Keynote Address
Dr. Edwin E. Gordon

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy
Lombard, Illinois 2015
July 30, 2015
Reprinted with permission

Beyond the Keyboard

Good morning to all. I am delighted to be invited to participate in your Conference. Although I am not an accomplished pianist, I have been interested in piano pedagogy for many years. As a result, I am lead to believe piano is taught to many persons by teachers who typically teach the way they were taught rather than according to an objective learning theory and current research. With no intent of being critical, I am anxious to share concepts I suspect are unfamiliar to many of you. It is my hope you will be inspired to give serious consideration to your approach to teaching piano and, perhaps, be encouraged to embrace some new concepts in your pedagogy. My presentation will be relatively brief to leave time to answer questions. I am an incorrigible professor.

I will begin by talking briefly about language acquisition. There is a striking similarity between learning a language and learning music. Using language as analogy should make it easier to grasp what I soon will be explaining about learning music, particularly piano instruction.

There are five language skill vocabularies. In sequential order of development they are listening, speaking, thinking, reading, and writing. Each provides readiness for learning the next. I must emphasize listening comes first. It is fundamental. Without a firm listening vocabulary, the remaining four vocabularies can have only marginal development. Consider the following fact. Throughout history, humans have spoken more than 30,000 languages. Only 6,000 currently exist. The reason is a language is no further from extinction than only one, just one, generation of adults not giving newborn and young children opportunity to listen to that language. As an aside, only 200 of the 6,000 languages are written.

Without a rich listening vocabulary, development of a speaking vocabulary with proper pronunciation is restricted. Need I bring to your attention the unfortunate necessity
of so many adolescents and adults to depend on the words “like, you know, basically, I mean, whatever, awesome, and incredible.” These words represent the paucity of repetition in their narrow listening vocabulary. The chilling thought is society is losing the wealth of our language heritage, and due to similar neglect, our classical and Baroque music heritage is in jeopardy.

There are five parallel music skill vocabularies. In sequential order of development, they are 1) listening, 2) singing and chanting, 3) audiating and improvising, 4) reading, and 5) writing. As with language, listening is basic in piano instruction as well as all music instruction. Unfortunately, in typical instruction, listening is disregarded. Detrimental results are similar in music as in language when importance of listening is overlooked.

A most egregious consequence is piano instruction typically is begun with the fourth vocabulary. Students are generally presented with a book of notation. The first three readiness vocabularies are bypassed. It is not surprising a high proportion of students are frustrated with good reason. It is assumed they are able to silently perceive sounds notation represents. That ability is rarely achieved. Imagine using a computer keyboard in an unfamiliar language. That is not much different from depressing keys on a piano without expectation of sounds to be heard or their musical meaning. Such a mechanical process is not, to say the least, conducive to motivation. Only planned guidance in listening can adequately prepare piano students to learn more than press correct keys when reading music notation.

Before I describe the second and third vocabularies, a few more words about the listening vocabulary are essential. You might ask what students are supposed to listen to? In a word, the answer is sameness and difference of contexts. It is awareness of differences compared to memorizing sameness that contributes to extensive development of overall musicianship. Whereas language has syntax, music has tonal and rhythm contexts. Major and minor tonalities, for example, constitute tonal context. A resting tone of a tonality organizes sounds that surround it. A sense of major tonality has a resting tone of do and minor tonality a resting tone of la. That can be taught theoretically but only abundant and systematic informal listening can sustain it and related information in audiation. Would it not be wonderful if piano students were aware of context as they are
performing and reading music notation, similar to the way persons naturally think syntax of what they are speaking and reading?

What about rhythm context? Meter is to rhythm what tonality is to melody. Meter may be duple, triple, or combinations thereof. In keyboard instruction, accurate intonation is not a deterrent. Secure rhythm is another issue. There are no keys for note values. It is indeed regrettable most students throughout the world display poor rhythm. Without a sense of meter, audiation of consistent macrobeats and microbeats, which gives rise to sensitive expression, is at best problematic. Just as a sense of tonality is acquired best by listening, a sense of meter also is attained best by listening. But, with regard to rhythm, there is significantly more. I will include movement as I speak about the second vocabulary, singing and chanting.

