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## **Using Social Media in Private Lessons: Why the Future of Learning Piano Needs to Include Social Media**

by Margarita Denenburg, Heidelberg University

Over the last decade, social media has blended into our existence, becoming a significant part of our daily life and society. Today, most of us are using some form of social media. It's simplicity, convenience, and local/global capability has changed the way we access and share information with each other. Sharing ideas through social media has many advantages and can potentially enrich various learning experiences. Social media can be implemented in higher education and equally well in private studio environments. However, the ease of use and the degree of comfort we feel with social media in our day-to-day private lives is one thing, but using social media professionally is something else completely.

Applied piano lessons can be quite limiting considering that the one-hour weekly lesson is by definition limited to only one hour per week. Often in a lesson there are so many technical problems to solve that artistry can be overlooked. Big picture concepts such as interpretation, imagination, and stage presence can be cut short to focus in on that pesky phrase that has confused a student all semester. While this is often a reality, it is still necessary to cover topics like technique, memorization, performance anxiety, current leaders in the field, past leaders in the field, academic research, and wellness. As a result, many instructors are faced with this impossible mission and search for alternative ways to enrich their students' knowledge and artistry. Social media often provides great solutions to these problems.

In applied piano lessons (or other related classes), students can gain amazing amounts of knowledge, experience, and writing skills, and develop critical thinking through active online interaction. Connecting with their professor and classmates while discussing different ideas, videos, and/or articles motivates students, which keeps them involved, and in addition, creates a sense of community that piano students often lack. It unifies the class and establishes mutual goals while enhancing the learning experience. After teaching for several semesters using social media, I can testify that social media has been beneficial in both applied piano and pedagogy classes.

Yet, in spite of the great advantages that social media presents, there are several impediments to using it effectively. The colossal amount of blogs and lack of quality control can be problematic for a student who does not have the necessary knowledge to distinguish good quality from bad. Needless to say that in a learning environment the quality of content must be the highest priority, which creates a unique need for the teacher to become the curator.

To ensure quality, the teacher must create an exclusive social media group for students of his or her studio only. It is the instructor's responsibility to create the group and more importantly to curate it. There are many different social groups available: Facebook, Google+, Myspace, Blackboard, and many more. In my classes, a "closed" Facebook group was implemented, but most social media sites have a setting that allows users to enter private posts that only a limited group of people will be able to access.

Here are some ideas on how to implement social media in your classroom. I will group these into four large categories related to content, social implementation, participation, and social media for young students.

## **Content**

World-class performances: Perhaps the most obvious use for social media in the applied lesson setting is the sharing of YouTube video performances. The availability of world-class performances has to be one of the most important benefits of the online world for any musician.

With just a few simple clicks, a great musician can appear in your living room, and play just for you! The ability to listen to the same piece played by several different performers is a valuable tool that enriches the students as musicians while teaching them the art of interpretation. Unfortunately, many teachers feel that they have to post only great performances. *Performances that are just “O.K.” are important, too!*

YouTube is a place with extraordinary performances as well as unprofessional ones. It has an abundant amount of video and audio clips that range from life changing to, well . . . not so life changing. Teaching the students to differentiate between good and bad performances is a valuable skill set for any performer. In many institutions, during the weekly studio class, students play for each other while their classmates get to comment on their playing. While some teachers might suggest that such an evaluation is fair and educational, I would like to add that the benefit of a freely expressed opinion is much different when evaluating a stranger versus your studio classmate. Evaluating performances that are not by a classmate eliminates the discomfort of peer pressure and allows students to honestly voice their opinions.

Posting two performances, one excellent and one not, and asking the students to evaluate them by discussing which one they prefer and why can greatly enhance their musicianship as they apply what they have learned to their own music. The evaluations can address technique, musicianship, stage presence, and more. One of the two performances should be significantly less musical or artistic, making the quality difference obvious at first. Once the students are comfortable with the process, blurring the difference between the two makes the task more challenging.

