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The role of piano improvisation in teaching harmony, using combined materials selected from the Baroque period and jazz standard repertoire: towards a comprehensive approach

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Introduction

My motive for investigating the common elements of baroque and jazz harmony teaching and the role of piano improvisation originate from my extensive experiences in teaching classical music subjects (theory, solfège, history and piano for non-piano majors) in jazz vocational and tertiary music education as well as leading both classical and jazz vocal ensembles. During this time, meanwhile, I faced many challenges applying the approaches that I had learnt from my classical music academy training, I instinctively began to combine elements from jazz and classical music pedagogy into my classroom teaching, unconsciously following a model called 'comprehensive musicianship'. During the individual piano lessons, I observed that some jazz students were interested in improvising with music material from other styles such as classical or baroque. Furthermore, some of the non-pianist jazz students, who had limited piano skills, seemed to have been keen on improvising with me on the piano, sharing certain parts of music between each other. In my PhD research, therefore, I explored these subjects further through two teaching courses at The Music Campus of the University of Jyväskylä.

Background of research

Baroque and jazz harmony teaching traditionally follows separate paths in tertiary music education, based on the distinctive stylistic features and idioms developed in different eras, which all influenced their pedagogical approaches, concepts and music curricula. The fundamental difference between these genres both in historical and educational terms is that the baroque musical practice relies more on the written score, whereas jazz tradition is still more associated with ear-learning and practical learning by which early jazz musicians learnt the repertoire principally from each other (Berliner 1994, 28–29; Jackson 2002, 90; Monson 2002, 115). Certainly, the jazz music education uses the written score today, and musical reading skills are fundamental for learning the musical pieces, arrangements and solo transcriptions. Yet, the pedagogical practice still places emphasis on the listening and adopting aspects of other musicians' techniques from both life performances and recordings, and developing musical ideas through improvisation (Monson 2002, 119). At the same time, while classical music pedagogy also recognizes the importance of aural learning (Ilomäki 2011; Kopiez & Lee 2008) and collaborative learning (Green 2002; Rikandi 2012) classical musicians still prioritise the notation based skills (Creech et al. 2008), because the notated score is the primary source of learning particular musical opuses and various stylistic features.

The content and approaches to theory and harmony studies are to a large extent also differently organised for classical and jazz genres in textbooks. Most classical textbooks are primarily analysis-centred and offer stylistic approaches to harmony by presenting existing musical examples, whereas, most jazz theory books and computer tutorial programmes focus on mainly the theoretical presentation of jazz harmony in order to advance the appropriate theoretical knowledge for jazz improvisation, while quoting a limited number of musical examples (Benedek 2015).

Improvisation has always been a central topic in educational research on jazz performance focusing on effectiveness of various approaches, materials, and tools for teaching it, such as aural instruction (Laughlin 2001; Heil 2005), transcription (Hughes 2011), and play-along recordings (Flack 2004). In the classical domain, however, many efforts are being made to bring improvisation back to the curriculum (e.g. Apagyi 2008; Callahan 2012; Chyu 2004; Dolan 1996/1997; 2005; Kossen 2013; Woosley 2012) there is still a long way to go until improvisation regains its former prestige in music education and becomes as everyday practice as it was for instance in the Baroque era.

Practitioners such as Chyu (2004), Lee (2000), Sarath (2010), or Woosley (2012) agree that a certain level of theoretical knowledge is required for improvisation, and vice versa, improvisation also leads to a better understanding of music theory and develops the aural skills (Randall 1993; Brown 1990; Humpreys 1984). Still improvisation is rarely used as comprehensive approach for teaching music theory (e.g. Sarath 2010). Furthermore, however, baroque and jazz genres do share a variety of common features such as certain harmonic progressions and improvisation practice, there seems to be a lack of specific studies on (i) combining baroque and jazz styles in teaching harmony; (ii) investigating and developing teaching methods and tools in teaching baroque and jazz harmony combined; (iii) and exploring the role of piano improvisation as pedagogical tool in teaching harmony. The current research intends to fill this gap.

Aims of research

The main aim of research was to explore the applicability of piano improvisation as a potential pedagogical tool in combined teaching of baroque and jazz harmony, in particular, in what ways can it support the development of harmony knowledge and various musical skills, such as accompaniment, aural and improvisation skills. The research intended to establish a teaching material that bridges the gap between baroque and jazz, such as the use of baroque variations that contain similar chord progressions as do particular jazz standards. Since the improvisation activities were based on particular chord progressions selected from the teaching material, the study looked how the various improvisation activities involving these chord progressions contributed to the progress in learning harmony. Peer improvisation techniques, in which the parts of music such as melody, chord accompaniment, and bass were shared between the students were examined to determine how they influenced students' accompaniment, aural, and melody improvisation skills with peer accompaniment and students' individual improvisation performances on the piano, and how they related to students' pre-existing knowledge of harmony and musical skills.

