

Six-hands piano pieces: Creating a social learning opportunity for piano students

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Abstract This paper explores the possibilities and benefits of social learning within music making, more specifically when learning the piano. Its starting point is that the piano, for beginners, is too often treated only as a solo instrument and the possibilities for social learning are not sufficiently explored. And although much literature and studies are dedicated to social learning within music, there is not much development regarding different possibilities and tools we can use for social learning environment when it comes to piano students. As a pianist, composer and music teacher I am constantly searching for new methods to involve children in music making; to truly engage and motivate them. One of the results of this exploration has led to a series of compositions and learning tools for the piano: A series of three books with compositions for six-hands piano, and a series of three books with exercises in music theory for piano students at beginner level. These books have all been created with the aspect of social learning as a starting point; social learning as in learning music in a group as opposed to individual lessons. The books serve as a case study for identifying and focusing on three key aspects that are crucial when learning the piano; motivation, communication, and musical understanding and skills. These aspects are considered through a social learning environment for piano students and by pointing at different factors that can lead to motivation and a positive learning experience.

Keywords social learning; six-hands piano; group teaching; music

Introduction

When children learn to play the piano, it is in most cases treated as a solo instrument: With individual lessons in a teacher-student setting, and with music written to be played by one person at the piano. Unlike other activities for children like sports, dance, drama or music groups like choirs or marching bands, learning the piano is mainly a solo experience with no other company than the teacher. There are of course, situations that offer group teaching also for the piano, but only to a certain point. For instance, when children learn through playing electrical keyboard there are normally several children who share the lessons, but in most cases, they still sit alone in front of their own keyboard sometimes isolated with headphones, and not making music *together* or even playing the same music. Then there are the ensembles that are sometimes put together across the type of instruments; a piano student accompanying a flute student, or a violin student, or any other individual instrument, perhaps even put together as a trio or a quartet. But in these cases, the young pianists do not meet other students that are learning exactly the same as them and they do not necessarily share the same type of challenges.

Whilst many activities for young children call for group activities, learning the piano can be a lonely task, without the possibility of making friends through the activity itself. Human beings are social beings and more prone to enjoy ourselves in others company. Furthermore, many studies have proven that we learn easier and quicker when we enjoy ourselves. Everyone working within music education knows that it can be a challenge to motivate students to

practice. I strongly believe in the benefits of a social learning environment where students can learn from each other as well as from the teacher, but also be motivated by having fun with their peers in the lessons and outside the lessons. Through this paper, I aim to show how social learning at the piano is an unexploited opportunity and to point out the many benefits of it. This is not to claim that group teaching should replace individual lessons, but it should be a frequent and regular supplement. I want to show that young pianists would really benefit from having group teaching as frequently as individual lessons and how to do this.

1. Background

I have studied music and played the piano since I was a young child and I have taught music and the piano for more than twenty years – a relatively short time, but long enough to experience different learning environments and the benefits and challenges that come with these. I have mainly taught individual lessons but when I was thrown into an extreme teaching setting of having nine young beginners at the same time in a small room with one piano, one hour shared between all of them, I was forced to explore group teaching and social learning. At this time, I preferred individual lessons and I was struggling to make it work having so many students at the same time. In the beginning, I tried to give them all a bit of individual time at the piano but I quickly learnt that this was only stressful, both for me and for the students, and it was not working very well. I then started exploring teaching books and music for groups on piano but struggled to find good material. I finally got hold of one German book with pieces for six-hands piano, for beginners. I brought some of those pieces to the lessons and suddenly I could include everyone in a different way; three students could play at the same time whilst the others were paying attention in order to learn the voices for their turn to play. The time was spent more efficiently and each student got more time at the piano. We got through the whole book like this and I could notice the students improve. They enjoyed playing together and to be a part of a bigger piece and soundscape than what they could manage on their own. The six-hands piano pieces provided a good opportunity to learn about listening, not only to oneself but also to the others in the group. And the students who acted as the audience while waiting in turn, learnt to listen to how each individual part contributed to the bigger piece. They helped each other when someone struggled and also started to meet up outside the lessons to practise. I believe their improvement most of all came from being included in a group activity and from having fun together. They had been learning in a group for a while but never really playing together, or behaving as a group. When playing together with two other students they could play music that sounded much nicer and more impressive than what they could manage on their own. They impressed themselves and got motivated by not wanting to let down the others in the group.

When we had played all the ten pieces in the book, and I was not able to find more books with six-hands piano pieces for beginners, I started arranging pieces for six-hands myself. This in turn, led to composing new pieces for six-hands piano and in 2005 I published my first book; *Playful piece for three*. Since then I have published two more books; *Piquant Pieces for three* (2007) and *Pacesetting Pieces for three* (2015). Each book contains ten pieces for six-hands piano with the aim to contribute with good teaching material for ensemble playing at the piano and to stimulate piano teachers to combine individual teaching with group teaching.

