

Reflections and strategies on piano music education in university curriculum practice

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Abstract. Piano music education, as a core course in preschool education programs at higher normal institutions, plays a vital role in enhancing students' artistic literacy, performance skills, and overall competence. However, current university-level piano education still faces several challenges, including weak foundational knowledge, monotonous repertoire, outdated teaching models, and underdeveloped evaluation systems. These issues result in students lacking learning initiative and artistic understanding, making it difficult to meet the talent development demands of the new era. This paper analyzes the current state and problems of piano education in universities and proposes reform and innovation strategies, such as systematically strengthening theoretical knowledge, implementing group collaboration and personalized teaching, and promoting curriculum and instructional model diversification. The goal is to build a more scientific and efficient teaching system that fosters the comprehensive development of students' artistic literacy and creativity. The study argues that piano education reform should balance skill training with cultural enrichment, integrating traditional and modern teaching approaches to cultivate versatile art professionals with both technical proficiency and humanistic spirit.

Keywords: piano education, university curriculum, teaching reform, instructional model, personalized teaching

1. Introduction

As a core subject in preschool education at higher normal institutions, piano teaching holds irreplaceable significance. First, mastering piano fundamentals lays a solid foundation for subsequent coursework, ensuring a smooth educational process. Second, it helps prospective educators accumulate valuable teaching experience. Piano education is a critical component of university-level arts education, decisively influencing students' piano performance skills, aesthetic appreciation, and personal development [1]. University piano courses notably enhance students' learning abilities. However, piano education should not be confined to the transfer of knowledge—it should also engage students on emotional and intellectual levels.

In the wave of curriculum reform, traditional models are increasingly inadequate for nurturing creativity, emotional cognition, and humanistic values. Current piano instruction often deviates from its original purpose, overemphasizing technical training while neglecting students' artistic cultivation and holistic development. Under teacher guidance, students learn to play the piano but often lack initiative and enthusiasm. They may be able to play pieces, yet struggle to articulate their inner thoughts due to a superficial understanding of music. In essence, many students are merely imitating rather than truly comprehending the essence of piano artistry. Over time, such students may find it difficult to fulfill the responsibilities of piano educators, thereby hampering the broader dissemination and development of piano art in China. In the 21st century, university piano instructors shoulder the crucial task of improving students' artistic literacy and overall competence. Therefore, teachers must actively address existing shortcomings, break away from traditional teaching models, and embrace innovation in daily instruction to nurture more outstanding piano education professionals for society.

2. Problems in university piano education

2.1. Weak foundation in piano knowledge

For beginners, mastering the basics of piano is an essential starting point for performance learning. Unfortunately, influenced by flawed educational philosophies, many students and even teachers new to piano underestimate the importance of foundational knowledge. They mistakenly believe that piano playing merely involves acquiring basic techniques, ignoring the need for

theoretical grounding [2]. This perspective is clearly misguided. Just like building a skyscraper requires a solid foundation, mastering piano performance requires a strong grasp of theory. Without it, performance flaws will inevitably emerge, no matter how impressive the surface-level skills appear. Only with a firm foundation and solid theoretical understanding can students achieve long-term, steady progress in their piano journey. Moreover, many first-year university students have had little to no exposure to piano training prior to enrollment and are largely unfamiliar with fundamental piano theory. Therefore, imparting essential knowledge at the outset is of paramount importance.

2.2. Monotonous and rigid practice repertoire

Guiding students through finger exercises is both a crucial and challenging part of piano instruction. After initial periods of training, the depth of students' learning is closely linked to finger flexibility and expressive ability. However, it's important to note that many students have not received formal piano training prior to university, leading to potential missteps in technical practice. In current university piano teaching practices, instructors often favor traditional and conservative practice pieces.

While these exercises may have pedagogical merit, their uniformity can negatively impact student motivation. Initially enthusiastic learners may lose interest when practice lacks variety, resulting in diminished engagement and declining performance skills over time. This negative cycle undermines students' progress. To counteract this, instructors must appropriately adjust and expand teaching approaches, enrich the repertoire, and inspire students' enthusiasm. By doing so, educators can more effectively enhance students' technical proficiency and foster a deeper commitment to piano learning.

