

THOUGHTS BY SOME OF AMERICA'S LEADERS IN GROUP PIANO TEACHING

Why Do You Advocate Group Piano Teaching?

Sylvia Coats

I have taught piano pedagogy and class piano at universities for nearly thirty years. Each year the pedagogy students, working together, teach a group of children. While one or two students teach the children, the rest of the class observes. Graduate pedagogy majors are supervised in teaching a group of music majors as well as a children's group.

In the group setting pedagogy students are immediately aware that teaching in groups is a learning process, not a repetitive drill to imitate the teacher's playing. They discover that trying to teach group members individually is not only nonproductive but quite chaotic. They learn to listen to each student's needs and facilitate a creative lesson in which each student is actively involved. Pedagogy students recognize that planning objectives and activities is of the utmost importance in order to focus the lesson on the concepts to be learned and the transfers that can be made between repertoire and improvisations. When groups are well facilitated with a positive, accepting environment that encourages exploration, students are more likely to be intensely engaged, express opinions, and experience personal insights about themselves and music. Both student teachers and children are amazed at their progress in one semester, which is a result of being process-oriented, not product-oriented. Good playing evolves from students learning through interactive experiences with music and each other.

Ted Cooper

There are many reasons I advocate teaching in groups. Some of the most important reasons are:

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- Groups have a powerful, built-in motivation because of the peer interaction.
- Classes provide an efficient and upbeat way to teach fundamental skills like rhythm, ear training, and technique.
- They offer students frequent and relatively stress-free opportunities to perform.

The most important reason I advocate groups, however, is that group study develops students as independent learners more predictably and consistently than private lessons alone. Group teaching is *rooted* in the idea of creating independent learners. When students study in groups, they are required to have a level of independence to function within a class, and that independence is carried home.

In my private teaching, I find myself less likely to allow students to have a healthy struggle with their difficulties. It's just too easy to step in and solve their problems, but that strategy won't necessarily help them develop their problem-solving abilities for the future. Teaching in groups helps me to rein in the tendency to help out too much.

Brenda Dillon

Having taught private piano lessons prior to my exposure to group teaching, I was always frustrated with how little could be accomplished in a thirty-minute or hourly lesson. My core belief about playing piano is that adults who were taught as functional musicians tended to play piano longer than those who were taught just repertoire and technique. My informal research consistently reinforces this belief. Adults who were taught to harmonize, transpose, sight-read, improvise, and ear play are more likely to continue to play for their own pleasure, whereas those who learned a few recital pieces don't necessarily play as adults. Not only do group lessons offer the extended time for a more extensive curriculum, I was always impressed with peer learning and peer influence on home practice. Playing badly for me was one thing, but playing badly for peers is quite another.

Barbara Fast

In my experience, beginning adult students in the group setting progress more quickly than students in private lessons. Meeting more frequently (fifty minutes twice a week) and working toward group goals and deadlines fosters rapid development.

The group setting naturally provides motivation. Individuals hear their peers perform, they observe comments made to and by other students, and their class-

mates provide support. A collective energy occurs when students share their knowledge within a group. Fostering dynamic learning that moves beyond a teacher's individual instruction is exciting.

It's rewarding to continually hone one's teaching skills due to the demands of the group environment. In addition to monitoring individual and group response, teachers are continually making decisions about the most effective:

- Teaching medium (on headset, off headset)
- Learning situation (individual, paired, group)
- Technology (MIDI accompaniments, Visualizer, overhead projector/SMART Board)
- Motivational activities and projects
- Feedback (verbal and written instructor or student comments, self-recording, taped video performance)

Martha Hilley

Group piano provides the perfect environment for “active learning”—the process of learning through doing. Research has shown that active learning promotes a higher level of remembering by incorporating such activities as read, hear, see, say, and do. These activities are easily adapted to the group piano classroom. Students must be encouraged to recognize and accept their responsibility for learning. They must realize that mistakes are learning opportunities. A strong “sense of community” within the group piano classroom will promote peer activities and a support for peer learning.

How Has Group Piano Teaching Impacted Your Approach to Teaching in General?

Sylvia Coats

The teaching skills acquired in planning and facilitating group lessons markedly improve one's individual instruction. In an individual setting the teacher may not intentionally prepare lesson plans, and teach by imitation and lecturing rather than involving the student in problem solving. In order to enable students to make creative musical decisions, the teacher's mode of instruction is one of asking the student what musical concerns he or she has and experimenting with solutions to improve the playing. The teacher should completely invest in caring relationships in both individual and group settings.