1.1 The benefits of group lessons as an addition to individual lessons

I only taught the group of nine piano students for a year but my time with them really showed me the possibilities and benefits of group lessons, or social learning. I started reorganising

my individual lessons to also include ensemble playing with other pianists. I soon discovered that the students who also got a chance to play with other students were looking forward to these sessions and in fact, putting more effort and commitment into learning the repertoire and tasks for these group lessons than to their own lessons. They were motivated by wanting to succeed in the group and discovered that it was fun to be able to play a piece well with the group in a whole different way than to when they played a solo piece well by themselves. Also, they experienced that having problems in the piece could give opportunities for helping each other and to get a higher understanding of the problem by having to explain or help the other students with it. There is a Swedish proverb that describes well what the students were experiencing: "Shared joy is double joy; Shared problem is half a problem."

I believe that group lessons for the piano is an unexploited opportunity for creating good learning environments and enhanced learning experiences. I do not claim that group lessons should replace the individual lessons, but that they should always be an additional offer to the students as far as possible. If the groups are put together well, we can establish a safe, fun and including learning platform where we are more likely to get the children enthusiastic about the task in front of them. Enthusiastic children, motivated by the task in front of them and the creative process that goes with it, is normally a clear sign of success. Depending on what goals are set, success can of course be measured in various ways. One way to measure success in music making is to measure through new skills and techniques developed by the students. But it can also simply be measured through the students' enjoyment of making music and to be together. Students learn easier and quicker when they enjoy what they do and when they have fun in the lessons. Perhaps new musical skills and techniques is not the first result we see, but by helping the students enjoy and have fun with learning the piano, those skills are more likely to show as a 'side effect' of the motivation created from the enjoyment they get.

1.2 Why six-hands piano pieces and not duets?

Let me start by saying that there are plenty of good duets for piano students and I use those in my teaching too. But when I started composing pieces three players, and not only two, it was because I felt that to obtain a real sense of group teaching and to truly benefit from it, one need at least three players. The dynamic in a group of three is different than to a group of two when it comes to musicality. Playing in a group of three, the students need to widen their awareness and it calls for a higher level of listening, concentration and collaboration. Just learning to start at the same time gives plenty of opportunity for practicing concentration, communication and leading. Leading two other players is a "bigger" experience than leading only one other player. There are also more opportunities to practise for collaborative decisions on different key elements in the composition; tempo, dynamics, which parts to practise and how to, articulation and so forth. In a group of three we can easily rotate the roles and demonstrate that different opinions are valuable and accepted, in fact desired. Music is not meant to be played in *one* way only and there are possibilities for several interpretations and personal opinions.

There is also a different social dynamic in a group of three; being one of three is different than to be one of two. In a group of two it is easier that the roles become static; one is always the leader whilst the other is the follower. In a group of three that dynamic has a better possibility to constantly change, in a positive way. Discussions will see more opinions and ideas and the students can learn that there is more than one way to get the desired result. The teacher should play a part in ensuring the group dynamic is healthy and not

static, that each individual gets to experience the different roles, but also in how the groups are put together. The groups should be put together with students at a fairly similar level, or if they are very different, the teacher should make sure that also the strongest players are challenged in a suitable way. Furthermore, with involving three children and not only two, one has a greater chance to give them the sense of group effort. The musical result and achievement will be the result of the group working together. To experience being one of several people engaged simultaneously in the creative process of music making is not only enjoyable but also offers opportunities for students to get a bigger understanding of musical aspect like rhythm, precision, metre and other key elements.

Another benefit of six-hands piano pieces to four-hands pieces, is that the teacher can step in as one of the players without losing the benefit of students learning together with a peer. The teacher has a chance to join the playing and to keep things on track and to be the steady musical pulse that the students might need. I strongly believe that a social learning setting can enhance the students' motivation; playing together with friends and with other pianists provides a unique opportunity for mutual feedback and a friendly, relaxed and fun learning environment.

1.3 Having the right tools and how to structure the lessons

As written in my introduction, there is not much material written for groups at the piano. I have taught the piano in England, Hong Kong and Norway and utilized the repertoire available in those countries, as well as books from Germany, France, Scandinavia, Canada and the US. It only exists a few books for six-hands piano for beginners and they are not easy to find. With this in mind I created a series of three books for six-hands piano. The books are suitable for beginners with *Pacesetting Pieces for three* being the easiest, and then they get more advanced towards the third book; *Piquant Pieces for three*. In most cases, the voices are equally levelled so that students at the same level should be able to play all the voices and can do so in turn. In this way, they can learn from, and teach each other, as well as getting a greater understanding of the repertoire they are playing.

