

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

Wednesday, July 18, 2001

Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

Oak Brook, Illinois

“Toward A Pedagogy for the New Millennium”

Introduction to Curriculum and Degree Plans

A VIEW OF FERTILE LANDS

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Earlier this summer, while sitting in the corner of my backyard and enjoying the view from my favorite double glider, I looked out over the fertile farmland of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. As I admired the colorful patchwork quilt effect created by fields with different colors and textures, it occurred to me that those small patches of various crops in fields of various sizes and shapes, those patches of fertile land, provide an analogy to our profession, Piano Pedagogy. In Lancaster County, where I now live, farming is a revered activity. Our local farmers demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility related to caring for the land. They live the ancient philosophy, “Our land does not belong to us. We merely hold it in trust for our children.”

In some parts of the world where I have visited, you can find mile after mile of land planted with the same crop – such as corn or wheat or alfalfa or soybeans. As far as the eye can see, the fields will show wide expanses of the same color and texture. But in the backyard of my home in central Pennsylvania, when I stand by the fence and look out over the rolling land, I see fields that are divided into small geometric shapes planted with a little of this and a little of that. From one year to the next, each farmer decides how to use a field in any specific season. Those decisions depend on answers to two questions: “What will benefit me and my family, financially?” and “What will benefit the land, preserving its health?” Another version of those two questions might be “What will be beneficial in the short run?” and “What will be

beneficial in the long run?"

Sometimes farmers plant and harvest the same crop year after year; some seasons they experiment with different seeds or add needed nutrients to the soil; and sometimes they allow a field to lie fallow, while the land rests and renews itself.

For me, those small patches of Pennsylvania farmland suggest parallels to other small patches of richly fertile areas - those tended by piano pedagogues all over the country. Just as each Lancaster County farmer decides what the land needs and can produce, each person who teaches piano pedagogy decides what is needed and can best be nurtured in his or her part of the country.

In the classic French play, *The Would-be Gentleman*, written in 1670 by the actor known as "Moliere," the main character of the story is Monsieur Jourdain, the bourgeois gentleman. In a comic scene featuring Monsieur Jourdain and his philosophy master (who comes to the house to teach) his student, the would-be gentleman is told that "all that is not prose is poetry; and all that is not poetry is prose." Monsieur Jourdain is elated to discover that he's been speaking prose all his life! In one modern translation of the Old French, he declares, "Well, I'll be hanged. For more than forty years I've been talking prose without any idea of it; I'm very much obliged to you for telling me that."

I'd like to suggest that you have been dealing with curricular issues your entire teaching lives. Whenever you teach a class or piano lesson, prepare a lesson plan, present a lecture, design a course syllabus, revise a course description for a catalog, sequence learning activities, or select test questions, you are dealing with curricular concerns. You are making decisions about what to include in an instructional unit, what your students need to learn, how to invest time and energy, what to include and what to leave out. And so, like Monsieur Jourdain, perhaps you are thinking, "Well, I'll be hanged! I've been dealing with curricular issues all my life!"

Curriculum development has received a lot of attention recently, especially as we have ended one century and begun a new one. On campuses throughout the country, in academic

publications, at MTNA conventions, in College Music Society newsletters, in congressional committees and at this conference, faculty and administrators are being asked to re-evaluate what they want students to learn and how teachers can most effectively present that material to students.

It may be useful to think of curricular issues in three layers. First, at the top of a pyramid, is the layer we hear the most about: the requirements and expectations of accrediting organizations such as the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). Administrators at institutions that seek to obtain or retain accreditation from NASM or other official academic bodies, often spend lots of time considering the question "What do we have to do to keep our accreditation?"

Second, the middle layer is the one that surrounds us every day. It is the aspect our students are most aware of: The graduation and diploma requirements of our particular institution or school or department. This middle layer is reflected in students' questions such as "What do you require? What do I have to do in order to complete a course or get that piece of paper?"

And third, perhaps the most important aspect, is the one over which we actually have a great deal of control. I'm referring to our own teaching. As many of you know from your own experiences, it may take years to change the requirements established by accreditation agencies. Certainly it can take months to get institutional approval for degree programs and specific courses. But in this country, in our own teaching, we have something that is nearly a sacred tradition, "academic freedom." Academic Freedom enables us to use our expertise and best judgment to determine what we will include in a course we teach. Course requirements and expectations do need to be stated clearly at the start of a term and then honored by the instructor. But, from one semester to the next, teachers have the right – even the responsibility – to decide what to include in an instructional unit. (Bob Duke has suggested that teachers can shut the door of their classroom or studio and – short of moral turpitude – do virtually anything.)

In planning this pedagogy conference, it was decided that this evening would be structured so that you pedagogy leaders could consider curricular questions in terms of what you think the profession of piano pedagogy needs from its leaders. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what needs to be included in piano pedagogy curricula and degree programs?

About 15 years ago, a committee of the National Conference on Piano Pedagogy (NCPPE), in conjunction with the NASM, evaluated the curricula of several piano pedagogy degree programs at the bachelor's and masters' levels. Those reports, co-authored by Marianne Uszler (University of Southern California) and Frances Larimer (Northwestern University), resulted in the publication of two handbooks. In the 1980s and 1990s, those handbooks became basic resources for administrators and faculty at schools wanting to establish or maintain degree programs in piano pedagogy. Two decades later, I understand that there still are a few unsold copies of those historic handbooks. If you want to order one, I suggest that you contact the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy as soon as you get home.

