

# The Surprising Outcomes of a Group Keyboard Learning Experience in an Australian Conservatorium.

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This paper documents the results of a nine year pilot study in Group Keyboard Learning Experience tested in an Australian Conservatorium. *Group Keyboard Tuition has long been under-developed and occasionally abused in Western Music Education, yet it has clear advantages:*

- 1. The chance for students to engage in music learning without the usual expense of private tuition.*
- 2. The chance for ensemble experience: the keyboard is no longer a loner's instrument, the keyboardist functions as specialist unit of an ensemble according to their level of skill and training.*
- 3. The chance for weekly bench-marking between students: a gentle form of competitiveness that motivated participants.*
- 4. The potential for musical institutions and some private tutors, to increase their income - far more income per hour than private tuition.*

## The Main Challenges of Group Keyboard Learning Experience:

- ⌚ Meeting the needs of each individual by presenting material that is manageable yet progressive for each participant throughout the lesson.
- ⌚ Promoting students' attention to posture and technical development.
- ⌚ Building aural skill development in group context.
- ⌚ Developing ensemble skills for a range of personality types.
- ⌚ Developing a positive, helpful relationship with parents of students whilst having very limited time to socialise.
- ⌚ Acquiring the skill-level needed for tutors and establishing a good ratio of Teacher-students. [Minimum recommended is 1 professional and 1 skilled assistant per 4-6 students, maximum 6 students per class if school age].
- ⌚ Getting support from management in realising the importance of presenting the ensemble component as part of a organisational performances.
- ⌚ Choosing education material to satisfy cultural and age expectations. (Ensuring the music is *relevant to students and parents*).

## Electronic Keyboard Technology and Keyboard Education

The Electronic keyboard is a modern instrument, sometimes under-appreciated. It has potential to do some things the piano could never do.

Physical Advantages of Electronic keyboard	Physical Disadvantages of Electronic keyboard
Keyboard is light and transportable	Can be damaged when transported, by being dropped, bumped or burnt by sun (display can burn out, albiet temporarily).
Can have headphones for practice and instruction. This removes the distractive elements in the group situation and reduces noise stress for the teacher and students.	Has lighter keys and easier touch therefore has lower muscle development rates.
Height is adjustable (Ensure the parents understand the importance of keyboard placement in the home and good ergonomic positioning for the student.)	Some students were practicing whilst sitting on their bed, others with the keyboard on a table that was far too high.
Stays in tune? Range of sounds?	Needs power to work. A basic understanding of power packs, leads and amplification is needed to keep the keyboards functional.
Teaching Advantages of Group Keyboard	Teaching Disadvantages of Group Keyboard
It can provide an opportunity to renew a students interest in keyboard beyond the piano sound into synthesised and other quasi-instrumental sounds.	The wide range of available sounds has to be monitored, it can be very distracting in the early lessons.
Can play a wide range of sounds, which is wonderful for ensemble situations.	
<p>Keyboard groups can accommodate different personality types:</p> <p>The ensemble keyboard experience allows the more extroverted students to perform keyboard in a co-operative</p>	It was found that a few personality types were not suited to the group situation. Students who demand constant attention from the teacher and teaching assistant, and who cannot work alone (even for a short period) are happier with

environment. Students can control the level of participation by adjusting the volume control on their own keyboard.	individual tuition.
There is the opportunity to play along with the teacher but not be heard by others. This does not require expensive controls, the student can simply put their headphones on and still hear outside noises.	Some training and ideas are needed for the instructors to be able to handle all the different progress and abilities of the students. <b>This is discussed later.</b>

### A Brief History of the Electronic Keyboard

Every period of music has been affected by the technology of the time. In the 1960's the computer found a voice and grew powerful. It sent men to the moon and it hooked up to every communication device known (TV, Telephone, radio, recording studios). At this time the art movement called Modernism also emerged and was highly influential in all forms of new musical composition. On the one hand, compositions became simplified and controlled, and on the other ,highly explorative. Process music was born and computers were embraced as a vital musical tool; the concepts that were trialled in those 'modern' compositions are now commonplace in mainstream music of the 2000's: ie. looping, sampling, filtering, layering etc.

