Piano Pedagogy Forum
Volume 22, No. 1
Summer 2021

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Perspectives on the Pedagogical and Teaching Expertise of Elvina Truman Pearce

by Todd E. Van Kekerix

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Introduction

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first century, Elvina Truman Pearce (b. 1931) made an indelible mark on the field of piano pedagogy as a teacher, performer, composer, and writer. Although her talents were many, her focus was singular; she devoted her life and every aspect of her career to advancing the field of piano pedagogy. Pearce shared her educational philosophies and ideas about piano pedagogy generously through recitals, concerts, workshops, journal articles, piano lessons, pedagogy classes, and her comprehensive text, *The Success Factor in Piano Teaching: Making Practice Perfect.* As she did so she spread her ideas far and wide, reaching countless pianists and piano teachers across the United States and world.

Informed by her teachers, most notably Frances Clark and Isabelle Vengerova, Pearce took a practical approach to her teaching philosophy. Her belief that successful music educators prepare students to become their own teachers is echoed in her words: "Great teachers lead us to the threshold of self-discovery and thereby make us aware that all really important answers lie within, not outside of ourselves."[1] This overarching belief system informs her approach to piano education.

Throughout Pearce's teaching career, she focused on developing students who understand not just what the dots and lines on a page of music mean, but also what they represent. She summarizes:

> What I object to is the sense that anything can be learned overnight. The real teacher is the one who is interested in musical literacy, not having a kid move his fingers from one place to another. I'm sure you could teach a chimpanzee to do that. There's a big difference between an educator and a manipulator.[2]

Across her diverse teaching experiences, Pearce was steadfastly dedicated to the following goals: refining the teacher/student lesson experience, improving students' home practice habits, promoting the benefits of group teaching, and developing critical thinking skills in students that benefit them at the piano and beyond. In pursuit of these goals, Pearce often emphasized the importance of teaching students how to practice with purpose, a technique she referred to as "self-directed practice."[3] More specifically, training students to identify the cause of a problem, equipping them with practice tools to fix the problem, and guiding them to implement those tools independently in their practice to achieve desired results.

Pearce's influence through teaching pre-collegiate students, pedagogy students at the university level, and piano teachers around the world lead to widespread influence. Thus, information regarding her teaching practices was ample and accessible. In first-hand interviews with the author, Pearce described her approach to teaching each of these categories of students in detail. Former students, colleagues, and close associates also completed questionnaires to providing a greater perspective on Pearce's impact.

Teacher Influences

To better understand how Pearce arrived at her pedagogical philosophy, it is vital to look at the teaching styles of influential educators she worked with during her student years. Craig Sale, a longtime colleague of Pearce, sums up the amalgamation of experiences Pearce encountered as a

student: “I believe she was most shaped by the experiences that she had with her own teachers. She took what she learned from the good and the bad and created an approach that provided positive, successful experiences with music at the piano.”[4] Pearce referenced five impactful teachers with whom she had formative experiences that shaped her teaching philosophy.

Pearce admires the way her first-grade classroom teacher, Jane Harnish, demanded excellence from all of her students and was dedicated to helping all of them experience success. Pearce sees those qualities as interconnected, two parts of a recipe that led Harnish’s students to experience a sense of accomplishment and pride. She says she remembers Harnish “…as one who always expected and demanded great things of them, which ultimately resulted in their success.”[5] In her own teaching philosophy, Pearce mimics Harnish’s emphasis on high standards and expectations.

Pearce describes her relationship with her first piano teacher, Lenore Hunter, as nearly perfect and filled with “happy, positive, and productive experiences.”[6] It was in that supportive environment she first learned to read and play music, a foundational learning experience that laid the groundwork for how she would go on to plan and facilitate her own beginning students’ lessons. Later, as a piano teacher and pedagogy instructor, she would preach about the importance of positive lesson experiences for students.

Pearce’s second piano teacher was Helen Ringo, a professor at the University of Tulsa with whom she studied for eight years. Pearce recalls Ringo’s emphasis on sound quality and producing a tone that was “never harsh, never percussive,” something that became a priority for Pearce as a pianist and teacher. From her lessons with Ringo, Pearce also discovered that the environment in which a lesson is taught is as important as the contents of a lesson. Ringo’s love of music permeated her lessons and proved contagious — a motivating factor Pearce felt was essential.[7]

When recalling lessons with her third piano teacher, Isabelle Vengerova, Pearce describes a seemingly contradictory atmosphere that was demoralizing in some respects, and positive in others. In short, with Vengerova, Pearce experienced some pedagogical practices she wanted to emulate, and others she decidedly did not. During her three years of study with Vengerova, 1952–1955, Pearce explains that she “experienced both the best of times and the worst of times. The best of times were the days when I did *not* have a lesson. The worst of times were the lesson days when Mme.’s persistent dissection of my playing mechanism and aural awareness became so comprehensive that I couldn’t even play a scale or a two-note slur to her satisfaction.”[8]

Pearce began lessons with Vengerova intending to pursue a performance career. However, their time together ultimately nudged her away from that goal. In contrast to the positive, encouraging atmosphere Helen Ringo had provided, Pearce describes lessons with Vengerova as often terrorizing and discouraging. Ultimately, Vengerova’s pedagogical approach left the young pianist doubting her abilities as a musician and performer.

In a 1979 article for *The Piano Quarterly*, Pearce recapped several of the positive ways in which Vengerova influenced her.

