

Music Education Issues for Adult Beginners in Armenia: Specifically the Analysis of the Difficulties of Piano Playing

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This paper reveals contemporary issues of music education in post-soviet Armenia. The author analyses the state of music education and draws special attention to the music education of adult beginners, which is a new challenge for the educational system of Armenia. In particular, the author reveals new problems in the performing arts, especially piano playing by adults, which brings with it many questions about new methodical approaches.

The author details ideas with respect to the psychological aspects of adults who wish to play piano and presents results of her tests on students from the chair of Music Education, Armenian State Pedagogical University after Khachatur Abovyan. She also provides observations and a number of recommendations for even more productive work.

Introduction

The system of music education today is facing challenges created by changes in the modern education system. Nowadays, the western model and experience of education is being introduced to the post-Soviet area, in particular to Armenia, in order to integrate the country within the European higher education area. The result of numerous studies, analyses and reports indicate that there are a great number of unresolved issues in the present education system.

After joining the Bologna Process in 2005, Armenia is persistent in trying to achieve concordance in its education system and these accepted European standards. Moreover, the Bologna Process has been ratified as the official programme of improvement of the education system. Integration into the European education area has significantly broadened the former horizons and allowed Armenia, and Armenian students, to avoid isolationism.

Analysing the present state of music education within this context, it becomes evident that music education also has its issues and requirements within the framework of adult education. Actually, nowadays adults aspire to obtain higher music education based solely on their own will. Today anyone has the right of obtaining a higher music education in Armenia, regardless of the level of his or her music education and experience.

Formerly, during the time of the Soviet Union, in order to study at the faculty of music of a university or conservatory in Armenia, the minimum requirement for an applicant was to have studied at a musical school or college and have a minimum of seven years of musical education. In 90% of cases an applicant also had four years of additional vocational education or ten years of complete education at a musical school. Today, however, anyone

who wants to study music is able to achieve a higher music education, to obtain a music teacher qualification or become a performer, and teach music in the future. It should be noted that the educational programs resulting in a degree qualification as a teacher-musician include courses such as vocal courses, courses on playing musical instruments (mainly the piano), and courses in conducting.

As a result a number of issues and questions arise regarding the effective organisation of music education for adult beginners. In particular, further research may be needed regarding the question of whether there is a need to develop a special methodology for adult beginners. If this need is observed, then additional answers should also be researched regarding the questions, 'What should that methodology look like?', and, 'What repertoire should be developed, in order to teach adult beginners the basic skills of playing a musical instrument' (Adamyán, 2015, p. 241).

Consequently, adults who start learning music and want to get higher education get easily frustrated when the process of acquiring beginner musical skills and knowledge becomes difficult. Reality does not meet their initial expectations. This is, in part, due to the lack of information and the absence of opportunities to practice music at an amateur level. There are many musical and vocal groups and bands in Armenia, but for professionals only. There are no alternative musical courses offered for beginners, or private schools that do not have age limitation, or amateur bands. This results in a void that causes these problems. In order to obtain a music education, a beginner has to turn to a private tutor and this makes the acquisition of complex musical skills (knowledge of musical theory, analysis, Solfeggio, music literature) almost impossible.

Therefore, in order to efficiently teach adult beginners higher music education, there is a need for new teaching methodologies and programs which will provide them with high standards of professional music education.

A number of modern western studies reveal the background, motivation and aspiration of adult beginners wishing to be educated musically as part of continuing education (Palmer & Drake, 1997; Roulston, Jutras & Kim, 2015; Taylor & Hallam, 2008; Perkins & Williamson, 2013; Orlofsky & Smith, 1997; and many others). But our study refers to the issues of adult beginners, (ages 18 up to 50 years old) who want to achieve a higher musical education; this brings new challenges into this area.

However, before moving on to the practical issues, we would like to try to analyse some motivations adults have when making the decision to practice music, or sing, or to play any musical instrument. According to our hypothesis, the reasons behind this desire to learn are as follows:

- a) The beginner's personal character,
- b) In post-soviet countries, like Armenia itself, the reasons are also conditioned by time and we have already spoken about this in the beginning of our research.

