

A Case Study Exploring Piano Pedagogy in Yangon, Myanmar

Aung Chan Nyein¹, Anak Charanyananda², Kyle R. Fyr³, Monsikarn Laovanich⁴

¹Student, Music Education Department, College of Music, Mahidol University

²Assistant Professor, ³Lecturer, Musicology Department, College of Music,
Mahidol University

⁴Assistant Professor, Piano Department, Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University

Abstract

This research aim to explore the condition of piano teaching and learning, to understand more about current piano teaching pedagogies, the obstacles and the challenges of piano teaching and learning in Yangon, Myanmar. The research was conducted in qualitative method; the participants are teachers who have at least 10 years' experience on piano teaching. Eight piano teachers from different music teaching centers, churches and universities, and three independent piano teachers were interviewed. After the analysis of data, it was found that most of piano teacher cannot well undertake the essential competencies of piano teaching and majority of piano teacher are not qualify. The most encounter problems are students' lack of interest on music, and do not have time for practice because of tuitions. Parental involvement in music is still weak. The present research examines the current piano teaching and offer better recommendation to improve the level of piano teaching in Yangon.

Keywords: Piano pedagogies, teaching, Yangon

Introduction

Ample research showed that music education in all societies is paramount. Even in Southeast Asian countries, music education appears to be well aware. Because countries like Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia held music competitions like piano competitions, violin competitions, composition festival and chamber music festival in every year. But unlike other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar did not have music competitions and concerts, especially in Western art music. In addition, there were very few published research and, data about western music education in Myanmar. According to Lwin (2002, pp. 1-10) document analysis of Burma education system (1945-2002), it can be found that there was no music curriculum in all primary, secondary and high school. There was another scholarly article that has been written about western music education in Myanmar, Onishi and Young's "Western music education in post-world war II Burma/Myanmar," as found in "Musical childhoods of Asia and the Pacific" which was the first scholarly published article concerning with western music education in Myanmar (Onishi & Young, 2012, pp. 215- 235). Summarizing their finding and comment, Myanmar people had very few opportunities to learn, to be exposed western music education. There were some international schools that teach music as compulsory subject such as Yangon International School, International school of Yangon and International Language and Business Center, but the tuition fees is very expensive and only affordable for the wealthy people. Although there are University of Culture in Yangon and

Mandalay, students are mainly taught Burmese traditional arts, music and theater. In government school, music education was neglected in the formal curriculum and public education system.

As mentioned previously, a lack of music schools and conservatories, Myanmar had very few gifted children, especially in western art music. Although the western instrument like piano, violin, guitar, banjo and mandolin, were successfully localized since World War I, Myanmar musicians and western music learners have been struggling to get higher international performance standard until lately. Among Western musical instrument, the piano is significantly popular to younger audience and children. Although the piano has been increasingly popular, western piano teaching and learning left behind compare to other Southeast Asian countries. In fact there is no remarkable classical pianist who can perform a high international standard in Myanmar and no one can participate at international piano competition festival yet.

In light of the above aforementioned facts, this article focusing on the piano pedagogy employed by contemporary Myanmar piano teachers; serves to examine the development of piano teaching and learning process in Yangon/ Myanmar. The results of this research will ascertain the respective weaknesses and strengths of piano pedagogy, and offering effective advice to improve future piano teaching and learning in Yangon/ Myanmar. In addition, it will be fulfilled the need of scarcity of data about music education, and western classical piano teaching/learning in Myanmar.

Objective

- 1) To study and gain a comprehensive understanding of current piano teaching pedagogies in Yangon /Myanmar
- 2) To study the challenges and obstacles of piano teaching and learning in Yangon/Myanmar.

Scope of the study

The study involved eight piano teachers (4 females and 4 males, age from 30 to 72) who are currently teaching piano in different teaching centers, school, college and some are independent teachers.

The criteria are 1) The selected key informants are currently teaching piano in Yangon, 2) The key informant must possess at least 10 years of experience in piano teaching.

Eight piano teachers were interviewed from November 2014 and January 2015, and the research was done in May, 2016.

Expected Benefits

- 1) Develop a comprehensive understanding of current piano teaching process.
- 2) Identify areas of instruction not fully covered in current piano teaching methods and offer innovative approaches to remove barriers and promote new teaching approaches for the future.

3) The result of this research will be used as information for piano teachers and to promote piano teaching in Yangon, Myanmar.