> One of the great gifts of time is perspective, and now, looking back on my study with Vengerova, what do I remember the most? I remember the gifts of patience

> and self-discipline that she helped me acquire. I remember the birth of artistic standards that allowed me to continue to reach for the stars.[9]

Pearce also recalls that Vengerova's tutelage shaped her musicianship and her understanding of the importance of careful score study.

> I remember the opening of ears that *really* hear, and eyes that *really* see the notation on the printed page. And I remember a growing awareness of respect for the score as a representation of the composer's intentions and my responsibility as a musician to convey these intentions in performance.[10]

Vengerova's approach to the art of practice also left a mark on Pearce. She recalls,

> I also remember countless approaches to practice that replaced endless hours of mindless repetition and helped to ensure maximum success in a minimum amount of time.[11]

Pearce's approach to technique was also formed by her time with Vengerova. She says,

> Last, but by no means least, I remember the painful years spent in pursuit of the 'Vengerova Technique,' an acute awareness of the function of each part of the playing mechanism and a knowledge of how to integrate all parts into a workable whole to deal effectively with any type of pianistic problem that presents itself in a piece of music.[12]

In a separate account, Pearce describes the Vengerova technique in more detail:

> I also learned a technical approach which was based on beginning tone production *on* the keys as opposed to lifting up individual fingers before striking the keys. The 'on-the-key' approach produces a true legato and a non-percussive sound, both of which are characteristic of Vengerova's students.[13]

With Vengerova, Pearce experienced first-hand how a teacher can both negatively and positively affect a student. From Vengerova, she learned that draconian, punitive tactics only serve to demoralize students. However, she also learned the usefulness of replacing mindless repetition with thoughtful and purpose-driven practice, and of analyzing a piece thoroughly before learning it. These experiences with Vengerova, the good and the bad, inform Pearce's teaching philosophy.

Pearce spent nine years working closely with her next influential teacher, piano pedagogue Frances Clark. Under Clark's tutelage at Westminster Choir College (1955-1960) and The New School for Music Study (1960-1964), Pearce embraced piano pedagogy as a new career path. In these settings, Clark supervised Pearce as she gave private lessons, teacher workshops, and feedback to pedagogy students. "I just think everything that I came to believe as a student of Clark has become more apparent," Pearce says. "When I first came [to Westminster Choir College], I didn't know what the word pedagogy even meant. I began to learn that there's an art and a science in teaching people how to teach, and I was grateful that I was involved in that."[14] From Clark, Pearce picked up pedagogical tools both practical and philosophical. She recalls, "In terms of teacher training and what studios should include, etc. I feel very, very wealthy to have had that experience with [Clark] for so many years. When you signed up, it was not just for a class."[15]

Under Clark's mentorship, Pearce grew into a teacher who was obsessed with studying how children learn and how best to instruct average-age beginners. She adds, "I think what people fail to realize with Frances [Clark] is that it was preparation for life. She was much more interested in keeping up with the times and finding out what was going on out there than I was, for example."[16] Pearce was inspired by Clark's hunger to learn as much about life as possible and to apply those broader life lessons to the study of music. In her own teaching, she incorporated Clark's philosophical and practical ideals, seeking to fully understand and appreciate a child's learning process and how piano study fits into the larger picture of life.

The fusion of Vengerova's and Clark's influence molded Pearce's teaching approach. Vengerova helped Pearce achieve high standards in her own piano playing, an experience Pearce emulated as she consistently demanded the best from her own students. From Vengerova, Pearce also learned how to be efficient and effective while practicing technical exercises and repertoire. Furthermore, from Clark, she gained a philosophical understanding of sequencing, the importance of healthy student practice habits, and practical tools for how to guide students to become independent musicians. Ed Darling, a former student of Pearce's at Westminster Choir College, provided the following summary of how Pearce's most influential teachers shaped her teaching philosophy:

> Pearce's confidence was based, in part, I believe, in her 'survival' of studying with Isabelle Vengerova when Elvina was young. She always says she learned much from Vengerova, but it was a difficult time. She came out of that and gained confidence in herself and her playing. Her years of teaching pedagogy students and teachers, in performing, in composing, in writing and editing, in working with high-achieving colleagues like Frances Clark, Louise Goss, David Kraehenbuehl, Richard Chronister gave her confidence. Her ability to learn pieces through a wealth of approaches in practicing gave her confidence.[17]

Pearce fused her own student experiences with the philosophies she absorbed from Clark, eventually finding her own voice and unique perspectives and contributions as a pedagogue.

Teaching Precepts

Influenced by her teachers and her own extensive practice, performance, and teaching experiences, Pearce developed distinct pedagogical views, which had a lasting impact on her students. The following section defines the central tenets of her successful teaching approach. Among the topics covered are Pearce's dedication to ensuring effective and efficient learning habits through a student-centric approach built on a foundation of discovery learning.

As a teacher of teachers for over twenty years at North Central College and fourteen years at Northwestern University, Pearce developed a keen understanding of what to look for in young teachers and how to help them develop and improve as music educators.[18] In 2004, Pearce participated in a panel discussion at MTNA's first Pedagogy Saturday in which she was asked to describe qualities she noticed and observed in promising pedagogy students. The following list, taken from the Editor's Page of the Winter 2002 edition of *Keyboard Companion*, gives insight into her response to that prompt. According to Pearce, the following questions were vital in evaluating teachers:[19]

1. How much lesson time is spent hearing and making music as opposed to just talking about it?

2. How successfully does the teacher prepare the student for new things that will appear in the coming week's assignment?
3. How successful is the teacher in bringing about obvious changes in the repertoire heard in the lesson?
4. When working on pieces, does the teacher try to make too many points rather than zeroing in on just one or two and really making them?
5. Does the teacher get too refined too soon?
6. How effectively does the teacher structure the lesson content and distribution of lesson time?
7. What is the quality of the lesson environment and the student/teacher relationship?
8. Final questions to ask oneselves as the student leaves the lesson:
    1) Did the student leave today's lesson having experienced a lot of music making beyond the notes, as well as the fun of discovery?
    2) Did he/she leave with a clear idea of the coming week's goals and how to practice to achieve them?
    3) Above all, did the student leave the lesson feeling successful?