The representative of 20th-century humanitarian psychology, the renowned American psychologist Abraham Maslow, said that a creative nature is a characteristic feature of human beings. He described it as an inseparable quality of human nature: 'According to Maslow, since the potential for self-fulfilling creativity exists in everyone, it does not require any special talent or ability. In order to be creative we do not necessarily need to write books, music or spectacular canvases. A relatively small number of people are

doing this. Creativity is a universal function of human beings which leads to all forms of self-fulfillment' (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1992, p. 320).

This theory by Maslow may serve as a baseline in understanding what triggers adults to start practicing music and thus seek self-fulfillment. According to Maslow, the majority of people need to realise their inner potential and this is only natural and necessary. Therefore, a human being may seek self-fulfillment at any age.

Coming back to the subject of our research, the fact that formal music education is not a mandatory prerequisite for getting higher music education in Armenia, has resulted in the need to develop novel methods and approaches.

In order to tackle the above issue we need to answer the question of how to train professional teacher-musicians who, in the future, will not only be able to perform, but also to teach in schools, and increase the awareness of the role of music education in modern society. All of this needs to take place within a six-year (four years for a Bachelor's degree and two years for a Master's degree) period of education.

It is evident that it becomes almost impossible to have a universally accepted ideology and programme. Should the problems be solved by an individual approach and methodology used by teachers with each and every adult learner, or should more universal guidebooks and methods be developed for adult beginners? This becomes even more difficult given the fact that the results achieved by a child, who studies music when he or she is only six or seven years old and continues his or her education for ten years, need to be achieved in only six years at a higher education institution, along with the initial lack of skills of the student to play a musical instrument.

There are also other circumstances hampering the achievement of success at an adult age. Despite the facts which indicate that it is possible to achieve serious musical success even at an adult age, as is the case with acclaimed Armenian composer Aram Khachaturyan and many others, it is evident that not all learners succeed in displaying serious results, especially when we speak about instrumental performance.

There is a wide range of potential obstacles during the educational process. Firstly, it is preferable one should start his or her music education at an early age, when an individual is more receptive, perceives impressions in a more direct manner, and has a brighter imagination. But how does one treat an adult, when teaching the mastery of a musical instrument, since an adult and a reasoning person, who has some talent, may acquire theoretical knowledge even in a short period of time.

It is clear that one can only achieve mastery of playing piano by putting in long hours of patient practice. Only the most persistent students, who also have a strong will, can succeed in doing this. A child can start playing piano at the age of six or seven and can achieve great results by playing the instrument only 10–15 minutes a day. However, this is not the case with adult beginners, because here everything depends on the beginner's will, desire and talent. It is hard to oppose the opinion, presented in the given article, which reflects on this issue in greater detail, and to disagree with the fact that realised work is essential here: '[I]f we intend to teach adult beginners the art of music, our method should be based precisely on the principles of their thinking. This means that any skill acquired in the process of education should be realised and perceived by the beginner himself and not by means of multiple and pointless repetition of the same action' (Klimay, 2009, p. 170).

Of course, this approach completely transfers the essence of the issue, but it is not a secret for performance musicians that it is impossible to eliminate practice when mastering a musical instrument. This becomes especially important when learning musical scores by heart, mastering fast tempos, acquiring articulation knowledge (legato, staccato, different types of stress), and more.

When working with adult beginners, one faces difficulties which are also present when working with children. These include difficulties with reading musical scores, absence of an artistic character of the musical piece, difficulties with the piano keys, development of motor skills and so on.

Thus we also need to analyse what percentage of beginners achieve success given these circumstances and whether or not it is possible to achieve visible results in a short period of time.

In our research we have tried to clarify the difficulties faced by adult beginners at the initial stages of mastering a musical instrument, and in particular with the piano. This is because playing piano is important for musicians who play other musical instruments.