In the 1970's there was a surge in popularity in electronic organs. Music shops promoted the organ with staff demonstrating them. Synthesisers and organs were part of mainstream popular music (eg. Pink Floyd) and an influential part of Modern Art Music (eg. Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*) . The first major artists to fully use the synthesizer included [Wendy Carlos](#) (who is accepted as the first artist) Jean Michel Jarre, Arthur Brown, Giorgio Moroder, Vangelis, Tangerine Dream, Kitaro, Stevie Wonder, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush. An era of new and exciting music technology, high status was attributed to the technology because some models were extremely expensive (in excess of \$50,000 AUD). Yamaha was a leading company in teaching people how to use the features of these organs. They set up group lessons to keep lesson cost effective and to meet the surging market demand.

In the 80's, as the technology developed, keyboards became much cheaper, and more sophisticated (no more levels and pedals, just buttons). The popularity of group organ lessons had declined, and the electronic keyboardist emerged as a musician capable of playing a full, often essential, but subdued role in group music. There were a few rare exceptions, including keyboard bands such as Kraftwerk.

Today, the pianist, not the keyboardist, has a role as a feature musician in the modern music world: in Classical music (Lang Lang in the Chinese Olympics), as

popular Solo Artists (ie. Elton John, Billy Joel, Delta Goodram, Missy Higgins, Guy Sebastian, Alicia Keys). Occasionally keyboardists feature as lead roles in pop bands (ie. White Stripes) and in Comedy (ie. Tim Minchin, Kransky Sisters).

### Group Keyboard Tuition Better Defined

There are two types of group keyboard tuition. This needs to be recognised in the literature today. There is the tuition that attempts to teach what would normally be taught to individuals in a group situation, for efficiency purposes. This is commonplace in a number of higher education situations eg. Universities in USA and Canada. The other type of Group Keyboard tuition is one that aims to utilise the group experience. Our program aimed to utilise the group experience whilst trying to teach some concepts that would be expected in individual lessons. A comparison of student progress (when compared to students on the same material in individual lessons) was documented and is discussed in the *Outcomes*.

### Optimum Learning Conditions for the Keyboard Group Students

Group numbers were initially between 4 and 6 students, the optimum size proved to be 4 or 5. This was not simply a shared lesson: the students were learning the same material through verbal instruction and teacher demonstration, with supervision of individuals by the use of headphones; then the final part of the lesson worked on ensemble skills by performing the songs learnt in that lesson. Toward the end of term the last two lessons were dedicated to mastering a select number of pieces for performances with other groups. For performances the groups were as large as 36 keyboardists. In the large ensembles each student was required to know their role in the performance work in order to participate in ensemble performance. Roles were allocated according to experience and skill level.

<i>Lesson Participants:</i>  <i>Instruction of new material</i>	<i>Ensemble Participants:</i>  <i>Performance of known material</i>
3-6 Ideal = 4	5 - 40 Ideal is 8 - 25 depending on venue acoustics, sound equipment and stage size.  Essential to have a singer to lead the group and good to have a nominated soloist to improvise or embellish the work. Roles varied from percussion tones for early

	beginners through to improvised arrangements of bass, chords and melody by experienced students.
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### **About the Pilot Study**

In 1999, I was asked to develop a group teaching program for keyboard, I had taught group keyboard before at another school but was frustrated by the lack of information and music books that suited this special type of teaching. I had to write a lot of the music myself, arranging and simplifying songs that the children requested and each week this was time-consuming. Also, I needed to organise the material so that it could be incremental, reach teaching goals and develop all aspects of musicality (aural, sight reading and ensemble). I came from a background of teaching traditional systems and had then taught aural based teaching for a short period. I then wanted to promote empowerment of students through developing both sight reading and aural skills.

I wrote a Group Keyboard course and it was requested that it be trialled at the Conservatorium. It was first taught in 2000 and trialled in group and individual tuition. It was taught to approximately 150 students over the 9 year period. It has undergone numerous reviews in response to student needs and throughout the trial period several factors emerged and are discussed later in Outcomes.

