

# Piano Lessons—Private or Group?

By Dr. Robert Pace

In recent years there has been a noticeable upsurge in interest in class and group piano instruction as evidenced by the number of magazine articles and piano publications on that subject. With this popularity have come ambiguities and some confusion over terms such as "class piano," "group piano instruction," and "keyboard experience." As the enthusiasts of the group approach have extolled its virtues, others have vigorously defended the private lesson as the best means of piano instruction. Unfortunately, a few have regarded group teaching as some sort of "encroachment" into the private lesson domain. Energy expended in this type of polemic is highly unproductive, since the real issues are rarely brought into the open. In any case, let's consider the question, "How shall we teach--individual or group lesson?"

First, we should teach in whatever manner best "facilitates" or "expedites" each student's learning whether this be one student at a time or groups. Students must gain the necessary learning tools and understanding to enable them to go on their own in the future in any manner they choose. For those who aspire to become concert artists, we must help them acquire appropriate musical background and skills for that demanding career. Most people, however, want to participate in music either as intelligent listeners or as non-professional performers, therefore, we must help them achieve their goals. Which type of instruction will produce the best results for either or both segments of our population? To help structure the discussion, let us first consider some "working definitions" of the various types of instruction involving the piano:

1. PRIVATE PIANO LESSON (individual lesson) consists of teaching or tutoring one student at a time. This approach has been widely used in piano instruction throughout the world for many years so that millions of "private lessons" have been given and undoubtedly millions more will follow.
2. MASTER CLASS is a session during which several student performances are criticized by the teacher (may be the regular teacher or an outside "master" teacher). The repertoire may or may not be performed by the teacher of the master class in contrast to a "lecture-demonstration" in which the master may do all of the performing. The sizes of master classes vary greatly from 6 to 8 students to 50 or more. Students generally are not asked to offer their criticism of another's performance.
3. CLASS PIANO INSTRUCTION usually means piano instruction in which a

number of students (perhaps 6 to 24) meet together regularly under the tutelage of an instructor for the purposes of performing certain assigned repertoire, technique, and related materials. Much of this (including solo repertoire) is performed in ensemble because of the difficulty in covering the assignment with that many students. In "class" instruction, students are usually not expected to interact with or criticize each other. Rather, they are there to perform the assignment as directed by the instructor. Each student may have an instrument (these may be either conventional or electronic pianos) or in some cases, several students will share a common piano. The inclusion of specific piano repertoire and technique are two distinguishing features of class piano, in contrast with courses in keyboard harmony, which concentrate on the study of chord progressions, melody harmonization, improvisation and analytic exercises. Class piano sessions usually meet from one to two hours per week.

4. KEYBOARD EXPERIENCE has been defined as general classroom music of the elementary schools where piano is used as the audio-visual-tactile "resource" instrument. No out of class assignments are made, no home practice is assumed and no piano technique or repertoire is covered. Keyboard experience provides excellent opportunities for students of all aptitudes and backgrounds to learn the fundamentals of comprehensive musicianship in the public school music programs.

5. GROUP PIANO INSTRUCTION denotes a learning situation in which two or more students interact under the guidance of the teacher in a dynamic learning complex. Each person in the group is constantly involved, whether in performance, aural and visual analysis, or constructive criticism of self and peers. Each member feels a responsibility to others for adequate preparation and all have a real sense of personal involvement. At the more advanced level, group instruction may be structured for 1 two-hour sessions per week (maximum 4 students), 2 one-hour sessions per week, or may involve 1 dyad session (2 students for one hour) with a larger group session (1 hour). Shorter lesson periods are scheduled for younger students.

Of the five categories just mentioned, the private piano lesson is still by far the most widely used, although in recent years more and more teachers have become involved in some type of group instruction. There is no doubt that the private or individual lesson is very effective when one seeks coaching lessons in preparation for a specific performance. And, a superior teacher will get good results regardless of the mode of teaching. Obviously there are a number of very talented teachers using the private lesson approach who are turning out some spectacular young performers. But what results might these teachers get if they could increase both their own teaching efficiency and the effectiveness of the student's practice?