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Ted Cooper

Group teaching has without a doubt made me a better private teacher. Teaching groups of children challenges teachers to think more fundamentally about how children learn, and that understanding benefits all my students. Classes require us to confront and examine how we think about teaching. It requires us to plan more carefully, think more clearly, and be more creative. Group teaching compels instructors to constantly clarify and refine our vision of how children learn with an urgency not always felt teaching privately.

Barbara Fast

My private teaching became more efficient and goal-oriented after gaining group experience. The following skills I attribute to acquiring in the class environment and continue to work on in my teaching:

- Speaking succinctly: this facilitates fast-paced group teaching and quickly enlivens private teaching.
- Verbally cueing students through scales and cadences or repertoire: This skill easily transfers to the private lesson and becomes an additional teaching tool
- Lesson planning: After years of teaching group piano, I still generate five-week block lesson plans and daily plans before each class. It's essential to know where the group is going and the strategy for getting there. In private lessons this translates into always previewing new material and completely alleviates "turn the page" teaching.
- Incorporating fun activities: Both young students and adults in groups respond to ensembles, quick games, and innovative projects. The same activities expand the scope of private lessons.

What Are Some of the Most Common Misconceptions about Group Piano Teaching?

Ted Cooper

The most unfortunate misconception is that teachers need an electronic piano lab to offer group classes. While I have taught using a piano lab, for the past twenty years I have taught in studios equipped with two acoustic pianos. I currently teach classes with six to eight students using this setup and would feel quite comfortable teaching a group of four students with one instrument.

The biggest misconception, however, is that group study produces less successful piano students than private lessons. My experience has shown that while there are differences in abilities among students in the two types of study, the varying curricular strategies result in both positive and negative qualities. Private teaching is generally more repertoire-based, with considerable energy focused on learning individual pieces for performance, but students may have a less developed ability to learn independently. Group teaching, on the other hand, is often more heavily skill-based, focusing on the requisite reading, rhythm, technical, and aural skills needed to learn repertoire independently, but may not have had as much of the back-and-forth modeling to present a fully polished performance. Teachers of both disciplines need to be aware of the inherent strengths and weaknesses in each program of study and make the necessary adjustments to ensure students receive a well-rounded musical education.

Brenda Dillon

I think the most erroneous misconception is that group lessons aren't for serious pianists and they rank below private lessons. Richard Chronister often said that "good teaching is good teaching no matter how many people are in the room." Not only do I believe that, but I also believe that private piano teachers often develop the mind-set that polished repertoire (with whatever technical skills it takes to polish it) is the "be all, end all" of piano study. That's why we have piano majors who may play several concerti beautifully, but you might have to call 911 if you asked them to play "Happy Birthday" without the music at a party. Another misconception is that everyone in the class must be at the same skill level even if it means turning the class into several private lessons. Skilled group teachers know how to work with the class as a group and how to work with varying skill levels.

Barbara Fast

One of the most common misconceptions is that students won't learn as much or will not progress as quickly in groups. Just the opposite is true, particularly at the beginning levels if students meet together frequently. Students learn from each other and are motivated by their peers.

Another misconception is that students are unable to perform musically in the group setting. While addressing musicianship principles demands more thought, with careful planning it can be accomplished. Students who perform well are an inspiration to their classmates.

It's often thought that group piano teachers miss out on personal relationships with students. One of the invigorating elements in class teaching is balancing brief but critical individual attention with instruction to groups of students or to the entire class. Observing students interact individually and also within the group allows teachers to experience a wide spectrum of the student's personality.

Martha Hilley

The most obvious misconception about group piano is that students do not learn as much when they don't have the undivided attention of their teacher. As mentioned previously, the environment within the group piano classroom is perfect for promoting learning. Students will listen to their peers, often more than they will to their teacher. If the teacher acts as the facilitator and allows the group dynamic to occur, learning will be at a premium level. There are many who feel the ideal teaching/learning situation would be a combination of group and applied. For many students I feel this is true.

What Qualities Make a Group Piano Teacher Most Effective?

Brenda Dillon

I find that a good sense of humor is greatly desirable. Also, a group teacher must have good organizational skills. Good planning and flexibility have salvaged many classes from disaster. Another quality is having empathy for adults who are genuinely trying but often struggling. It's also helpful when the teacher can explain a concept in different ways. We may know that our students' learning styles vary, but we may be teaching in a way that only honors one style. Another skill is the ability to know when to push, when to pull, and when to just relax. Another skill is the ability to be student-centered rather than teacher-centered. This is especially true in teaching adult groups because they are usually emphatic about the curriculum they want to learn.

