamic possibilities of an acoustic piano, though they'll also feel how much heavier the keyboard action is compared to a electronic keyboard; that can be a real challenge for either complete beginners or smaller children. Plus, they'll eventually hear the difference what a sustain pedal on an acoustic piano does, versus an electronic instrument, namely, the resonance of all those wonderful vibrating strings.

Looking At The Source

(M) "We've looked at several major areas that will help this class take off or die a painful death. Can you recap them?"

(R) "Sure. Playing pieces that have parts of different density, a good balance of on-and-off-the-beat emphasis, and the flexibility of pentatonic melodies. Also, taking full advantage of the sonic possibilities of the electronic keyboards."

(M) "Great. Today's session lays the groundwork for you to be able to more fully enter the world of truly engaging ensemble facilitation. Now we're going to briefly look at two more ways to make the class take off. The first is to assess the different playing levels of each of your students. You're going to need to be clear from the beginning if this class is open to any student or if there's a minimum proficiency required – that's really up to you. What I can say is that knowing that before your class actually starts will make a huge difference. Even if you do this, your job will consistently revolve around observing what each student can handle so that they're challenged without being overwhelmed. Part of this game also requires you to notice what type of music sits more easily with each student. For example, one student may ace playing melodies in octaves, but playing a percussion instrument (or percussion part) may be hugely challenging."

(R) "I've already seen that, for sure."

(M) "Lastly, I encourage you to generate new pieces based on ideas or melodies that come directly from your students. This, too, is more easily done by having worked with at least some of them before the class. Maybe privately, maybe by making a request for simple melodies to be brought in by the students before the class begins. I've found that students will be more excited about a class if they feel invested in some way, and having a teacher base a composition on a student's idea is an excellent way to do just that. Think about how *you'd* feel if your class was playing a piece that you helped to write!"

(R) "Well, this is all pointing to my being the source for how this class turns out from day one. My previous class felt like a fight sometimes. I think I'm going to be in a better position to keep my students more focused this time around."

(M) "Like you said, you're The Source."