The general broader aim of this research was to identify ways of improving the curriculum for mainstream classical and jazz harmony studies at the tertiary level, by exploring and comparing the most applicable teaching methods, approaches, and tools. The research considered the traditional differences between the two genres from both historical and educational perspective, therefore, first identified certain distinguishing teaching approaches to harmony from each genre and examined their cross-applicability in a context that combined the genres in teaching harmony.

Research methodology

Data collection

Following the practitioner research strategy, the research was conducted in two cycles, Study One (Pilot) and Study Two (Main Study), and data were collected in two subsequent teaching courses at the Music Department of the University of Jyväskylä. Qualitative research methodology was applied in both studies (Atkinson & Delamont 2010; Mason 2002).

Study One involved seven students and examined what kind of approaches the students and the teacher found the most applicable in combined harmony teaching. Data concerning students' previous experiences and the progress and challenges to learning harmony during the course were gathered from questionnaires, learning diaries, video recordings, and harmony tests for comparative analysis with the researcher's observations. Findings showed that the practical approaches i.e. improvisation, composing variations, aural learning, and using existing musical examples were particularly successful in such combined teaching of harmony.

Study Two involved nine students divided in two groups. Students of both groups learnt the same material from baroque and jazz literature and practical approaches using keyboard, with emphasis on aural learning. Students' improvisation skills were tested as an additional music activity on the piano, both alone and with peers in different part of the course, the Early Improvisation Group during the first part of the course, and the Late Improvisation Group during the second part of the course, respectively.

Data sources and analysis

Three written harmony tests consisted of 21 tasks, measured the development in students' harmony knowledge in both baroque and jazz, and aural skills at the beginning, middle and end of the course.

Audio recordings of improvisation tests measured the students' improvisation skills, with and without peer accompaniment before and after the improvisation phases. The anonymous audio files of the improvisation tests were evaluated by external experts using the rating scale (1–7) according to four assessment criteria: *Musicality in general, Originality, Stylistic awareness of rhythm and form* and *Stylistic awareness of melody, phrasing, and embellishment*. The numerical results were transcribed to expressions (i.e. 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = moderately good; 4 = good; 5 = very good; 6 = excellent; 7 = outstanding) for supporting the description of results and were compared to the teacher-researcher's qualitative evaluation.

Students expressed their opinions about learning harmony with and without improvisation via questionnaires (both written comments and using rating scale with scores ranging from 1 to 7). The questionnaires also provided data of students' previous formal and informal education, and their favoured musical styles to play and listened to. The responses to the questionnaires using rating the same scale (1–7) were transcribed into expressions, giving meanings to the figures, supported by content analysis of the students' detailed written answers about their learning progress given in the final questionnaire and the supplementary questionnaire.

The observations supported by video recordings (a total of three hours) of the lessons examined the students' overall learning progress and development of musical skills.

22 weekly lesson plans for each group as well as self-reflective observations and evaluations of the teaching process provided the background data from the teacher-researcher. The 'dialogue' between the various forms of data formed the basis of the validation of the findings.

All data were analysed separately in each student's case and were presented as a chronological narrative of each student's learning progress, and conclusions were drawn from each case.

Findings

The overall results showed that improvisation, especially with peers, positively influenced the students' theoretical and practical knowledge of both baroque and jazz harmony and their aural skills. However, students' existing knowledge of harmony in each genre, the starting level of their aural, improvisation, and piano skills, and the timing of the improvisation during the course also influenced the learning progress. Improvisation appeared to be more applicable to learning harmony once a certain amount of theoretical knowledge and aural and piano skills were first established.

The findings showed that those students, who had solid theoretical knowledge, sufficient piano skills, and more formal and informal experiences of improvisation benefited more from the improvisation activities in the first part of the course, than those students who lacked the theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The students with more knowledge and musical skills could apply their skills and knowledge more easily to both baroque and jazz improvisation exercises, especially with peers. Harriet (Early I G): *"the improvisation tasks were more like a kind of eye-opener: they helped me notice how many possibilities there are and that I should explore the world of scales better in order to be able to use them". …it [piano improvisation] helps to get familiar with the chord progressions and the fitting scales and notes"*.