Barbara East

Although embodying different teaching styles, both extroverted and quieter personalities are equally successful in the group setting. More important are the qualities all effective group teachers possess. These include:

- High-level personal musicianship skills
- Organization: necessary for systematic lesson planning and clear goal setting
- Efficient time management in the classroom
- Concise use of language: too much teacher talk kills group teaching
- Incisive diagnostic skills: what's going well, what needs attention
- Ability to prioritize: what's the most important element to address first
- Persistence to tackle and "get to" the core of any technical or musical problem
- Ability to quickly create change in student playing or comprehension
- Understanding of student motivation: incorporating humor and creative activities
- Passion and great love for the students and the material being taught
- Insistence on having fun themselves: if a teacher is bored, it's a sign that elements need to be changed

Martha Hilley

The ability to listen, the ability to see, the ability to understand, the ability to criticize, the ability to plan and then not follow the plan, the ability to laugh *at* yourself and *with* your students.

What Factors Have Had the Most Impact on Group Piano Teaching?

Barbara Fast

As inexpensive electronic keyboards became widely available, teachers realized they could easily group students together. Even independent teachers with acoustic pianos could more easily expand instruction possibilities. Certainly keyboard labs at the university level revolutionized group piano teaching for beginning-level instrumentalists and vocalists.

The expansion of piano pedagogy degree and certificate programs greatly impacted group teaching. Because most programs include some training in class piano, there are many more qualified teachers committed to group instruction.

Broad musicianship skills that include sight-reading, harmonization, transposition, score reading, accompanying, ensembles, and ear training are more easily taught in a group setting. These skills are currently more emphasized in both private and group teaching.

With the growing interest in class piano teaching, materials specifically targeted for group piano students were published. Currently we are in our second and third generation of group piano texts for the university-level student, a testament to the acceptance of group piano instruction.

What Technology Has Most Positively Impacted Group Piano Teaching?

Brenda Dillon

I rank digital pianos as having the most positive impact—especially digital pianos produced in the last few years. When I first started teaching on a lab at a college, it was helpful to have headsets and multiple keyboards, but the quality was nothing like it is now. Then I thought that having a lab setting and a Visualizer meant that I had died and gone to heaven. When I compare that to the technology found in many collegiate classrooms and some home studios today, it seems awfully paltry. Although technology was never meant to replace a teacher, it can certainly enhance the curriculum and effectively enable the teacher who knows how to use it wisely.

Barbara East

The use of electronic keyboards has had the most impact on group teaching. Depending on how advanced the keyboards are, students can hear MIDI accompaniments, create multitrack recordings, and experience recordings of their practice or performance. With advanced lab controllers teachers can address individual students, a group of students, or the entire group. All of this produces a tremendously varied classroom environment.

The Visualizer has been around for a long time but is still one of the most useful pieces of equipment. Not only can teachers visually show chords or scales, it can be used to physically demonstrate technique.

Another essential technology tool is an overhead projector, SMART board, or some method of projecting teaching materials that the entire group can view simultaneously. This is an enormous aid in previewing music with students.

As computers have advanced, they are continually being used to interact with keyboards, or used as projection devices by teachers.

Martha Hilley

The quality of digital instruments has had the most beneficial impact on group piano instruction. It is now much easier for students to go to and from digital and acoustic instruments. The music industry has listened to those of us in the field and has met our needs with the highest quality and durability possible.

What Do You Foresee Will Have an Impact
on Group Piano Teaching throughout This Century?

Sylvia Coats

Continuous advances in technology will change how we deliver instruction. Digital pianos, computers and software, iPods, Internet, podcasting, and video-conferencing have changed how we communicate with colleagues, students, and families. It is possible to teach a student or class anywhere in the world from the teacher's home. One can join an Internet band and rehearse regularly as if band members were in the same rehearsal room rather than at locations all over the world. Our students immediately involve themselves in the latest advances in technology. Socializing is appealing to students of all ages. In the future piano groups may be connected by the Internet, video cameras, and electronic or acoustic pianos.

How do we as music teachers help students learn and improve their performance in such a rapidly changing environment? Teachers may meet the challenge by focusing on student-centered instruction, which encourages students to make creative and knowledgeable choices about music and technology. Learning with others in a group setting prepares students to make musical decisions for the rest of their lives.

Barbara Fast

Technology and how students interface with it in their personal lives will continue to impact group teaching. In the last few decades we have experienced vast technological development. I anticipate that change in the technology tools used for learning or how we learn by interacting with technology will accelerate in the future. Current teachers are immigrants in the world of technology. We have gone from not experiencing technology at all to acquiring some or many skills. Younger students on the other hand are growing up with technology from birth; they are the natives. I'm sure they will eventually incorporate technology naturally into their learning and teaching in ways we haven't yet conceived.

