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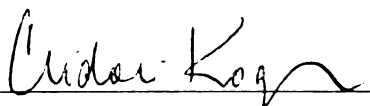
**The Implications of Using  
Improvisation in Undergraduate  
Class Piano Curricula**

presented by

**Yuko Kishimoto**

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

**MM** degree in **Piano Pedagogy**

  
Major professor

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**THE IMPLICATIONS OF USING IMPROVISATION IN  
UNDERGRADUATE CLASS PIANO CURRICULA**

**By**

**Yuko Kishimoto**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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**MASTER OF PIANO PEDAGOGY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE IMPLICATOINS OF USING IMPROVISATION IN UNDERGRADUATE CLASS PIANO CURRICULA**

**By**

**Yuko Kishimoto**

**This is a qualitative study, in which improvisation is used as a tool for developing basic keyboard skills in an undergraduate class piano curriculum for music majors at Michigan State University. The purpose of the study was to investigate (a) if improvisation can be successfully incorporated into a class piano curriculum, and (b) if improvisation is beneficial and valuable for the students in their piano study.**

**Five original improvisation exercises were incorporated into the teaching of 2 sections of MUS 141 (Class Piano I) as supplemental activities during the course of 15 weeks. The data for the study included the instructor's log, videotapes, and a survey that the participants responded to on a voluntary basis.**

**The study concluded with the following results: (a) improvisation is an appropriate tool in class piano instruction, and (b) students find improvisation beneficial and valuable as well as fun and enjoyable.**

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Dr. Colleen Conway, former faculty member at Michigan State University, was the greatest help at the very beginning stage of the study and the writing of this paper. Without her assistance, this thesis would have never been written. After she left, Dr. Frederick Tims, graduate advisor, came to my rescue and agreed to serve on my committee. His expertise was absolutely necessary for the completion of my thesis.

I must note that many of the ideas for this study were inspired by Andrew Speight and Rodney Whitaker, great jazz musicians and wonderful teachers. Although they were not directly involved, they had shared so much information and musical wisdom with me over many years, which became essential to the study.

I would also like to express my appreciation to all my friends, who patiently listened to me talk about the frustration and the problems that I came across during the study and the process of writing this thesis.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) requires that improvisation and composition be incorporated into undergraduate music curricula in the United States (1999). Many agree that improvisation can be beneficial for the development and understanding of various musical skills (Albergo, 1990; Azzara, 1993; Baker, 1980; Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Dobbins, 1980; NASM, 1999; Watkins, 1979; Willoughby 1973).

Improvisation is very often associated with jazz (Azzara, 1993; Baker, 1980; Dobbins, 1980, Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Marks, 1994). In our time, jazz is the only art form in the Western world that represents the most highly developed form of improvisation (Dobbins, 1980). However, there were times in the history of classical music when improvisation was a major part of music making and performing. In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, performers were expected to add embellishments and ornaments to original compositions (Bechtel, 1980). During the Classical and Romantic periods, it was not unusual for the cadenza of a concerto to be improvised by the soloist (Randel, 1986). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as precision of notation became greater and the concept of perfection of compositions in performance became more emphasized, improvisation gradually lost its place in classical music (Randel, 1986).

Why are improvisatory skills important? In early music, improvisation was a form of expression displaying the individual's skills and interpretation of the music. Such ability was considered as a significant measure of musicianship (Bechtel, 1980). Now, many again believe that improvisation is a useful tool during the process of musical

training (Azzara, 1993; Baker, 1980; Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Dobbins, 1980; NASM, 1999). Among many in-service music teachers, improvisation is considered useful, and the training for such skills is indicated as being absolutely necessary (Lester, 1978; Marks, 1994; Saunders & Baker, 1991). However, the practical implication of improvisation has been rather unsuccessful, and improvisation has been often excluded from traditional music training, including music programs in universities and colleges (Albergo, 1990; Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Lester, 1978; Marks, 1994).

Keyboard competency is also a required (Hines, 1994; McCalla, 1989; NASM, 1999; Trantham, 1970; Uszler, 1995), yet rather unsuccessful area in undergraduate music curricula (Hines, 1994; McCalla, 1989; Peterson, 1955; Trantham, 1970). The most common format for developing students' keyboard skills used in universities and colleges is classroom instruction, commonly called class piano. This format first became widespread in the 1950's and 1960's, and the textbooks designed for class piano started to appear in 1960's (Uszler, 1995). In spite of its 40 years of history, the adequacy of the quality of class piano programs is still questionable (Hines, 1994; McCalla, 1989; Peterson, 1955; Trantham, 1970).

One of the major weaknesses of traditional piano study including class piano is the unequal emphasis of the content of study (Albergo, 1990). Teachers and the programs tend to focus on basic keyboard skills, such as technique and literacy as well as the performance aspect including building repertoire, memorization, and interpretation (Albergo, 1990; Hines, 1994; Trantham, 1970; Watkins, 1979). However, functional keyboard skills such as improvisation, harmonization, and aural skills tend to receive very little emphasis during piano study (Albergo, 1990). In reality, there is the need for

such skills especially among in-service classroom music teachers (Lester, 1978; Marks, 1994; Peterson, 1955; Saunders & Baker, 1991). Therefore, it is important that improvisatory and aural skills are successfully applied during piano study.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

This study is an attempt to find a way to meet both improvisation and keyboard competency requirements in the undergraduate curriculum by incorporating improvisation into class piano. The purpose of the study is to describe and evaluate the inclusion of improvisation in the existing class piano curriculum. By observing the students' learning process in improvisation and progress in piano skills, the study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Can improvisation be successfully applied into a class piano curriculum?
2. Is improvisation valuable and beneficial for students in piano study?

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of the Literature

The following literature review is organized into three categories: the content of class piano, successful class piano teaching, and a successful approach to improvisation.

#### The Content of Class Piano

The following are the major components in elementary level piano study as well as beginning class piano study: basic keyboard and musical skills, functional keyboard skills, and keyboard musicianship (Albergo, 1990; Hines, 1994; Pounds, 1974; Trantham, 1970; Uszler, 1995; Watkins, 1979). Basic keyboard and musical skills include music reading, rhythmic and metric concepts, independence and coordination of fingers and hands, and technical skills such as playing scales and chords. Functional keyboard skills, connected closely to music theory, include improvisation, harmonization, accompaniment, arrangement, and transposition. Aural skills are also included in this category. Keyboard musicianship, which is the performance aspect of piano study, includes sight-reading, building repertoire, interpretation, memorization, and actual performance.