Literature Review

The meaning of piano pedagogy is an art of professional piano teaching in classrooms, schools, private and group lessons. The study of piano teaching and teaching training in the area of piano teaching can nurture a well-rounded musician for individual piano students. Tayrattanachai (2014, pp. 151-152) summarized the importance of piano pedagogy in her research. Piano pedagogy is a field to develop professional piano teachers, and provide expertise as an excellent piano teacher in their teaching career. Since piano pedagogy is an educational field, it should have a specific purpose when teaching and learning. Typically, (Bastien, 1988, p. 222) the essential competencies of comprehensive piano teaching and musicianship begin with a list of course and those courses can be categorized as repertoire, technique, sight reading, music theory, ear training, memorization, harmonization and improvisation, and ensemble playing.

Piano Teaching and Learning

In piano playing, each student learns differently. According to Garcia (2002, pp. 1-2) and Jacobson (2006, p. 33), there are three kinds of learning which are visual, auditory and tactile/kinesthetic learning. Visual: A visual learner thinks images and converts information into pictures. Reading, writing and looking at pictures is the best way of learning for visual learners. Auditory: Auditory students can easily remember what the teacher says or plays. Tactile/kinesthetic: These people are better at learning by doing activities with their entire body and manipulating objects. Piano teachers need to know each student's learning style and what kind of learning style they should use for each student. Teachers also need to understand themselves. Teachers need to beware of their own dominant learning and teaching style.

Piano lesson, practice and parental involvement

According to Bastien (1988, p. 29), there are three types of private lessons: thirty minutes lessons, forty-five minute lesson, and hour lessons. He pointed out that since there is no class participation in private lessons, student may lose interest in private lessons after a year later because there is no external motivation that can force the student other than teacher. There are advantages of private lesson, student can get a full attention of the teacher and teacher and student have more chance and time to discuss the piece. Maydwell (2007, p. 49) stated that group piano lessons can provide great benefits such as motivating, students can be taught in a small amount of time, students can listen to one another, give feedback, students are enjoying by playing for their friends and they can learn from each other.

Practicing is important for all musicians because they spend most of their time practicing their pieces, learning how to play complicated things, and how to find the best solution for a difficult passage. Bancroft (2004, pp. 50-52) stated about practicing that "Practice requires analyzing parts, organizing priorities, creating action plans, making assumptions, reacting to realities and limitations, and reviewing music over and over until it can be performed correctly". There are two kinds of practicing which are active practice and

passive practice. Passive practice, which is called the "straight through" approach, means that student plays the music with less awareness of or no regard to the important musical elements such as notes, rhythms, phrasing, form, articulation, dynamic and correct interpretation. In this kind of practicing, students spend a lot of time on practicing their piece by repeating the same mistakes again and again. After practicing many times, the students become ingrained with the mistakes and the mistakes are very difficult to correct.

Active practice means stopping and spending more time on difficult passages to make a decision and fix up everything before moving on. Technique, phrasing, interpretation and style are considered before playing. If the student practices correctly, this active practice can be applied to any piece of music. Bastien (1988, p. 124) said that only careful and correct practicing will develop a student's performance such as the mood to perform music, projecting the style, etc. To perform in a correct manner with the right mood, the student needs to practice slowly, hands separate practice, correct fingering, correct hand motions for good phrasing, using metronome and counting aloud while playing.

Parental involvement also encompasses in music learning and especially teaching for young beginners. Parental involvement includes home-based parental involvement, such as listening to children, reading and monitoring homework, and also attending school functions and responding to school obligations (Hornby, 2011, p. 1).

Research Methodology

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interview in this research. After consulting with Mr. Moe Naing (Director, piano teacher) and Mr. Ne Win Htun (Manager, vocal teacher), who are acknowledged as significant musicians from Gitameit Music center, they recommended music teachers from twelve music teaching schools, centers and colleges that have been teaching music at that current time in Yangon. The snow ball technique and the determination of selecting criteria were used to select to acquire of the research sample. The researcher then recruited and followed up the next selected key informant and so on. The selected criteria and the research sample are used subjectively purposive sampling as a tool for the key informants. The participants were contacted and informed by phone and email two weeks before they are interviewed. The size of the sample is comprised of eight remarkable piano teachers.