Pearce's evaluative questions provide direct insight into her definition of effective and efficient teaching.

Pearce describes her students as her most significant source of motivation, explaining that she felt inspired daily by each individual she encountered in her studio. Describing that thought process, she said, "…the problems that we had last week, are we still going to have them in the lesson today? And what can I do to solve them, and what can I do to prevent them?"[20] Pearce's former students recognized and appreciated the individualized manner in which she approached each one of them. One former student, Kim Nagy, recalls, "Elvina [Pearce] wanted the absolute best for her students and from her students. She wanted all of us to experience the great joy she took from being an exceptional musician and teacher."[21]

Student-centric

Pearce takes a student-centered approach to lessons, advising her pedagogy students to consider an individual student's unique needs rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to lessons. "She taught me the importance of teaching the student — not the method," former pedagogy student Karen Walker says. "Each student learns in a different way and we must have the flexibility to inspire our students. There were no 'bells and whistles.' Just good, solid pedagogy."[22] Walker recalls Pearce making this point humorously by saying, "You cannot teach an owl the same way that you teach a monkey!"

Many of Pearce's former pedagogy students vividly recall her dedication to student-centered pedagogy. Camille Conforti, a former piano major from North Central College, explains Pearce's precision when guiding student teachers, "I learned to be as clear, yet concise, as possible during the lesson and make sure it was 'student' focused."[23] Amy Glennon, Educational Director at The New School for Music Study, also stresses this vital part of Pearce's pedagogy: "After her time with Clark, [Pearce] further developed her own ideas, focusing on student-centered learning and highlighting the importance of developing student independence." [24]

Other former students expanded on this, offering further insight into how central this student-focused approach is to Pearce's teaching. Kim Nagy, former private student and later pedagogy student of Pearce's provided more definition as to what student-centered means to Pearce: "Her overarching goal was student independence and student-centered lessons. She asked the student questions. She asked them to actually listen to their own playing – to adjust on their own."[25] Emily Jane Katayama, a former high school student of Pearce's, explains the impact this student-centric teaching approach had on her and how this student-centered approach encourages thoughtfulness. "I have found that many students are overburdened and over-scheduled to the point of entering their lessons shut down and simply wanted to be told what do to and when. But Elvina [Pearce] encouraged (and required) us students to think, and we were all the better for it."[26] These accounts reveal how consistently Pearce promoted and practiced student-centric teaching.

Self-discovery

At the heart of Pearce's student-centric pedagogical approach was a dedication to encouraging student self-discovery. Pearce believed it is far more valuable to provide a student with the tools to make their own informed musical decisions than to tell them explicitly how to shape a phrase or precisely how to execute a dynamic marking. When students experience self-discovery, she believed, they gain a sense of pride and ownership over new repertoire, technique, or concepts. On the contrary, she believed that when teachers simply tell students what to do without helping them experience self-discovery, they promote passive learning resulting in uninspired performances.

In an interview, Pearce gave a vivid description of how she helped one student achieve self-discovery while working on Mozart's "Fantasy in D minor."[27] The student was not grasping or communicating the larger structure of the piece early in the learning process. Instead of telling the student exactly how to shape the piece, Pearce guided them to come to their own unique understanding of its structure by asking strategic questions. She asked the student to consider how each section of the piece differed, and then asked them to demonstrate those differences. Then, Pearce played the piece for the student and asked them to describe what they heard and compare and contrast her interpretation with theirs. In this way, she encourages the student to listen critically and make their own decisions about the piece rather than follow instructions blindly. When the student then experimented with new interpretations, she asked them to articulate their experience, which inevitably led them to make their own decisions. Pearce explains,

> There's very little of just my saying play this passage all forte. Or taper the ends of these phrases. Why do you taper the end of a phrase? The answer to those questions can be determined by every student's studies if they study long enough with a good enough teacher. And the more they learn about what to do with situations, the more interested they're going to become in what they do, not in what the teacher does or what the teacher tells them to do, but what they experience.[28]

By guiding students to a deeper and more personal understanding of musicality, Pearce nudges them toward becoming self-informed, lifelong musicians with the ability to perform musically, which is ultimately her goal.

Sequencing & Lesson Planning

As a teacher, Pearce was skilled at effectively sequencing concepts in lessons, an essential tool for encouraging self-discovery in students. On this front, Pearce was heavily influenced by her time

working with Frances Clark to develop the *Frances Clark Library Keyboard Literature* books. That process required Pearce to consider sequencing thoughtfully and analytically, enhancing her ability to break down complex musical concepts and organize and present them to students in a useful, logical manner.