The pieces take inspiration from the fugue-form so that each voice in turn plays part of the melody or counter-melody. In this way, each student can contribute with a few simple tones, at the same time as taking part in a more advanced piece than what they would be able to achieve alone. Apart from being fun to play, the pieces also provide valuable experience in several key musical skills such as keeping a steady pulse, leading, counting-in, interaction, and balancing – making them excellent as teaching material. The music is written so that each individual part is also interesting to play on its own. And if the students' levels are different, it is possible to include extra challenges for those who need it, for instance by adding sections where one student can improvise over the other two playing the written part. The pieces are also well suitable as concert pieces and present good opportunities for successful public performances, taking the pressure of the individual, if treated in the right way.

Along with learning to play in a group, it is very suitable and natural to learn music theory in a group. This, as we will see later, provides the perfect opportunity and solution to structure the group sessions well.

My other series of books, *A Nutter for Notes*, consist of exercises in music theory for piano students, from complete beginners in the first lesson to more advanced students. The books are structured so that there is one page with exercises each week throughout the year. The

books go through and explain everything from the first meeting with the piano to the musical system, rhythms and note values, dynamics and other musical terms - in short; most of what one needs to know during the first years of learning the piano. The exercises are short, varied and well explained. I do not necessarily see it as vital to understand music theory in order to be able to play the piano well (or any instrument for that sake), but it can certainly help making it easier. But I strongly believe that music theory can be fun and easy to learn by having the right tools and doing it the right way.

A Nutter for Notes can be used for individual students as homework or in their lessons, but also as exercises for a group. In this way, the books can help teachers in structuring their teaching time so that students get individual playing, group playing and music theory. Below, I will show an example of how these lessons can be structured. My example is taken from a teacher who would normally offer individual lessons of 30 minutes; student A, B and C, hence working 90 minutes for three students, for instance from 4 pm to 5:30pm. To include individual teaching, group teaching and music theory without expanding the teaching time, the sessions can be structured like this:

4:00 – 4:20pm	Student A: 20min individual teaching
4:20 – 4:40pm	Student A, B and C: 20min group teaching with six-hands piano
4:40 – 4:50pm	Student A, B and C: 10min to go through theory exercises collectively
4:50 – 5:10pm	Student B: 20min individual teaching, A and C do theory exercises
5:10 – 5:30pm	Student C: 20min individual teaching, A and B do theory exercises (or A chooses to go home)

In this example, the students all get minimum 20 minutes with individual teaching in addition to 20 minutes of group playing, as well as time practising music theory. The students get more time at the piano without the teacher having to spend more time teaching, he/she still teaches three students from 4pm – 5:30pm. This is only one example of how to structure group lessons, there are plenty of options of course on how to organise group teaching.

2. Three key aspects when learning the piano; motivation, communication, and musical understanding

By having three people playing at the piano together, not only can we facilitate for a fun experience, but also present the students with an exercise in cooperation and in musical understanding. They have to listen carefully to each other as well as to themselves and to find collective solutions to problems. As a teacher, I always try to get the students to find solutions to their problems themselves. In a group, you can guide the students and ask questions that will start their thought process in a more natural way than in the style of one-to-one “interview” that often can be the case in individual lessons. To engage students in this way and to let them have fun together by playing together with other peers, we can directly *and* indirectly focus on three aspects that I believe is crucial when learning the piano; motivation, communication, and musical understanding and skills.

2.1 Motivation

When playing six-hands piano pieces, each player is contributing towards the greater musical experience. Beginners can take part in a more advanced piece than what they would be able to achieve alone. This is something that will motivate them to stretch and to be persistent in their practising at home. Motivation is a crucial part when we are to learn new skills. Healy (1999) says that the efficiency in children learning new skills depends on to which extent the child is personally and actively engaged. Furthermore, she points to movements, music and other ways of expressions as means to get there (ibid., p.40-41 and

p.173-175). For everybody working within music, it is easy to agree with her on that. Music and movements is an easy way to engage the child. But do we also remember the feelings and commitment that comes with being motivated? Brodal (2007) says that we remember better when we are emotionally engaged in what we are learning. When we are playing music together with others we experience a sense of belonging and emotional attachment. Hence, we can strengthen our motivation through the appreciation of having a good time together. This means that it can be easier to learn something when we are learning in a group instead of sitting by ourselves repeating exercises or tasks. However, to achieve having a good time when learning in a group, it is vital that the group dynamic is balanced and positive. The teacher has an important role here to ensure a good combination of students and to work with those who might see it as a challenge to be put in a group.

