

In Defense of Piano Majors

By Arthur Houle

The Glass Half Empty?

Is a degree in piano still viable and relevant? To paraphrase Mark Twain: News of its death is greatly exaggerated. Some misconceptions, however, should be addressed. A while back I dined with a distinguished retired professor. He now teaches several extraordinarily talented private piano students. When the subject of collegiate study came up, he declared: "None of my students will major in piano – thank goodness!" As evidence for his perspective, he cited one former student who, despite having earned a doctorate from Juilliard, could not make it in music and had to change careers.

I have thought a lot about this conversation, since it dovetails with two popular pessimistic viewpoints with which I must respectfully take issue:

Myth No. 1: Only super-talents should major in piano. And they must go to pricy Ivy League schools to have any chance of success.

Myth No. 2: Forget #1. Nobody at all should major in piano, since pianists can't make a living.

Overspecialization vs. The Multi-faceted Approach

Let's discuss #2 first. If the overarching goal of higher education training is to produce highly specialized professional classical solo concert pianists who, as a fallback option, might teach in higher education, then the naysayers have cause for concern. Serious concert pianism is increasingly competitive, and full-time teaching positions in higher education are getting scarcer.

Nevertheless, let me play devil's advocate for the status quo for a moment. The fact is, some exceptional students do beat the odds. My best former student, for example, is now a professor at a university and concertizes internationally. In any case, one can make a case for orthodox "conservatory"-style training solely on the basis of its timeless soul-enriching value. I do not decry those who promote it shamelessly – providing, of course, they are honest with students about its dubious potential for fame and fortune. Commercial considerations need not and should not be the ultimate determinant of all curricula, particularly at the undergraduate level. Indeed, many higher education schools (such as where I teach) espouse the "liberal arts," which is defined as, in the words of columnist Marilyn vos Savant, "rooted in 'liberty' and goes back centuries, when it referred to work or studies that one undertook freely, in contrast to activity necessary to earn a living or to train for a technical profession." Do we really wish to live in a world where teachers avoid Shakespeare like the plague because it has little, if any, relevance to the marketplace? That's a slippery slope.

That said, a growing number of collegiate teachers (of whom I am one) are mindful of today's economic challenges and are doing everything we can to help students actually (don't faint) succeed in music after graduation. You're probably thinking, "I'll bite. What's the secret?" In a nutshell, it's this: We recognize that students need realistic career advice and versatile skills to adapt to an ever-changing world. Furthermore, it's not just musical heavyweights who should consider majoring in piano.

The Birth of Colorado Mesa University

Due to its expanding programs and rapid growth in enrollment and infrastructure, Mesa State College has evolved into a university. On August 10th we officially became Colorado Mesa University (CMU). We are excited about this transition, for it helps us better communicate where, who, and what we truly are, as well as how our holistic approach in the music department is especially tailored to foster success despite the harsh economy. (By the way, our job placement rate for music education graduates is 100%.) Moreover, we are more affordable than most comparable institutions.

CMU is an excellent fit for me, for my colleagues and I are on the same page when it comes to promoting high artistic standards *and* preparing students for the real world.

Neglected Creative Skills

Like many of you reading this, I was conservatory trained, so my students bear ample witness to my enduring love of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and all the other composers of keyboard masterpieces. But students at Colorado Mesa University go beyond classical repertory excellence. We delve into the rich tapestry of our *entire* classical tradition, which includes improvising, composing, embellishing, and preluding. Regrettably, most of us (me included) were not taught these important facets of music to any appreciable degree in our formal training. (I'm particularly humbled by the topic of preluding, of which I only recently became aware!) Kenneth Hamilton's

excellent new book, [After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance](#), chronicles how these creative skills flourished in bygone days.

"O.K., I'm intrigued, but how can I teach these skills to students without special training?" you may ask. To help address this conundrum, I have posted a wealth of practical educational information online, from step-by-step basics to scholarly citations: www.pianofestival.org/prizes/prizeembellish.htm. Please share this valuable link with your students and colleagues.

Versatility & Whole Musicianship

What practical career advice can we offer the collegiate piano major? Many, if not most, will become (or already are) independent teachers and/or accompanists (oops...I mean "collaborators," of course!). This realization significantly informs what we do in the piano area at CMU. My colleagues and I emphasize what I like to call "whole musicianship." In addition to classical training, piano students learn other skills that will be invaluable to them as private teachers and performers: e.g., how to read fake charts, play jazz, and tackle worthwhile popular music. Theory and technique are important components of piano lessons. And, of course, a rigorous course in piano pedagogy is offered.

Should only the prodigy Sviatoslav Richters of tomorrow major in piano? Well, consider this: We all know that pianists can become superb teachers without necessarily being superstar performers. At CMU we maintain high standards of performance, but we also recognize that excellence comes in many forms – something that is reflected in the novel prize incentives of our [Festival for Creative Pianists](http://www.pianofestival.org/prizes.htm) (www.pianofestival.org/prizes.htm).