It is interesting that the research shows that singing, conducting and other subjects are mastered much more easily than playing the musical instrument itself. Of course, singing is a much more natural process. However, playing a musical instrument, especially the piano, is connected with developing more complex skills. Thus, by learning piano one faces more difficulties.

As Armenian pianist, honoured teacher and professor Y.Zargaryan puts it: 'The piano surpasses almost any other musical instrument in its capabilities (range, volume of sound, multifaceted nature, harmonic versatility and other characteristics). Other instrumentalists rarely face the same problems and peculiarities that a pianist has to deal with. Multifaceted, multipart piano playing requires a pianist to perform a number of functions at the same time. He needs to both play solo and to accompany himself at the same time, to keep the proportion between the sounds made by the solo player and the accompanist. He also needs to carry out not only the mentioned details of the performance, but also other separate elements which in their turn accentuate the harmony, rhythm and colors, to keep track of the pedals and both hands which, sometimes play on the opposite sides of the keyboard and ... and ... tens of other ands' (Zargaryan, 1998, p. 28–29).

Thus, we may conclude that a certain level of mastery may be achieved only in the case of displaying a complex wealth of abilities.

Research Methodology

We conducted a survey among ten beginner-level students of the Chair of Music Education of ASPU, in order to understand the main difficulties which adult beginner students face when starting their piano classes. The questionnaire consisted of five main questions with four or five possible answers offered to students, though the students were encouraged to respond more freely with their answers and add additional comments. Based on our teaching experience, our observations about each question and offered recommendations are brought below.

Question 1: *List the difficulties you face when sight-reading musical scores.*

- The majority mention the difficulty of sight-reading two lines of a piano score simultaneously,
- Some note that it is difficult to coordinate both hands when playing, whilst others have problems perceiving the rhythmic picture and timings,
- It is also hard for them to understand the tonalities and moods when reading the scores for the first time.

Observation with respect to question 1:

It seems likely that the problem of reading two lines is related to the insufficiency of polyphonic ear training skills. It is also difficult for them to think in multiple directions simultaneously, like the fact they need to play the melody with one hand and accompany or play a chord with the other hand. Here the problem is both in the insufficiency of polyphonic thinking and imperfection of technique, such as hand-eye coordination.

Recommendation for question 1:

It is important to conduct a theoretical analysis of the piano texture, and study the musical scores in great detail, because given the insufficient independence and lack in the development of fingers, aural and visual work gains greater importance. While playing, it is important to differentiate between primary and secondary parts of the texture from an aural point of view in order to be able to make the main melody more expressive and create a background melody by means of the accompanying sounds. Since piano texture is extremely complex, one is occasionally required to play multiple lines with one hand; therefore it is important to develop the competence of keeping track of multiple sounds by means of one's ears.

It is important to improve the skill of 'looking ahead' in the score. The beginner must try to look ahead, to the next bars, while playing, after the whole phrases, lines and so on. The learner must start from shorter easier pieces and increase the repertoire gradually.

Question 2: *State the difficulties you face when you are required to play a piece of music from memory.*

- The majority of beginners state that they play for as long as they remember the scores by heart,
- Some of them mention that they sing in their mind and thus memorise the melody,
- Others say that they are able to remember by means of muscle memory, mainly by movements of hands, chord jumps and so on,
- No one mentions the importance of analytic work.

Observation with respect to question 2:

It is apparent that playing by memory is mainly combined with playing aurally. In the citation from the tractate 'An introduction to the skill of Musick' by John Playford (published in 1654), English pianist L. Mackinnon says: 'If you try to learn a piece by

heart only by means of aural memory, without using musical scores, it is impossible to memorise more than you would if you heard someone else play a piece of music for you. This type of knowledge will be lost in no time, whereas someone who has practised and used musical scores-using gamut, will never have any difficulties' (Mackinnon, 1967, p. 13).

Recommendation for question 2:

Concentration is also very important when learning a piece by memory. It is important not to make this process mechanical. The same can also be said for the process of performing (please see question number five).