The data were collected through in-depth interview and used as a tool for collecting data. The researcher created an interview guide from literature review and the questions were checked and guide by proposal committee and IRB committee. The interview questions are designed into three parts. Part one comprised the questions about personal data and basic information of the respondents. Part two comprised the questions that related to the current piano teaching process, and part three comprised the question about condition of current piano teaching, problems, obstacles and their suggestions of piano teaching in Yangon, Myanmar.

Findings and Results

The research of the data was presented into three parts: 1) current piano teaching process; 2) problem and challenges found in teaching piano; 3) offering innovative approaches in piano teaching and suggestions for teachers and students.

1. Current piano teaching process

In current piano teaching process, all piano teachers teach only one hour private piano lesson and do not teach group piano lesson. One hour private piano lesson is similar to Bastien's (1988, p. 29) the three types of piano lesson. Teachers need to teach group piano lesson to avoid quitting piano learning, being too boring to come to the piano class. And they complaint, they have problems in making fixed piano lesson schedules because most of the students are very busy with their school. The teachers said that in Myanmar, apart from government school, students have to take tuition (extra classes) in the morning or evening. Some students even have extra class at night. When the tuition makes up an extra class, students choose tuition rather than piano lesson.

There was a lack of piano examinations and tests in all music school and center. This caused a lack of motivation to practice piano for the students. Furthermore, teachers are recommended to make piano examinations, piano competitions or piano recitals, in which every student must perform as a requirement. Giving rewards and certificates can also be an incentive for those who do not want to practice piano. Moreover, teachers are recommended to teach group piano lessons, because group piano lessons can make the students feel more enjoyable than private piano lesson. By teaching group lessons, students will have some positive peer pressure to practice piano.

Teacher should have a special teaching plan for young learners (between ages 5 to 8) who cannot concentrate on piano playing. Offering incentives, playing music games and making competitions for the students are encouraged (Bastien, 1988). The lesson should be as enjoyable as possible for child. For young learner, teaching group piano lesson and using teaching equipment or tools would make it more interesting and enjoyable for them.

For the lack of role models in Myanmar, the teacher can be a role model for the student. Teachers need to give a regular piano recital and let the student join the concert. Moreover, if there was a concert happening in Yangon, teachers should insist the student watch a concert, and parents should take the children to the concert.

Table 1: Supplementary musical activities

Subjects	Supplementary Musical Activities
Music Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MIT and KBTS taught music theory as compulsory subjects but other teachers teach music theory but they do not have fixed lesson schedules. • A majority of teachers only teach basic and intermediate level theory. • Some teachers do not teach music theory because students are not interested.
Music History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only two teachers teach music history but very basic knowledge of music history
Ear Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only two teachers teach ear training but very basic knowledge such as whole and half interval.
Harmonization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None of the teachers teach harmonization because they think it is a different field of study and does not relate with classical piano music
Improvisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four teachers teach sometimes (very basic) because student are not interested • The other four teachers do not teach
Ensemble Playing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three piano teachers teach ensemble playing such as duet and accompaniment. But only students who are good at sight-reading are taught. • At MIT and KBTS, piano students have to play accompaniment for other instruments and church.

Table 1, revealed that most of the piano teachers are not well undertaken for supplementary musical activities. They tend to think those subjects are not important. Another reason is a majority of teachers do not have enough time to teach those subjects.

Teacher suggestions for piano practicing are enough for the beginner and intermediate students. Young beginners are assigned to practice piano at least 30 minutes per day. At first, body position, hand positions are taught. Practicing hand separately, slow practice with metronome and clapping when encounter complicated part. Some teachers teach how to search composers' biographies, genres of music dictionary. Later, students have to play easy technique exercise such as playing staccato, legato, soft and loud. For the advance students, the teacher assigned them to listen music recordings and giving tips and tricks for memorization. One of the teachers insisted their students to practice 6 hours per week for minor piano student, and 16 hours per week for advance piano students. Moreover, students have to do Roman numeral analysis for their piece to become familiar with theory and memorization. The study found that there was lack of piano practice suggestions for advanced piano students. From the result, it can be assumed that there were no advanced students, or teachers cannot provide effective practice suggestions for their advanced students. Although some piano teachers give a good practice suggestion for their students, some teachers cannot give a good practice suggestion.