Children enjoy making new friends. And whereas learning the piano through individual lessons do not naturally provide the opportunity to make new friends, learning in a group certainly does. I have experienced students who were new to each other creating strong friendships and making a habit of meeting up to practice together also outside the lessons. Some parents have worked together on the practical aspects of the lessons, of bringing and picking up from the lessons, and they have been more than happy to help in facilitating the group teaching and to arrange social meetings outside the lessons.

2.2 Communication

Musical communication

As musicians, we are constantly communicating. We are listening and conveying. Through my experience as a piano teacher, I have seen how important it is to train the students' musical understanding in order to get them to communicate the musical "message", and how this is linked to listening.

One of the challenges with the piano, is that anybody can produce a tone correctly and in tune (assuming the piano is tuned) without needing to listen to it or struggle to produce it. We just press a key and the sound is produced. This is somewhat a curse for the piano; it is easy for anybody to make a nice sound on the piano, even babies can play tones on the piano that sounds good. To make a sound on the piano does not need any skills or more effort than to press a key, neither does it require that we listen to the tone to adjust it. This means that students can play for years without really listening to what they are doing or to the sounds that they are producing. To play with a 'good tone' is in many cases something that comes much later, and in the beginning, little focus is put into the listening aspect of playing music and how you are expressing a phrase or musical passage. I believe this should be there from the beginning, perhaps only indirectly through having to actively listen, but it should still be something that the teacher is aware of including in the lessons.

I believe that playing in a group provides the best opportunity to learn about communication within music. Through using ensemble pieces the students learn to listen to themselves but also to the others in the group. They can hear the same motif or melody moved between the players, including him/herself and how that melody will change depending on how it is interpreted. By being made aware of the differences to how people can express the same phrase differently, they will learn the impact of their own interpretation and how to communicate that.

Communication between teacher and students, and between the students themselves

Gaining the confidence of students is vital to success – all communication and instruction

should be pitched at the correct ability level. Needless to say, each student is an individual. Still it happens that teachers try to stick to one program for all the students. In my experience, this does not work if we want to include all the students in the desired growth and development. As teachers, it is our job to see each individual and to give them tasks that are suitable for them. Furthermore, I believe in praising and celebrating our differences and to make students aware that their differences can be a good thing. One student is good at one thing but perhaps need longer time with another thing, whilst with his/hers peers it might be the opposite. Perhaps they can learn from each other? This is something that is easy to show in a group lesson but not so in individual lessons.

Furthermore, group teaching provides the perfect opportunity to make students take part in their own learning. They can be encouraged to discuss problems amongst each other and find solutions together. They can also in turn take on the role as the teacher, whilst you as a teacher can join into the roleplay and get the chance to ask questions they might need help to formulate and to reflect upon. This will also help them in learning how to lead a group and how to communicate clearly, friendly and efficiently in order to get the desired result.

2.3 Musical understanding and skills

I see musical understanding and skills to also include technical and theoretical understanding and skills, and this paper is considering them together. I believe that the three elements of technical, musical and theoretical understanding are strongly connected and that they should go hand in hand. In my experience, seeing the three elements as a whole benefits the students when learning an instrument. Furthermore, I believe that listening plays an important role in all aspects of musical understanding: In order to play with good rhythm, it is not enough to understand the rhythm itself but you also have to “hear” and feel the rhythm in order to play it correctly. And to play a scale evenly you have to truly listen to all the notes and that they follow each other with precision and ease. Furthermore, in order to play a phrase in the desired way, you need theoretical and musical skills to understand the phrase, but also the ability to truly listen to what you are playing in order to play it technically correct. In this way, technical skills are linked to musical and theoretical understanding and awareness.

As discussed earlier, group pieces give the perfect opportunity for students to learn to listen to each other. As I believe technical abilities are strongly connected with the ability to listen, group pieces that allow students to develop their musical ear will therefor also develop their technical abilities. The importance of playing with a good rhythm is visible and obvious in a completely different way in group teaching than to what solo playing can offer. The same with the students’ theoretical skills; everybody needs to have the required technical skills to play the same piece and it will become very visible if one student does not understand elements such as note- and rest values, dynamics or rhythms. Group pieces then offer a good opportunity for awareness of the importance of these skills. By rehearsing difficult sections together, they can pull each other and help each other in finding the problems, and then the solutions.

3. Summary

This paper has aimed to describe the benefits and possibilities of group lessons when learning the piano. Not as a substitute for, but as an important compliment to individual lessons. I believe it is equally important with group playing as with solo playing at the piano. Furthermore, I believe that this is an area that is not enough explored or exploited, and with my books for six-hands piano, I hope to motivate and stimulate piano teachers to also

include group teaching for their piano students.

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The piece *One for us* from *Pacesetting Pieces for three* has been included as a supplementary file to this paper as an example of a piece for six-hands piano
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