When teaching a piece by memory, a range of methods may be offered to an adult beginner, such as memorising a piece in segments, or learning the characteristics in tone, rhythm and harmony, final cadences and the endings of certain parts. It is also advisable to reinforce the performance aspects such as chord jumps, fast transitions, and arpeggios. It is important to awake and develop the analytic, visual, mechanical and other types of memory of a beginner.

Therefore, we once again arrive at a conclusion that analytical work is essential here.

Question 3: *Why is extended technical practice difficult for you?*

- In the majority of cases beginners mention the lack of patience and time.
- A small number of beginners noted the absence of method, that is to say that they do not know how to work on a musical piece and are unable to keep track of their own mistakes and reveal their own shortcomings.

Observation with respect to question 3:

If we refer directly to our own practice, we should state that this is where the main issues are. For instance, problems of mastering articulation techniques come up; some learners are unable to master, for instance, legato, tenuto, using one finger in transitions and arpeggios.

This is probably the greatest problem, because it is evident that the technical skill should be developed. In this case a beginner should realise that success cannot be achieved instantly and only those who have strong will are able to do this. For instance it is impossible to learn to play the 'Revolutionary' Etude op.10, no.12 by F. Chopin in a very short period of time. The teacher should record and encourage any achievement of the beginner.

There are various approaches in the practice of performing arts. Some musician-pedagogues believe that the positioning of hands are important and the rules are the same for everyone, whereas others think that these should be individual. In the case of adult beginners it is better to let them chose whatever works for the performer. As an example, the acclaimed Russian pianist and pedagogue K. Igumnov was of this opinion and said: 'Almost any hand positioning may be justified only if it is comfortable enough' (Zargaryan, 1998, p. 17).

Recommendation for question 3:

At first, by means of analytical practice, an adult beginner has the chance to adopt a professional approach towards the performance of a musical piece and master the artistic requirements of the work on at least a theoretical level.

This kind of awareness of the work may assist a performer in realising the artistic requirements of a given work and try to reflect them in his or her performance.

There is however, one important issue following the analysis of a composition: how does one combine the clarification of the technical issues with the disclosure of the artistic image. Renowned Russian pedagogue and pianist H. Neuhaus said: 'The clearer the aim is (the content, music, perfection of performance), the clearer the means for achieving them become' (Neuhaus, 1958, p. 3). Here the adult beginner should decide on the necessity of technical training; that is, that this process can be directed towards revealing the artistic essence of the work. The learner should realise, under the teacher's supervision, that by practising a hard-to-master passage he or she is initially solving the issue of the artistic sounding. It is important to evoke imagination by means of using associations and comparisons: for example, it should sound 'as subtle as the wind', or should 'shimmer like the flame' or 'be as calm and peaceful as the sea.'

'For the adult keyboard student, the teacher is advised to provide structured, clear-cut goals, as well as instruction on how to achieve maximum efficiency within practice sessions' (Orlofsky & Smith, 1997, p. 23).

Based on our research and pedagogical experience we may claim that the second main problem is that beginners start studying a work at a slow tempo and then have to play it in the required tempo. The problem is that if one plays a work at this slow tempo during his or her practice, the piece has thus been memorised at this tempo; therefore the image and essence of the work are also altered.

We would highly recommend adult beginners occasionally play at a tempo which is at least close to the original tempo prior to the performance, and select active compositions more often.

Question 4: Which genres and styles of musical works are the most difficult to play?

- The majority of people mentioned the performance of virtuoso works as the most difficult work,
- The next most difficult works are modern 20th and 21st century works,
- Some people mentioned large scale sonatas.

Observation with respect to question 4:

According to these observations, adult beginners enjoy playing romantic or classic popular music more (for instance the most popular miniatures by Chopin; waltzes; nocturnes; the first part of 'Moonlight Sonata' by Beethoven). These are easier to perceive and they directly affect a person's emotional world. Of course, this is due to ear training because it is important to develop one's ears and enrich the musical supply by means of national and modern intonations, and it is important to attend classical music concerts more frequently.

This could also be the shortcoming of the teacher, who does not bring the works of modern composers into the mix, as this would contribute to the training of beginners.