Training in group teaching will only increase. As more teachers become comfortable with this mode of teaching, group teaching will continue to flourish both as a unique mode of learning and as an increasingly integral component of private teaching.

Martha Hilley

The use of digital media will probably have the strongest impact on teaching during this century. Computers, iPods, video iPods, software (both music and nonmusic), website, the Internet and all it implies, virtual study through distance learning and Internet 2—all are no longer possibilities. They are realities!

Highlight the Most Important Current Trends
in Group Piano Teaching

Brenda Dillon

The trend I can address most knowledgeably is the trend toward Recreational Music Making (RMM) group classes for adult piano students. Demographics suggest that a huge number of adult piano students are going to be available to teachers who want to teach them. One out of every three adults over twenty-one in the United States is a boomer. Not only do 10,000 of them turn fifty every day, they control 70 percent of the nation's net worth. The icing on the cake is that a large majority of them have always wanted to learn to play the piano or they wish they hadn't quit taking lessons as a child. My experience is that RMM students just don't drop out when the class is nonstressful and they are getting to learn pieces that satisfy them. I also found that the classes can be taught quite simply with two pianos side by side and the students seated in a semicircle facing the pianos. They go to the pianos in pairs when we're learning concepts, and all solo playing is voluntary. My job is to think of ways to make the concepts easier and to support whatever level of playing they find acceptable.

Barbara Fast

The flourishing of piano pedagogy degree and certificate programs nationwide has contributed to many more group piano teachers receiving excellent training. There is also a parallel interest from independent teachers in professionalism through certification and national exam systems. All of this has contributed to a high level of class teaching across the country. Group teachers are committed to that teaching environment and are motivated to seek out continual training. National conferences and professional organizations centered on group piano teaching continue to flourish.

Because group teachers tend to embrace change and new technologies have the potential to revolutionize the classroom, keeping up with the latest technological advances is of continual interest. Deciding which equipment to utilize has many ramifications. While almost every new technology enhances the class environment, learning a new technology takes time for the teacher and sometimes demands class time. Which technology, then, is worth the investment is an ever-increasing difficult decision.

What Changes Do You Foresee in the Future of Group Piano Teaching?

Barbara Fast

Technology will continue to impact group teaching at an even more accelerated pace, while staying up-to-date will remain a budget concern for individuals and institutions. Decisions will continue to be increasingly complex: which technological advances to incorporate, or which ones will pass quickly, will be ongoing questions.

Because young children today experience most of their extracurricular activities in groups, I anticipate that group teaching will gain even wider acceptance in the future. Children experience class lessons as very natural. It's teachers that are sometimes unfamiliar with this mode of learning. As teachers gain more experience in group teaching, they will continue to find ways to intermix group teaching with private teaching.

Biographies

Sylvia Coats

Sylvia Coats is active as a teacher, performer, adjudicator, and workshop leader. She is Associate Professor of Piano Pedagogy and Class Piano at Wichita State University and previously served on the faculties of the University of Oklahoma, Norman, and Texas A&M University, Kingsville.

Dr. Coats is a member of the Sotto Voce Trio, which has performed contemporary music throughout the United States, most recently on a tour of Texas, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Other recital tours have included universities, recital series, and children's concerts in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Virginia, Nevada, and Oklahoma. The unique trio composed of soprano, saxophone, and piano has premiered many new works.

Dr. Coats has given presentations at several music teachers national conferences on dancing Baroque and Romantic music, group teaching, technology, and chamber music. She has presented the session “Dancing the Baroque and Romantic Dances” in Beijing, Tianjin, and Hong Kong and at Westminster Choir College, Augustana College, Texas Music Teachers Association Convention at Corpus Christi, the Kansas Music Teachers Association Conference at Pittsburg, Music Teachers National Association conferences in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, and the World Piano Pedagogy Conference in Cherry Hills, New Jersey.

She recently completed a term on the MTNA Board of Directors, served as past president of the West Central Division of MTNA and the Kansas Music Teachers Association, and served as the MTNA National Chair for Collaborative Performance and Student Chapters. She is in demand for adjudicating piano competitions and festivals throughout the Midwest.

Coats holds a doctor of musical arts in performance and pedagogy from the University of Colorado, where Dr. Guy Duckworth was her primary professor, and bachelor’s and master’s degrees in piano performance from Texas Tech University, where she studied with Louis Catuogno.

The graduate and undergraduate programs in piano pedagogy, which she directs at Wichita State University, are recognized as leading programs in the field and draw students from the United States and abroad.

