

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

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Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

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TEACHING DEMONSTRATION BY SUSAN OGILVY

Report by Paul Sheftel

The title of this presentation was Intermediate Group Lesson Utilizing Technology. While the focus of the presentation was in large part on technology there was also a considerable amount of attention paid to issues of group teaching as well. We were first invited to a mini tour of the very exciting, technology rich Ogilvy teaching studios with images of rooms equipped with computer work stations as well as acoustic instruments, and a piano lab facility. The actual video demonstration occurred in the piano lab with a group of three junior high school students working through a variety of maneuvers including ear work, improvisation and ensemble performances as a group as well as with MIDI accompaniments.

The moderators for this event were George F. Litterst and Alejandro Cremaschi. To quote from the program: George F. is a pianist, music educator and music software developer. He is the author of numerous articles on music technology and the co-author of the intelligent, score-following program Home Concert 2000. Alejandro Cremaschi coordinates the class piano program and teaches piano at Ohio University. Specific areas of interest include class piano and technology in the piano classroom. The moderators served to clarify for the audience some of the approaches and techniques that they had observed in the video. Questions being faced were: What was experienced by the students in this class that might not have been possible in a one-on-one private piano lesson? How did this lesson capitalize on the students' creativity.

There was an extremely impressive range of positive comments that emerged from the numerous breakout groups that followed the presentation.

1. Many commented upon the positive and joyful atmosphere during the session:

“Nurturing and gentle.” “Positive atmosphere.” “Clearly the students were enjoying themselves, were free to experiment and were looking forward to each new class session. They were comfortable in the technological classroom and enjoyed valuable experiences manipulating sounds, playing in ensembles, improvising and reading full score.” “Comfortable with the group setting and willing to explore possibilities without fear of ridicule or undue criticism.”

2. The positive comments with regard to Susan Ogilvy’s teaching strategies were equally numerous and enthusiastic: “Structured but flexible sequence.” The term scaffolding was used to refer to incrementally increased amounts of testing as the lesson progressed. “Came at the task from many different angles.” “Concepts and skills were thoroughly prepared and drilled in a variety of ways and learning was achieved through explorations and discovery” “Repetition led to change.” “Elements of good teaching were as present in the group and “technologized” setting as in any of the one-on-one lessons observed during the conference.” “The teacher demonstrated an ability to sequence the material effectively, gradually increasing the difficulty of each example and working toward a synthesis as the students developed their own ideas.”

3. There were numerous appreciative comments upon the use of and stress upon ear training, ensemble work and improvisation. “ Susan’s ear training exercises ingeniously lead to the practice of improvisation within a five-finger patterns. It is amazing to see the comfort level demonstrated by each student when they improvise off of each other’s melodies.”

4. There were many comments upon the effectiveness of the group experience in general and this particularly successful group in particular. “ The value of this group experience was providing an opportunity to share with others the joy of music making. This experience provided an incentive for the students to stay with music study.” “Feedback was achieved through the environment.”

5. There were positive comments regarding the use of MIDI accompaniments: “ Varied use of the MIDI accompaniment patterns demonstrates different musical styles to

students—and replaces more traditional use of metronome.” Many teacher expressed interest in becoming more involved with technology.

Questioning comments fell into the following clusters:

These students have purportedly had about 4 years of lessons. It was generally felt that the materials seemed quite simple and somewhat repetitive for this length of study. Many questions and much discussion was in fact prompted by the simplicity of the materials for students with this amount of training. “What is a lesson?” “Is it desirable to offer different kinds of piano/keyboard training for different types of students/families?” “The aim of this video seemed to be directed at the “non-serious” student, those taking lessons for general exposure to music rather than to develop a basis for serious piano study.”

There was a wish for more information regarding curricular context. What were other lessons like? Was there private as well as group study? As one group phrased it: “Is this videotape made just for showing the few advantages of incorporating technology in a group situation, or is this a regular lesson setting for a group that has been studying the piano for four or five years.” How were assignments given? What preparation was there for following lessons?

Can the teacher be sufficiently effective seated (or standing) in front of a class rather than being next to a student? What about posture and hand position?

Some took exception to the electronic sounds as being either unpleasant or distracting and expressed concern that the accompaniments tended to cover up the playing of the student.

Some felt that the video did not demonstrate the most effective use of technology and would not be particularly inviting to the novice teacher.

Susan Ogilvy was extremely generous in giving us this fascinating tour of her extraordinary studio, allowing us a glimpse of her teaching approach and introducing us to her charming students. Inevitably a tiny vignette of this sort might lead to some

misunderstandings. I daresay that Susan Ogilvie is very much on top of curriculum planning and knows how to help her students with postural considerations. She is, like all of us, concerned with traditional values: helping students to playing with artistry and good tone and helping them to become literate musicians.

I, like everyone, greatly enjoyed the presentation, both for its content as well as style. The content did indeed seem rather too elementary to me but I strongly suspect that for this occasion Susan was simply concerned not to set the bar too high for her students. I would have liked to have seen a bit more use of technology but appreciate that this may have been difficult to accomplish in the brief amount of time available. The MIDI sounds were, unfortunately, not attractive on the video but I have heard Ogilvy orchestrations and know them to be tasteful and aesthetic. Admittedly there are MIDI orchestrations on the market that are unappealing (to say the least) but this need not be the case. Students need never be either confused or overbalanced by MIDI accompaniments. These are unfortunate misconceptions. Playing with an outside source is in many instances a skill that must be acquired whether the outside source is another musician, other musicians or a recorded accompaniment. The great advantage of MIDI accompaniments is that the tempo can be adjusted. In the hands of a skilled teacher MIDI accompaniments should never be distracting to students but only enriching.

To conclude I quote this apt remark from one of the breakout sessions: “The most important responsibility in today’s teaching is to provide a balance between the new and the traditional and to use technology in its best and most effective sense to provide the most comprehensive curriculum possible for every student.” It would seem to me that this demonstration was most helpful in this regard.

Special gratitude is extended to the leaders of the breakout discussion groups following this teaching demonstration: Philip Autry, Debora E. DeWitt, Jeffery Kleinsorge, Yeeseon Kwon, Annie Lin, Wilma Machover, Tom Pearsall, Anita Renfroe, Paul Sheftel, and Judith Wade.

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