Recommendation for question 4:

Based on our own experience, we should mention that learners are often intimidated by large scale works and are afraid of long compositions. These compositions also need to be analysed and divided into segments, and the teacher needs to explain those parts which are to be repeated and to help the beginner to perceive these works in a more compact manner. For example, a beginner should be aware of the fact that, very often, the beginning and the end of the sonatas are the same and that only the middle part may impose some difficulties.

It is also possible to combine these problems by means of playing large scale works of modern composers like sonatas, variations or ballads. Students should also know that the music may not necessarily attract them instantly and that this will come during the process of working on the piece and whilst overcoming the difficulties in playing the piece.

The study of modern music should be considered mandatory, since this will enable a learner to train his or her ears, and to get acquainted with the style and ways of self-expression of modern composers.

We are quite sure that that a productive repertoire should contain works that have different rhythms, different piano texture techniques, and various manners of articulation, so that it is possible to tackle a couple of problems at the same time, all whilst learning one piece of music.

A vivid example of this sort of work is 'Andantino' by the Armenian composer Aram Khachaturyan. This is a short piece that is suitable for the beginner level, it has various performance and artistic complexities. First of all, it is a sample of 20th century music and is also considered an example of classical national music. It has a versatile texture, and a wide scale of melody with harmonic accompaniment, with a complex left-handed accompaniment. This piece also requires the use of a pedal. That is, this work enables a beginner to solve a range of difficulties at once by means of using a comprehensive approach.

Question 5: List the shortcomings of performing during an exam or concert.

- The majority of people mentioned uncontrolled anxiety and wet or cold palms,
- Some students also encountered memory loss, difficulties in remembering the musical scales, a lack of concentration, absent-mindedness, a pounding heart or shivering.

Observation with respect to question 5:

No doubt, anxiety is characteristic to all performers. Even immensely talented and well-known musicians are unable to avoid stage anxiety. However, in the case of adult beginners, this is mainly due to psychological stress and lack of experience.

In our opinion this is mainly because of the responsibility that adult learners may have before a performance. If children are able to overcome anxiety at a subconscious level and

Andantino

Aram Khachaturyan
(1903-1978)

Tranquillo

p *mf cantabile*

cresc. *p*

cresc. *a tempo* *mf*

f *dim.* *p*

6 *Ped.* ** Ped. * Ped.* ** Ped.* ** Ped.*Ped.*Ped.*

11 **Ped. *Ped. * Ped.* ** Ped.* ** Ped.*Ped.*Ped.* **Ped. simile*

16 *Ped.*Ped.*Ped.* Ped.* ** Ped.* **Ped.* **Ped.* **Ped.* **Ped.* **Ped.*

21 **Ped. *Ped.* **Ped. simile* *rit.* *dim.* *p*

25 *Ped. *Ped. *Ped.* Ped.* Ped.* Ped.* Ped.*Ped.*Ped.* ***

Figure 1. Sample of musical piece of A. Khachaturyan

try to appear in front of the audience with all of their sincerity, an adult approaches his or her performance with all due responsibility and seriousness, but realises the shortcomings of his or her preparedness. This is why it is much more difficult for adults to overcome their anxiety. Here the factor of 'clean conscience' comes up, this means that an adult needs to prepare for a performance as if it is the assessment of his or her preparation and must perform at their best. 'Practice may be the single most important factor that influences memory for performance' (Palmer, 2006, p. 43).

Recommendation for question 5:

As renowned pianist V. Horowitz would say, one needs to be in best shape on the day of the performance. This, of course, requires great psychological preparation. It is important not to allow anxiety to cause negative thoughts which turn into fear. One should try to find the positive side of the anxiety and use it to one's own advantage.

In order to solve such problems we agree with L. Mackinnon's advice which is that one should remember successful performances and scrutinise the unsuccessful performances (Mackinnon, 1967, p. 127). Therefore one reveals all the factors that caused the failure and one should not agonise about it, but should learn from this such that it leads towards an even more successful performance.

