

Bridging the Great Divide Between Classical and Contemporary Music and Creating Well-Rounded Musicians

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Musicians today tend to be classical or contemporary and there is a great division between the two though the demands on musicians today require them to be more flexible and well-rounded. Often both types of musicians are envious of the qualities that the other possesses. The music education that musicians receive greatly influences the type of musician that they become. There is much scope for music educators to assist in bridging this divide between classical and contemporary musicians and create well-rounded musicians.

There is an established stereotypical understanding of what classical and contemporary music and musicians are. Classical refers to classical or art music. Contemporary refers to jazz and pop music. It has been the custom that classical and contemporary musicians are very separate and very different from each other and that they possess different qualities. How they learn music, how they perform it, what they perform, often the instruments that they perform on and the environments which they perform in, are all different. Common qualities that constitute classical musicians are they are good music readers, learn music through reading, have a good understanding of classical music theory, have a classical playing technique and perform and understand classical music. They are not good at improvising, composing, working out music by ear, or arranging music and have a limited understanding and knowledge of contemporary music. The contemporary musician is often one that learns music by ear, is good at improvising, performs with contemporary technique and often performs in bands with electronic equipment. They have a poor understanding of theory, cannot read music well and have a limited understanding of classical music.

There has been a shift in music education in recent years towards a more integrated approach between classical and contemporary music. This is evident in examination bodies, tertiary institutions and learning methods. Examination bodies include contemporary music in classical exams and they also offer purely contemporary exams or jazz exams. University classical music degrees now have some elements of contemporary music as part of their curriculum and contemporary music degrees have some elements of classical music. Also learning methods include a mix of classical and contemporary music. However, even though there has been a shift in the mentality and content of music education of today, there remains a great divide between classical and contemporary musicians. As a jazz musician will tell you, just because a student learns to perform a jazz-style piece of music, this does not make the student a jazz musician. Today the position still stands that many students and performers alike, are not well rounded. They

tend to be classical or contemporary and have many of the strengths and weaknesses that are typical of that performance style.

A point to consider is the necessity, importance or even desire for musicians to be well-rounded. Perhaps musicians should simply remain either classical or contemporary. If you ask musicians how they feel about this, often you will find that they would like to possess well-rounded skills and knowledge. Besides, there are many benefits to be gained from creating well-rounded students. They will be more flexible and capable and can accept and enjoy the many musical challenges and opportunities that come their way throughout their musical life. This applies to students who continue to follow a career in music, and those who enjoy music for recreation only. In both cases it is beneficial for students to have a variety of skills. For a professional musician, there are many skills that they will require outside of being able to play their instrument. They may pursue a career in arts management, composition, song writing, conducting, private or classroom teaching, arranging, performing, accompanying or recording. For all of these careers, varied skills and knowledge are required. For the recreational musician, useful skills to possess are to have a performable repertoire, be able to accompany, arrange, improvise and play with other musicians. For all students, it is hoped that when they discontinue lessons, they will continue to play their instrument and enjoy music and will have acquired skills and knowledge that they will be able to use throughout their life. Well-rounded musicians will also have a greater appreciation, knowledge and most importantly, love of music, than musicians that have restricted skills, knowledge and experience.

A well-rounded music program is one that incorporates aspects from both classical and contemporary music. It is a program that develops students into musicians who can read music, learn music by ear, can improvise, arrange, compose, perform, have a varied repertoire, have good aural skills, can use music technology and has a wide knowledge of many styles of music.