Although these components are deemed by most teachers to be equally important, often they are not equally emphasized in teaching. According to Albergo's survey study, teachers most likely teach what they are comfortable with, which tends to focus on piano playing and literacy, but not so much on creative or aural skills (1990). The purpose of this study was to define the content of elementary level piano study. First, the researcher analyzed eight leading elementary level piano methods books in the U.S. and their related materials. Eight objectives were organized based on the analysis. They were sent out to

the authors of the methods books used for the analysis, along with a short questionnaire to affirm the explicit and implicit objectives. Based on the responses from the authors, the researcher formulated a composite list of behavioral objectives for elementary piano study. This list was distributed to 319 experienced piano teachers as a survey on behavioral objectives in elementary piano teaching. Based on 240 survey responses, 57 behavioral objectives were derived. The objectives were organized into 4 categories (playing, listening, creating, and knowing/understanding), and listed by importance (essential, important, and optional), as indicated by the respondents.

The following are the ordinal data of the survey: 26 objectives for playing, 10 for listening, 5 for creating, and 16 for knowing/understanding. The objectives for playing and knowing/understanding greatly outnumbered the objectives for playing and listening. The data clearly suggest the unequal balance among the categories, which is a reflection of the typical content of current piano study and the teachers' tendencies and priorities in teaching. The researcher speculates that piano teachers tend to teach what they were taught in the way they were taught. In other words, the teachers teach what they are comfortable with, and, as a result, creative and aural skills tend to be avoided or excluded from their teaching. The researcher also notes that the authors of the methods books included more objectives for listening and creating, and rated them higher in importance than the teachers did. This study indicates the lack of comprehensiveness of the content of the piano study, and recommends a student-centered teaching approach.

Designing a class piano curriculum according to the students' future needs as well as the current is highly recommended by some studies. Peterson investigated the value of the classes required for music education majors offered at 121 colleges and universities in

17 western states in relation to in-service music teachers' professional needs (1955). Three hundred and one music teachers responded to the survey, and twenty teachers received a follow-up spot check for additional information. According to this investigation, approximately half of the teachers felt that their college training was quite adequate. However, a variety of comments and suggestions were made by the other half. They felt that their college training should have been presented in a more functional and practical fashion. One of the comments made most frequently was the need for greater emphasis on piano study. Other comments indicated the need for emphasis on arrangement techniques for various ensembles, and contemporary music and choral literature in music history. Even for such areas, having better functional keyboard skills would be a tremendous help.

According to Marks' survey study on pre-service music teacher training programs in California, despite the fact that many in-service teachers indicate the need for skills and instruction in improvisation or jazz methods, only 25% of schools require a course in such areas (1994).

The results of the studies suggest more emphasis needs to be placed on functional keyboard skills such as improvisation, harmonization, and arrangement. Such skills are considered not only practical but also necessary among many in-service music teachers.

### Successful Class Piano Teaching

How does one teach piano to a group of people successfully with greater emphasis on functional keyboard skills? Trantham's experimental study suggests a successful way of interrelating music theory and piano playing by using aural skills (1970). Fourteen freshman music majors received 11 weeks of group piano instruction. Seven students in

the control group received instruction with an emphasis on basic keyboard technique, repertoire, and music literacy. The other seven students in the experimental group received instruction with an emphasis on music theory and aural skills. In the first session described by the researcher, the students in the experimental group were instructed to play familiar folk tunes such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” “Long, Long Ago,” and “Swanee River” by ear. After having performed these songs, they analyzed the intervals and tonality of each tune. Through this process they found the appropriate fingering according to the intervallic movements of the melodies. As a result of this particular approach, the students in the experimental group gained better insight into piano playing than the students in the control group, despite the fact that the instruction time that the experimental group received was less than half of the time that control group received.

Active interaction between the instructor and the class as well as between the students and greater performance opportunities also contribute to better learning in students (Dimmick, 1994; McCalla, 1989; Trantham, 1970). In Trantham’s study, the students in the experimental group often performed for each other. During the performance of a student, others would be listening to the performance and observing the musical score. Afterward, a brief open discussion was held where the listeners and the instructor made comments and suggestions for the performer. This process was not only helpful as a performance opportunity for the students, but also beneficial for the development of their listening and instructive skills.

Dimmick’s case study also suggests that the instructor’s teaching approach has an influence on the students’ progress (1994). The study was focused on the effect of piano instruction on piano skills and attitudes of 19 music students. In addition to written and

oral pre- and posttests, anecdotal data were collected to determine the results. The researcher found that reassurance and encouragement by the instructor have a positive influence on students' attitudes, which contributes to the increase of comprehensive musical ability and the confidence level of the students.

The quality of the content is an important issue for successful class piano teaching. However, the presentation of the content is as important as the content itself. The effective presentation of the content involves not only how things are taught, but also how the instructor approaches teaching and communicates with students.

### Successful Approach to Improvisation

Improvisation, although its role has diminished in classical music (Randel, 1986), represents many important aspects of music and can help develop a variety of musical skills and knowledge in the study of music (Azzara, 1993; Baker, 1980; Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Dobbins, 1980; NASM, 1999). Azzara's study suggests that improvisation contributes to the improvement of instrumental performance ability at the elementary level (1993). Sixty-six fifth-grade instrumental students received 30-minute group instruction each week for 27 weeks. While the students in the control group received traditional instrumental instruction, the students in the experimental group received instruction with an improvisation emphasis. The experimental group did various improvisatory activities such as (a) learning songs by ear (imitation), (b) developing vocabulary of tonal and rhythmic syllables, (c) improvising vocally and instrumentally within the major tonality, and (d) improvising vocally and instrumentally within the metric and rhythmic structure. As a result, the students in the experimental group reached higher performance achievement levels than the students in the control group. The



researcher also notes that, as well as the accuracy in instrumental playing, the students with improvisatory experiences developed better understanding of harmonic progression and tonality.