2.3. Ineffective piano practice

In learning piano performance, the coordination of fingers, wrists, arms, and the body as a whole is essential to achieving a high level of mastery. Therefore, piano instructors often guide students to engage in repeated practice to achieve technical fluency [3]. However, when such mechanical repetition lacks clear purpose or structured planning, it not only consumes excessive time but can also lead to emotional fatigue and disengagement. Aimless and unstructured piano teaching often fails to yield the expected outcomes. To avoid this, instructors should abandon purposeless mechanical practice and emphasize instructional effectiveness, while also fostering students' confidence in learning piano.

Students should be encouraged to practice with clear objectives in mind, and teachers must help them maintain sustained interest in piano performance.

2.4. Lack of diversification in piano education curriculum

At present, the curriculum design for piano education in Chinese higher education institutions generally follows traditional teaching paradigms. Specifically, comprehensive universities typically offer piano courses for only one to two academic years, while arts colleges extend instruction to about three to three and a half years, with one to two class hours per week. This uniform curriculum structure lacks the necessary differentiation and personalization, significantly limiting students' holistic development in artistic literacy. The rigidity of course duration and structure fails to accommodate varying student needs and learning paths.

2.5. Outdated piano teaching models

Traditional classroom-based instruction continues to dominate piano education in universities. Although some specialized courses employ individualized one-on-one instruction, the majority of piano classes are still delivered in group formats. Even when occasional individualized feedback is provided, the prevailing pedagogical approach remains outdated. Instructors tend to center their teaching on lecture-based delivery, with classroom activities largely confined to technical drills such as scales and finger exercises. This narrow instructional scope restricts the breadth of student learning and ultimately hinders the development of their artistic sensibilities and musical depth.

2.6. Urgent need for reform in piano education evaluation systems

Currently, most piano education evaluation systems in universities still adhere to the traditional exam-oriented model. At the end of a course, students are required to select pieces from a predetermined repertoire and give standardized performances. Professional instructors then assign scores based on criteria such as technical accuracy and musical expressiveness. This one-dimensional evaluation system exposes three major underlying issues:

2.6.1. Narrow evaluation criteria

The current system overemphasizes the final performance outcome while neglecting the gradual development of artistic literacy. Core competencies such as improvisation, collaborative performance, and ensemble coordination are excluded from the assessment, resulting in students' lack of practical experience in accompaniment or chamber music.

2.6.2. Monopolization of evaluation authority

The teacher serves as the sole evaluator, reinforcing a fixed aesthetic standard and leaving little room for diverse artistic interpretation.

2.6.3. Outdated evaluation tools

Traditional assessments rely heavily on subjective auditory judgment and lack scientifically grounded support. Technical nuances such as key pressure, pedal usage frequency, and articulation are assessed qualitatively rather than through empirical data. No acoustic sensors or dynamic performance metrics are utilized. Moreover, interdisciplinary skills are not assessed with dedicated tools, leaving the evaluation system disconnected from the evolving needs of the digital music industry.

3. The current development status of piano education in China

The core value of piano education in Chinese higher education institutions lies in the construction of a comprehensive and high-quality arts education system. The instructional model aims to help students systematically acquire artistic knowledge, ensuring that their cultivation in artistic literacy is both coherent and integrated. This highlights the crucial role of piano education within the broader framework of university-level arts education. Therefore, universities should align with this objective and actively promote reforms to foster innovation and development in piano education. Only within such a pedagogical framework can students' enthusiasm for learning be effectively stimulated and their aesthetic and artistic literacy meaningfully improved.

As society advances, the need for reform and innovation in piano education at the university level becomes increasingly urgent. In developing methodologies for piano education reform, exploring effective piano instruction techniques is a pivotal step, as it can invigorate the internal dynamics of the teaching process. At present, China's universities are exhibiting a growing trend toward diversification in their arts training programs, which opens up broader pathways for the development of piano education. Moreover, each institution can leverage its unique educational strengths to further drive the flourishing of arts-related curricula.

Piano education reform in universities should not be confined to technical improvements but should instead focus on establishing a "holistic view of piano education." This educational ecosystem must include a profound understanding of European classical traditions, creatively reinterpret Chinese musical culture, and also respond to fundamental artistic questions in the era of artificial intelligence [4]. Only by reconstructing the teaching system at the intersection of historical depth and contemporary innovation can we genuinely cultivate piano artists who possess technical excellence, cultural awareness, and creative thinking. Such an approach will lay a solid foundation for the global dissemination of Chinese musical culture.