There are several methods for learning a piece of music: reading it, learning it by rote, working it out by ear, making an arrangement, composing or improvising. Each of these methods has its own strengths. Learning music through reading is essential for learning much of the classical repertoire. It is necessary to read music to be able to follow the instructions from the composer on how to interpret it. Musicians who can read music have the advantage of being able to pick up a piece of music and simply being able to play it. If students can read music, they can learn independently, not being reliant on their teacher to teach them the next piece. The benefits of learning music by rote or by ear, are that it improves listening, aural and memorization skills. Also, if the piece is learned without reading, it immediately becomes convenient memorized repertoire. Also time and money is

saved in looking for an appropriate arrangement of the music and buying it. Students will feel more confident when they hear a piece of music that they like, to then sit down and try to learn it independently. They will also have more freedom to make their own interpretation of the music. Learning without music also has a great advantage for beginner students who can not read music well yet. They can enjoy playing their instrument without the strain of reading music. Some pieces are easier to learn by rote than by reading. Students can enjoy playing these pieces before they reach the level at which they are able to read them. It is beneficial for students to learn music both through reading and without reading. The trend for classically trained musicians is that there is too much emphasis on music reading. Students rarely learn music through any other method. This limits students into becoming sheet-music-dependent musicians. Alternatively, contemporary musicians tend to be poor music readers that struggle to cope with performing a piece at sight. Ultimately, to create well rounded and flexible musicians, it is important to keep a balance between music learning methods.

There are some theoretical concepts and knowledge that tend to be learned or used only by classical or contemporary musicians. For example, concepts that fall under the umbrella of contemporary music include: bridge, slash chords, the blues and jazz minor scale. Examples of classical terminology are harmonic minor scale, symphony, perfect cadence and adagio. Some concepts have both classical and contemporary terms such as the tremolo or shake; Dominant 7th chord or 7th chord; and coda or outro. Other concepts are used by all musicians; these include the major scale, arpeggios, staccato and time signatures. Having an understanding of theory is necessary for performance, composition, improvisation, arrangement, aural and music appreciation. For a musician to gain a thorough understanding of music and to be able to play a variety of music styles, they should understand many theoretical concepts in both the classical and contemporary fields. The areas of theory that students are exposed to, are normally closely related to the type of music that they are experiencing in their music lessons. Some areas that classical musicians tend to neglect to teach their students are the construction of scales such as the natural minor, jazz minor, pentatonics and modes. They also do not teach the spelling of chords such as 9th chords, minor 7ths chords and suspended chords. Students do not learn about contemporary genres such as blues and bossanova and boogie. Contemporary musicians tend not to learn many Italian musical terms such as presto or maestoso or classical genres such as the sonata or fugue. For students to have a real understanding of music, and not just a particular style of music, they will need to learn the theory behind each of these styles.

In music education, aural refers to training which heightens the understanding of sound. Aural can not be removed from a music program because music is an aural art. Good aural skills provide students with a greater appreciation of music; it empowers them to work out music without the printed score, and they are

inextricably linked with improved listening skills. They also assist composition, improvisation and arrangement. Aural skills can be developed in both a structured and unstructured way. There are many aspects of aural that should be included in a well-rounded program: rhythmic and melodic imitation and dictation and the ability to aurally recognize chords, chord progressions, modulations, tonality, meter, instruments, style and form. There are many similarities between the aural learned by contemporary musicians and that from classical musicians. Some differences however are that contemporary musicians focus more on contemporary rhythms, chords and contemporary styles and classical tends to remain within classical styles. The aural development of many students is often restricted by the aural requirements in exam syllabi or is a sadly neglected part of students learning. Often teacher do not follow a developmental, well-rounded aural program. The possession of good aural skills is an important component in creating flexible and capable musicians.

Arrangement is the ability to play a piece of music in many styles. There is much knowledge that is required to be able to arrange music. Students need to understand scales, chords, chord progressions, chord voicing and musical styles. If students have the ability to arrange music they will also have a deeper understanding of the construction of music. This will assist them in both performance and composition. It will help them to be more creative and they will find it easier to play without written music. Once they know how to arrange, they will find this a fun and easy way to play music. It will become like the 'instant cake' way of making music: just add water and stir. They will be able to play more music, because they will not have to learn 'all of the dots' in a written score. They will also be able to perform a piece at their playing level rather than trying to find a suitable arrangement of the piece. Students who can arrange will find this useful for sing-alongs, for accompanying and for reading chord charts. An important aspect of arrangement is the ability to read and understand chord symbols and have the ability to play these chords in various ways. Students need to be able to 'spell' chords, understand their construction and then also understand different ways to play these chords. Another aspect of arrangement is understanding common chord progressions. Arrangement is an integral part of contemporary music but is often neglected in classical lessons. It is an important aspect of a well-rounded music program and if incorporated into these programs, will contribute much to bridging the divide between classical and contemporary musicians.