Several of Pearce's former students point to her ability to develop lesson plans and create practical practice assignments as examples of her talent for sequencing. Karen Walker, a former master's student at Northwestern, says Pearce influenced her teaching style in the following manner: "She opened up the world to me in an invigorating way. She empowered each of her students through experiences and practical advice. Nothing trendy or gimmicky about it — sheer logic and sequential learning through discovery."[29] Walker lists several other defining characteristics in Pearce's pedagogical approach: "The sequential understanding of piano pedagogy for young beginning students — practical application and introduction to piano study. Also, the importance of careful, thoughtful planning for each lesson. Each student will learn differently, and therefore your teaching must be adaptable."[30]

Pearce's meticulous approach to sequencing was particularly useful in developing lesson plans. Camille Conforti, a former student from North Central College recalls, "She was very detailed in her approach about how we, as future teachers, should organize our lesson plans."[31] Walker explains further, "Expectations were made clear at every lesson. Elvina [Pearce] had a way of setting the student up for success through the very specific nature of her assignments. Practice strategies were clearly stated throughout every stage of development."[32] Julie Rieth, a former graduate student at Northwestern, defines Pearce's careful planning and deep understanding of how to achieve goals: "Her thoughtfulness in her approach and sequencing made it easier to reach the goals she was setting."[33] In addition to these first-hand accounts, evidence of Pearce's talent for sequencing appears in lesson plans she generated for group classes and distributed to pedagogy students.[34] Sequencing is an integral part of her pedagogical practice, a tool she uses in conjunction with a student-centric approach to foster student self-discovery and efficiency in student practice.

In *The Success Factor*, Pearce asserts that successful teachers regularly dedicate time to both long-term and weekly lesson planning. Weekly lesson plans, she says, must summarize the contents of a lesson and include important notes and details about how to practice new and review pieces at home. She notes that weekly lesson plans should also be flexible, serving as a helpful guide and a jumping-off point for teachers rather than a rigid schedule.[35]

With her students, Pearce says long-term planning was a hybrid of reflection and looking forward. She describes her process in detail: At the end of each school year, she compiled a comprehensive list of materials studied by each student. Using that list as a starting point, she then made informed decisions about future areas of study. Additionally, she provided an end-of-year evaluation form to her students annually.[36]

To help students achieve their weekly practice goals, Pearce says she provided students with pre-printed assignment sheets kept in a three-ring binder. While Pearce admits an assignment sheet does not guarantee practice, she firmly believes it can be helpful as a daily reminder of specific goals and practice steps. Additionally, Pearce's students were often required to record each lesson on tape so that both they and their parents could reference it to review concepts covered in the

lesson and reinforce practice guidelines. Over time, she discovered that students who reviewed those tapes weekly were better prepared in lessons.

Repertoire Introduction

Pearce's emphasis on appropriately introducing new repertoire to students is heavily informed by her studies with Vengerova in New York City. Pearce recalls that she was required to complete a full analysis of each new piece of music before starting to learn it in order to better inform practice strategies. From Vengerova, Pearce learned that a useful repertoire introduction was key to efficient learning and practicing.

Pearce places great significance on "initial experiences," a focus that informs the way she introduces each new piece of music to a student. She believes that laying concrete musical foundations from the very start is invaluable. She explains: "What does that piece mean to him when he's working it out from the beginning? And how effective is he in his work out of his piece because of it?"[37] Pearce believes that those first impressions in the learning process are crucial to the success a student might achieve with a piece of music.

In an interview with the author, Pearce explains her own justification for analyzing repertoire during the introduction stage in more detail,

> I would like to think little children that are learning how to analyze their music grow up and create beautiful music rather than people who just say, here's a piece, you learn it and play it for me. And oh, that was good, I think you should crescendo more here. No, let's find out why, not just do it because the teacher said to. Those are the kinds of things that make music exciting to students. There's too much telling and doing, but not experiencing what it is all about. The performers that I have heard over the years that I have the greatest respect for are not the ones who just played the most notes in the shortest amount of time but had something to say with those notes.[38]

Pearce makes a point of noting in interviews that this philosophy was not inherent in her. Rather, it grew out of her experiences as a student and teacher. She says those same experiences also led her to a deep respect for and understanding of the power of music study. That, she believes, should be a piano teacher's first priority.

Another aspect of Pearce's approach to repertoire introduction involves extracting musical elements that might pose technical problems for students. Rieth explains Pearce's approach, "Repertoire should be carefully analyzed so its difficulties are known before it is assigned. Those difficulties should be taught before they appear in repertoire. Sequencing is essential."[39]

Amy Glennon, Educational Director at The New School for Music Study, gives specific details into Pearce's approach when learning new repertoire, saying,

> One area that appears to me to diverge from Clark's philosophy is Pearce's belief in the importance of subdividing when learning new repertoire. The routine: find the "smallest note value" and set the metronome to click on this note value at a tempo that allows for no errors (thinking tempo). My recollection was that Clark did not

> mention subdividing as much as feeling the larger beat, and I do not recall the same intense focus on metronome work.[40]

A former student of Pearce's at Westminster Choir College, June Frank Tipton, recalls the inspiring and accessible way Pearce introduced challenging repertoire. "Like the Bartók Sonatina — that was not typical of the pieces that I usually played, and it was demanding for me. But she was very good at directing me exactly what I needed to do," Tipton says. "She was also patient when I was struggling with something. I enjoyed that Bartók piece and studying it with her. I really did."[41]

