

The Historical Development and the Teaching Reform of Improvisational Piano Accompaniment in China's Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The subject of improvisational piano accompaniment aims to develop a student's capability in accompanying a vocalist, an instrumentalist, or a chorus spontaneously and harmoniously without following a music score. Improvisational piano accompaniment transformed from a secondary subject to a highly demanding skill for music-major students who desire a teaching job in preschools in China. Thus, improvisational piano accompaniment has become an essential curriculum in colleges and universities. This article analyzes the historical development of the course on improvisational piano accompaniment and elaborates how the growth leads to the current teaching reform in China's higher music education.

Keywords: *Improvisational Piano Accompaniment, Improvisational Course, Piano Accompaniment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of improvisational accompaniment majors in Chinese colleges and universities began in the 1960s, which was not highly valued yet, and was regarded as a hobby of professional music educators. Several reasons resulted in the situation. First, it was challenging to recruit the faculty in piano improvisational accompaniment, as there was little access to build up this skill. Second, a teacher capable of piano skills is not necessarily professional in improvisational accompaniment. Remarkably, the improvisational accompaniment possesses a different training process than the regular piano accompaniment because the improvisational accompaniment does not entirely follow the printed music.

On the contrary, it requests the piano accompanist to improvise with the given melody sung or played by the soloist or the vocalist. Accordingly, creating a systematic training program in China's higher education is mandatory in order to cultivate the music-major student's diverse ability. The training process also elevates the teaching level of the futuristic music faculties for middle schools.

1.1 Overview of Literature

From 2000 to 2020, CNKI indexed 2335 articles concerning piano improvisational accompaniment research topics, of which ninety-four percent were from the core journals. Observing from the number of essays, one can find that there were only 586 articles in the first decade. This discovery means that the subject of improvisational piano accompaniment was less attractive to the public. Gradually, the number of research articles on improvisational piano accompaniment increased. Most articles discussing the importance of improvisational accompaniment were published between 2000 and 2010, with the general introduction of this subject as the content. This kind of literature serves as an essential reference for the further development of the curriculum. In recent years, the relevant research articles have focused on the theoretical analyses that explored the training plan's effectiveness for the curriculum of improvisational piano accompaniment. Among these researches, scholars began to explore different approaches in delivering the concept of improvisational piano accompaniment by experiments [1].

From 2010 to 2020, the number of articles concerning improvisational piano accompaniment has reached more than one thousand and eight hundred

papers, indicating the significance of improvisational piano accompaniment in China's music education. The Universities and colleges have widely opened the courses to enrich the educational program [2].

1.2 The Research Hotspots

According to the research content of the literature, the structure of research papers on improvisational piano accompaniment can be divided into three types: Overviews, theoretical thesis, and teaching practices. From the perspective of research hotspots, some of the research articles respectively address the fundamental techniques of piano improvisation, and others emphasize teaching practice. The report of overviews elaborates how the skill of piano improvisational accompaniment improves a music student's comprehensive ability develops his or her musicianship. It also introduces the basic techniques involved in learning improvisational piano accompaniment. For example, sight-reading, functional harmony, and collaborative piano skills are incorporated into the training. Moreover, the articles of overviews point out the lack and shortage of pedagogical strategies for improvisational piano accompaniment.

The theoretical analyses in research articles often discuss essential concepts of music theories such as cadence and modulation in performance. Mainly, this type of reference provides readers with solutions to resolve the commonly seen mistakes in improvisational piano accompaniment. The authors of these articles also offer various accompanying patterns in terms of improvisation. These articles are theory-based research, less referring to the playing technique. However, many standpoints of these articles can serve as part of a textbook on improvisational piano accompaniment.

Research on teaching practices involves many practical applications, and the scholars experiment strategically with the students under a controlled environment. The experimenter comes up with advanced pedagogical methods in the curriculum. For instance, a scholar may utilize a specific textbook or a particular teaching discipline for experiments. After a certain amount of time, he or she examines learning efficiency. Furthermore, the researcher can determine the subject in the investigation regarding age or level, and therefore, the result is more accurate. With the rise of technology, scholars began to adopt innovative tools such as web classes and digital equipment to create a more interactive pedagogy.