### **Aims of The Conservatorium's Pilot Study**

The group keyboard study aimed to evaluate:

1. Group learning as a primary source of keyboard instruction for beginners (not designed as complementary to individual lessons).
2. Optimum group sizes and combinations (eg. students grouped according to age, level or progress to date).
3. Progress indicators and methods of adapting the group to the needs of individual students when there will be varied levels of ability and commitment to practice.
4. Methods of assessment and review of student progress.
5. Optimum number of classes to enable student progress review and placement.
6. Benefits of ensemble experience to enhance student commitment to practice and concentration in the lesson, especially in an Australian context.
7. Key expectations of a method that enabled students to progress in contemporary, classical and/or jazz piano study.

### **About the Keyboard 'Laboratory' Equipment Used**

In 2000 the Conservatorium invested in a system that allowed the teacher to have a console and network headphones, but this assumed that the teacher would not be moving about or needing to be close to the students. By 2009, the equipment was simplified. Each student was encouraged to bring their own headphones (for health reasons) and was taught to operate the keyboards, allowed to move them, set them up for performances and pack them away. This meant it was better to have inexpensive lightweight keyboards. If teachers know the instructional material well and are able to sight sing, then they don't need to hear the student play but can see what they are playing and correct them as required. If teachers have trouble sight singing they could buy an inexpensive double-adaptor for each headphone socket and simply plug their own headphones in to each keyboard as required.

### **About the Instructional Material**

For the purposes of this review it is vital to separate the instructional material from the primary goals. The instructional material had specific goals but could be written by any keyboard teacher as long as it is incremental in its structure and contains a large volume of short works. The instructional material used was a collection of 380 short works, mostly folk songs, set into eight books an eight-term beginner period. It was shown that short works (approx eight bars containing no more than 32 notes) were preferred by students and enabled a goal of attainment of three works per lesson for the average student, one work for younger or less capable students and four works for exceptional students. Students who mastered more than the four set works were re-assessed and often found to be capable of joining the next level.

The instructional material has to have very clear goals because it needs to be less dependent on input from the teacher by providing clear instruction and incremental exercises for the student.

### **Lessons Plans**

1. *Lessons Need Clear Goals.* The initial presentation of lesson concepts needs to be very clear and offer incremental developments on the introduced concept/s.

For Example: A concept can be presented incrementally throughout 5 slightly different pieces, each one slightly more complex. The complexity can be developed rhythmically or by variance in co-ordination. ie. the new concept might be dotted rhythm. The program can present a basic pattern of dotted crotchets in amongst simple crotchets (as in the song: *Happy Birthday*) and the following work can have the dotted crotchets at more frequent intervals (as in *Inci Winci Spider*). These are basic examples. It is strongly recommended that song choice reflects the interests of target age group.

Our program had songs in the first levels that were best suited to young students (age 5) and songs in the higher levels suited to the older student (age 8+). Third year students were taught repertoire from Piano for Leisure Syllabus and also instructed in improvisation for Jazz and contemporary works. They were allowed to nominate repertoire. *Teacher Input Needs to Target The Whole Group*. Tuition is presented to the whole group with some fine-tuning by the assistant teacher and by the teacher to individuals throughout the lesson.

2. *Each Lesson Needs To Be Structured*. Structure achieves two main goals: individual concentration and group unity. A student's concentration is more quickly built from the lesson ritual because the student knows exactly what is expected of them each lesson although the content is new. Structure also brings the group together as a unit or a team, the students can participate in the set works co-operatively. From the pilot study a successful structure was devised: each lesson contained a timetable of Preparatory work followed by individual work then Ensemble work. A typical lesson aimed to introduce all students to relevant theory, solfege and aural aspects of the works in the first 5-10 minutes of the lesson, allow for private study in next 10-15 minutes of the lesson (whilst teacher and assistant attended to each student individually, correcting posture, hand shape and finger choices) and then in the final 10 minutes of lesson to perform the works as an ensemble, with the teacher or assistant leading the performance.