In general, there are indications that higher levels of musical accomplishment and understanding are being achieved today through group teaching than in the individual lesson. And it is for this reason that an increasing number of piano teachers prefer group over individual lessons, regardless of the level of advancement. These people have seen group instruction in actual practice as a more effective and efficient use of both teacher's and students' time.

But merely getting students together in "bunches" is not the panacea for piano teachers. In fact, there are some common misconceptions about both private and group teaching that need clarification:

1. The private lesson was here first so it must be the logical way of teaching. Actually this is not accurate, since various piano pedagogues over the past 150 to 200 years have taught piano to more than one person at a time, Franz Liszt being one of them. Subjects such as music theory, ear-training, sight-reading, music history and keyboard harmony have for many years been taught in classes or groups, yet the teaching and application of these "fundamentals" in the private piano lesson has been neglected.

2. More good pianists have come from the private lesson approach than from group lessons, which must indicate the superiority of private lessons. It is true that most professional pianists and teachers of the past century came from the private lesson approach, since 90 to 95% of all piano lessons offered in this country have been private lessons. By the same token, it is safe to assume that of those who failed in their attempt to learn to play piano, 90 to 95% took private lessons. Only a very small percentage of students taking private piano lessons ever get to the point that they can go on their own independently and continue to grow musically throughout their adult lives. What might this situation be if the tables were reversed and 95% of all students were taught fundamentals of music from the beginning in their group piano lessons? Dr. William Roger's research project showed group piano instruction produced superior results over private lessons at Dorothy Maynor's Harlem School of the Arts. Obviously much more research needs to be done comparing both approaches.

3. Students don't like to be criticized by other students since they are paying for the criticism of the teacher. Actually, no one is paying for the criticism of anyone as such. Rather, students are paying tuition for a variety of learning experiences which will help them become musically literate and independent. And learning the processes of good self-criticism is an important part of this. In effect, each student must also practice the art of self-criticism as he evaluates and criticizes his peers in the lesson.

4. The one-to-one relationship of the private lesson provides a more intimate

setting for the development of musical talent. First of all, this is not true in good group teaching where there is never a lack of closeness between teacher and pupils. Anyway, why should the learning process be so secretive? Music is a social art and a means of communication. Students should learn how to express themselves musically with and in front of others. The group provides limitless opportunities for students to share their knowledge of music and the other arts with their friends.

5. Some students -- particularly teenagers -- need someone in whom they can confide. Only the private lesson can provide this atmosphere. Although this is related to the point just discussed, it has even serious implications. First of all, most piano teachers are not trained therapists, therefore they are not equipped professionally to do counseling. But even more important, the real reason that students want to chat and confide in teachers is that they are trying to avoid the embarrassment of their being unprepared. In group lessons, however, students understand what they are doing and are prepared for the lesson therefore they feel no need to talk their way out of a tight spot. They have a healthier attitude about themselves and their daily practice.

There may be other points about the individual lesson that need discussion, but let's move on to some of the most common misconceptions about group teaching.

1. "I would like to teach in groups but I just can't find enough students of any particular age to make a good grouping". This too-often-heard statement really has nothing to do with grouping students, but stems from a tendency toward age stratification that seems to be more prevalent in this country than in Europe and South America. Mental and emotional maturity is more crucial than chronological age. We all know of 7 year olds who solve problems as easily as many 9 or 10 year olds. Children who have not been segregated by age will usually mix rather well with children of other ages. Certainly adults past the age of 20 must interact constantly as part of daily living with people of all ages.

2. "Since students all learn at different rates of speed, it is difficult to maintain good groups" Actually, the fact that students proceed at different rates is a positive factor in group instruction. For example, some may be good sight-readers while others excel in creative work. Conversely, there will be those with a tendency to play by ear at the expense of developing reading skills. In group instruction, the teacher uses the student who spurts ahead as the success model for others to emulate.

3. "There are students who feel they cannot work well in a group therefore they obviously must have private lessons" There are too many examples of people who are "loners," who in reality would be happier if they could deal more

effectively with their insecurities and the destructive forces within themselves. Members of the group can help the insecure person build on his strengths as a means of beginning to realize his potential in music. We are not teaching music, per se--rather we are teaching people how they can teach themselves music.