“Is it time for our profession to create an updated version of those handbooks that were published in 1984 and 1986?” That question may become part of what you discuss this evening. “What does our profession need?” As experts in our field, what do you think a solid pedagogy curriculum should include? What would you recommend to administrators? What would you like to see as the requirements of students getting certain academic degrees or certificates? What do you think students should be able to demonstrate at various stages of their education? What has changed in our field in the past fifteen years?

It seems appropriate to evaluate our curricular expectations and to make some statements on behalf of our profession. But ultimately, each of us has the opportunity and the responsibility of creating sequenced activities in every lesson and every class during every term or semester. Whenever we deal with insensitive life partners, unruly children, or unsupportive administrators, we are ill-advised to wait for Them to change. Most significant changes begin with Us, not Them. I want to say that again. “Most significant changes begin with US, not

THEM.”

The American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, challenged all of us when she said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.” Let me paraphrase Mead’s words. You, who are here this evening, represent “a small group of thoughtful, committed piano pedagogy teachers.” Mead believed that small groups could change the world. In fact, she was convinced that change would occur only when “thoughtful, committed citizens” assumed responsibility for making changes.

I do not pretend that you can diagnose and fix everything in our profession during the next sixty minutes. (National Public Radio is not presenting a piano pedagogy version of “Car Talk.”) But I do believe that the people participating in this pre-conference seminar can take some important preliminary steps this evening in addressing the topic “Toward a Pedagogy for the New Millennium.”

In your discussions groups, you can

- Begin the process of sharing your concerns,
- Establish links with other thoughtful, committed citizens,
- Evaluate the content of successful pedagogy programs,
- Explore some of the procedures for obtaining credentials in other professions,
- Consider the perimeters of what you believe pedagogy students need to learn and experience during their time of formal, supervised education.

I began this evening’s talk by describing the fertile farmland that adjoins my back fence. Now I want to return to my yard and describe the trees growing around my house. Perhaps you can picture the diversity of those trees: black walnut, white ash, black locust, red bud, black cherry, blue spruce, white pine, tulip, dogwood, oak, elm, hemlock, maple, ornamental cherry. Those trees are tall and short, thin and thick, majestic and scrawny, with rough and smooth barks. Their leaves and needles provide many different shapes and textures. Some of those trees will drop their leaves in the fall. (In the fall, we will have lots of leaves to rake!)

Other trees will remain green throughout the winter. Each tree is complete in itself and often stands next to a tree that is quite unlike it. When you look closely you realize that every one of those trees bears signs of trauma and injury – whether from storms, extreme temperatures, bugs, coatings of ice, lightning, drought, or age.

But those trees are no more diverse than the students who enter our studios and classrooms. I find many parallels between the trees in my yard and our pedagogy students. Our students have survived many winters and experienced all sorts of storms and traumas. They come to us in different sizes and shapes, with diverse strengths and experiences. Each is complete in itself, but often sits next to a student that is quite unlike it.. All are affected by the same storms, but their reactions vary. Their interests and needs will vary, also.

Before I close this short talk, I want to share some good news and some bad news. First I'll give you the Bad News.

We will never be able to provide our pedagogy students with everything they need in order to become effective teachers. As Jim Goldsworthy said at one of his sessions this afternoon, "We can't do everything."

But here's the Good News:

As individuals, we don't have to provide our students with everything they will need. We are not the only people involved in their growth and development. Borrowing from Ted Tim's comment this afternoon, "Any problem needing to be solved, needs more than one discipline involved in resolving it."

The historic series of piano pedagogy conferences organized by Richard Chronister and Jim Lyke created the profession of piano pedagogy in this country. Because of those conferences, held on a regular basis, a pool of committed piano pedagogues came together. It is my impression that, in the past quarter of a century, virtually all the significant projects in the field of piano pedagogy can be traced back to those NCPP conferences that were held in

various mid-western states (Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, and Illinois, - and Illinois). Now, once again, our profession has returned to Illinois (my home state!) for a pedagogy conference built on the traditions established by Richard and Jim. At the National Conferences on Piano Pedagogy, people came together and conferred. They gathered to identify and grapple with problems, share ideas, and explore possible responses to professional issues. At NCPP conferences, we learned to know and respect each other personally as well as professionally. We became partners, working on various projects in response to significant issues and serious needs identified by musician/teachers from various schools and programs. At this NCKP we gather to confer with respected colleagues who are committed professionally to the challenges of preparing musicians to teach music at the keyboard.

I assume that the conversations that begin in the next hour will continue during the coming days and, after you return home, will expand into e-mail messages and lead to further discussions with colleagues in your home area. But tonight gives us an opportunity to identify concerns and make a formal start.

In the pre-conference booklet, mailed out months ago, the activities for July 18 carried the heading “Look to the future.” Tonight, as I look at this “small group of committed citizens,” I realize that I am looking at those who represent The Future of Piano Pedagogy. Look around the room. (This afternoon, at the start of this pre-conference portion of the NCKP, Sam Holland remarked, “I just want to stand here and look at you!” Look at your neighbors. Look around this room. You people are it! You are the ones entrusted with the fertile lands of piano pedagogy.

Sam Holland has explained where you are to go for the next sessions. You have your assignments. My time is up, but I’ll see you back here in an hour for the brief oral reports on discussions from each of the four topic groups. So, “That’s all for now, folks!” Class dismissed! Thank you.

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