2. THE CURRICULUM OF PIANO IMPROVISATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

The course of improvisational piano accompaniment was not as popular as it is in China's higher education at present days [3]. The concept of improvisation

originates from Western music history, particularly in the Baroque era, when the instrumentalists played the music with the Roman numerals at the bottom of the melodic line. This tradition has become widespread, and the skill lasted for a long history in keyboard literature.

2.1 The Infancy of Piano Improvisational Accompaniment in China

In China, the concept of improvisational piano accompaniment began to be integrated into Chinese culture in the 1970s [4]. When China's two major categories of both Chinese folk songs and modern Chinese songs started to flourish, the skill of piano improvisational accompaniment became essential as the numbered musical notation (also called simplified notation) dominated general music education. The improvisational piano accompaniment became a beneficial study in the music program to make a better collaborative performance. Before the subject of improvisational piano accompaniment turned into an independent subject, there were few disciplines concerning the training program. Most likely, the course at the very beginning was established for preschool and precollege majors to be able to play in children's activities. Consequently, the improvisational piano accompaniment course demands a primary playing degree in Czerny's mid or late Op.599 for students [5]. Therefore, in contrast to the professional conservatory that aims to develop artistic performers, the improvisational piano course existed mainly in the regular universities.

2.2 The Growth Period of Piano Improvisational Accompaniment in China

In the 1980s and the 1990s, with the rise of piano learning in China, colleges and universities gradually planned a systematic program for music-major students. Piano accompaniment was, therefore, more influential. Improvisational accompaniment shares many characteristic features with courses, such as composition class, sight-singing class, and ensemble playing style, involving the knowledge in music education, performance, and aesthetics. These factors make improvisational accompaniment a specific course different from the classical piano accompaniment. Discovering from the research articles written after 2000, much of the content indicates that the training of improvisational piano accompaniment should be applied to examine a graduate's combined ability [6]. Moreover, scholars paid more attention to a more appropriate evaluation in this subject to create the discipline. The course has added stage training to learn and act together [7]. With the program's improvement mentioned above, improvisational piano accompaniment is open for the creative teaching process to improve the study results in higher education significantly.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF PIANO IMPROVISATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Nowadays, improvisational piano accompaniment is mandatory in China's regular universities. The technique is applied to various teaching objects, not only for learners from the field of music performance but also for students majoring in music education. The diverse repertoire and teaching tools utilized in the course also increase the learner's enthusiasm. For example, the class's pop songs and the interactive projectors enrich the learning program. Students are able to take their favorite pop songs as examples, practicing their improvisational accompaniment skills. In addition, the popularization of MIDI creates an open source for the learners to record the improvisation process, allowing students to check and improve their playing.

In general, the course of improvisational piano accompaniment syllabus possesses scales, triads, sevenths, non-chord tones, cadences, tonalities, secondary dominants, the Chinese modes, and modulations. Mainly, each theoretical concept needs to be fully comprehended before the teacher moves to the advanced level of knowledge. Students are requested to play with the designed melody for improvisation and play specific chordal progression to show their understanding of harmony in the lessons. Therefore, the course of piano improvisational accompaniment can be divided into theoretical and practical sections. Toward the end of the class, the performing aspect of skills is involved. Students have to learn how to play on the stage attentively and flexibly. Getting familiar with various musical styles in music appreciation is also important. A good piano improvisational accompanist is able to adapt to any musical form with appropriate accompaniment and quickly react to the soloist's performance. The sounding balance between the soloist and the accompanist is also essential, and both players have to carefully listen to each other and perform with a steady tempo. The collaboration is particularly challenging to the improvisational accompanist's spontaneity. Collectively, the accumulation of teaching materials in the course of improvisational piano accompaniment contains many multiple-task issues for the learner to build up a solid foundation of skill. In recent years, scholars have proposed more and more academic suggestions in support of this new subject.

