

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy

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Hyatt Regency Oak Brook

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TEACHING DEMONSTRATION BY TED COOPER

Report by Joanne A. Smith

Ted Cooper, Educational Director of the New School of Music in Kingston, NJ, is recipient of the 2001 Group Piano Teaching Award sponsored by MTNA and the National Piano Foundation. Ted is co-author of Side by Side, a duet repertoire series for the elementary pianist.

An outstanding videotape was viewed of Ted Cooper teaching a beginning piano class of five children, ages six and seven, who are first and second graders. This was truly an example of extraordinary results from extraordinary teaching. The first 23 minutes of tape represented continuous learning segments of the students weekly class lesson, during the 7th week of study. As Sam Holland stated, "this class is an example of virtuosic teaching". A second tape demonstrated group learning activities to establish pitch, train the ears, drill intervals and sight-read. Mr. Cooper presents all new material in the class lesson and includes new repertoire, technique and concepts as well as games, movement, rhythm and ear training activities. Each child has an additional weekly half-hour private lesson where the emphasis is on playing pieces more expressively, developing individual technique and learning how to practice. The combined group and private instruction allows these children to experience "the best of both worlds"

The group lesson was held in a roomy classroom equipped with desks at keyboard height for each child, two grand pianos, an electronic keyboard and sufficient floor space for movement

and floor seating. Each pupil had a raised plastic keyboard table of approximately 4 1/2 octaves on their desk with space for music books. No other equipment was used other than flashcards and a drum. The students did not do any written work. No lesson plan was visible. WOW!

Lesson content:

1. Technique warm-ups (5 min.)
2. Rote presentation of a new piece "Jumbo" (6 min.)
3. Review piece, "Winter Fun" (5 min.)
4. Review piece, "The Schumanns" (4 min.)
5. Rhythmic movement (3 min.)

Total 23 minutes

As you see the length of time spent on each learning segment and observe the thorough and complete presentation within each, one is amazed at the planning and pacing which is required to bring this to fruition, without ever having the students feel rushed. The children were happy, with eyes and ears intent on what was going on and their body language was energetic and responsive. Their facial expressions indicated both enjoyment and complete trust in Mr. Cooper. They looked forward with anticipation to whatever might happen next. A key to this high energy level lies in the fact that not one of them was ever without something to do, each student having an assignment at all times (play, check, point, sing, watch, listen). Each of these individual tasks had specific musical goals.

Teacher communication skills

Ted asked a myriad of carefully planned questions throughout the class (many open ended). Many questions focused on sound and aural preparation. He maintained the student's attention and interest with intense eye contact, use of variable pitch, inflection and tempi for speech, and short, concise verbiage to

maximize the time spent making music. Positive reinforcement was given when earned with these enthusiastic statements: That was a smart mistake! You are ready, so ready! I love it! That is terrific! Good for you! Looking good!"

Class discipline

There was no question that the students are expected to listen and follow directions. They were instructed quickly, within the context of other instructions, to "not play just yet", "do not touch his piano", "don't play the piano while someone else is standing there". Directives were established to "Always raise your hand to answer questions" or "Raise your hand when you have found it" or "you didn't get to answer because your hands were not up". I loved, "You guys know so much, let's see if you are right!" and "you should know this, like that!" (with a snap of the finger). One of the most impressive challenges to the students was to prove that the answer they gave was correct. "Prove it!" will be added to every teacher's vocabulary.

The group learning environment was carefully engineered to guarantee student success. Each step became preparation for the presentation that followed. Ted is a master at sequencing from the known to the unknown, leaving no stone unturned along the way. Group questions were asked in order to reinforce concepts and he always turned his back to the students, looking over his shoulder, when demonstrating the hand to be used and the fingers. He then asked them to "raise the hand that starts, is everyone raising the same hand as me? Quick pacing was achieved by giving instructions while the students moved from place to place. When the students circled around the grand piano to look at the "picture of the piece" (great wordage!), the fallboard was down to prevent any possibility of students "diddling" on the keys. Every student, however, had an opportunity to perform at one of the grand pianos during the class.

The lesson: Technique warm-ups (5 min.)

The opening warm-up, that might be taught by one less experienced as a mere finger exercise,

incorporated affective ear training, pitch matching, rhythmic pulse, and dynamic levels by simply singing while playing in the air. The students were then directed to play and sing either legato or non-legato, forte or piano. The correct fingers moved as they sang and played (RH) 3-2-3, connecting the ear (aural) to the hand (tactile). All of this was experienced physically and aurally before taking it to the keys. As the students moved to the pianos, a "good piano hand" was the next expectation. Students were paired as "players & checkers" with the checker fixing their partners hand, checking for space under the hand, looking for a loose thumb, and 4 knuckles showing. The checker, empowered to be the teacher, was learning what to focus on in their own practice. When the student achieved the expected hand position, he was ready to play. His hand shape was discussed by the entire class and became a positive model for others to emulate. The checker then selected the touch and the dynamic for the player and everyone else watched, listened and determined the player achieved his goal without altering his hand position. The checker was asked, "how did he do?" and the progression of preparation, presentation and reinforcement was complete.