Preparatory work	Individual work	Ensemble work
Preparatory work may include aural solfege, relevant co-ordination exercises (eg. clapping or slapping the rhythms)	Individual work (here it is vital to have headphones and for the teacher to develop skills in sight singing, or at least know the work really well to be able to detect errors. In early sophisticated keyboard 'labs' the teacher can have access via their headphones to the students' individual work, but to be able to correct fingers and hand position, it is important to be close to the student. Remote headphones for the teacher may help if sight-singing is difficult. You also need to be able to speak with that student and this may be easier if the teacher is not wearing headphones (or has microphones and switches to individual students). From a practical point of view, it is important that the room is quiet so that there is no external aural	Ensemble work (playing the works together) at close of lesson aids in assessment of student progress and understanding.

	interference. Parents can be encouraged to watch but not talk.	
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3. *New weekly material versus long term developed material.*

It is easier each week to start with new material than to try to revise or extend material from previous weeks. There was a notable variation in how much time the students practised, and their ability to practise effectively. In the pilot study there were classes that developed works throughout the term and there were other classes that faced new material each week.

Lessons containing new weekly material	Lessons with same material until mastered
Students are able to develop incrementally through a program.	Students are assigned roles according to progress and ability.
This suits beginners well.	This suits students who are trained in various roles. (Contemporary and Jazz roles include percussion, bass, chords, melody, improvisation, Classical music roles can be segments of right hand or left hand parts)
<p>The assessment is clearly defined and they have a body of short works to demonstrate they stages of their learning.</p> <p>The use of new material accommodates a variation in student progress and attendance which can affect the progress of the group as a team.</p>	There is a distinct risk that students may not develop new techniques because they will choose a role that is comfortable. The teacher needs to educate the whole group periodically in all the different roles.

Teacher Roles and Choices	Levels of Student Participation and Choices
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The teacher can elect to sing and play the songs	Students can point to the music to show they know where you are up to.
The teacher can sing and play the songs and improvise an accompaniment. This is the ideal instruction of the work because it gives them a 'big-picture' goal.	Student can clap.
	Student can sing along.
	Students and teacher assistant can speak the rhythmic solfege.
	More advanced students can slap their thighs in time with the relevant hand (right or left) as indicated in the music.
The teacher can bring together groups of different levels once set works are known. The more advanced groups serve to accompany the beginner groups and give a big-band or orchestral experience to the keyboardist.	Students can sing and play. Once set works are known they are able to perform in conjunction with students at higher levels. It was found that when the set works are well known, the teacher does not need to participate in the performance and it is led either by a student singing, or by a nominated advanced student.

4. *The lesson goals need to be demonstrated clearly by the teacher.* The teacher will demonstrate the outcomes to be achieved by playing the music. The students need to know which songs are to be attempted. This can also be marked at the bottom of the page in the instructional material. eg. *Lesson 5 Song-name*
5. *Ongoing Student Assessment.* The students required hands-on assessment from each step in the lesson before they were permitted to progress through the material. This may seem like an obvious comment but it quickly arose in the group situation that the students thought they could turn the page and progress to the next song without the teacher's approval, if this happens, how can the teacher be sure they achieved the outcome for that piece until the end of the lesson, when there is little time for correction? It proved invaluable to set a clear assessment and approval process that both the student and parent/carer understood.
6. *Keeping track of Students and Offering Alternative Levels.* If a student misses a number of lessons or is having trouble keeping up with the class, and the timetabling is generous (ie. there are enough classes in the institution) the

student can change to the class best suited to their level of progress: (ie. they can repeat a level). The pilot study showed that it was necessary to have flexibility in the programming, to allow some students to participate in extra classes to either accelerate their learning or to revise concepts. This requires a few extra keyboards in the classroom. The optimum working program was four classes each with a minimum four students, preferably five. This is not just for profitability purposes, but for the purposes of flexibility to suit student needs.

7. *Performances.* When a performance of set works needs to be organised, the students can nominate pieces from the material covered in the term prior to the performance, and the teacher can help them assess the repertoire. The children responded very well to performance opportunities, they practised more knowing they had upcoming performances and repeatedly told us how much they enjoyed the group performance experience. Regular performances (1 per 10 week term) were shown to increase enrolment retention levels.
8. *Assessments.* It is important to have a method of assessment that works as a back-up to the lesson. At the end of the lesson, allow time to play the lesson pieces together in an ensemble situation. This has been shown to be a powerful teaching tool in the Australian context. Australian students enjoy co-operative learning and friendly competitiveness. When students see others playing or attempting the same works they are inspired to concentrate and master it too. If a student is having difficulty because of an unusual break in their practice (eg, they have been on holiday etc.) they could be given an easier task that still relates to the work being performed as a group at the close of the lesson. For example, they could be asked to clap or to sing or to play only one particular note as it occurs (they would still need to be able to follow the music to play when required).