A moment ago I used the word context. It belongs primarily in the domain of the listening vocabulary. In contrast, the word content is fundamental to the second music vocabulary, singing and chanting along with moving. Brief tonal patterns and rhythm patterns in a variety of tonalities and meters, not individual notes, facilitate content. Tonal patterns comprise from two to five pitches, normally three. Rhythm patterns usually are superimposed over two macrobeats. Macrobeats, for example, are quarter notes and microbeats are eighth notes in conjunction with the measure signature 2/4.

Learning letter names of detached notes to audiate music makes little more sense than teaching the alphabet, not words, to understand language. We think with words and we audiate with patterns. Tonal patterns and rhythm patterns are the words of music. Students learn to audiate tonal patterns by singing the patterns and resting tones. Movable do syllables with a do based major and la based minor in conjunction with beat function rhythm syllables have been shown to be most operative. Students learn rhythm patterns by chanting patterns and moving to macrobeats and microbeats. It is unrealistic for students to sing and chant all they read and later all they will read. A more fruitful approach is to follow an objective taxonomy of difficulty levels of tonal patterns and rhythm patterns.

Before students are guided in chanting rhythm patterns, they move to them. Without feeling rhythm and letting it out of the body rather than pushing it in theoretically, consistent tempo and meter that support accurate chanting of rhythm
patterns are disoriented. Bereft of consistent tempo as a basis, tempo rushes and slows, meter is unstable, and durations in a rhythm pattern become irregular. Learning to move begins with free flowing, continuous physical movement in plentiful space without keeping musical time. Only after a feeling of spatial freedom is established, moving the body in musical time is appropriate. It is rhythm independence that provides for artistic phrasing in contrast to mechanical counting.

The third music vocabulary, audiating and improvising, is usually discounted. It is no less vital than the first two. In fact, it might be even more crucial in music development. Before I continue, I think it necessary to define audiation for those who may not know its meaning.

Audiation is to music what thought is to language. It is the process of assimilating and comprehending sound not physically present, or momentarily heard or heard sometime in the past. Sound becomes music through audiation when, as with language, it is translated in the mind and given meaning. Meaning given these sounds is different depending on the occasion as well as different from meaning given them by others. Musicians, of course, audiate when assimilating and comprehending in their minds music that may or may not have been heard but is read in music notation or composed or improvised. It is possible to audiate and not improvise but it is not possible to improvise without audiating. With your understanding of audiation, I will now continue with the third vocabulary that includes improvisation.

By the time young students are introduced to the third vocabulary, ideally they have improvised unpretentious piano pieces. Among the many virtues of early improvisation is it makes formal and lengthy instruction in learning to read music notation unnecessary. It just happens. Think of it! The process is simple. Students perform a melodic pattern, phrase, or something longer and then are shown the notation of what was performed. The teacher explains the melody they performed looks like what they see. Tedium theoretical discussions about signatures, pitches, and note values are needless and remote. Supplementary markings in a score are dealt with briefly as the need arises. Rather than learning to read, students are reading to learn. It is amazing how rapidly students generalize what they have learned when improvisation serves as readiness for reading music notation.
There are chord patterns, theoretically triads, and chord progressions. A chord pattern consists of two or three chords. A chord progression is longer. It links chord patterns or parts of chord patterns. A series of chord progressions support a melody. It is advantageous when engaging in the third vocabulary for students to become familiar with a few chord patterns and progressions so they may improvise upon them when playing a melody. Melody is not necessarily improvised but chord patterns and progressions are. Using only tonic, dominant-seventh, subdominant, and major and minor supertonic chords will sufficiently sustain students’ interest over a productive span of time.

When chords are learned in this manner, they are not taught individually in vertical fashion. Which pitches are in the soprano and bass and inversions are irrelevant. Sonority established when one chord moves to another longitudinally is of the essence. What, you may ask, is the role of common practice music theory, that is, the teaching of note names and associated information. It is the grammar of music. It has a purpose, but it should be taught at the right time. It properly is not taught to give details about what is to be learned but rather to explain the background of what has been learned. Grammar, you know, is not taught until after students have learned to listen to, speak, think, and read and write a language with comprehension.