The study by Della Pietra and Campbell is a successful example of integrating improvisation into a college level music curriculum (1995). The researchers believed that improvisation could be used as (a) an attraction to draw more students into music, (b) a tool to develop students' comprehensive musicianship, and (c) an opportunity for students to be exposed to music in non-classical traditions. They were also concerned about the lack of experience and knowledge in improvisation and world music among pre- and in-service music teachers. Therefore, eight music education students were selected as participants for this study. The purpose of the study was to examine their process of group improvisation focusing on the concept of improvisation, its relation to analytical listening, social and musical interaction, and the possibility of its implication into the existing curriculum. They received ninety-minute group instruction in improvisation each week for 5 weeks as a part of a 10-week methods course. The class proceeded in the following order:

1. Listening to 2-minute excerpts from percussion ensemble music of Ghana, the Bahamas, China, Vietnam, and Brazil.
2. Discussing and analyzing the music.
3. Breaking into 2 groups (same membership for 5 weeks) and inventing an ensemble piece based on the style of the model piece in separate rooms.
4. Performing the piece for each other.

Through this experience, the students felt that they learned the importance of musical cohesiveness, a better concept of ensemble playing (communicating with others by musical cues and eye contact), and the awareness of musical structure (form, rhythmic patterns, etc.). The researchers concluded that such an approach to improvisation contributes to the development of the students' analytical listening skills, creativity, pedagogical skills, musical social skills. They also recognized that imitation was effective for developing a better understanding and awareness of world music as well as improvisation.

### Summary and Conclusion

The content of the class piano curriculum appears to have a lack of emphasis on functional keyboard skills such as, aural skills and improvisation. Many consider that such skills are practical and even necessary, especially in music teaching professions. Greater emphasis on aural skills and the use of improvisation during instrumental study contribute to the students' development of comprehensive musical skills and knowledge. One of the ways to integrate aural skills into the existing curriculum successfully is to interrelate the area with other components of piano study such as technique, literacy, and repertoire. A model-based approach and group activities like ensemble, performance, and open discussion are recommended for improvisation.

Imitation (learning by ear, model-based learning) is considered to be the most effective way of approaching improvisation. In other words, aural skills are essential in improvisation. If aural skills can be successfully interrelated with other components of piano study, improvisation may also be interrelated. Therefore, I believe that it is possible to successfully incorporate improvisation into the existing class piano curriculum. It is

necessary to find effective ways to apply improvisation into the existing class piano curriculum interrelating it with other important components of piano study.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

For this study, I have developed five musical exercises that incorporate improvisation, aural skills, and basic keyboard techniques. Each one is designed to be an extension of various keyboard skills required in the first semester of class piano study at Michigan State University. The exercises were incorporated into the existing class piano curriculum and presented to the students as supplemental activities. The condition of the class and the students' behaviors and responses during the exercises were observed using various methods for the purpose of description and evaluation of such application of improvisation. In order to fulfill the purpose, I structured my study in the format of a qualitative case study. This particular design allowed me to observe and describe what happened during the process of the study, and this became the essential data for the final analysis.

#### Selection of the Participants

At Michigan State University, all undergraduate music majors are required to take two semesters of class piano (MUS 141 & 142), with the exception of those who are piano majors and those who test out of the course in the beginning of the semester. Every fall, approximately 100 students enroll in this course. Most students take this course during their first year, so that the majority of the students in the class are freshmen. There are a wide variety of majors among the students such as music education, music therapy, instrumental and vocal performance, and music theory and composition.

The participants of this study were 33 students who were enrolled in two of the sections of MUS 141 at Michigan State University in fall semester, 2000. The majority of the participants were freshmen with limited keyboard skills and theoretical knowledge.

### Site

The class was held in a keyboard lab located in the Music Building. There are 21 electric keyboards in the room, of which one is specifically for the instructor. Therefore, the capacity of a lab is up to 20 students.

The keyboards have weighted keys, so that they have a somewhat similar key action to the acoustic piano. Each keyboard has a headphone that can be plugged in and out manually, which allows students to practice individually as well as play for and with others through built-in speakers. The headphone can also be used for verbal communication between the instructor and the individual students or the whole class, as well as listening to the keyboard demonstrations by the instructor and other students. The instructor can monitor individual students through the headphone while they are practicing. The instructor's keyboard is located in the front center of the room, and has additional features, such as built-in drum machines, a programming system, a vast variety of sound options, including acoustic piano, electric piano, strings, and winds.

### Course

The course MUS 141 is the introduction to keyboard musicianship and proficiency designed for those who have limited or no prior experience in keyboard study. The class meets for 50 minutes, twice each week for 15 weeks. The following is the basic content of the course:

- Major and minor 5-finger patterns and blocked triads.

- Chromatic scale, hands together, contrary motion.
- Major and minor triads and inversions, hands separate.
- Major scales in all 12 keys, one octave, hands together, parallel motion.
- Minor scales (natural, harmonic, and melodic) in a, e, and d, one octave, hands together, parallel motion.
- Major cadence progression (I-IV6-I-V6/5-I) in all 12 keys.
- Harmonization of melodies using I, IV, and V (7).
- Sight-reading.
- Appropriate solo and ensemble repertoire.
- Improvisation.

Students are expected to learn and master the listed criteria successfully, and demonstrate their ability during the class and examinations. There are six quizzes, one midterm examination, and one final examination administered individually during the course of 15 weeks.

### Definition

Improvisation in music is analogous to conversational speech in language. It is simply a way to communicate and express ideas and thoughts. We all improvise when we converse with others. We all think of what to say and create sentences accordingly as a conversation progresses. Although conversational speech appears to be “created on the spot,” this is by no means the invention of language. Instead, people organize their ideas and thoughts, find appropriate words, construct sentences by putting them in order, and then finally verbalize them. Such process is taken simultaneously and spontaneously, which requires familiarity and an adequate command of language including vocabulary

and grammatical skills and knowledge. In other words, the fluency of conversational speech in language indicates one's linguistic competency.

In music, however, many appear to conceptualize improvisation as the invention of music. Having recognized the process of improvisation in language, this is a clear misconception of the phenomenon. This is common especially among those who are classically trained musicians and are unfamiliar with the process of improvisation.