2. Problems and challenges found in teaching piano

The common problems that are encountered between piano teachers, student, parents and the need of teaching materials and aids are summarized as under:

Table 2: Problems found between students and teachers, and teaching materials

1. Problem found between teachers and students	2. Parental involvement, support and problem	3. Material, resources, aids in teaching and learning piano
1. Hand stiffness, non-relaxing fingers-wrist-body (mostly adult learners) 2. Lack of practice 3. Young student cannot concentrate on playing piano (age 5- 8) 4. Student are not interested in music (by parent force) 5. Need advanced level teachers 6. Students do not have commitment and no role models in Myanmar	1. Parents interfere during piano lesson 2. Parents want their children to play an advanced piece 3. Parents cannot support piano for their children 4. Parents want certificates	1. Students do not have piano because it is very expensive 2. Lack of piano maintenance and No private teaching rooms 3. No music store and difficult to buy music books and instruments 4. Adult beginners feel shy to play method books because they think those piano methods, which are illustrated with cartoons, are designed for children

3. Offering innovative approaches in piano teaching and suggestions for teachers and students.

According to Table 2, there are three main factors that need to be addressed with promoting piano teaching and learning, and the requirement for the future. The three main factors are as follows:

Teacher: Piano teachers are suggested to study piano pedagogy and upgrade their teaching. Teachers also need to practice regularly and should give public performances. Piano teachers must know about the piano repertoire that is assigned to the students (Maydwell, 2007, p. 73). Moreover, teachers should prepare and make lesson plans when they have chosen repertoire for the students.

Student: Piano students should have a commitment on piano playing. They need role model who can inspire them. Students need to listen to classical music DVDs, mp3s or live classical concerts. Piano competitions or recital performances are required for piano students.

Parental involvement, teaching materials and tools: Parents are suggested to find practice time and make regular practice for their children. Their positive reinforcement and encouragement are critical for the improvement of their children's music education.

Moreover, theory books and method books which are translated into Burmese language also needed for those who do not get enough exposure.

Conclusion and recommendation

The result of this study led to draw the following conclusions. One of the most encountered problems in teaching piano is making a fixed lesson time and lesson plan because of the situation in Myanmar education, therefore piano teachers should try to think about the ways they can make it better. Teachers need to discuss with the parents about their children's piano skill and practice routine, and let them know how important their role in piano teaching and learning is, and convince them they can also help to improve their children's piano skill by supporting and giving time to practice for the children.

Teachers are suggested to find new ways of piano teaching that make students feel more happy and willing to play piano especially for those students who have no interest and want to quit learning piano. Teachers are recommended to upgrade themselves and they should also teach music appreciation to the students. A majority of people do not know how to appreciate diverse music. Since music education is not well developed in Myanmar society most people do not aware of music education and its value. Therefore, teaching music appreciation is very crucial to promote understanding music education in Myanmar.

To promote and establish piano teaching or music education in Myanmar, the government education system is a very important factor. If music can be part of the Myanmar education curriculum, musicians can get jobs in government school around the country and there would be more hopes for those who are interested in piano music and promoting music education.

References

- Bancroft, T. (2004). *Growing your musician: A practical guide for band and orchestra parents*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 4501 Forbes Blvd, Suite 200, Lanham, MD 20706.
- Bastien, James. W. (1988). *How to teach piano successfully*. (Third Edition). California: Nei / A Kjos, Jr., Publishers.
- Garcia, S. (2002). Learning styles and piano teaching. In *Piano Pedagogy Forum*, 5(1).
- Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Jacobson, J. M. (2006). *Professional piano teaching, Book 1: A comprehensive piano pedagogy textbook for teaching elementary-level students*. Alfred Music.
- Lwin, T. (2002). Issues surrounding curriculum development in the ethnic nationality areas of Burma. Paper presented at the Burma Studies Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden.
http://www.thinkingclassroom.org/uploads/4/3/9/0/43900311/4._issues_surrounding_curriculum_development_in_the_ethnic_minority_areas_of_burma,_2002.pdf.
- Maydwell, F. (2007). *Piano teaching: A guide for nurturing musical independence*. New Arts Press of Perth.

Onishi, H., & Young, K. (2012). Western music education in post-world war II Burma/Myanmar. In C.-H. Lum & P. Whiteman (Eds.), *Musical childhoods of Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 215-235). Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Tayrattanachai, N. O. (2014). *A Study of Piano Pedagogy Course Content at the Undergraduate Level in Thailand*. Doctoral dissertation, Mahidol University.