4. The positive role of piano education reform in university talent development

After a thorough understanding of the theoretical foundations of piano education, it becomes clear that piano education plays a vital role in the cultivation of talent within higher education. Only when these foundational concepts are fully recognized can we further strengthen the role of piano education in talent development.

The fundamental purpose of offering piano courses in Chinese universities is to enhance students' basic artistic literacy. It is only when students achieve a higher level of artistic cultivation that their overall development can be more balanced and well-rounded. Today, reforming and innovating piano education curricula has become one of the most effective means for improving students' artistic literacy in higher education and holds a pivotal place within China's education system. Piano education encompasses a rich theoretical system—including piano music history, music aesthetics, performance studies, and in-depth analysis of piano works. It also requires a comprehensive understanding of the historical context, performance styles, and unique characteristics of musical pieces. Many vocal works are closely linked to literature or folklore, placing further demands on students' interpretive and expressive skills in performance. Therefore, piano education becomes an efficient means of fostering students' artistic cultivation and performance abilities.

In addition, deepening the reform of piano education has become a key trend in the development of higher education in China. To continually stimulate students' creative potential, appropriate tools must be employed at critical stages. Piano education offers significant advantages by enhancing students' multifaceted learning capacities and motivating them to engage in

purpose-driven, innovative learning. This plays a critical role in advancing China's efforts to cultivate innovative talent and contributes core value to the construction of an innovation-oriented education system. Evidently, the persistent efforts of Chinese universities to improve students' artistic literacy are closely tied to the proactive reform and innovation of piano education. Furthermore, piano education assists students in broadening their global perspective and nurtures artists with international competence. It emphasizes the internationalization of talent cultivation, aiming to elevate students' professional standards to a global level. In sum, the positive role of piano education must be further emphasized within the overall strategy for talent development in universities, in order to encourage diversified learning and elevate students' artistic literacy.

Therefore, Chinese universities should actively advance piano education reform, closely aligning it with their own teaching realities, while efficiently drawing on advanced instructional models from both domestic and international arts education. This will support students in conducting deeper exploration within the artistic domain.

Piano education reform should also focus on enhancing students' collaborative performance abilities. Instructional practices must emphasize the development of students' capacity for artistic collaboration, thereby achieving teaching objectives more effectively. Elevating the pedagogical value of piano education is a key aspect of university-level arts instruction. Hence, the reform and innovation of piano education precisely meet the fundamental needs of arts education in Chinese universities, particularly in improving students' ability to cooperate artistically—a skill essential to their overall artistic development. In conclusion, reforms in university piano education must be implemented in a concrete and effective manner. For instance, beginner piano students often face issues such as weak foundational knowledge and unclear performance goals. To address these challenges, evaluation criteria should be adjusted—such as introducing modules in improvisational accompaniment—so as to integrate performance goals with a spirit of collaboration, thereby achieving newly defined educational objectives.

5. Reforming and innovating higher education models for piano instruction

5.1. Systematic understanding of foundational theoretical knowledge

To ensure the healthy development and effectiveness of piano instruction, educators should guide students to systematically and comprehensively master foundational piano theory, performance techniques, and the historical evolution of the instrument. Music instructors in higher education should divide classical music works from various periods into structured phases for instruction and support students in setting clear learning goals through continuous practice, thereby solidifying their mastery of foundational methods and techniques. Moreover, teachers should continuously enrich students' performance skills and help them refine their control over piano techniques to improve their overall playing level [5]. It is equally crucial to place students' understanding and expression of music at the core of teaching objectives. Throughout the instructional process, educators should not only nurture students' emotional perception but also guide them in forming a sound worldview and value system. Through musical insight and experience, students should be encouraged to discover beauty in life and cultivate a healthy, well-grounded aesthetic sensibility.

Additionally, integrating Chinese cultural elements into piano education can enhance students' confidence in their learning and foster a sense of national pride.

5.2. Implementing collaborative group instruction

Group-based collaborative teaching, as a highly efficient and modern pedagogical approach, fully respects the subjectivity and initiative of students. Teachers should gradually shift from the traditional leadership role in the classroom to that of a facilitator or mentor. Students can choose their learning focuses based on personal interests and abilities and propose research topics aligned with current teaching contexts. In the early stages of the course, instructors may teach basic pedagogical methods and musical knowledge, then organize students into small groups to promote collaboration and peer learning. When students encounter difficulties, they should feel free to consult teachers and engage in equal dialogue.