Commercialism is Not Always a Dirty Word

Two of my colleagues, Sean Flanigan and Darin Kamstra, have developed an exciting new emphasis option for those who wish to explore the commercial side of the music world. It is called Elective Studies in Business, which is essentially a music degree with a minor in business. Last May, a piano major in this program, Dustin Wise, performed his Senior Recital, which featured an eclectic array of solo and collaborative music. Dustin introduced his own variants on every repeat in music by Handel and Haydn. He repeated Ravel's short but sophisticated [1913 Prelude](#) four times, progressively embellishing the second and third reprises to the point of free fantasy. (Purists can relax; Dustin played exactly what Ravel wrote on the first and last time through.) Dustin took considerable liberties with two of my own jazz compositions – [Bright-Eyed and Bushy-Tailed](#) and Piece in the Shape of Fred's Hair. The program also included a note-by-note transcription of [Bill Evans'](#) legendary Town Hall performance of his composition, "[Turn Out the Stars](#)" – an exacting jazz work on a par with the lyricism, classical form, artistic subtleties, and harmonic sophistication of any nocturne by Chopin. The second half of Dustin's recital featured jazz trio standards, original tunes, and creative arrangements for acoustic piano, keyboards, bass and drums.

I can take only take a fraction of the credit for Dustin's success story, for it is the culmination of his entire ESB experience, which included technology courses as well as two eye-opening internships – one last spring with [Sweetwater Studios](#) in Fort Wayne, Indiana (a leading music technology and instrument retailer with state-of-the-art recording studios) and his final summer internship at [Dark Horse Recording](#) in Nashville, Tennessee (where [Neil Diamond](#), [Jewell](#), [Taylor Swift](#), [Wynona](#), [Tim McGraw](#), and [Alison Krauss](#) have recorded). These types of experiences impart to our students valuable skills in the ever-evolving art of recorded audio and music production. Dustin's newfound abilities enabled him to co-produce and direct a music video (with original music) entitled [The Mustard Seed Theory](#). This video was one of the winning presentations in our recent campus-wide Student Showcase. See it on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY3_eGbQg0s (yes, that's him singing, too).

The Road Not Taken

As you can see, it's not all gloom and doom in the music field. While I agree with those who urge caution before steering fledgling musicians into this daunting arena (especially if students lack the requisite talent, passion and discipline), I fear we may be going the other extreme nowadays when we rain on the parade of students who really should pursue their innermost dreams. A few years ago, a student who seemed truly in her element as a piano major left the program. She had made great progress and appeared quite happy. We were dumbfounded, and made considerable efforts to persuade her to stay. Recently, word got back to me that she had heeded the counsel of people who advised her to switch to something more commercially practical. I cannot say for sure whether this was the right decision for her. After all, who can be 100% sure of another person's true calling? However, my instinct tells me she will one day regret not heeding her muse. Moreover, the business world is volatile; that "practical," potentially lucrative career choice may not be such a sure bet tomorrow. Music, on the other hand, is eternal – so, ironically, chasing one's artistic bliss is often a win-win, even with respect to finances.

For every person who has lamented going into music, I could cite two middle-aged or elderly people with opposite stories. They express feelings of emptiness from having suppressed their artistic side. Most recently, I

received a bittersweet lengthy letter from a 78-year-old gentleman who was inspired and moved by the programs in our most recent [Festival for Creative Pianists](http://www.pianofestival.org/archive/results11.htm) (www.pianofestival.org/archive/results11.htm). In great detail and with fervid emotion, he shared his life story – in particular, his heartfelt regret that his pursuit of piano never went beyond playing (in his words) "for my own entertainment." Our piano festival brought to the surface what had always been lacking in this gentleman's early training. As he put it, "I'm still struggling to free my...creative [side]...improvise more freely, ...play more by intuition, and...with...less reliance on the printed page."

Others are more fortunate in their fork-in-the-road choices. My colleague, Brita Fay, told me she had originally planned to be a dental technician. Thankfully, my predecessor pulled her from the brink. When I consider how stupendously successful and fulfilled Brita is as an independent piano teacher and performer, I can only utter an emphatic "Whew!" As founder of [Sera Schools](http://www.seraschools.com) (www.seraschools.com), which serves an ever-expanding number of students with after-school and early childhood music programs, Brita is a veritable poster child for entrepreneurial initiative. As such, she is a role model and mentor for many students. Her recent presentations for my piano pedagogy class were inspiring.

Science Confirms the Value of Music

Neuroscience is only now beginning to map precisely how music enhances learning in the brain and enriches the human experience. But the emerging evidence is compelling. PBS, for example, recently aired "[Musical Minds](#)," a fascinating look at the growing body of scientific evidence attesting to the incredible value of music.

So let's be careful about indiscriminately advising young people away from serious collegiate piano study, no matter how well intentioned we are. Despite how bad the economy gets, there will always be people who appreciate and support the arts. Granted, the current situation appears bleak. My dear friend and colleague, Evelyn Billberg, reported to me that Gary Ingle, Executive Director and CEO of MTNA, lamented society's sparse funding for music education at the CSMTA's annual conference luncheon on June 3rd. He exhorted music teachers in the association to merge their efforts and work together to meet the challenge of maintaining quality music programs for students in a declining economy.

Let's take it a step farther. Given how the arts are under relentless budgetary assault, I implore everyone not to compound our woes by shooting ourselves in the foot. Let's stay positive; our motto for students should be (to quote CMU President Tim Foster): "Thrive – not just survive." Yes, this is a formidable task, with no clear-cut roadmap. No doubt all of us – whether we teach privately or in higher education – are wrestling with how to keep pianism viable in a brutal economy. But I agree with Dr. Ingle that we should work together to find solutions. Let's get a dialogue going on this. Please let me know what you think at arthurhoule@cableone.net.

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