

A STUDY ON ENHANCING AND DEVELOPING PIANO SIGHT-READING SKILLS OF MUSIC EDUCATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The cultivation of the sight-reading ability of students in piano education at normal universities can improve their overall piano performance and application. At present, however, sight reading has not been treated as a separate, scientific and systematic course of instruction in piano teaching in Chinese normal universities, and university teachers do not pay sufficient attention to the cultivation of the sight-reading ability of their students. Because of this, the teaching philosophy is still traditional, the teaching content is relatively simple, and there are lacking of scientific systematic training methods. In this regard, the paper proposes three ways to help improve the sight-reading ability of Chinese piano students in normal universities: selecting suitable sight-reading materials, adopting effective training methods and developing scientific training habits.

Keywords: higher normal education; piano sight-reading ability; piano courses; promotion strategies

INTRODUCTION

Piano sight-reading refers to a player playing the music indicated in the score on the piano for a certain period of time without prior practice. Sight-reading is one of the most fundamental abilities for piano learners. It not only requires performers to display various complex musical elements, such as music tone, rhythm, strength, in the music score by fingers within a given time, but also requires performers to have a high degree of accuracy in the "translation" of music score, which is the embodiment of the comprehensive ability of piano performance.¹ During piano education at a normal university, the possession of sensitive and accurate sight-reading skill also largely determines the development potential of a student. However, the piano courses in normal universities in China still have great defects in the cultivation of students' sight-reading ability. Students' sight-reading ability cannot be systematically cultivated, which in turn poses a negative impact on their learning development and future employment. This paper mainly summarizes the sight-reading ability of piano, and explores the problems existing in the sight-reading training of Chinese normal school piano courses, and on this basis, it attempts to combine the existing research results at home and abroad to put forward some effective solutions.

OVERVIEW OF PIANO SIGHT- READING PERFORMANCE

Sight reading that is defined as reading and playing a music writing which one sees for the first time without prior notice is a basic skill which student should acquire from the start of piano education and comprises a basis for acquiring the other functional piano skills. According to the definition provided by the Encyclopedia of Music Dictionary, "Sight reading is to develop the ability of responding quickly to the new music through the performance technology of the instrument on the basis of solfeggio, that is, the ability to play immediately in the face of new music, which requires accuracy in terms of pitch, rhythm and intensity, and other aspects." Generally speaking, sight-reading is to translate the music information on the music scores through the piano immediately. It has certain requirements on the ability of the performer in all aspects, requiring the performer not only to present the various complex musical elements contained in the music score, such as tone, rhythm, and strength on the piano within a given time, but also to have a high degree of accuracy in the "translation" of the music score, which

is the embodiment of the comprehensive ability of music performance.ⁱⁱIn general, there are three levels of sight reading corresponding to the three principles of occurrence. The first layer is the lower sight-reading layer, which converts the visual signal of the music into a position signal of the pitch. At this level, the notation of music is transmitted directly to the fingers through the rapid response of the corresponding positions, but there is no clear concept of music in the brain. The second layer is to convert the visual model of the score into musical elements. At this level, musical notation is processed by the brain into specialized musical elements such as tonality, rhythm laws, melodic trends, and harmonic progression, and simultaneously converted into key position signals. This level can only be mastered through the study of systematic music theory. The third layer converts the music visual information into a full brain auditory, which is then processed into a key location signal. At this level, the symbols of the score are processed directly by the brain into music with an auditory effect, that is, to establish complete internal hearing, and expressed through finger acting.ⁱⁱⁱ

In piano education in normal universities, cultivating the sight-reading ability of the student can lead to a higher blind playing ability. The basic requirement for sight reading is that you can find the keyboard position with your hands without looking. From a psychological perspective, this is something that takes practice.^{iv} During piano sight reading, players look directly at the sheet music, relying on the touch of their fingers to locate notes on the keyboard, and practice repeatedly to improve their understanding of the positions of different keys in the keyboard. In addition, sight reading can also play a role in training a student's hearing. In the process of sight reading, it is necessary to listen to the music with one's heart in order to make it clear whether the sound being played is correct or not.^vIn addition, the increased sight reading ability allows students majoring in pre-kindergarten education to practice more children's songs in limited time, and improves the quality of students playing children's songs with improvisational accompaniment.^{vi} As a result, piano teaching in colleges and universities, guided by the concept of quality education, should focus more on cultivating the sight-reading ability of students, consolidating the foundation of their piano learning and promoting the development of comprehensive piano quality.^{vii}

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH PIANO SIGHT READING IN CHINA

Although sight reading plays an essential role in improving students' comprehensive music quality and piano playing ability, from the current situation of piano teaching in colleges and universities, many teachers in China do not pay sufficient attention to the cultivation of students' sight reading, and the teaching methods are inefficient. Lots of students do not have solid sight-reading abilities after completing a phased piano program. It has been a big problem for piano educators to cultivate children's sight-reading ability. In Chinese children's piano teaching, influenced by traditional teaching patterns, teachers always rely on very traditional and simple teaching methods, and the piano courses generally do not involve visual teaching. Thus students still cannot master the sight-reading skill after a long-term study.^{viii} Moreover, there is no scientific and systematic method of training for sight reading in the practice of teaching piano lessons in normal universities, and sight reading is not yet included in the teaching of piano in the various colleges and universities.^{ix}

In addition, piano teachers in Chinese normal schools do not pay sufficient attention to discovering and using some scientific and systematic sight-reading teaching materials in their teaching practices. In most schools, the repertoire used by teachers to train pupils in sight reading is relatively diffuse, random, and lacks a system. Thus, in terms of the learning characteristics of students and the current situation and development prospects of piano education in China, how to select the sight-reading teaching materials with Chinese national characteristics and suitable for Chinese normal piano students is an urgent problem to be solved.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE PIANO SIGHT-READING ABILITY IN CHINA

Based on the above discussion, I propose to improve the sight-reading ability of Chinese piano students in the following three ways.