It is also very important to evoke inspiration since this will enable one to detach from external factors and fear of the stage. However, the teacher should also inform students that a performer-musician can only gain self-confidence by means of long and persistent practice.

Conclusion

All of the issues that we have tried to reflect upon in this article may serve as a subject of separate research works and it is impossible to include the whole range of problems that adult beginners encounter during their course of learning the art of playing a musical instrument and performance. As a consequence it is recommended that further research is undertaken. However, we had a practical aim, mainly to try and uncover some of the principal issues that come up during the initial stage of education, as well as to try and find some practical steps in order to tackle these problems.

The analysis of the problems revealed shows that all of the issues are intertwined and stem from one another. For instance, the absence of practice has a negative effect on learning the piece by memory and increases anxiety during the actual performance.

Based on this we may conclude that these problems are almost the same as those of children. However it is impossible to organise the education of adult beginners in the same manner and to use the same methods as those of teaching children. These learners require a special approach.

'Results of the study showed that many of the musical concepts were introduced to the adults with the same types of activities that would be seen in a school ensemble setting, but the way in which information was presented to the adult beginners did appear to vary in many ways from the standard 'school model'' (Rohwer, 2005, p. 37).

The design of a repertoire for adults is a problem by itself, since it needs to help a beginner have a general idea of music from different ages and styles. It also needs to assist a

beginner in obtaining fundamental musical knowledge, to master the necessary techniques for playing the musical instrument and obtain theoretical knowledge. It is also necessary to compile collections that have methodological instruction, that will enable a beginner to start from simple pieces and to work their way up to more complicated pieces. One thus develops his or her skills and attains a certain average level, whereas more talented learners can master a concert repertoire of some level of complexity. Particular attention also should be paid to the study of polyphony. Bartók believed that polyphony should be introduced into teaching children music (Barenboim, 1973, p. 176) and the same should be done with adults, since it may contribute to the solution of all of the above mentioned issues, and help the acquiring of the necessary skills.

It is evident also that adult beginners experience greater levels of psychological stress, complexes and depression.

'It is particularly important to be both encouraging, yet not patronising, when teaching older adults as many students of this demographic can be lacking in confidence' (Sarah, post-questionnaire). Realising that vulnerabilities are not necessarily detrimental to progress, and can often be supported by high levels of motivation, is further evidence of the teachers' changing views and practices' (Perkins, Aufegger & Williamon, 2015, p. 85).

Of course, the psychological aspects of working with adult beginners need to be analysed in greater detail. 'A sense of accomplishment could well be the strongest motivating factor for an adult piano beginner' (Orlofsky & Smith, 1997, p. 26).

However, we would like to concentrate on the more practical side of this problem for now and try to answer questions such as what kind of work should be carried out with an adult beginner when working on a musical piece. Should we use traditional methods (that is to first work on the technical aspects and then on the artistic side), or should principally novel methods be adopted? Let us try and summarise all of this and arrive at a conclusion.

During our analysis it became evident that one should adopt a comprehensive approach and one needs to try and involve an adult beginner with the help of creativity. It is crucial to analyse a piece, in particular to study its rhythm, mood, tone, texture, harmony and structure. An adult beginner should approach the performance of a work with this awareness, since it is our firm belief that the shortcomings mentioned by beginners stem primarily from the absence of analytical work. According to our survey conducted among adult beginners, analytical work presently contributes almost nothing to the overall process.

In general, the education of adult beginners should be directed towards the beginner's independent and individual work. When designing programs and compilations, one should take into account the need of developing the competence of independent practice in beginners. According to our conclusion the following three basic approaches should be taken into account when starting the education process of adult beginners:

1. Comprehensive analysis of the composition;
2. After studying the musical score and solving the technical issues of the piece, learners should practice often at tempos that are close to the tempos of the original work;
3. Mandatory inclusion of polyphonic and modern works into the repertoire.

All of these should be directed towards the development of independent practice skills. When finishing their education, adult beginners should have developed their own ideas and methods for playing a musical composition.

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