Improvisation is creative. It is about musicians creating their own music ad libitum. It is a method of freeing the musician from the restrictions of composed music. It is also a means of developing coordination and an understanding of phrasing. Improvisation is useful in reinforcing the knowledge of scales, chords and chord progressions and musical styles. Also it assists in composition. Most commonly with improvisation there is a given, such as a chord progression and a

scale and the remainder is for the student to create for themselves. Improvisation tends to be an area of music that is often explored or essential in contemporary music, but not as commonly used in classical music programs. Music has often been taught as a discipline, similar to math or science, and not as a creative art. The creative element is one of the most enjoyable aspects of playing music. It is similar to how interpreting notes is the enjoyable part of playing the notes, and it is a great shame if students miss out on this enjoyable opportunity.

Composition projects can be based on a motif, chord progression, lyrics, tonality, form or style, and once again, this can be used as a means of reinforcing knowledge in these areas. It can also be completely free and unstructured. Composition is often seen as a separate learning area that is not incorporated in the subject of learning the instrument in both the classical and contemporary fields. This is unfortunate, because it can be incredibly rewarding and enjoyable. Many see composition to be a talent for the gifted few, but contrary to this belief, composition is actually something that everyone can do and should do.

Electronic media is a large part of music today, whether it is listening to music or recording, performing or creating music. It is useful for students to know how to use an iPod, download music, burn CDs, use equipment such as a digital piano, mixing desk, amplifier and microphone, use software programs such as Garage Band for creating electronic music and Sibelius for writing music, and having an understanding of recording techniques and equipment. Classical musicians often only perform on acoustic instruments in a purely acoustic setting, and feel lost when it comes to connecting cables, choosing settings on equipment and experimenting with electronic forms of music. Musicians should be familiar with music technology to become comfortable in creating and performing music in a range of environments especially in the constantly shifting and developing digital age of today.

Music appreciation covers the areas of music history, composers, song writers, bands, musicians, musical genres, styles and instrumentation. It includes the symphony, The Beatles, Mozart, the bassoon and Indie Pop. Exploring these aspects of music provides students with a deeper understanding of music. Once again music appreciation tends to be an aspect of private music lessons that is not covered in much depth. Perhaps it is because teachers expect students to learn these things elsewhere such as in the classroom, at university, or even through the student's parents and peers, or because teachers do not think that they have the time to go into these areas in much detail. For students to gain an in-depth understanding of music, both classical and contemporary music appreciation should be incorporated into the program.

Often playing an instrument is a solo art. It is common for students to not have the opportunity to play in an ensemble, yet if they follow a career as a musician, ensemble skills are essential. Playing in an ensemble is very enjoyable and is something that all students will benefit from experiencing. There are various types of ensembles that students can be part of: accompanying singers and instrumentalists, being in a small group such as a trio or playing in a band, or a large group. It is very motivating being in an ensemble. It is an opportunity for students to put into practice many of the skills that they have learned. Also playing with other musicians inspires them to play more. Because of the lack of experience in this area, often musicians shy away from ensemble opportunities that come their way. Playing in ensembles should be part of the experiences and skills of students.

There is no better way for students to gain a well-balanced repertoire and an understanding of many styles of music, than by learning pieces of music in these styles. This includes styles such as stride, fugue or rock or music from a composer or song writer such as Elton John, Bach or Michael Nyman. When students learn pieces in these styles they will become familiar with the techniques and performance practices of these styles and gain a deeper appreciation of them.