Exploring common repertoire through social media is a great way to get students familiar with the standard literature as well as to listen to pieces that are seldom performed and are overlooked in the standard literature class. This technique can also encourage students to seek out and find their own unique pieces.

It is important not only to let the students comment on your posts but to allow them the freedom to explore the YouTube channel for different pieces and share these with the class. While students search through various pieces, they expand their musical horizons and repertoire knowledge. Being exposed to as much music as possible creates a better and a more educated musician. Being familiar with pieces that are not under the cap of standard repertoire is important not only for the sole reason of musical knowledge but also from a performer’s perspective.

Pedagogy: There are many pedagogy blogs online that can benefit both the teacher and the students. In the same way that viewing less than stellar performances can lead to great musical development, critically reading blogs that are unprofessional can be a great learning resource. The instructor, as well as the students, can take part in large pedagogy blogs online while sharing some of the quotes that interest them in the class's social group. Certainly, not all of the posts will be of the highest quality. With the instructor's guidance, the students learn to evaluate the quality of the content. The instructor once again takes the role of the curator, leading the discussion in the right direction. While some of the larger pedagogical blogs can be, at times, judgmental and intimidating for a beginner teacher, the small, closed group becomes essential for exactly that reason. You as an instructor have to provide an environment where the students feel safe and comfortable sharing their ideas, thus making a confident, motivated, and "thinking" teacher. The students will also hopefully stay active as members of the blogs after they graduate, which gives them a lifelong tool that will allow them to stay on top of their craft.

Another use of social media in a pedagogy class setting is posting video clips of young children performing and critiquing their technique, musicality, and artistry. It is much easier to see mistakes in someone else's students than in your own. Learning to evaluate young students' playing will help the students with their own teaching. Some teachers may worry about privacy issues. However, if it has been made public on YouTube, there should be no conflict.

In addition, posted teaching clips can help the students in their first steps of piano teaching. Viewing such clips can help with note reading, rhythm introduction, technique, dynamics, music theory, and much more. Also, because every student is unique, the video clips can provide the novice teacher with different teaching approaches.

## **Social Implementation**

Social implementation is an unexpected bonus that occurs with involvement in a social media group. Properly used, social media can help with the creation of a "family" feel in a studio. Pianists, especially, can feel quite alone and lacking the support that more collaborative instruments provide. There is no orchestra or choir for pianists unless they are soloists. Therefore, through social media, a "piano family" is created, which benefits students not only with knowledge and artistic exposure but also with friendship. Most of us are social beings, and working together on mutual targets can be of great value to all of us.

While the numbers of participants involved measures the success of most social media groups, in the educational setting that is not the case. The key to a successful social media educational group is to have consistent activities and interaction between a small cohort of pianists. To have an effective social group, the teacher has to keep the blog alive by posting often and interacting with the students. By doing so, the instructor creates a learning environment that the students share, expressing their ideas, and learning new material.

Often with the short time frame of the weekly lesson, it is far too easy to be overly serious; light-hearted performances get overlooked. By having a social group, a teacher can have posts solely for fun. Funny piano comics or "different" piano playing (Anderson and Roe and/or Igudisman and Joo duos) can be posted just for enjoyment.

## **Participation**

Perhaps the most important aspect of a successful educational social media group is equal participation by all the members. For that to happen, the instructor has to create a welcoming and non-judgmental environment where students feel comfortable sharing what they have to say. The instructor may want to have a graded section in the syllabus requiring students to comment on every post made in that particular group, but the *content* of responses should never be graded. In addition, I found it helpful to require students to comment on at least two of their classmates' comments. I observed that once the students got involved in the social group, they would comment longer, more often, and be an active participant in the online discussion without being forced into it. When students visit the group often and share their ideas, you, as a teacher, know that you have done something right!

An additional point worth mentioning is that the instructor has to curate the discussion and step in immediately in case of negative, offensive comments. Words on the screen have no intonation. We don't hear how they are being said, and that can be occasionally interpreted in different ways, especially if there are students from different backgrounds and at times from different countries.