Since mature keyboard technique requires that a performer is able to play at different dynamic levels, touches and tempi, that goal is already in process by the 7th week of lessons.

One of the most beautiful moments in the class followed when Ted asked the children to listen to "a little bit of silence, to see what it sounds like", and they did. The room was absolutely silent, serving as preparation for focused concentration. As you would guess, Ted then said enthusiastically "and now we are going to learn a new piece!"

Rote presentation of new piece: "Jumbo"

Ted began with, "I am going to tell you all about the piece, just by playing it". The students did not know the title, only that it was about an animal and they were asked what animal it might be. The slow, ponderous nature of the piece prompted an immediate shout of ELEPHANT. They were asked if the music went higher or lower (always the correct answer

first), was forte or piano, and how many octaves were used, creating focused listeners. When the students gathered around the grand piano to see the score for the first time, they were asked if their previous answers were correct? "Did it go higher, is it forte, does it play in 4 octaves?" (All yes answers). When asked if all 4 octaves are the same, they circled the one that was different.

A very important next question "what does it do every single time?" When the students discovered that the pattern was their daily warm-up, RH 3-2-3, the piece was almost learned. They sang "3-2-3, left" as Ted played and they were ready to go back to their silent keyboards to find the position and practice the moves. One student played at the grand, with the teacher duet, while the others played and sang at their keyboards with "big, elephant voices". This was a masterful presentation.

Two review pieces: "Winter Fun" and "The Schumanns"

Before each piece numerous questions were asked beginning with: "Tell me something about this piece", is it forte, what interval does it use, what color keys, does it move, higher or lower?" The children were instructed to "play the move" (blocking) as preparation and to listen for all the signs as they played. After playing and singing each piece with teacher duet, listening evaluation followed with "did you hear all the signs?"

A ritualistic approach to correct piano posture (sit short/sit tall, feet on the floor) and performance procedure (hands float to and from the keyboard) was repeated, relentlessly, and will be remembered by the students for rest of their life! By establishing these important tenets in the first seven weeks of study, the student is prepared for a lifetime of correct posture and an artistic approach to the keys. Never stop doing this, Ted. It is wonderful!

Rhythmic movement with drum beat

"I want you to walk this sign" (quarter note). Before proceeding with an 8 beat lead-in the students practiced clapping a steady pulse and then an unsteady pulse. This moment of teaching by "opposites" convinced the students that they liked the steady beat better, and it prepared the successful that followed. They then marched to the drumbeat ("no stomping, no jumping") and when the drum stopped, they had been instructed to clap the quarter pulse until the drumbeat returned. This simple three-minute exercise segued into walking half notes to two drumbeats with huge steps and the kids loved it! When this activity is continued and developed on a weekly basis it will certainly help to establish the student's sense of internal pulse. The large body gestures and activity also serve as a physical reprieve after concentrated work on repertoire.

Ear Training

This brief segment included finding and matching a pitch by "swooping" up to it, and a vocal call and response interval game to the childhood tune, A F# B A F#, singing "Who has a 3rd?", "I have a 3rd".

Cognitive interval drill

Flashcards with intervals from a 2nd to a 4th were used with stems in various directions to force the children to concentrate on the note-heads and the line/space relationship. They were rapidly asked "What interval is this? Prove it!" and the child had to point and say "line-space-line, 3rd".

Tactile interval drill

The students were instructed to "Start with (LH) thumb. go down a 2nd, down a 2nd" and asked to name the interval. This enabled them to feel the intervals within a single hand (not yet

in their pieces).

Rhythm

Flashcards were used which had ties and the students were to clap and count, then play (on C) and count.

Sight Reading

Standing at the grand pianos, the students sang the intervals on the four note reading flashes, saying the interval and direction i.e. "note, down a 2nd, down a 2nd, up a 2nd". Then students were selected to play and their hands were covered as they played and sang the pattern on the card.

My only concerns are as follows:

1. Students standing at the piano to play. Does that send a message that it is ok to stand, compromising "good piano hands" and posture.
2. Selecting duet tempi from the students singing of the words.
3. The students did not see their music book for "Jumbo". It would have been nice for them to circle the one pattern that was different (in their own book) and to sing the words before leaving rather than "3-2-3 left".

A healthy and appreciative dialogue followed with Moderators Mary Brostrum Bloom, Chair of the Keyboard Department at the Neighborhood School in New Haven, CT, and Randall Faber, co-author of the Piano Adventures method and over 200 publications, joining Ted Cooper on stage to discuss the group lesson.