4. "Students need individual attention, which can only be given in a private lesson" First of all, this is not an accurate statement. In group instruction, each person receives lots of individualized attention from both peers and the teacher. What this statement often implies is that students are encountering difficulties they can't solve. The "individual attention" syndrome is usually a vicious cycle--the more "spoon-feeding" the student gets, the more he or she will require. On the other hand, observing others who are also involved in the same learning processes and similar problems helps one identify and solve his or her own problems.

5. "Group instruction is mass production, since it teaches several students at a time. Actually the factory assembly is the epitome of "mass production," where one product follows another in an endless succession. In private lessons, the "assembly line" is the 3:00 p.m. student followed by the next one at 3:30, then the 4:00, the 4:30, the 5:00 student and so on. Since unnecessary repetition is avoided through group instruction, time is gained to teach students music fundamentals and to offer individualized treatment.

6. "Individual differences are more difficult to handle in the group than in a private lesson". Quite the contrary. In group learning, individual differences and personal uniqueness provide much excitement and richness. Students respect and cherish each other's individuality and begin to understand more about their own potential as creative human beings. Learning problems are analyzed and solved before they become insurmountable obstacles. In the private lesson, it is difficult to recognize and value this personal uniqueness, since there is no one of approximately the same level present at the moment for comparison.

7. "Some students do not flourish in the competition of the group". Unfortunately, there is probably more misunderstanding about competition than anything else in group instruction. Good group teachers do not play up competition among students. Rather, they concentrate on developing a positive and constructive spirit of cooperation from which students derive rewards both from helping others succeed and from feeling their own musical growth. If indeed this puts students in a friendly "give and take" of competition as they check each other to see what is being learned, then it has very positive effects. The teacher has helped students understand that it is not a matter of winning points by a split second--rather it is whether each shows some improvement over what was done previously. Students can succeed in the "learning process"

without actually winning points in the drills. Teachers should help students experience an inner desire or motivation to do a better job rather than feel the external pressures of competition to win points.

8. "Group instruction may be good for average students but those with talent must have private lessons." We really know very little about what constitutes musical "talent". Personally, I believe there would be more "talented" students if we would provide richer learning situations for very young students so that they would get more insight into the processes of developing their own musical potential.

9. Some students do not want to play in front of others; therefore, the group is a waste of time." Unfortunately, this person is probably saying to himself, "I'd give anything if I could play in front of someone, but I'm scared". No doubt music can provide deep satisfaction to those who wish to perform or listen only in the solitude of their own inner sanctum. However, most often this type of student can't even play well for himself. The real point here is to provide a type of instruction which will allow for both playing for yourself and also sharing music with others. To deal with these learning problems effectively there is an ongoing need to learn as much about musical structure as possible and to analyze appropriate study processes and problems of musical performance.

In conclusion, we should not view this as "private lesson versus group instruction." Instead we should consider the best ways to give our students the most in the amount of available time. Not every person can or will teach in groups, but all should strive to give students the broad elements of good musicianship. Here are several points teachers raise over and over as to why they prefer group teaching over individual lessons for most students.

1. Fundamentals of music are basics to be taught to all. To get the most from their piano lessons, students all need harmonic analysis (to say nothing of ear-training and sight-reading) that is related to their repertoire. In groups, since teacher can present a point one time to 8 students instead of eight time to 1 student, there is less repetition and redundancy. Common points of pieces can be dealt with in less time.

2. In group or peer interaction, teachers can observe students teaching each other. In that way, they get feedback on what students actually comprehend and how their learning might be applied during home practice the other 6 days. The emphasis is on helping them improve their own learning "processes."

3. Students grow by helping others. They learn how to make direct, positive, and thoughtful criticism. Students assume a greater responsibility in keeping their commitments and accomplishing their goals.

4. Teacher's role as "facilitator" or "expeditor" is challenging, exciting and very rewarding as he or she sees students becoming independent, intelligent young musicians. Helping students realize their own creative musical potential as part of a lifelong process of growth and development is tremendously exciting.

Our society could benefit from more people who have a genuine concern for each other's well-being, success and happiness and a desire to help individuals develop their creative potential. It could be that group learning provides some of the best settings in which this can happen.