Improvisation in music is an expression of musical ideas and thoughts. Good improvisers speak the language of music fluently. Just like verbal language, they organize their musical ideas such as melodic and rhythmic ideas, phrasing, metric structure, form, style, tonality, harmonic progressions, and express them by playing the instrument. The process of improvisation in music involves basic musicianship, theoretical skills and knowledge, listening ability, historical knowledge and understanding, and instrumental/vocal proficiency.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of improvisation is the ability to make coherent musical sentences based on one's musical vocabulary. Playing random notes without any logic or reason is not considered to be improvisation in this study. In other words, improvisation is playing a consciously chosen series of notes, which is musically logical and therefore sounds good. Such ability includes improvisation of the melody, harmonization of the melody, accompaniment as the embellishment of harmonic progressions using various accompaniment figures, aural imitation, and analysis of music.

### Personal Orientation

This study not only involves the traditional beginning classical piano training materials, but also deals with a large amount of improvisation as well as the blues form, both of which are traditionally non-classical areas. Therefore, this particular study requires an instructor who is confident and experienced in both classical music and non-classical music.

In my undergraduate study, while I majored in piano performance in classical music, I was involved in jazz studies as well. During those years, while I took private lessons in classical piano, played in chamber music groups and orchestras, and gave solo and chamber music recitals, I also took private lessons in jazz piano, played in the jazz band and combos, and performed professionally in public. Because of my background in both areas, everything in the study, including improvisation, was well within the limit of my musicianship level as well as my comfort level. Therefore, I was able to incorporate the best of each area into my teaching very naturally and comfortably.

Another important characteristic that is required of the instructor for this study is that one has to be understanding and patient with the possible difficulties and frustration that the participants might experience. It is hard for an experienced pianist to remember how difficult piano playing can be for a beginner or a non-pianist, or for a jazz musician to truly understand how intimidating improvising can be for someone with no experience in improvisation. I must admit I could easily think, "What is so difficult about this?"

However, I have a relatively fresh memory of learning something new as an adult. As a native of Japan, I spoke only Japanese all my life until I came to America at the age of seventeen. After coming here, I started to learn English, which was completely



different from the language I was used to. The process of learning was very slow. I recall very clearly how frustrating it was for me not to be able to express myself comfortably, not because I did not know what to say, but because I did not know how to say it due to my limited English language skills.

I relate this experience of my own to the one that many class piano students seem to experience with piano playing and also classically trained musicians often experience with improvisation. All participants are musicians. They are proficient on their major instruments. If one's major instrument is violin, the violinist surely is able to play scales and arpeggios on violin. But, if the same scales and arpeggios were to be played on piano, the violinist would most likely be rather uncomfortable demonstrating, not because of the lack of knowledge, but because of the lack of familiarity with the instrument. I find a similarity between my own experience in learning a different language and the participants' experience in learning a different instrument. Therefore, I believe I can understand the process of learning something new and different as an adult and the frustration that they might feel at a very personal level.

As a musician who is familiar with both classical and jazz (improvisation), I believe I am capable of using the devices from each area in teaching, and providing creative, yet logical, musical learning experiences for others. My recent experience as an adult learner allows me to see the participants and what they go through during their study through the lens of a learner. This, I hope, makes me a better, more understanding instructor. Because these experiences (playing both classical and jazz, and being an adult learner) are in my own personal background, I am able to teach the course incorporating the improvisation

exercises with great sincerity and understanding. Therefore, I believe that I am the most appropriate and well suited for designing and conducting this study.

### Tool

Based on my personal experience and belief and the criteria of class piano requirements, I have developed five keyboard improvisation exercises. Each exercise is designed as the extension of the required criteria of the course. The major purposes of these exercises are (a) to develop the students' familiarity with the keyboard, (b) to provide a more musical and creative approach to the students' technical development, (c) to provide the connections between various aspects of music such as music theory, aural skills, creativity, ensemble, and keyboard technique, and (d) to fulfill the requirements of aural skills and improvisation in the undergraduate music curriculum. All exercises are designed to be coherent, so that the more advanced exercises are designed to be based on the previous exercises.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The following three methods were used for the collection of the data: instructor's log, videotape observation, and survey.

#### **Instructor's log**

I kept the instructor's log for each class period that incorporated any of the improvisation exercises. This included a description of my observation of participants' behaviors and responses, any expected and unexpected events during the class, and any thoughts that occurred to me during and after the class. This data revealed not only my etic perspective (viewpoint as an administer), but also my emic perspective (viewpoint as a participant) for the study.

### **Videotape observation**

The segments of class periods that incorporated the improvisation exercises were videotaped. The recorded data were viewed by Dr. Midori Koga, professor and chair of piano pedagogy program at Michigan State University, two graduate piano pedagogy students who were enrolled in MUS 843 (seminar in piano pedagogy), and myself for the purpose of triangulation. After the viewing of each tape, we had a brief discussion regarding the particular exercise(s) we had just viewed. The three viewers also made comments and suggestions to me.

### **Survey**

At the end of the class periods in which improvisation exercises were used, blank sheets of paper were handed out to the participants as an open-ended survey. The responses were turned in voluntarily and anonymously, and there were no specific questions asked for the survey, which allowed the participants to freely express their honest thoughts and feelings regarding the exercises.

The comments were collected and reviewed by 3 outside reviewers as well as myself. The outside reviewers were pianists who had no involvement in the study up until this point. We individually coded the collected comments into 3 groups: positive, neutral, and negative. There was no specific scale system that we used for the procedure. Judgment was based on personal interpretation of each individual reviewer. The comments that expressed an enthusiastic response to the improvisation exercises were categorized as positive. The responses that indicated a dislike or disagreement towards the exercises were considered negative. The responses that contained both positive and negative comments, or the ones with no expression of liking or disliking of the exercises,

were categorized as neutral. I also had a brief session with each reviewer privately to discuss the results.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results and Interpretation

#### Improvisation Exercises

Because improvisation exercises were meant to be supplemental activities, I had to be careful not to spend too much time for the exercises during the class. I spent 10 to 15 minutes of a class period for the exercises when new techniques were introduced. Some class periods were devoted for quizzes, sight-reading, and reviewing old materials, and the exercises were not used during those classes.

#### Exercise 1: Play 4-bar phrase

##### Objectives.

- To extend the 5-finger patterns to a more creative and musical activity as opposed to a purely mechanical routine.
- To familiarize with tonalities as well as the keyboard without concern about reading.
- To develop finger coordination.