As editor of the "Home Practice" section of *Keyboard Companion*, Pearce frequently explored effective repertoire introduction in lessons. She believed the way a teacher introduces a piece heavily influenced how effectively a student practices it at home. She emphasized to teachers the importance of assigning specific practice steps as part of a new piece's introduction. As an example, Pearce describes her approach to introducing Kabalevsky's *Toccata*, Op. 60 to a student.[42] The *Toccata* features a section in which the right-hand does double-duty, playing sustained melody notes and accompaniment patterns at the same time. Instead of asking the student to execute that technical challenge in the right hand from the start, Pearce advises splitting the right-hand accompaniment and melody sections between both hands. Because playing the passage with two hands is easier, students can then focus more attention on listening for and generating the desired sound. Pearce was convinced that when a student focused first on sound, they would find technique much more comfortable to achieve. This was useful because, she argues, students who are forced to think about and execute too many musical elements at the same time too soon (fingering, voicing, dynamics, etc.) are often less secure with a piece in performance. "Because working on musicality [interpretation] requires almost total concentration of one's focus, I believe that this aspect of practice is most productive when the student no longer needs to think about 'mechanics' [accuracy]."[43]

Pearce brought all of her thoughts on introducing repertoire together in an essential chapter of *The Success Factor*. In "From Presentation to Performance – Getting It All Together," she chose three pieces to illustrate the central tenets of her teaching philosophy: Fantasie in D minor, K. 397 by Mozart; Fantasy Dance, Op. 124, No. 5 by Schumann; and Notturno, Op, 54, No. 4 by Grieg. She suggests that when teachers introduce these pieces, they use the following four-point plan:[44]

> Step 1: Discuss what the piece is about with students.
> Step 2: Hear a performance of the piece as preparation for analysis.
> Step 3: Analyze the piece's formal structure and mark and label its parts.
> Step 4: Provide the first week's assignment.

In addition to these universal steps, Pearce goes into more detail, providing specific instructions for introducing each of the four pieces. Separately, in a blog article for Alfred Music, she provides the following more concise way of communicating and remembering that four-point repertoire-introduction plan: explore, listen, analyze, practice.[45]

Pearce believes teachers should always provide students with clear and specific practice goals, arm them with proven, results-driven practice strategies, and guide them toward their own discoveries in a lesson rather than wasting time with teacher-centric talking and telling. She writes, "It is the

repetition of success that makes practice perfect, and this is what produces students who want to continue with music study and with their ongoing journey into the wonderful world of music – both as listeners and as music-makers themselves!"[46] In addition to arming students with practice procedures designed for student success, Pearce goes to great lengths to follow through on these strategies as part of each lesson.

Development of Students' At-Home Practice Strategies

When asked what sets Pearce apart from other teachers, her former students underscored her ability to diagnose problems and provide solutions through effective practice strategies. Kim Nagy submitted:

> Her ability to break a piece apart into components and develop practice steps to learn quickly and efficiently was revelatory to me. From the very beginning pieces in 'Time to Begin' to the Schumann Concerto, she helped her students break it down, so nothing seemed inaccessible.[47]

After a new piece was introduced through analysis and teacher performance, preparation for a week of practice was the next order of business. Pearce guided students to experience effective practice procedures during the lesson, a teaching technique she believes presents the strongest opportunity for a teacher to make a meaningful contribution. "It's what you have them do in the lesson," she says. [48]

Pearce's students vividly recall the ways in which she shaped their practice habits and strategies. Katayama explains that Pearce insisted on establishing a practice plan, "Elvina [Pearce] always stressed the importance of having a strategy in place before mindlessly playing!"[49] Conforti recounts Pearce's explanation for the importance of practicing, "Piano pedagogy involves, more than anything else, proper practice techniques. If that is not stressed at the lesson, student performance success and ability is limited."[50] Reith points out Pearce's diagnostic strengths, writing that, "Pearce was very good at homing in on exactly what the problem was and eliciting solutions for addressing the problem. She was never one to let students off the hook, but she was kind, enthusiastic, and fun while doing so. She never lost sight of her goals and knew how to teach others to reach those goals. She made students think critically for themselves."[51]

When offering tips to teachers on how best to guide student practice, Pearce drew from her own extensive experiences practicing and teaching students how to practice. In 2006, after nearly fifty years of teaching, Pearce published an article "What Makes Practice Perfect," in which she shared some of her hard-earned wisdom on the topic.[52] In that article, Pearce reiterates that teaching students how to practice improves their chance of success at the piano more than any other factor. She writes that many students are clock-directed versus self-directed when they practice and explains that clock-directed practice results in students merely playing through repertoire for an allotted amount of time with little regard for tempo, accuracy, or artistry. Such practice often leads to student dropouts, she explains. On the other hand, when students are self-directed in their practice, they are engaged with their music as active listeners and score-studiers.

In *The Success Factor,* Pearce provides practical home-practice advice culled from her own lived experiences as a teacher-performer.[53] She understood first-hand the importance of establishing efficient and effective practice habits and gave the following advice to teachers and students:

1. Establish a regular practice time.
2. Practice in multiple short sessions rather than one long one.
3. Start learning new pieces by analyzing them.
4. Keep a pencil at hand to mark in the score.
5. Know how to select a “thinking” tempo.
6. Include repetition while practicing.
7. Tackle challenges first.
8. Vary the order of your practice sessions.

She also advocates for “backward” practice or rehearsing the end of a piece first so that it would be as strongly prepared as the beginning.[54]

From Frances Clark, Pearce understood the importance of the teacher’s role in prepping students for home practice. It was a topic covered regularly in her teacher-training sessions with Clark, and a lesson she internalized. Pearce explains: “Creating lesson situations in which students can repeatedly experience success as a result of utilizing intelligent practice procedures is, of course, one of the teacher's major responsibilities.”[55] While it may seem counter-intuitive, Pearce also believes that teachers should work to become disposable to their students. In her own teaching, she took great pride in ushering her students toward independence.