4. THE TEACHING REFORM OF PIANO IMPROVISATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

4.1 Problems of the curriculum

The traditional setting of the class for piano improvisational accompaniment in China encounters several problems. First, the course is usually arranged as

a group class, in which different levels of students gather together for the same curriculum. For students who are more capable of keyboard skills, the pacing of the course can be too slow. On the contrary, the class can be too difficult for those who learn the piano as beginners. There is a lack of enough resources in the repertoire unless the instructor incorporates additional teaching materials in the class. Besides, most textbooks utilized in the Chinese colleges for improvisational piano accompaniment emphasize the method to accompany Chinese folk songs. Chinese folk songs possess very different styles from modern popular pieces in terms of harmony as well as modality. The technique of improvisational piano accompaniment is applicable to various kinds of music, and it is significant to consider a broader range of repertoire for this class.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, reading simplified notation and the staff notation is another challenge to the learners. Many Chinese college students do not easily switch between both styles because of the old habit. Thus, the concept of transposition becomes very difficult for students who are not able to read the music instantly. For many students, transposing a tune is to write down the score first and then play with the written music score. Unfortunately, this method is against improvisational piano accompaniment's definition, limiting the training results. Specifically, for people who are not capable of the keyboard instrument, both transposition and modulation are too undertaking.

Due to the challenges in the improvisational piano accompaniment we encounter today, modern scholars constantly explore innovative pedagogical strategies to improve the quality of classes. The following paragraphs will address the teaching reform for the curriculum of improvisational piano accompaniment.

4.2 The Teaching Reform

There are several ways to improve the quality of improvisational piano accompaniment. In the teaching approach, an instructor can divide students into smaller groups according to the learners' levels and assign different tasks to each group in the class activity. Besides, the harmony of knowledge proficiency on the piano and the music ensemble skills should be emphasized in the course. Notably, many scholars considered that the theory-oriented class quickly decreases the learners' interests in the subject [8]. To avoid this weakness, an instructor has to take advantage of the lesson time efficiently.

Moreover, since the class activity reflects students' feedback on the learning process, a teacher has to pay more attention to the practice of improvisational accompaniment. It is also possible to have a few students with a deep foundation of the classical piano

performance to lead each group to accomplish the assignment. That is to say, in the setting of a group class, a good interaction between the peers and the instructor influences the learning pacing makes the lessons more attractive.

In addition, a good teacher encourages students to raise questions in the lessons. An instructor is able to assign the proper homework and resolve students' problems from students' questions. Also, because of the multiple aspects of the improvisational piano accompaniment, the evaluation of the course should not be the same as the regular music courses. There is more than one factor in determining a student's ability on improvisational accompaniment. As a result, both the theoretical analysis and the performance skill should be combined in the examination to consider a student's final grade. With a variety of tests, the instructor can observe the result of his or her teaching efficiency. Furthermore, singing and playing at the same time is good training in improvisational piano accompaniment, which can encourage the students to listen and play together simultaneously. It is helpful to practice one's coordination.

A teacher can utilize some well-known pop songs as additional sources besides the textbook regarding the teaching content. Notably, a song that is most often sung and heard today can quickly reinforce students' impressions. With this strategy, the class activity can be more attractive and vivid.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose and the teaching goal of improvisational piano accompaniment are distinctive, comprised of multiple disciplines spanning from music theory to music performance. Although professional classical piano training is still the primary class in China's conservatories, the role of the improvisational piano accompaniment is getting more attention. In China's preschool education, a music instructor has to be able to accompany spontaneously in the children's activities. Besides, the skill of improvisational piano accompaniment is also applied in dance, opera, and theatre. Therefore, the educational goal of improvisational piano accompaniment is even more beneficial compared to the traditional piano program. Based on this reason, the regular universities in China gradually valued the subject and spent energy enhancing the training target of improvisational piano accompaniment to develop music educators. Current scholarly findings note that, compared to the 1970s and the 1990s, the improvisational piano accompaniment of today reveals much more significance in terms of the training practice. Also, with the rise of innovative technology, research on this subject is widely open for futuristic teaching methods and pedagogical strategies to establish more creative programs.

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