##### Method.

1. Introduce 5-finger pattern in C major.



2. Instruct students to play open blocked 5<sup>th</sup> in the left hand (C and G) while playing the pattern in the right hand.



3. Have them experiment with the 5 notes in the right hand and make up their own melodies. Play an example for them:



4. Have them practice individually.
5. Have them perform for the class.
6. Provide brief feedback after each performance.

### Results.

I called on some volunteers to perform. Just as I had suspected, no one volunteered at first. I announced that I was interested in their grasp of the concept of this exercise and their progress within the short given time, instead of in the performance quality.

I asked a few students, who seemed comfortable with the exercise when I was monitoring, to play for the class. They all demonstrated fairly successfully.

One particular student, although the melodic line itself sounded fine, kept playing without any sense of time or phrasing. I told her that the next step for her would be to organize the right hand notes rhythmically so they would fit in 4 measures.

There were 2 students who found already-existing tunes within the 5-finger patterns. One played “When The Saints Go Marchin’ In,” and the other played a Christmas carol, “The Little Drummer Boy.”

### Observation.

While they were practicing, I monitored all the students to make sure that they understood their task and were doing the exercise correctly. This process was helpful for me to assess their individual levels of understanding, keyboard skills, and overall comfort. I could individually hear the students who were very comfortable with the exercise and ready to play for the class, and others who were still struggling. This was important for me to pay attention to because, although I encouraged every student to be brave and play for others, I wanted to be sensitive to those who were uncomfortable and were not quite ready to play yet. However, the students, including those who were more advanced than others, seemed to be hesitant to play for the class at first.

The students quoting “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In” and “The Little Drummer Boy” was very unexpected. Although they were not exactly improvising, I was glad to see the students enjoying experimenting within the range of 5 notes and having fun with it.

### **Exercise 2: 12-bar blues form**

#### Objectives.

- To continue expanding students’ creativity and flexibility on the keyboard.
- To familiarize with the basic harmonic progressions (I-IV-I-V-I) by playing and listening to a real musical form.
- To keep a steady tempo without stopping throughout the form.
- To practice switching hand positions from key to key.
- To keep track of the form.

### Method.

1. Review Exercise 1 in C major, F major, and G major.

2. Introduce 12-bar blues form in C major:

	C	C	C	C
F	F	C	C	
G	G	C	C	

3. Describe the form as 3 sets of 4-bar phrases. Explain that each phrase starts out in a different key area; the first phrase starts in C, the second in F, and the last in G, and they all end in the same key area, which is in C. This is for the purpose of increasing the students' awareness of phrasing and analytical listening.

4. Go over the form:



5. Have them improvise the melody through out the form, using only the notes of the 5-finger patterns. Play an example:





6. Have them practice individually.
7. Have them perform for the class.
8. Feedback and analysis of each performance.

#### Results.

A typical thing that occurred when one lost track of the form was to stay in F major for too long in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> measures. One of the reasons was because the 2 bars of F major take place immediately after the 4 bars of C major in the beginning of the form. Another reason may have been the fact that 2 bars go by so quickly that they were not ready to make the hand position change from one position to another.

In addition to giving feedback, I encouraged the students to share their thoughts with others. In other words, we, as a class, analyzed and discussed each performance together. I thought they could learn from each other through this process. For example, a particular student was very successful keeping a steady tempo and switching the hand positions from key to key. This student advised others to keep the right hand patterns simple and to choose a manageable tempo through out the form.

### Observation.

In some students' playing, I could hear various musical influences on the students. This was very interesting to me. For example, one student played the rhythmic ostinato-like example, using a lot of syncopation. It was very rhythmic, but not very melodic. It reminded me of popular dance music. Another student played the entire form in 7/8 meter. He was a vocal major, but was also a member of the drum line at the university.

Another interesting thing that I noticed was the students seemed to have a natural inclination to "swing" the 8<sup>th</sup> notes instead of playing the classically conventional straight 8<sup>th</sup> notes in this particular exercise. This may have been because of the way I played the example, in which 8<sup>th</sup> notes were swung. In my demonstration, I swung the 8<sup>th</sup> notes (almost like a dotted 8<sup>th</sup> note and a 16<sup>th</sup> note) and used some syncopated figures to make the example sound jazzy. I thought this was appropriate for playing the blues form. I also thought, because this particular form is very common in jazz, it would be important for me to demonstrate in the stylistically correct fashion. When they played their own ideas, many of them swung the 8<sup>th</sup> notes instead of the straight 8<sup>th</sup> notes. While the majority of the students were classically trained, many were aware of the jazz/blues style of playing associated with the 12-bar blues form.

When the primary chords were introduced to students in freshman theory class, we reviewed the exercise substituting the specific key areas with roman numerals:

	I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I	
V	V	I	I	

I used this exercise in all 12 keys including some of the more challenging keys with more accidentals such as D-flat major and F-sharp major. This was a great way to challenge students. Most of the pieces written for beginning students such as these participants tend to be in simpler keys. There is hardly any piece that has more than 3 sharps or flats. There are a very few sight reading examples in more involved keys in the textbook and other supplemental materials, but they are only 4 to 8 measures long and are rather too simple. The students in class piano would rarely come across any piece in D-flat major or F-sharp, despite the fact that they are required to know scales and chord progressions in those keys. I believe that by challenging the students through this exercise we give them an opportunity to apply what they have learned in a practical way. From this early stage they are able to apply their technique and their theoretical knowledge to do something musical as well as creative. It would also give them a chance to know what it feels like to play something in those difficult keys on piano.


### **Exercise 3: Ensemble**


#### **Objectives.**


- To review the 5-finger patterns.
- To practice playing various intervals (3<sup>rd</sup>s, 5<sup>ths</sup>, and triads)
- To develop outward listening skills that are essential for ensemble playing (maintaining a steady tempo, the balance of sound volume between the parts, playing together as a group).

### Method.

1. After reviewing the previous exercise, divide the class into 3 groups. Assign 3 separate rhythmic patterns to each group by clapping the rhythms and have them copy them:

Group 1 

Group 2 

Group 3 

2. When students are comfortable with the rhythms, assign the notes for each pattern:

Group 1: open 5<sup>th</sup>  
Group 2: 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of each chord  
Group 3: triads

[illegible]

3. Have them practice individually as well as with the whole class. It is recommended to repeat the patterns in C until they get the feel and the sound of how all the parts fit together. Then, have them play through the blues form as they learned in the previous exercise.
4. Play an example of improvised solo over their accompaniment. Then, call on volunteers.