When Pearce was concerned about a given student’s at-home practice habits, she addressed them directly in the lesson. In a 1992 *Keyboard Companion* article, she provides the following in-lesson suggestions for improving student practice:[56]

1. All practice steps assigned for home practice must be experienced in the lesson.
2. Always start the lesson with warm-ups to set an example for the student.
3. Record portions of the lesson containing suggested practice procedures so that the student can listen at home and have a "mini-lesson" each day.
4. Encourage students to stick with practicing small segments.
5. Rotate through different practice procedures throughout the week.

To illustrate that last point, Pearce explains that a piece containing three different sections should be approached with three different practice procedures. This tactic adds variety to a student's home practice and therefore is more likely to sustain their attention and interest.

Pearce believes a piano lesson’s primary purpose is to prepare a student for at-home practice. she writes that students must have an understanding of “specific goals for each piece or activity in the assignment and specific practice procedures for fulfilling them.”[57] Pearce then identifies four primary study goals for every piece:[58]

1. Be able to play the whole piece 100% accurately and with technical security at a “thinking” tempo.
2. Be able to play the pieces at tempo with technical ease and security.
3. Be able to express the musical “message’ of the piece convincingly.
4. Achieve secure memorization (NOTE: this goal is required when memorization is assigned.)

Pearce also acknowledges that students sometimes become frustrated when they are not able to play through passages with ease and accuracy. Therefore, in the initial stages of learning a piece, she advises refraining from assigning the most demanding musical elements until after the student has demonstrated the ability to play the piece accurately at a given tempo. Mistakes are more likely to creep in when a student is forced to think about too many musical elements at once, Pearce says.[59] She believes a student's success with a piece is determined in large part by how the teacher initially presents it, and what practice steps the student experiences in the lesson.

To increase the likelihood that a student will follow all practice steps at home, Pearce suggests providing a take-home checklist so they can mark each step as completed. Another tip: If a student repeats the same mistake week after week, pre-performance exercises are suggested to focus their thoughts on preventing the mistake. These pre-performance routines include isolating and working on a problem spot, playing the section in which the problem spot exists successfully on its own, then playing through the entire piece.[60]

To help a student increase the tempo of a piece, Pearce calls for teachers to develop fast-thinking students who are secure in their fingering. Fast-thinking students, she writes, develop their skills through impulse practice. For instance, if a piece is in 4/4, the student should start by practicing just the first two beats of a measure and stopping on the third. The student should then repeat the third beat and add two more beats. Next, the student should increase the number of beats that are part of each impulse. Finally, one impulse might include multiple measures, resulting in a state of flow across a passage of music.[61]

Pearce also believes that verbalization during practice can strengthen a student's grasp of various concepts. For instance, if a student is careless about using correct fingerings, Pearce recommends they verbalize finger numbers aloud as they play. To further reinforce good habits, she also suggests that teachers ask students to verbalize dynamic changes, pedal changes, and other details as they play.[62]

Throughout her many writings on home-practice, Pearce is clear that one of her main teaching goals is to develop students who are self-directed in their own practice. In 2004, after nearly fifty years of teaching, Pearce presented a workshop on "Pedagogy Saturday" at the MTNA National Conference in Kansas City, Missouri, titled, "Self-Directed Practice: A Key to Both Student Success and Motivation."[63] The presentation was also repackaged editorially and published in the October/November 2004 edition of *American Music Teacher*. In both settings, Pearce argued that in order to achieve success at self-directing, students must be decided on specific goals, possess a toolkit to achieve those goals, and be active participants in lessons. She also lists five ways teachers can encourage students to be active participants in lessons, outlining specifically the best language to use in each instance. These five ways include:

1) Involve students in choice making.
2) Encourage students to make use of the pencil in the lesson.
3) Involve students in the setting of pre-performance goals.
4) Involve students in post-performance evaluation.
5) Involve students in demonstrations of practice strategies.

Modeling

Aurally and physically modeling concepts and repertoire is a key component to Pearce's effectiveness as a teacher. She sees the process of introducing each new piece as laying the groundwork for any potential success that can be achieved during at-home practice. For Pearce, this means that she typically performs new pieces for her students in order to ignite their imagination, provide an aural model, and inspire them to practice. Pearce explains, "If it was a piece that I wanted the students to play in recital, I would always perform it. But that doesn't mean that the student will listen to my performance and learn from it. The main reason I want them to hear it is I want them to be as excited about playing it as I was."[64] Pearce also voices concern that teacher performances of a student's pieces in a lesson might be the only time that student is exposed to sophisticated musical performances of their repertoire, a vitally important means for piquing a student's interest in a given piece of music.