## **Social Media for Young Students**

While social media can be used in everything from the academic environment to private studios that cater to children and teenagers, special attention needs to be paid when dealing with younger students. Of course, we are not going to let our six-year-olds go on Facebook unsupervised. Instead, we encourage the parents to go on Facebook with their children.

Parents can be excellent motivators, supporters, encouragers, and educators to their children. If we get the parents motivated, the young student will get motivated as well. Creating a social group for parents is a powerful tool that can lead to better and more diligent students. The parent can watch different video clips with his or her child, commenting on it through their child's eyes. The posted material, of course, will be much different than that posted in an academic social media group. The private instructor will still have to navigate and encourage participation. Asking the parents and students to comment on the posts together can be a key to a bond with the teacher and, consequently, with the music. Examples for posts may include classical music with a Disney cartoon, short character pieces for children, performances of young pianists, tips for practicing, other related discussion questions, and much more.

There are multiple ways that social media can be implemented in academia as well as in the private studio spectrum. To have a successful social media group, the instructor/curator of the group must create a closed social group where the only participants are students of a particular class. Posting often and having a wide variety of posts will result in an active group where students gain mutual interests and goals. The need for a small exclusive social group contributes to the creative and critical thinking of students while providing a safe learning environment that will motivate them. The teacher has to monitor the quality of content as well as teach the students how to evaluate the posts. Most importantly, social media has the power to alleviate the

pressure of condensed lessons and classes, making the learning cohesive, exciting, and innovative.

*Dr. Margarita Denenburg is Assistant Professor of Keyboard Studies at Heidelberg University, where she teaches applied piano and pedagogy, among other courses. She recently presented Stravinsky's Rite of Spring with pianist Dr. Gerald Evans, culminating with concerts in Chambery and Le Bourget-du-Lac, France. Cleveland Music Blog called their performance "breathtakingly beautiful," while American composer Jeffery Mumford hailed their efforts as a "refreshing fidelity to the composer's intentions."*

*In spring of 2016, Dr. Denenburg was awarded the prestigious campus-wide Innovative Teaching Award for her contributions in piano pedagogy, class piano, and applied lesson teaching at Heidelberg University. In addition, she received the Aigler Research Award from Heidelberg University for her work in musician's wellness and for recording a CD with soprano Carol Dusdieker. Currently, she serves on the Faculty Development Committee at Heidelberg University and is the Chair of the Ohio Music Teachers Association Commissioned Composer Committee.*

*Dr. Denenburg judges multiple piano competitions, is a member of the College Music Society and the Music Teachers National Association, and has recently become a Nationally Certified Teacher of Music. As a researcher, Dr. Denenburg has published articles in the American Music Teacher and Clavier Companion, and she has reviewed More Classics to Moderns, Books 1–6, (Second Series) in the American Music Teacher. In summer of 2016, Dr. Denenburg created the very first Practical Piano Pedagogy Workshop at Heidelberg University, the essence of which is to have a progressive series of lectures that share important ideas on the basics of piano teaching from the very first lesson into intermediate stages. With lectures by Irina Gorin and herself, teachers gained knowledge in how to develop healthy technique, musicianship, and much more. In the spring of 2015, Dr. Denenburg was a presenter at the University of Savoy and Chambery Conservatory, France, as well as at the College Music Society's Regional Conference at Michigan State University. Topics included "Using YouTube in the College Classes and Applied Lessons" and "Challenges in the Performance of the Rite of Spring for One Piano 4 Hands and Its Transformation to Two Pianos." In spring of 2016, Dr. Denenburg returned to the College Music Society's Regional Conference at Indiana University, this time presenting a lightning talk on "20 Ways to Enhance Your Class Piano Experience."*

*After receiving her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in piano performance from Arizona State University, she graduated with distinction from the University of Southern California in 2012 with a Doctorate of Musical Arts in piano performance. In addition, she participated in several summer festivals, including Sergei Babayan's International Piano Academy at the Cleveland Institute of Music and the International Keyboard Institute and Festival at the Mannes School of Music.*