### Results.

The students took turns playing solo while others kept playing the accompaniment. Along the way, I had them switch their accompaniment parts. I also had them transpose and play it in a several different keys as we did in the previous exercise.

We discussed the balance between the sound volume of the soloist and the sound volume of the accompaniment. For the first couple of students, the accompaniment was so loud that it was hard to hear the soloist. I advised them to play the accompaniment quiet enough so that they could hear the soloist at all time. I thought that the balance issue was important enough to point out. All my students were vocal, string, brass, or woodwind majors. Ensemble is a significant part of music playing for them so that they should be aware of the balance.

In addition to the 5-finger pattern, I also assigned a set of 3 notes, C, D, and E-flat (or tonic, supertonic, and minor third) as their options for melodic playing. This was for the students to experience a more “bluesy” sound, which was effective and stylistically appropriate for the form.

### Observation.

The advantage of doing the exercise in a group format is that there is a smaller chance of stopping or losing track of the form. In the previous exercise, it was a great challenge for many students to play in a steady tempo without stopping, because they had to play alone. In a group format, even if one or two people get lost and drop out for a moment, there are always others who keep playing. If one gets lost or makes a mistake and stops playing for a minute, he or she has to get back in the form. Whether they can

play it perfectly or not, they would have to be aware of the form and chord changes and think ahead at all times.

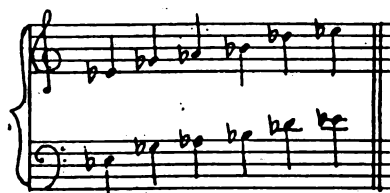
#### **Exercise 4: Call-and-response phrasing (pentatonic scale)**

##### **Objectives.**

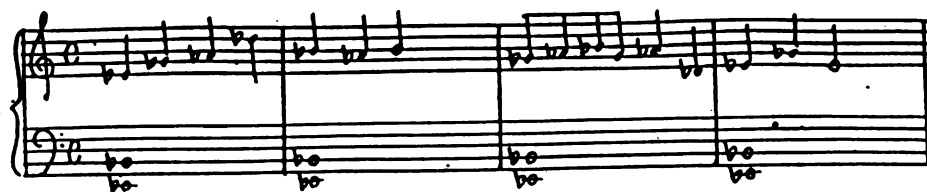
- To familiarize oneself with black keys.
- To familiarize oneself with the sound of pentatonic scale, which is not as common in classical music as diatonic major and minor scales.
- To develop musical listening skills.

##### **Method.**

1. Introduce minor pentatonic scale in E-flat (all black keys on the keyboard):



2. Have the students experiment with the tonality by making up a melody within the scale in the right hand while playing blocked open 5<sup>th</sup> (Eb and Bb) in the left hand. Play an example:



3. Teach them a “riff,” or a background pattern, by having them learn by ear.

Write the pattern on the black board if necessary:



4. Have them repeat the pattern until they are comfortable: Then, play an example of improvised solo:



5. Have every one in the class participate in this exercise as a soloist. Have one person take a solo while others play the accompaniment, or the “riff.” Each student should take a turn and play 4 phrases, moving from one soloist to the next without any break.
6. Transpose the scale into other keys.

### Results.

When the students finished playing the first time, they realized that they had sped up while playing. Sometimes, a simple exercise such as this will expose one’s weakness that may not have been noticed otherwise. In this exercise, keeping a steady tempo all the way through was a challenge. The rests between the phrases became shorter and shorter. The soloist was, not only relying on the rest of the class to keep a steady tempo, but also involved too much into their own playing to notice the tempo increase. As a result, the tempo got faster and faster as the exercise progressed. In my own experiences playing with other classical musicians, I have noticed that many of them tend to rely on others to maintain a steady tempo. Especially when they have rests, they have a tendency to stop counting themselves and simply wait for a cue from others. In a bigger ensemble such as

orchestra or band, some musicians do not even keep the pulse on their own because they rely on the conductor to do that for them. Playing this exercise made them more aware of how important it was for each one of them to keep a steady tempo, count, and listen to each other carefully to play together.

### Observation.

In the beginning stage of piano study, pedagogical materials such as repertoire and exercises tend to be written in simpler keys. C major in particular is the most common and popular key of all. This is because there are no black keys or accidentals involved in C major diatonic scale. C major is the easiest major key for one to locate the notes on the piano and to play the scale; all one has to do is to play the white keys starting and ending on the note C on the keyboard. The problem with this is that the students are not exposed to other keys and tend to develop discomfort and even fear towards playing black keys.

For this exercise, I reversed this idea by limiting the students to the black keys only. At this point the students were able to play major 5-finger patterns in all white keys (C, D, E, F, G, A, B). They had not yet learned the patterns in black keys. This simple exercise helped students feel more comfortable with black keys on the keyboard and have fun at the same time.

### **Exercise 5: Theme and variations**

#### Objectives.

- To extend major scales into a more creative and musical activity as opposed to a purely mechanical routine.
- To practice cadence progressions in a more creative and practical context.
- To practice shifting hand position within a single harmony.



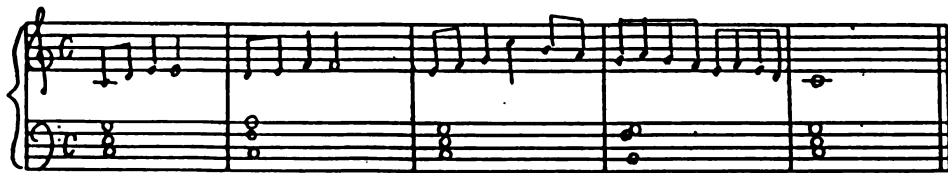
- To familiarize with basic harmonic movements and develop musical listening skills.

### Method.

1. Introduce C major scale and cadence progression (I-IV6/4-I-V6/5-I).
2. Have students play the cadence progression in the left hand and the scale in the right hand simultaneously:



3. Treating the previous stage as a theme, have them make up their own variations. Have them experiment with a melodic line in the right hand, using the notes of C major scale, while playing the cadence progression in the left hand:



4. Have them practice individually, and then perform for the class.
5. Provide feedback, and discuss and analyze after each performance.