Randy Faber began by congratulating Ted Cooper on so many examples of expert teaching and the rich setting it provided for today's discussion. He went on to commend Ted for his ability

to gain and maintain the attention of the students and lauded his range of intonation, use of movement, eye contact and body gestures to control individuals and the group, at the same time. Ted acknowledged that he had many failed attempts as a new group teacher and that he gives a lot of thought to the way he speaks including subtle voice changes (soft to loud) and even silence.

Mary Bloom commented on how much went on in the lesson and asked if the lesson plan involved determining where the children will be, physically, at any given time. Mr. Cooper replied that he tries to do as much away from the piano as possible since the "clock starts ticking" when the students face the keys. He, instead, wants them to come to the piano knowing exactly what to do. Mary noted that the students explored many locations in the room, at the desks, standing or at the pianos during the course of each segment.

Break-out Discussion Group Leaders

Nancy Bachus, author of "Spirit" series integrating history and art in piano anthologies.

Carol Ann Bell, Associate Professor of Piano at Oklahoma Baptist University.

Carla Dean Day, pedagogy lecturer, author and independent teacher, Potomac Falls, VA.

Karen Ann Krieger, Assistant Professor of Piano and Piano Pedagogy at Vanderbilt University

Frances Larimer, Piano Professor Emerita from Northwestern University School of Music.

Annie Lin, Assistant Professor of Piano at Scripps College in Claremont, CA.

Tom Parente, Associate Professor of Piano at Westminster Choir College of Rider University

Joan Reist, MTNA Past-President, Professor Emerita, University of

Nebraska-Lincoln. Rachel Snyder developer of the piano preparatory program at Penn State University

Carol Winborne, NCTM, independent teacher and adjunct faculty at UW-Oshkosh.

Robert Wyatt, pianist, author, scholar, music educator and arts administrator.

Break-out Discussion Group

Robert Wyatt began his report with, "the mastery of Mr. Cooper's methodology was immediately perceived, not only in the way he interacted with the children, but also the way in which he was able to shift seamlessly between learning segments. Another group determined that "Ted Cooper is truly an artist-teacher of beginner-level piano students". All of the groups affirmed the effectiveness and success of this group lesson and of Ted's superior teaching, superb skill, organization and teacher-student relationships. His sensitivity to student reactions determined when he would move into the next phase of the lesson plan. The respect, which he earned from the students, and the suitability of the for the age group impressed all observers. His style was described as non-parental. All observers found that frequent use of singing was an invaluable source of ear training and a means of internalizing the music. The teachers commented on the difficulty getting students to sing in a private lesson. Ted's ability to maintain excitement and exuberance and to keep the class members constantly engaged was praised.

There were many positive comments on Ted's pacing, the progression from known to unknown, allowing the students to make connections between the elements in the lesson. Everyone marveled at the many areas of musicianship that were addressed simultaneously in a very short period of time along with the high level of expertise with which the children sight read new material. All considered this presentation well thought out, superbly sequenced and highly structured. The students were aware of what was required of them. Helen Marlais' group discussed Ted's effective strategies in having the students listen to their own playing and plan the sound before it was played. The presence of peers reinforced and solidified concepts of posture, hand position, and performance etiquette in a way not possible in one-on-one teaching. Everyone was smitten with "sit short/sit tall", "prove it", checkers/players and impressed by Mr. Cooper's ability to improve and correct playing and rhythmic errors through positive feedback, i.e. "smart mistake". One participant plans to use his away from the piano activities in her summer camp.

In conclusion, Nancy Bachus group felt that the greatest impact of this lesson on our teaching was in realizing the importance of preparation, the need to think about everything that we do, be pro-active rather than reactive, and view teaching as a performance requiring analysis, preparation and practice.

Most of groups did not want to stop the discussion when time ran out, one stating that while the things done in the group lesson could be done in private lessons, they were done more efficiently and effectively in the group lesson. Many were persuaded to TRY group teaching after this observation, saying "Ted Cooper is a great salesman for group teaching!"

The following items prompted discussion:

- How to incorporate group lessons within the private lesson schedule. The business aspect of group teaching was overwhelming for many participants.
- Does class instruction foster refinement?
- The need to audition group piano students to gather diagnostic information.
- The lack of spontaneity of the students in a controlled environment.
- The efficacy of group lessons and the skills required of an effective group teacher.
- The difficulties of dealing with touch and tone in a group setting.
- Attention to spatial awareness in rhythmic movement to promote accuracy.

A dynamic and thoughtful summary of Ted Cooper's teaching was presented the next morning by Robert A. Duke, University Distinguished Teaching Professor and E. William Doty Professor of Fine Arts at The University of Texas at Austin. Bob Duke said that Ted Cooper had a clear vision of each child being an accomplished learner. His teaching manner was always diligent, attentive and patient. An example of this was the way in which Mr. Cooper developed good piano posture by having the

student's experience poor posture (sit short/sit tall). Ted was diligent, also, in doing this repeatedly, with consistent, correct repetition. The emphasis in the lesson was always on quality versus difficulty and beauty versus complexity.

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