*For more information, please visit [www.MargaritaDenenburg.com](http://www.MargaritaDenenburg.com).*

## **Piano Duets: Facilitating Musical and Collaborative Skills**

by Paola Savvidou, University of Michigan

Sharing the stage with a duet partner can be an invigorating and exciting experience. Making music together is rewarding and provides our students with an opportunity to multiply the musical energy created on stage, creating bigger sounds and thicker textures. The process of working with a partner allows our students to deepen their musical skills and to learn valuable life skills for collaborating with others.

Playing duets generally refers to playing together on the same piano with four hands, as opposed to duos that involve two players on two separate pianos, or one piano player with another instrumentalist. Duets can be incorporated into the piano lesson in multiple ways: student with teacher, two students together, parent with student, or student with sibling.

By exposing our students to duet repertoire, we are expanding their horizons of the music available for the piano. (See Weekley and Arganbright (2007) for a list of representative duet repertoire.) Learning duets enhances our students' reading and listening abilities. Although pianists are already accustomed to reading two lines, adding the extra challenge of another grand staff takes score reading to an entirely new level! Developing flexible eyes is key for scanning the entire score (Burmeister, 1991). The teacher should develop assignments to help students with this skill. Although playing the entire score reduction may not be feasible for some students, it would be helpful for the students to be able to move through the score playing the primary melodic lines. Pedagogical composers often construct duets with melodic lines that pass back and forth between players in duets. One assignment could be for each player to be able to play just the melodic lines of both players without any accompaniment material.

Playing together means that students are not only responsible for listening to their own two hands, but also to their partner's. Listening for the composite sound requires each pianist to know their part well while understanding where their part fits into the bigger musical picture. Whenever possible (i.e., if the parts are of equal difficulty), I advocate for the student to learn both parts. This means advance planning—it is crucial to assign the works well ahead of a performance with enough time to study each individually. If one part is significantly harder than the student part (i.e., for the teacher), then the student could perhaps expedite this process by learning to sing the melody whenever it appears in the other part and make notes in the score.

Depending on the piece, one of the initial steps towards expanding listening skills would be to trim down the texture into its skeletal components. Harmonies could be reduced to blocked chords, which the students could then play together, and melodic lines could be played without any accompaniment. During this time students should listen carefully to one another and work on matching articulation and shaping of their melodies. With the accessibility of technology in the studio, another useful tool would be to have the students record their parts and send the students home with their partner's recorded part. Students could listen to their partner's part at home and also practice with it. Through the use of GarageBand, or apps such as Anytune, one could slow down the part for practicing at different speeds.

One of the most exciting aspects of playing a duet is the richer sound that can be produced from four hands on one piano. The entire range of the keyboard is often utilized, creating richer sonorities. In order to bring out all the colors, performers must be careful not to overpower one another and explore a greater palette of colors. Practicing with extreme dynamics can be helpful here. For example, the melodic lines could be played *forte* and all accompaniments *piano*. This will clarify where the primary lines are and where the supporting ones are.

In order to balance the sound and match articulation, students must also consider their physical approach to the instrument. Each pianist has her own unique sound resulting from how much arm weight she uses, her hand shape and size, as well as the way she releases into the key. Playing on the same instrument brings up the challenge of matching technical approach. It is helpful to have partners observe each other play and notice how each other's sound production mechanism works. Simple activities, such as copying each other's five-finger pattern or scale and working towards matching each other's sound and articulation, are helpful.

Precise cueing for starting at the same time, lifting the arms together, or landing together at the start of a phrase, are crucial for a polished-sounding duet. Both individuals should be responsible for deciding who is going to cue when and how. A quick sniff, head movement, or wrist motion could signify the upbeat before the beginning of the phrase. Cues should be considered as an important part of the body language in the performance and should be practiced consistently and clarified as much as possible.