Within the framework of piano instruction, group activities should be appropriately increased to enhance mutual understanding among students. Teachers should design a variety of discussion topics and actively participate in group interactions. When explaining key and challenging concepts, students can be divided into groups for discussions, and through heuristic teaching, be guided to independently seek solutions. This approach not only builds students' confidence in piano learning but also stimulates their enthusiasm.

5.3. Realizing personalized instruction

In practice, some students have yet to grasp the basic concepts of piano learning, while others—although possessing a certain foundation—still fall short of course requirements. Thus, instructors should develop a deep understanding of each student's proficiency and interests in piano to accurately assess individual differences and lay a solid foundation for effective teaching.

Educators should move away from uniform, teacher-centered instruction and rote learning, and instead help students overcome their anxiety toward piano classes through targeted guidance aimed at improving their technical skills.

Teachers should tailor content to their teaching context and personal style. Selecting high-quality musical works to teach piano techniques can enrich the students' learning experience. In the long run, this approach reduces the difficulty of piano instruction while maintaining students' engagement and motivation.

5.4. Diversification of piano curricula

In the pursuit of reforming piano education, teachers must break away from outdated curricular frameworks and explore diversified course structures. As societal demands on graduate competencies continue to rise, the traditional one-size-fits-all curriculum is no longer sufficient to support students' holistic development. A rigid framework restricts exploration in diverse knowledge and skill domains, rendering piano education repetitive and inflexible. In response, curriculum innovation must align with disciplinary characteristics and institutional resource advantages. This includes adopting synchronous instruction, blending group classes with micro-courses. Group classes should emphasize theoretical instruction and performance training, while micro-courses should address common challenges students face with targeted reinforcement. These two modes complement each other, jointly enhancing students' piano and artistic competencies.

5.5. Diversification of teaching methods

University piano educators should actively diversify instructional methods to cultivate students' comprehensive artistic abilities. Firstly, the content of group classes should undergo diversified reforms, with attention given to the learning progress of all students. The advantages of group classes should be fully leveraged to strengthen functional exercises, improve keyboard familiarity, and integrate modern technologies such as computers and multimedia tools to enhance auditory and visual learning experiences and improve sight-reading skills [6].

In the context of micro-course education, attention should not be limited to piano techniques alone; students' overall artistic competence should also be nurtured. Micro-course reforms should align with the broader talent cultivation goals of higher education institutions, emphasizing interdisciplinary development and promoting students' practical and creative capabilities. The diversification of piano teaching methods essentially reflects a shift from standardized training in the industrial age to personalized education in the digital era. By integrating the scalability of group instruction with the precision of micro-course interventions, a complete educational chain can be constructed—ranging from skill development, to cultural cognition, to creative output [7]. This transformation not only responds to the essential values of arts education but also reaffirms the irreplaceable value of piano instruction amid the rise of artificial intelligence: cultivating compound talents who not only master the physicality of 88 piano keys but also explore the boundless world of musical imagination.

6. Conclusion

Piano instruction, as a core course within music programs at institutions of higher education, not only lays a solid foundation for the successful progression of other music-related courses but also equips students with valuable teaching practice experience. Its significance within the educational system is self-evident. Currently, piano education in Chinese universities has entered a new stage of development and has already achieved notable success. However, such achievements should not be mistaken for long-term sustainability. The existing exam-centric model rooted in the industrial age stands in stark contrast to the personalized and innovation-oriented goals advocated by contemporary higher education. In the context of global competition in music education, European and American institutions have widely adopted multidimensional evaluation frameworks such as "learning portfolios + practice-based projects + cultural reflection," which underscores the urgency for reform in China's evaluation systems.

Accordingly, we must undertake continuous reform and innovation of current university piano instruction models. Institutions should actively explore new teaching strategies, increase investment in piano education research, and stay aligned with the pulse of the times. By fully leveraging the unique appeal and strengths of piano instruction, universities can improve teaching efficiency and enhance the overall quality of talent cultivation. This paper has sought to outline the current state of piano instruction in universities, identify widespread issues—including misunderstandings of foundational theory, rigid and monotonous practice repertoires, and suboptimal teaching outcomes—and propose reformative pathways.

In this context, educators must persistently explore innovative instructional methods to meet the evolving demands of modern education. Through the concerted efforts of teachers and students, piano education in higher education can continue to advance, yielding shared growth and progress for all stakeholders involved.

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