### **Outcomes**

After the 9-year trial period there were notable differences between students with individual lessons only and students in group lessons only. The program achieved its profit goals for the Conservatorium (to increase revenue in the keyboard faculty), and it also met some educational management goals of increasing performance experiences for keyboardists, increasing the profile of young keyboard performers by conducting regular performances and participating in community concerts. The students also said that the program gave them ensemble opportunities that were not possible for beginner students in the school bands.

Comparisons of pilot group to individual learners outside the group:

Students with individual lessons only	Students in group lessons only
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<p>Students who had individual lessons progressed more quickly and thoroughly through the material than those in the group lessons.</p>	<p>Older students in groups were more likely to stay in lessons than those in individual lessons. (retention level was higher for students over age 10)</p>
<p>Students in individual lessons studying keyboard have very few opportunities to participate in group music. There were several cases of discrimination against the keyboardist in primary school bands. It was noted that there are fewer ensemble opportunities for keyboard players than for most other instruments.</p>	<p>Students in group lessons developed higher levels of ensemble skills and were more likely to enter additional group music experiences such as Concert bands and Jazz ensembles.</p>
<p>Students who had individual lessons are less experienced in performance for others and tend to be more nervous. This can be overcome by either encouraging some group learning, or by offering more performance opportunities.</p>	<p>Students in group lessons developed higher levels of performance confidence because they had each other to perform to as required: they had a group to perform with rather than play on their own.</p>
<p>Some differences in social behaviour were also noted. Group participants developed more awareness of the other musicians in their ensemble and behaved co-operatively rather than competitively. The students would need to be studied for a longer period to determine whether this affected long-term career choices in music.</p>	<p>More than half of the students in the group lessons elected to stay in group lessons after the 2 year trial period. They became active in Jazz programs and keyboard ensembles.</p> <p>This was a very surprising outcome and not what was initially intended at the Conservatorium. The program had intended to encourage students to progress to individual lessons.</p>

### How Institutions can Improve Outcomes of Group Teaching Projects

Institutions can benefit from documenting the educational impact of the project. They can do this by setting up an evaluation and review system. When institutions change management staff, the pioneering projects are at great risk of being seen as personal projects. This can be avoided by having active, yet separate teaching and management roles. Alternatively, a project should not be wholly dependent on the teacher in case the teacher suddenly retires. A good relationship between management and teaching staff can guide the project and develop a succession plan.

It is essential that any project is recognised as valuable to the institution's long term success and reputation not just for short term financial benefit. The Group Keyboard Learning Experience was, and still is, valued because it is very profitable. The continued success of the project is dependent on management support, educational structure and program content. The management of any Institution can support these pioneering projects in a variety of ways, most importantly by including the groups in its public performances. A diversity of projects lends strength and durability to the institution.

### **Interdisciplinary Outcomes**

When a pioneering project proves to be successful, either by popularity or profit, the educational goals could be valuable for other music teachers, not just keyboard teachers.

Any institution that considers supporting a pioneering project such as this can increase its profits by documenting the outcomes, sharing the information openly with all staff, supporting development of similar projects for other instruments, encouraging inter-faculty relationships and supporting performances. These activities will not necessarily incur additional costs to the institution, because teachers appreciate that any shared experience, failures and successes, are beneficial.

### **About the Author**

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April has a Masters of Creative Arts (Performance and Analysis of Music) and Graduate Diploma Biomedical Science with focus on fine motor skills. April has studied a wide range of instruments in Australia and Spain. She regularly composes, arranges, conducts and performs with ensembles, choirs and dance groups including African, Spanish, and Early Music. She was author of Advanced Diploma texts on History of Music and has collated many Folk songs as the basis of Keyboard Instructional Program. She has taught group keyboard and individual piano studies since 1983 in various institutions in the Illawarra and Southern Highlands.

The Instructional Material used for the Pilot study was compiled under the guidance of the late Nan Price.

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