It is possible to confuse faking and improvising. When faking, something familiar is performed without aid of music notation. Improvisation is more elaborate. Not depending on music notation, a different melody may be performed based on chord progressions of a familiar tune, or a familiar tune may be performed with unique chord progressions. It is not unusual for an improviser to play a melody in a different tonality (for example, changing it from major to minor) or in a different meter (changing it from duple to triple). It is ironic that improvisation is called faking by some uninformed persons. Actually, it is the reader who cannot audiate or improvise who is the real faker.

I have preempted the fourth vocabulary. I described the music reading process as part of the third vocabulary. In a few words, genuine ability to read music notation is facility to bring practical meaning to notation rather than attempting to take theoretical meaning from notation. It is a dynamic part of holistic music literacy that includes all music vocabularies, not only reading, with an emphasis on listening.
There is prevailing credence that if students are not taught to read music notation, they are not learning music. Uninformed parents believe this and, unfortunately, some teachers believe and support the notion. It cannot be denied ability to read music notation is valuable but it is not the pinnacle of music education. As grammatical writing is an intrusion on creative thought, music notation is an intrusion on expressive audiation.

Music notation has other limitations. For example, what are called time or meter signatures are neither one. They are arithmetic measure signatures with distant relationship to music performance. As a matter of fact, little if anything is known about the interpretive transition of signs to measure signatures from 1650 to 1800. It is possible we have it all wrong.

Moreover, might I say the most salient parts of music, phrasing for example, cannot be notated. Yes, there are tempo markings and phrase lines but they usually are interpreted differently by various musicians. It seems incredible to some that Arturo Toscanini and Bruno Walter may be conducting the same Brahms symphony. Yet, both men were convinced they were interpreting the score correctly. Notation is more subjective than objective. To my knowledge it is not possible to know by looking at notation how J. S. Bach performed his own music. In that connection, I admit I could not learn syncopation from music notation. My teacher had to perform it for me and say that is the way it goes. Musicians may audiate all they see in music notation but they are not able to put into music notation all they audiate.

Finally, we come to the fifth vocabulary, writing. When students can audiate and read music notation, they do not find it arduous to learn to write music notation. Writing is a natural consequence of reading music notation through audiation. Though it is difficult to conceive, students who are taught to read music notation using the traditional method appear almost musically illiterate when writing music notation. The opposite is the case when they are taught to audiate music notation. Not being able to notate what is audiated prevents students from engaging in musical creativity.

With your forbearance, I would like to read what Harriet Ayer Seymour intuitively expressed almost one hundred years ago. Incomprehensibly, her keen observations in presaging audiation are as obscure today as they were then. The following
paragraphs are taken from the Preface and first chapter of How to Think Music. It was written for The New Music Review in 1910 and published in 1915 by G. Schirmer.

“In music, as in other things, we have allowed ourselves to do a great deal of thoughtless, and therefore useless work. The object of this book is to arouse those who have only played music to think music before playing it. The thought must always be prior to the fact. The inward process of listening and hearing is not adequately expressed by the word think, but it seems to be the best term descriptive of the process that the English language affords.

It is not what the teacher intends to convey that takes root in the mind of the pupil, but what the pupil understands. In my judgment there is really no such thing as taking piano lessons. The piano is simply the instrument we choose for the expression of musical ideas. Music itself is in the mind, and therefore the teaching of it should be distinctly a mental training. How many thousands of students of music have given up in despair because they had never been taught to think music.”

As I conclude my presentation, I feel I must acknowledge that change is difficult. It involves taking risks. It has been said the quickest way to make enemies is to try and change something. As you well might intuit, I have been taking professional risks my entire career. As I look back, I would not have had it any other way. Positives outweigh negatives. May I be presumptuous and invite you to think about change and concomitant risks? Follow your bliss and doors will open.

If you are agreeable, I have a few words of advice. Do not make a complete abrupt change. Maintain your current methodology while introducing one new concept at a time. If you enjoy success, many changes will naturally and unexpectedly come to pass. Embrace them and relish the thrill of observing students learn and wanting to learn. To be sure, you will be exhilarated as you learn along with them.

You may desire more information. Two of my books published by GIA should be of particular interest. 1) Music Learning Sequences: A Contemporary Music Learning Theory and 2) Essential Preparation for Beginning Instrumental Music Instruction. I should mention Marilyn Lowe has authored a series of piano books that embrace much and more of what I have disclosed.
I wish you all success and good health. Thank you.