Stephanie Myers, who observed Pearce's beginning group classes during her master's degree at Northwestern University, explains Pearce's dynamic approach to aural modeling,

> I remember when she was introducing 'forte and piano' to beginners, she demonstrated with such enthusiasm that even those of us who were observing her almost jumped. Her *forte* was so loud —we were never allowed to say that word, instead [were advised to say] 'big sound' — and energetic as opposed to her *piano*. She demonstrated [that] in her body language as well. These seem like such normal things but left such an impression. I realized this type of teaching is not done by every teacher.[65]

Pearce's ability to effectively demonstrates wide range of styles and tone colors grew out of her own extensive training as a performer. Two of Pearce's students highlight the unique tone and color Pearce drew from the piano when modeling. Susanne Baker, a former graduate student from Northwestern says, "She always demonstrated with the highest musicality, wonderful tone, and in the most professional way."[66] Nagy explains, "She also has a clear concept of what sound she wants in every piece. Her color palette is vast, and she gets the same from students."[67]

Pearce's teaching approach is also composer-centric. She believes students are more apt to play musically when they pay careful attention to the composer's intent as outlined in the score. This emphasis may have been informed by Pearce's own work as a composer.[68] She often gave her compositions evocative titles that were designed to inspire students' imaginations. Modeling that expressivity in the lesson is key. She explains, "Most of the talking at the lesson is done at the piano by hearing the sounds of what I want the student to experience and project in their performance."[69] Here again, Clark's influence on Pearce is apparent. Clark was also a proponent of minimizing teacher talk and maximizing demonstrations in lessons.

Teacher Talk

Pearce was a proponent of the efficiency of language, insisting that student teachers under her supervision minimize teacher talk during lessons as much as possible. Katayama recalls, "Elvina [Pearce] was so good to refrain from incessantly talking throughout lessons. She gave space for a student to reflect and for beauty to be heard."[70]

Rieth humorously reminisces about Pearce's disdain for too much teacher talk,

> I'm just now chuckling to myself thinking of how rich Pearce would be if she had a penny for every time she told one of us student teachers we talked too much during our teaching of a lesson. I cringe to think of what she would say if she saw some of my lessons today. Her voice is always in my ear when I'm pacing my lessons.[71]

Just as she emphasizes minimizing teacher talk, Pearce believes lessons are also more effective when student talk is kept to a minimum. She says she prefers for students to answer questions and communicate via sound (e.g., by singing or playing) instead of via words. She explains: "I'll say, 'Show me what you would do with this passage.' And they begin to tell you. And I say, 'No, I want to hear you tell me with your fingers what you would think about.' And whenever they do, they are much more successful than if they would be if they were trying to vocally tell you what they think about it."[72]

Musicianship

Pearce firmly believes that each student possesses the potential to play artistically, regardless of innate musical talent or gift. Informed by this belief, she asks students to be musically expressive from the very start, encouraging them to approach even the simplest pieces of music with thoughtful artistry. She believes that technique and artistry cannot be separated and should be taught as one.

Many of Pearce's former students and colleagues recount this same emphasis on musicality from the start in her teaching. Emily Jane Katayama recalls, "Pearce focused her teaching energy on helping me reach my own personal potential and challenged me to think deeply of musical emotion."[73] Helen Marlais recalls Pearce using vivid imagery in lessons to effectively communicate musical concepts.[74] Julie Rieth writes that she learned from Pearce that "Musicianship can be built in from the beginning lessons."[75]

Katayama, who studied with Pearce as a high schooler, recalls one pivotal learning experience: "As a high school student playing a Brahms Intermezzo, Elvina told me, 'We don't need beautiful notes. We need beautiful notes with *meaning.*' In that lesson, I understood the difference between a pleasing sound and a heartfelt emotion."[76]

Technique

Pearce espouses a two-pronged approach to developing student's technique, recommending the use of both prewritten exercises and technical exercises extracted from musical passages. For Pearce, strong technique is not a goal in-and-of-itself. Rather, it is a means to an end. Pearce firmly believes that proper technique enabled students to play and perform with more musicality and deems it essential to start all lessons with warm-ups so that students understood their importance. Through these warm-ups, she addresses technique, tone, and hand shape. Myers recalls, "Pearce frequently demonstrated when working on technique and never let the students get away with bad hand positions."[77]

Pearce outlines a system of developing technique in her self-published, *Technic Syllabus for Piano Students.*[78] By sequencing these technical exercises, she provides pedagogy students and other teachers with a road map for advancing students' technical skillset. Marlais describes Pearce's

technical exercises as "A clear system of practicing scales, cadences, arpeggios, always with the metronome."[79]

Teaching Beginners

First impressions are of utmost importance to Pearce because of how deeply they are capable of affecting the trajectory of students' musical education. She believes that just as a positive first impression can spark interest, a negative one can derail a learning experience before it even starts. In the wrong teaching environment, she says, a student's first year of piano lessons can quickly become his or her last. To avoid this scenario, Pearce is meticulous in the way she approached first lessons with beginners. She describes her philosophy and plan for a first lesson:

> That's the most important lesson I would ever teach that student. And I would take where they're interested in playing piano. I would sit there and make noise with the instrument. And I would teach them how to play two or three of the pieces from *Time to Begin* by rote. And that was enough to turn them on if I did a good job. And they could go home and play those pieces over and over again and hardly wait to come back.[80]

In addition to the very first lesson, Pearce was focused on making all early lesson experiences positive. Continually feeding a beginning student's excitement and enthusiasm was essential to their success, she thought. Helen Marlais explains Pearce's philosophies about how beginning private and group lessons should ideally be constructed:

> For the beginner students, she always said that it takes time for students to understand a new concept, especially when it comes to reading. So, she spent a lot of time on the whiteboard asking students about intervals and if they go higher or lower. We had our own beginner student to teach a private lesson to after the group lesson, which is something that I do in my own piano pedagogy class I and II at Grand Valley State University. She always told us that we needed to change activities often, so that students don't get bored, and that there always needed to be review pieces within the duration of the lesson.[81]