### Results.

Most of the students who played for others seemed to take a compositional approach rather than improvisation. I realized that they composed a melodic line that worked well

over the chord progression and practiced playing that particular melody. When they performed, they seemed to know exactly what they were going to play, and also seemed to be playing very carefully. Some of them made a mistake during the performance and started from the beginning again. When they did that, they played exactly the same thing that they were trying to play when they made a mistake. Also, when we did this exercise in different keys, some students simply transposed the same melody that they played in C major into other keys. Although this seemed more like composition than improvisation, I valued and appreciated students' effort to play well and correctly. Also, since they were playing the same melodic pattern, this could be beneficial for working out logical fingerings and transposition. However, because this was an improvisation exercise, I asked each student to play another variation after the first one that they had worked out and played well.

### Observation.

Compared to other previous exercises, this one was technically more involved. Students seemed to find this particular exercise more challenging than others.

There were 2 students in particular, who were more pianistically challenged than others in the class. They were almost always struggling to get through purely technical requirements and playing repertoire pieces. Interestingly, these 2 students were quite successful at this exercise. Although they had to play very slowly and were physically struggling to play, they obviously had clear ideas of what they wanted to play and knew exactly what they were doing on the keyboard. This made me realize that including the activities such as this could be an additional opportunity for students to be successful. I

believe that improvisation itself could be an area of piano study just like scales, sight-reading, and repertoire.

### Comments from Participants

The total number of collected responses to the open-ended survey was 126. There were a wide variety of comments: brief, lengthy, general, detailed, enthusiastic, objective, and so on.

Because there were not specific questions that the participants had to answer, I thought many of the comments were honest and less analytical. For example, many students began their comments with a phrase like, “Today’s exercise was fun.” From that, I could immediately tell that they had enjoyed the exercise.

However, because of the same reason, dividing them into 3 categories (positive, negative, and neutral) was very difficult for all 4 reviewers. Also, the differences of interpretation among the reviewers were bigger than I had expected. For example, there were comments like, “I enjoyed the exercises. They are very helpful. But, I’m not very good at doing them. I have to practice more.” Three reviewers categorized them as positive. They agreed that, despite the difficulty that the participants had felt, the exercises were still found to be helpful and enjoyable. They thought that the negative expression, “I’m not very good at doing them,” was not made towards the exercises, but towards the lack of their piano skills. One of them pointed out that the phrase, “I need to practice more,” indicated motivation and enthusiasm, so that the overall response was very positive. However, one particular reviewer felt that any negative expression should count against the positive expression as long as they were on the same comment sheet. So, he categorized the responses such as this example as neutral.

The result of the coding was:

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Reviewer A	60	6	60
Reviewer B	93	3	30
Reviewer C	93	18	15
Reviewer D	103	13	10

Because the result of each reviewer varied so greatly from others, I felt that I should not entirely rely on these data alone for drawing any definite conclusion.

The discussions that I had with 3 outside reviewers individually, however, gave me some interesting insights. After the reviewing of the comments, each one of them congratulated me on the “successful result” on my study. They all agreed that the most of the comments were positive. Many of neutral comments contained something positive about the exercises. They also said that, even though some participants had expressed disliking and discomfort, many of the negative and the neutral comments included the recognition of the value of improvisation. Having read all the comments from the participants, the reviewers felt that the participants overall liked the improvisation exercises, and that the use the exercises was successful.

My interpretation of the results is not at all dissimilar to the outside reviewers’. Disregarding the neutral comments and comparing the number of positive comments and the number of negative comments, it is clear that the vast majority of the participants felt the exercises were helpful. The exercises being helpful for getting to know the keyboard, getting used to switching hand positions, playing chord progressions, and playing both

hands together, were repeatedly mentioned in numbers of comments. They also acknowledged theoretical benefits in the exercises, such as reviewing key signatures, scale notes in various keys, and harmonic progressions. I would also like to note that many students found the exercises fun and enjoyable. Although this may not have a direct impact on students' improvement, it is curious and encouraging for me to know that they were actually interested in and enjoying what they were doing.

However, there were a few negative comments. Including those who liked the exercises, there were students who felt uncomfortable and embarrassed about having to play in front of the class. Other negative comments mentioned the lack of time spent on the basics such as correct posture and hand position as well as proper finger action, the lack of time spent on reading, and the exercises being too difficult.

There was a comment suggesting a composition style instead of improvising on the spot. Although I had read this comment while my study was still in progress, I did not consider including writing as a part of my exercises. This comment may simply suggest that there was not enough time to come up with good melodic ideas and work them up on the keyboard to play for others during the class time. However, because they have only limited time to do it, they are forced to rely on their own skills and knowledge. If it were a take-home composition assignment as suggested, students would have been able to look things up in textbooks and other pieces of music to borrow ideas and perhaps spent more time to practice in order to play well in the class. But, there is a different value in improvisation. In order to be able to improvise, one must be proficient on the instrument and have musical ideas with which to work for an immediate result. I believe that doing

the exercises as in-class improvisation activities challenges students in a way that nothing else in their musical training will.

### Summary

The vast majority of the participants enjoyed the improvisation exercises. They also found them to be helpful in developing various areas, such as music theory as well as piano technique. The exercises also allowed them to be creative, musical, and even successful in the class, despite the levels of their piano skills. They felt that the exercises were fun. They also enjoyed the opportunity to listen to others.

Many of the participants felt some discomfort in doing something different and new as well as having to play for others. But, the more they did the exercises, the more they became used to the procedure. In the end, they accepted the process and realized the value in the performance aspect of the activities.

There were, however, ones who expressed opposing opinions to the use of such exercises in a beginning piano class. A few students felt it was too difficult, that they should have spent more time on more conventional basic piano activities, such as learning proper positions of their hands and their fingers, learning more repertoires, and sight-reading. Unfortunately, they did not look beyond the technical aspect of piano study, and therefore did not find the exercises helpful at all.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Answers to Research Questions

Having taught the class piano course incorporating various improvisation exercises and observing students' progress as well as their reaction, I believe that a class piano curriculum is an appropriate place for improvisation to be applied.

