

## “Sound Reflections: Teaching Contemporary Piano Repertoire”

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Teachers begin the year with a big responsibility to assign the right repertoire for each student and choosing contemporary repertoire can be a tricky task. There is a vast collection of Canadian repertoire to be explored, taught and played, and the desire or need for variety in selections for students can be achieved, but it can take some searching and experimenting. This article highlights three suggestions for choosing repertoire as well as a few ideas for learning, practicing and teaching new pieces. Although the repertoire discussed in this article is for piano, the concepts can be applied to any other instrument.

Faced with the diverse range of styles by Canadian composers, a teacher can organize the process of repertoire selection to form an interesting and educational curriculum for their studio – selection by compilation, by composer, or by style. Some compilations combine varying styles into one volume. *Horizons I and II: Music by Canadian Composers* is a graded compilation inclusive of a wide variety of compositional styles providing brief explanations for each piece and style. An educational approach here is to assign each piece to a student, and when all are learned reasonably well, host an informal “compilation recital” for the students. The explanations serve as program notes and can be read aloud. In this format, students are introduced to the various styles. *Meet Canadian Composers at the Piano I and II* is another compilation of mostly earlier conventional style compositions. The compilation approach shows what a wonderful selection there is of our recent century of music from which to choose.

Another process for choosing repertoire is creating a “composer” year and assigning a selection from this specific composer. If the composer has written predominantly for the junior levels, a teacher might consider giving several pieces to an advanced student as an exercise in student teaching. For example, the *Amusements I, II, III* by Stephen Chatman are intended for juniors and intermediates, but a senior pianist can be equally challenged to produce the percussive techniques and special effects convincingly and comfortably. These selections can offer a fun and rewarding introduction to new sound concepts dreamed up by composers. Another year could be dedicated “Violet Archer Year”, for example, – whose Bagatelles, Preludes and three-movement Sonatine could be divided among senior students. This approach to learning about a composer could be connected with another teacher, and culminate in a “composer recital” when each piece gets talked about, played and heard.

Finally, a teacher might choose a particular style of composition as a theme for the month, the term, or the year. There is no shortage of ideas for this approach. Three examples: 1) the 12-tone system - *12 Twelve Tone Pieces for Children* by Otto Joachim is comprised of charming, colorful and melodic atonal pieces for junior to intermediate levels; 2) jazz-influenced styles in Ann Southam’s *Three in Blue* and *5 Shades of Blue*, John Weinzweig’s three-movement *Suite #2* (advanced) that is tinged with blue notes and subtle syncopations, *Uptown Music* (intermediate) by Jim Hiscott, *Two Sundances* (intermediate) by Joan Hansen and *Boogie Fugue* (intermediate) by Judy Specht; and 3) extended piano technique repertoire such as Stephen Chatman’s *Amusements*, Mary Gardiner’s *Short Circuits* (intermediate) and Hope Lee’s *Flake upon Flake upon....* (intermediate to advanced).

Once repertoire is chosen, incorporate several practice strategies to keep the imagination active. One creative approach to learning new music involves musical graphing. This can work well with music that does not readily appear to have a conventional melodic shape, as in several twelve-tone pieces by Barbara Pentland (for example, *Hands Across the C*), or for pieces that do not provide phrasing and dynamics markings. Graphing is done whereby a single solid horizontal line represents the middle range of the keyboard. The individual notes within the texture are then graphed in curved or angular lines below and above the solid line. A new solid line begins every four measures or so (no strict rule in this exercise). Graphing allows the piece to be “viewed” in more than one way and the teacher and student can experiment together to create longer or shorter groups of graphed phrases. What this exercise combines is the visual sense with the aural. The graphs activate the imagination in making decisions of phrasing and dynamic. Connecting the visual and aural senses also assists memory, and serves as a reminder of how music and sound move through time.

Choosing a technical focus is a creative practice strategy. The pianist chooses a technical pattern from the selected composition and creates an “exercise of the week” or “of the month”, by devising as many ways as possible to play this pattern. For example, Steven Gellman’s *Etude* from *Album for Piano* contains various fast patterns between the hands, hand-crossing, broken chords, scalar passages between the hands, and so on. Extract one of these patterns (the opening two measures, or measures 5–6 for example) and keep the rhythm correct but alter the keyboard range, change the accent placements, and experiment with at least five different dynamic and shaping ideas. Playing music requires an extraordinary amount of skill *and* imagination – this exercise develops both.

A third strategy for practice is incorporating free improvisation. Use any musical idiom, aspect or element from the selected composition (an arpeggio, a cluster chord, the pedal, a glissando) and ask: “How many ways can I play this element?” Respond by practicing that element with as many different fingerings, articulations, rhythms, tonalities or harmonies imaginable (for example, R.H. plays B flat major, L.H. plays G minor for a modal mix). Improvise by creating four-measure phrases from these practice ideas and repeat several times. Change the articulation, range, dynamic, etc. and repeat several times. Form is created in this manner and a freely improvised composition is born. Improvisation is an act of freedom and exploration and by experimenting in these simple ways the ear, eye, body and heart enjoy working and creating all together.

In conclusion, I believe that practicing must be a continually renewed act of co-creation. These thoughts can hopefully encourage the pianist to take part in composing, creating and most importantly, *listening* while developing strengths and strengthening weaknesses. Here’s to a creative year of music making!

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