In addition to cueing, well-organized and expressive physical movements can have an enormous impact in a duet performance. Non-verbal cues dominate the meaning we gain even from direct verbal communication. According to Pease & Pease (2004), body language comprises between 60–80% of communication. At the absence of verbal communication as in a performance, this becomes even more present, since we communicate with each other through the physical movements and musical sound. The close proximity of the piano duet allows students to explore moving together through phrases by leaning their torso together, pressing elbows together to signify growth in dynamics, and gently swaying to feel the pulse together. A study by Keller, Knoblich, and Repp investigated how musicians playing duets maintain synchrony during performance. The findings showed that musicians matched each other better when they were able to simulate each other's actions. When the movements of pianists were similar in style, their matching was tighter and their synchronization was better. Training students to match physical gestures may therefore assist in better coordination and anticipation of subtle rhythmic nuance.

Beyond the musical skills mentioned above, playing together teaches our students one of the most important skills musicians must develop: collaboration. The truth is that when working together with someone else, in addition to being a rewarding experience, it can also be a challenging one. Many of us dreaded when our teachers asked us to work together as a team towards a project. Inevitably there would always be team members who didn't complete their part, leaving the rest of us having to do extra work. This situation is a little different in the duet world. It is not possible for one person to "cover" for the other—we only have two hands, after all! However, other difficulties arise: the pace of learning may vary between partners, learning styles may differ, and levels of ability may vary. In order to successfully address these issues in

the duet setting, we must remember that we are teaching our students not only musical skills, but also how to collaborate. Here are some suggestions geared towards developing these skills:

1. *Understanding collaboration:* The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the verb "to collaborate" as "the action of working with someone to produce or create something." One of the key words in this definition is the word "working." Students must be made aware of the difference between solitary solo piano practice and collaborative music making. They must understand that to collaborate with someone, one must be willing to exert mental and physical effort in order to produce results. Each partner has to intelligently think about the music, practice on their own, and offer her ideas and suggestions for improvement.
2. *Productive dialogue:* As with any work environment, playing duets must be viewed as both a time to enjoy each other's company, and also to be productive. We must train our students to become peer mentors. They should be able to give each other feedback and frame it in a constructive and productive manner. For example, if their partner keeps playing the wrong rhythm in the same spot, the right response is not to be upset at them and blame either player that the duet is not sounding good. It would be more beneficial to offer help in identifying what the issue is and work together towards finding solutions.
3. *Clarify goals:* Goals for learning duets can be both long-term and short-term. The teacher can help establish long-term goals with the students. This could be an upcoming performance at a recital, a competition, or a festival. Working backwards from a performance goal can help establish a timeline and identify when and how many rehearsals will be needed. Coming up with a mutually agreeable plan of action can help alleviate frustrations. Each and every practicing session should have specific goals in mind. Again, the teacher can help establish those in the context of longer-term performance goals. It might amount to isolating one specific part, practicing right hands together, or left hands together, or deciding on the final tempo of the piece.
4. *Teach efficient practicing techniques:* In rehearsal (as in solo practicing, too!), time can be wasted on mindless repetition. If the amount of time to rehearse is limited, then maximum efficiency is a must. Each time they play part of the piece, it should be followed by a discussion addressing whether the problem was fixed, or what else needs to happen to improve. Both parties (and the teacher) should have an opportunity to speak and address these issues.
5. *Accountability:* Part of the master plan of determining long-term goals is assigning parts that are feasible for each student. Ideally the parts should be somewhat challenging to push students to a new level, but not so challenging that they cannot be learned in time and performed successfully. Each partner is responsible for learning their part and should have clear instructions to come prepared to each rehearsal.
6. *Honor each other's learning process:* The pace of learning can vary among individuals. If a student is a more advanced reader than their partner, for example, they will likely learn their part faster. If the teacher knows this in advance, they can give the part to the student with less adept reading skills ahead of time so that they can have more time to prepare their part.