Piano playing involves 2 major physical challenges that other instrumentalists or singers do not come across with their instruments or voices; reading 2 lines on 2 different clefs simultaneously, and the coordination of hands and fingers to play more than 2 notes at a time. Most students in the class had very little or no piano training background prior to this course. Therefore, many of them seemed to find piano playing overwhelming and rather intimidating despite the fact that they are musicians.

In the improvisation exercises, students worked with musical concepts rather than written information. Not having to read while playing allowed them to concentrate on the coordination of their hands and their fingers as well as locating notes on the keyboard. This seemed to be appropriate for those who were new to piano playing to get to know the keyboard.

I also noticed that there were students who were able to conceive strong melodic ideas although they were still struggling to play. This made me think that the Improvisation Exercises provided an extra opportunity for students to be successful regardless of their keyboard skills level. There also were students who read and played beautifully, but had a hard time thinking musically without any written material in front

of them. For those who were used to relying so much on visual and physical memory, these exercises were a good reinforcement for musical thinking and listening.

Although there were students who were hesitant to improvise in front of the class in the beginning, there was not a single student who refused to participate in the exercises or was absolutely incapable of improvising. In other words, all my students improvised despite the fact that many of them were beginners at piano. Considering that all music majors except piano majors are required to take class piano and that they were all capable of improvising, I believe that class piano is an appropriate place for the NASM improvisation requirement to be met.

Is improvisation valuable and beneficial for students in piano study? According to verbal and written comments from the students, many of them found improvisation exercises challenging, but manageable. They seemed to value improvisational skills in music in general, although most of them had no prior experience in improvisation. Therefore, having an opportunity to improvise in the classroom seemed to be a valuable experience for them. They also found the exercises fun and helpful. Many of them said that the exercises were particularly useful and helpful for getting a better feel for the keyboard and learning to shift hand positions. They also pointed out that having to do the exercises made them more aware of key signatures, scales, and various harmonies and their relationships. In other words, these improvisation exercises helped to reinforce students' knowledge in music theory. Taking these things into consideration, I must believe that improvisation is valuable and beneficial for students in piano study.



## Conclusion

Based on the study and its results, I strongly believe that the undergraduate class piano curriculum is the ideal place in which to incorporate improvisation, and that improvisation is valuable and beneficial for students in their musical study. The experience of improvising provides an opportunity for students to incorporate their theoretical knowledge and musical understanding into their piano playing as they learn new concepts and techniques. It also gives classically trained musicians an opportunity to be more creative and free with their playing. I have also noticed that such creative and non-traditional activities can be simply fun, thus the students may be more interested in piano playing. The course that I taught was offered at 8:00 A.M., which is one of the earliest morning classes offered on campus. The improvisation exercises seemed to help students stay awake for the 50-minute period and kept them interested in what they were doing.

Although the study results are favorable, there are two concerns that I personally have regarding the application of the improvisation exercises into beginning piano study. The first concern is the instructor's comfort level. Traditionally, the class piano curriculum is designed for classical musicians to develop their basic classical piano skills, such as playing notated music and drilling scales and chord progressions. In other words, the curriculum tends to focus on reading and technique. The course is, therefore, most likely taught by a classically trained pianist, who is accomplished in those 2 areas. However, improvisation requires more than just good technique. It focuses on creativity and ear training as well as technique, instead of reading. Will a classically trained pianist be truly comfortable improvising and teaching others how to improvise? One may feel

that, because all the exercises are simple and not exclusively jazz-improvisation-oriented, it is not necessary to have any extensive knowledge or experience in jazz at all. I have no doubt that any accomplished and educated classical pianist can understand the basic concept of each exercise and successfully play something that is theoretically correct. What about the style of music? It certainly is unimaginable, especially for a classical pianist, that a jazz pianist with no classical training would teach a student how to play J.S. Bach's music, for example. The pianist may have adequate reading skills and keyboard techniques to play a piece or two. But, would they have enough specific knowledge about the Baroque style? I believe that if anything were to be demonstrated, it should be in the correct style of the particular genre. Therefore, when the blues form is introduced and demonstrated in Exercise 2 and 3, the instructor should play the blues not only theoretically correctly, but also in the appropriate style. However, how many classical pianists are truly confident in playing blues in style? In my opinion, one has to be knowledgeable and skillful in both classical and other improvisational music such as jazz and blues in order to successfully use these improvisation exercises.

The other concern is that these exercises may be mistakenly used as a jazz method. One must understand that these exercises are only supplemental activities for beginning piano study of students who understand the basics of music, but not a teaching method for jazz improvisation. Although they are improvisation exercises and deal with some elements of jazz, they are not designed to develop one's jazz improvisation skills.

## Recommendations

### Variations of the improvisation exercises

Having considered the comments from the participants, and the suggestions from others who viewed the videotapes as well as my own ideas, I suggest the following as the possible variations of the original 5 exercises described and discussed in this paper:

- All exercises may be played in minor keys as well as major.
- Expand improvisation to composition.
- Explore different chord progressions for Exercise 5.
- Switch the roles of the right hand and the left hand; improvise the melody in left hand and play chords in the right hand. This would be helpful for developing dexterity of both hands equally.
- In addition to the scale-based melodic improvisation, use chords, inversions of the chords, and arpeggios.
- Improvise in a specific style. For example, the style of Mozart can be suggested by a single-lined melody with alberti bass. The Romantic style can be suggested by the use of the sustaining pedal, and the chords and octaves in the melody.

### Suggestions for further research

Because of my personal background, I did not consider the use of improvisation in class piano to be “research.” It was simply my style of teaching. My initial reason for using these improvisation exercises was to get the students more interested in piano playing. When I decided to do this as research, I wanted to maintain the same attitude and approach towards the idea of using improvisation. I was not interested in investigating or measuring specific effects on the students’ aptitude. I wanted to incorporate

improvisation in teaching, simply because I could. I designed this to be a qualitative study because I believed that it was the most natural and sincere research format into which I could apply my ideas.

It is, however, possible to design a quantitative study using the same tools. The subjects (students) could be divided into 2 groups; the control group, which will not receive instruction in improvisation, and the experimental group, which will receive instruction in improvisation. Students' aptitude in various areas such as keyboard skills and basic musical understanding could be measured during the course of the study. The survey could be a questionnaire with specific questions regarding the exercises and their effects, providing a scale system for the answers.

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