Students of Late I G had more time to establish their theoretical and practical skills with other practical music activities, such as realising and playing the various chord progressions, practicing accompaniments by playing along with or without the recording and score. Pamela: *"…Because in the beginning everything was new and we got to know all the basics … for example the II-V-I system as a part of cycle of fifths"*. Kathleen: *"The first semester began by refreshing my previous knowledge in baroque harmony, I think because baroque was more familiar to me, it felt more relatable. In this way, I was able to grasp the concepts more easily branching from my theoretical knowledge and slowly applying it practically." "in the second semester [improvisation phase], I was much more comfortable with: (a) the group [being one of the international students], and (b) the material. I was not so scared of making mistakes, as before, so improvisation was not as terrifying for me. And because jazz was not so familiar, it really helped me to hash things out on the keyboard. This helped the concepts make more sense to me"*.

Nevertheless, the students were motivated to learn harmony with improvisation and baroque and jazz harmony combined. Samantha (Late I G): *"It [improvisation] makes all teaching alive and motivates to learn. You somehow get a nice playing break but you actually still practice the same things you studied before the improvisation break. Some things in [both] jazz and baroque harmony you only learn by hands-on experience"*.

However, improvisation exercises were also challenging activities for all students, even for those students who had more experiences in piano improvisation, theoretical knowledge, and backgrounds of playing the piano in either baroque or jazz. Students' performances in the improvisation tasks were dependent on their technical ability to play the piano. Accordingly, when students improvised together in pairs or in trios, they were able to share the various parts of music (such as melody, bass, or chord accompaniment) between each other, either with two hands or one hand. This way, students with less piano skills were able to be involved in the learning progress that increased their encouragement and motivation to learn either the music theory or develop their various musical skills.

However, the success of peer improvisation activities depended on the students' individual skills. Peers were influential to the musicality, dynamics, tempo, character, stylistic traits, and rhythmical expression of the group. Usually, when students with similar musical skills were paired with each other, they could experiment more with the style and challenge themselves with more sophisticated solutions in the musical texture. Students with different abilities in a duo or trio benefited differently from each other: the less skilled students, who faced more challenges in their improvisation, could learn more from their peers, e.g. copy various ideas, meanwhile the more experienced students needed to be very collaborative to help the less-skilled students, e.g. to keep a more stable tempo and accurate rhythm. Nevertheless, all students' aural skills benefited from these peer improvisation activities, regardless of their levels of improvisation or piano skills. Peer improvisation exercises enhanced students' creativity, and positive collaborative attitude, which made all of these events even more meaningful, enjoyable, and memorable.

The accompaniment technique played an important role in the various peer improvisation exercises, from which all students benefited in various ways. Some of them developed their understanding of theory, such as the voicing and voice-leading of chords in chord progressions, meanwhile other students were more involved in the peer improvisation exercises, and some of them both.

Play-along recordings appeared to have been beneficial tools for playing and improvising various parts of the music. It helped refine the students' tempo and rhythm feel together with their aural skills. At the same time, students also seemed to have played with more ease and fun without the recording and improvise simpler and clearer patterns that resulted in the whole performance sounding more organised. Therefore, I assumed that this tool would be beneficial at least at the beginning of the learning process.

Implications for pedagogy

The findings of both studies are in line with certain curricular trends and philosophies that Rogers (2004) has presented, i.e. enhancing comprehensive musicianship, integration of aural skills, and focusing on skills instead of concepts in learning music theory. However, in the classical and jazz harmony context, at least, these curricular plans seemed to function the best when integrated with others to maintain a healthy balance between not only the conceptual and practical but also aural and written skills. Integrating approaches and combining elements from both mainstream classical and jazz harmony pedagogies seemed to have been generally successful among students in both studies. In addition, the present study not only looked at integrating various teaching approaches and skills in teaching of harmony but also two musical styles, i.e. baroque and jazz.

The general success of peer improvisation activities suggests that it might be helpful to include these techniques into the classical music theory curricula and aural skills programmes.

The outcome of research also recommends further investigation of the applicability of peer improvisation in learning harmony from the Baroque, Vienna Classical, or Romantic period. In this way, the research would be able to bring improvisation back into the mainstream classical music education and classical performance practice.

However, it is also hoped that these practical exercises would be able to motivate jazz students more to learn the stylistic features of harmony from the Common Practice period.

The peer improvisation techniques that were employed and explored in the current research would be suitable pedagogical tools for various piano courses, such as the Finnish 'vapaa säestys', i.e. 'free piano accompaniment' curriculum, especially at the advanced level. In these courses, students are able to deepen their learning of the attributes of certain styles.

Also, future studies on this topic would benefit by executing the course in the piano-laboratory environment, as it would provide more opportunities for students to improvise with their peers, i.e. students or teachers.

Furthermore, for those students who do not play the piano, these exercises may be performed with other instruments, therefore the research advocates including peer improvisation in the general classroom pedagogy and in the teacher education programmes. ■

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