7. *Have a respectful attitude:* As mentioned earlier, playing together means working together. Students must bring to their collaborative music making the same attitude they bring towards their teachers, teammates, and classmates. That means they have to be polite, leave any negative attitude at the door, and show respect towards their partner. At the end of Yoga classes I always appreciate the word *Namaste*, which means “the light in me sees and respects the light in you.” I wouldn’t require my students to say *Namaste* to one another; however, a “thank you for playing with me” wouldn’t hurt!
8. *Personality give and take:* Balancing personality styles in a classroom is probably one of the toughest challenges teachers face on a daily basis. A teacher is trained and able to identify her students’ personality traits and tendencies. However, younger students may not necessarily be able to recognize those differences or have the skills to reconcile. The teacher here again takes the role of the facilitator in bringing together different personality types and assisting them towards productive rehearsals. An extroverted student, for example, may have the tendency to take over, always offering her opinion without leaving much space for an introverted student to express their thoughts and feelings. The teacher must make sure both parties have the opportunity to express themselves, balancing the very difficult task of preserving their individual personality styles while creating an environment where they can meet in the middle and be productive.

Playing duets is a wonderful extension of our solo piano world that is available in all different musical styles to students of all levels. Duets can enhance the students’ musical abilities such as their listening and score reading skills, ability to balance sound, and expand their technique. And, just as importantly, making music together can teach our students the invaluable life skills of collaboration, accountability, efficiency, and respect towards others that will be of use to them no matter which professional path they decide to take in the future.

## Resources

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*Paola Savvidou serves as Wellness Coordinator and Global Education Advisor for the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. She previously served as Assistant Professor of Piano Pedagogy at the University of Missouri, where she taught applied piano, undergraduate and graduate courses in piano pedagogy and wellness, and coordinated the Group Piano Program.*

*As a proponent of healthy living for musicians, she utilizes Laban Movement Analysis, Yoga, and creative movement within her teaching to improve alignment while deepening expressivity in performance. She frequently presents related research work at prominent conferences including the MTNA National Conference, the International Society for Music Education Conference, the European Association for Schools of Music Conference, the College Music Society's International Conference, and the European Piano Teachers Association. Her work has won Article of the Year through MTNA two years in a row: in 2015 for her article "In Search of the 'Perfect' Musical Performance," published in the American Music Teacher, and in 2016 for her interdisciplinary research article "Assessing Injury Risk in Pianists: Using Objective Measures to Promote Self-Awareness," published in the MTNA e-Journal. This latter article is the result of cross-disciplinary research with Engineering and Physical Therapy specialists on the topic of injury prevention for pianists, funded by a Mizzou Advantage Grant. She has also published in Piano Pedagogy Forum and MMTA NOTES. In spring of 2015, she received the prestigious Purple Chalk Teaching Award from the College of Arts & Science Student Council at the University of Missouri.*

*In the spirit of healthy music making and exploring new pedagogical frontiers, she is currently building her own piano studio—Music Lotus—which offers a unique combination of piano and Yoga partner lessons for younger students. Between 2011 and 2016, she coordinated the Experiencing Piano Program (a community program offering group class and private lessons for beginning adults and children aged 6–9), and between 2014 and 2016, she directed the Experiencing Music Program, which brought music classes, drum lessons, choir, and*

*educational concerts by MU students to the Boys & Girls Club of Columbia, MO. She also initiated and directed the Music of the World Piano Camp for young children on the MU campus.*

*A devoted advocate of contemporary music, Paola is a member of the New Muse Piano Duo with Jonathan Kuuskoski, an ensemble dedicated to commissioning and performing works by living composers. Their concert tours have included performances across the United States, Norway, Greece, and Cyprus.*

*Dr. Savvidou served as President for the Mid-Missouri Area Music Teachers Association (2014–2016) and serves as a frequent adjudicator for local and state festivals and competitions. She is a Rainbow Kids Yoga Certified Teacher, holds a BM from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and graduate degrees (MM and DMA) in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.*