Coats’s book, *Thinking as You Play: Teaching Piano in Individual and Group Lessons*, is published by Indiana University Press. She has also published articles in the journals *American Music Teacher*, *Keyboard Companion*, *Piano Adventures*© *Teacher*, and *Piano Pedagogy Forum* and in numerous state journals and newsletters. She lives in Derby, Kansas, with her husband, Casey. Her college-age children, Michelle and Jason, attend Kansas universities.

Ted Cooper

Ted Cooper is a faculty member of the piano department at the Levine School of Music in Washington, D.C., and a composer of educational music. He is a recipient of the Music Teacher National Association/National Piano Foundation’s Group Piano Teaching Award and has presented sessions at the 2001 and 2005 National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy and at the 2004 MTNA national conference, where video segments of his teaching were featured. Mr. Cooper’s compositions are published by Alfred Publishing Company and Carl Fischer. His newest compositions for piano are *Changing Trains*, *Twilight Sky*, and *Around the World on 88 Keys, Books 1–2*, all published by Alfred Publishing Company.

Brenda Dillon

Brenda Dillon, Project Director for the National Piano Foundation, is a leader in the Recreational Music Making movement—teaching classes, training teachers, writing articles, and developing materials. She is the author of *Piano for Fun and Fulfillment*, an adult beginning method for RMM students. Brenda serves as a member of the advisory board for the Frances Clark Center and was former Associate Editor of *Keyboard Companion*. She is an education consultant for the Roland Corporation. Her articles have appeared in *American Music Teacher*, *Keyboard Companion*, *Clavier*, *Design for Arts in Education*, *Piano Technicians Journal*, *Southwestern Musician*, *PianoNotes*, (a National Piano Foundation publication), and various music trade magazines.

Barbara Fast

Dr. Barbara Fast, keyboard department Chair and Professor of piano pedagogy, coordinates the group piano program as well as teaches graduate and undergraduate piano pedagogy at the University of Oklahoma. Named the 2008 Irene and Julian Rothbaum Presidential Professor of Excellence in the Arts at OU, she cofounded the National Group Piano/Piano Pedagogy Forum, held for the first time in 2000. She also serves as Associate Editor of *Piano Pedagogy Forum*, the first keyboard journal on the Web, and has presented workshops on sight-reading, ensemble music, technology, newly published music, and historical keyboard pedagogy at numerous national and international conferences. Additionally, she has performed in chamber settings in England, Russia, Japan, and Korea, as well as presented lecture recitals and master classes throughout the United States. Dr. Fast previously served as Keyboard Chair and Associate Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Northern Iowa.

Martha Hilley

Martha Hilley joined the faculty of The University of Texas at Austin School of Music in 1982 as Coordinator of Group Piano. In 1986, she became Keyboard Division Head and served in that position until 1989. From 1994 to 1999, she served as Associate Director and Director of Undergraduate Studies for the School of Music and was Chair of the 1999–2000 University of Texas Faculty Council.

Ms. Hilley has been active in workshops, conferences, and seminars on the international, national, state, and local levels. She has taught for International

Workshops in Italy, Belgium, Hawaii, Australia, Norway, and Austria. She also served on the faculty of the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival in Alaska and Tunghai University's Summer Keyboard Institute at Tunghai University in Taichung, Taiwan.

Professor Hilley's abilities as a teacher were recognized in 1983 when she received the Texas Excellence Teaching Award and again in 1988 when she was awarded one of four Dad's Association Centennial Fellowships for excellence in undergraduate teaching. In 1992, she was recipient of the prestigious Orpheus Award presented by Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia in recognition of her contributions to the field of music. The Texas Music Teachers Association named Ms. Hilley Outstanding Collegiate Teacher in 1997. In 1998 she was the first College of Fine Arts faculty member to be awarded the William Blunk Endowed Professorship. In 2002, Professor Hilley was named as the first MTNA Foundation Fellow for the state of Texas. In 2005 she was elected Vice-President of the Music Teachers National Association. In the spring of that same year, Hilley was named to the Academy of Distinguished Teachers at The University of Texas at Austin. In the spring of 2008, she was awarded the Distinguished Service Award from MTNA. Professor Hilley's articles have been published in *Clavier*, *Piano Quarterly* and *Keyboard Companion*. She is co-author of two college piano texts: *Piano for the Developing Musician* (two volumes) and *Piano for Pleasure*. The texts were the first to embrace dedicated digital sequencer technology through disks furnished to teachers as well as the first to provide Web-based computer tutorials, as well as downloadable pdf and mp3 files.