Pearce places great emphasis on ensuring that students achieve success in each lesson. Susanne Baker, a former graduate student at Northwestern University, explains Pearce's effective approach to preparing and teaching pieces from *Time to Begin*:

> She played the song many times so the student could listen and answer questions, discussing what the piece was about, [and] having the student engage in many activities like 'say and play,' 'point and play,' 'clap and play' before performing the piece or practicing [hand position] moves, etc. Everything was done so the student could experience success when playing the piece for the very first time.[82]

Over the course of her long career, Pearce gained immense experience teaching beginning students, and thus honed her talent for crafting an ideal first impression at a piano lesson. Her wisdom here is apparent in the way she describes her secret to engraining good hand shape: "[Demonstrate it to a student] over, and over, and over, and over again for however many years they study. Until it becomes a part of them," she says.[83] Amy Glennon surmises that Pearce's goal when teaching young beginners was "to develop well-rounded musicians who play expressively

and confidently. To instill effective practice techniques." She adds, "Her emphasis on rote pieces would help students to develop technically and musically."[84]

Effectiveness as a Teacher

In her own studio, Pearce was able to put her teaching philosophies into practical use regularly. This allowed her to refine her pedagogical skills and discover for herself which teaching techniques were successful and which were not. The teaching techniques she espouses, then, are those she found consistently effective in developing independent musicians with strong technique and reading skills. Julie Rieth attests to Pearce's effectiveness as a teacher:

> Pearce was so insightful, clear, and consistent in her messaging and teaching. She had specific things she was helping me to improve over and over through practice and critique. She always stayed on-point with the things she was trying to teach. This focus and consistency while maintaining a pleasant and positive demeanor was incredibly effective. She knew what she was going for, and she kept teaching it until she got it. Her thoughtfulness in her approach and sequencing made it easier to reach the goals she was setting. Her feedback was always relevant, focused, and helpful, yet insistent on maintaining her standards (usually around the teacher not talking so much!).[85]

Conclusion

Pearce's educational and teaching philosophies stem from pivotal first-hand experiences as a student and a teacher. As a piano student, Pearce was dedicated to her instrument and the study of music. Furthermore, she was a keen observer of her teachers' methods, behaviors, and moods. From her teachers she learned the value of efficient, meaningful home practice. Just as importantly, through first-hand observation of her mentors' contrasting teaching styles, she discovered the most efficient means of transferring that skill to her own students.

Defined by practicality rooted in deep philosophical consideration, Pearce's pedagogy offers clear, simple instructions for achieving sophisticated results. She is precise in her espousal of group teaching and efficient home practice, and broad in her understanding of the emotional, physical, mental, musical, and educational needs of students. For Pearce, providing students with a positive learning environment and helping them to develop universally applicable critical thinking skills is equally as important as teaching them correct pedaling or fingering.

Pearce's mature educational philosophy represents an amalgamation of diverse influences, including that of Jane Harnish, Lenore Hunter, Helen Ringo, Frances Clark, and Isabelle Vengerova. She combined what she learned from them with her own experiences and found a distinct, confident pedagogical voice. Her firm understanding of how to develop technique and musicality in students, as well as expertise on the subject of home practice was bolstered by her determination to excel.

Several of Pearce's former students commented on her role in mentoring them when they were first getting started with their careers. In questionnaire after questionnaire, they described Pearce's dedication to growing them into more excellent piano teachers. She demonstrated best practices efficiently and clearly, and sparked inspiration with her enthusiasm. Glennon submits,

> Pearce was interested in sharing concrete ideas on how to be an effective teacher with others, and her teaching strategies were so concrete that they could be directly implemented. Everything about Pearce's teaching approach is practical and directly applicable.[86]

Descriptions of her teaching style and the impact Pearce had on their careers, like this one by Julie Rieth, epitomize that sentiment:

> Pearce taught me that I could teach, and that I could be good at teaching. She taught me how teaching could be organized and planned with specific goals and how to be effective in reaching those goals with students. She taught me critical thinking in teaching music and in evaluating my own effectiveness. She helped unlock my own creativity through the medium of teaching. I've had a fulfilling career of teaching music to many, many students, and helping them unlock their own gifts of music and creativity. Pearce's pedagogical instruction made this possible for me.[87]

Jennifer Cohen, Pearce's private piano student for eleven years, adds the following:

> She went above and beyond to help mentor me. The best compliment I can give is that, early in my teaching career, I would often hear the same words come out of my mouth to my students that I heard from Elvina when I was her student. Many of my successful teaching practices and strategies are directly and indirectly learned from Elvina, some intentional, but many from my subconscious.[88]

Just as her own teachers left an indelible impression on her, Pearce imprinted her legacy on teachers, students, colleagues, workshop attendees, and readers around the world. The consistency of her students' and colleagues' descriptions of her as a teacher and person reveals the constancy of her strongly held beliefs about piano education, and her dedicated commitment to practical pedagogical techniques.

In closing, Pearce's reflection on teaching in the twenty-first century beautifully highlight and summarize her pedagogical ideals:

> … where we are right now is but the result of where we came from — of all that we have seen, heard, and experienced about life, music, performance, learning and teaching. And where we shall be tomorrow and next week and next year will always be but a composite of all the "nows" that make up our pasts and present. We, as performers, pedagogues, and students, are never static but are always in the process of becoming.[89]

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Van Kekerix's research includes teacher expertise, pop music pedagogy, arranging and transcriptions, and the effects of keyboard music-making.

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