(1) Choosing suitable teaching materials

From the history of sight-reading teaching materials in China, sight-reading teaching materials were mainly imported from abroad. *Bastian Piano Basic-Sight Reading* is the earliest textbook for sight-reading training introduced in China. It aims to develop sight-reading skills for beginners, while also taking into account additional skills and theories of the same degree, which are required to be practiced together with different series content of the Bastian Piano Textbook. After that, many foreign sight-reading teaching materials were introduced, such as *Piano Sight Reading Lessons*, known as "compulsory courses for piano learners", *Sight Reading & Rhythm Every Day* written by British music educators, *Improve Your Sight-Reading* written by a well-known British music educator, Paul Harris, and *Trak* written by Caroline Evans. Sight reading teaching materials aiming at the international piano grade examination have also been widely introduced, such as the *Example of Piano Sight Reading Examination* written by the Associated Committee of the Royal Schools of Music for the ABRSM Piano grade Examination. There is also a series of "Learn Quick" course materials, written by Australian pianists and music educators Samantha Coates and Michelle Mardell, aiming to help amateur children pass the ABRSM exam or the Trinity Test in sight reading.

From the perspective of sight-reading teaching materials written by domestic scholars, the earliest systematic sight-reading teaching materials in China are *Piano Sight-reading Teaching Materials* edited by Zhao Songguang. The difficulty of arrangement is based on the sight-reading exam of the popular piano grading examination in foreign countries. Later, domestic scholars also drew on foreign teaching materials and wrote many systematic sight-reading training textbooks, such as *Piano Sight Reading and Piano Accompaniment* written by Chang Qing, the *Course of Piano Sight Reading* written by Wang Jiutong, the *Collection of Sight-Reading Music in Different Styles* written by Song Xiangkai, *No Longer Afraid of Piano Sight Reading* by Shi Wenling and KRABLS Piano Sight Reading by Ma Rui.

In general, most existing teaching materials for sight reading in China follow the objective laws of piano learning. However, piano teachers in most colleges and universities are not aware of the importance of using these teaching materials in their teaching practices. Besides, sight-reading teaching materials for piano students in Chinese normal colleges are still extremely scarce. Therefore, it is suggested that piano teachers in universities should establish teaching materials in line with the syllabus and students' learning characteristics from numerous existing teaching materials, and use them scientifically and systematically. At the same time, further

research should be carried out by scholars to compile sight-reading teaching materials specifically for piano students in normal universities.

(2) Using effective training methods

After selecting and determining appropriate sight-reading materials, how to adopt effective training methods to help students improve their sight-reading ability efficiently is also extremely important. First of all, teachers should pay attention to training students' hearing, to strengthening their eye-hand interaction, and to cultivating their concept of hand position, so as to considerably increase the accuracy and efficiency of visual reading.^x Second, the four-handed training mode can be used to improve the enjoyment of the class and student participation. Suitable pieces for this are Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*, Rachmaninoff's *Italian Boca*, Fukure's *Doll Suite*, Handel's *Water Music*, Robles's *Kepira's Little Train* and so on. Moreover, a close and reasonable training routine is also essential. Piano teachers are advised to schedule sight reading lessons 2-3 times a week, assign 8-16 bars of visual reading assignments after each lesson, and require daily practice.^{xi}

(3) Establishing scientific training habits

In addition to providing students with scientific and effective training methods, it is also crucial for teachers to help students form correct training concepts and develop excellent daily training habits. Above all, students should establish the concept of harmonic music reading, cultivate the ability of multi-dimensional music reading, strengthen the harmonic movement of fingers, cultivate the concept of counterpoint music reading and playing between high and low voice parts, establish accurate and rapid finger response according to the motion law of notes, shorten the time of visual reading and minimize errors. Additionally, teachers should help students familiarize themselves with and understand the tendencies of the various tonal types, master the characteristics of the musical figures as each tonal type is arranged, and improve the speed of reading by analyzing and observing the laws of the tonal types. Last but not least, by adopting the learning method of combining detail and rough practice, students are encouraged to play more pieces, so as to avoid only refining the examination pieces without extensive exposure to other music works. Otherwise, they may be constrained in single thinking, and even lose their enthusiasm for learning in excessive repeated exercises.

CONCLUSION

The cultivation of students' sight-reading ability in normal university piano education can improve their overall piano performance and application. At present, however, piano teaching education in Chinese normal universities does not treat sight-reading as a separate, scientific and systematic course of instruction, and university teachers do not pay sufficient attention to the cultivation of students' sight-reading skills. The teaching philosophy in universities is relatively traditional, the content is relatively simple, and there is lacking of scientific systematic training methods. In this regard, the author puts forward some suggestions to improve the sight-reading skills of piano students in Chinese normal universities from three aspects: the selection of teaching materials, the improvement of training methods and the cultivation of training habits, with the hope to contribute some wisdom to further improving the piano curriculum system in Chinese normal universities.

ENDNOTES

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