There are many aspects of music that can be incorporated into a music program to help create well-rounded musicians. The next stage is to look at how to put this into practice so teachers can incorporate these aspects into their music programs. There are impediments that will limit the execution of a well-rounded program such as the knowledge of the teacher, time, learning methods, examination bodies, tertiary education syllabi, opportunities and equipment. But there are solutions that can be explored to help overcome these difficulties.

Private music teachers are the managers of the music education of their students, and are therefore responsible for the education that they receive. In the majority of cases the style of music education that students receive, forms the type of musician that they become. A teacher can only pass on to their students their own experiences and knowledge. Therefore if the teacher does not possess certain skills, it is difficult for the students to acquire them. Most teachers are not experts in both the classical and contemporary fields. There are three options for teachers who have not received a well-rounded music education themselves. One is to send their students to experts in various fields, the second is to become experts in all areas themselves, and thirdly, is to gain a general knowledge in many areas. The third option is most readily preferred because it is difficult for students to have a music teacher for each learning area and teachers generally do not have the time, money or even desire to become experts in all areas. Teachers leaving their comfort zones, imbuing themselves with new skills and knowledge and exploring unknown

fields, will find this daunting, but also rewarding and stimulating. It should put new life and enthusiasm into the teaching experience and well worth the effort which the students will greatly benefit from.

Teachers should try not to think that a well-rounded program is a lovely idea that they would get around to creating in an ideal world where students have, long lessons, lessons twice a week or no other interests outside of music. Teachers should be convinced that have a well-rounded music program is very important. More important than a student moving onto the next grade and more important than just doing what the student wants to do or what the teacher feels like, or is comfortable in doing.

One way to achieve a well-rounded program is for teachers to create checklists that they work their way through. Each term to have a checklist including aural, improvisation, arrangement, music appreciation, music reading and learning music by ear, and check that each of these are included at least once throughout the term. Other aspects such as ensemble and composition could be included just once a year. While planning lessons, schedule five minutes of a thirty-minute lesson to be designated to something other than performance or technique. This could be listening to a CD, an aural exercise or improvising. If the teacher usually teaches pieces to students reading the music, then they could teach at least one piece a term without reading, or visa versa. Teachers could also create a checklist of essential music appreciation items that they think students should be familiar with such as: the symphony, The Beatles, Mozart, the bassoon, the Baroque Era, and gradually make their way through this list over time. Teachers could also create a checklist of styles of classical and contemporary music, and ensure that their students are eventually exposed to each of these styles.

In many countries, students have one to three private lessons per week and one to three general music lessons in addition to this. This is not the case in Australia. Most students have only one half hour lesson per week. They may also have classroom music lessons at school. In a half hour private music lesson, it is difficult for teachers to cover all aspects of the well-rounded program. Having said this, it is possible to achieve much if teachers use the time in lessons very efficiently and believe strongly in the importance of a balanced approach to music education. If more is planned to be achieved in the lesson, and in the year, then more will be achieved.

Teachers being efficient and organized in lessons may not be sufficient for some students. Outsourcing is a viable option. There may be a provider in your area that offers theory, aural or music appreciation classes. Teachers could encourage students to attend these. Another option is for teachers to run classes

for students in addition to their weekly private lessons. A few teachers work together to achieve this. Teachers could also encourage students to have longer lessons. Opportunities can be generated for students to be part of ensembles or use music equipment or music computer programs. Music teachers could connect with other instrumental teachers to group students together into ensembles. Not all teachers will have the technology or equipment for students to learn to use. But they may find that there are courses available for students to participate in, or people that they know that could offer these experiences to their students.

Learning methods, exam bodies and tertiary education institutions can make a considerable difference to the music education that students receive. If they offer courses and exams that require students to have an understanding and skills both in the fields of classical and contemporary music, then teachers will be required to teach these to their students.

Think about why it is that you are a music teacher. Is it to have your students love music and have a great understanding and appreciation of music? Then a well-rounded program is the way that you are going to achieve this.

By bridging the great divide between classical and contemporary music, and creating well-rounded musicians, students will gain a greater love and appreciation of music, and will be able to cope well in the many musical situations that they find themselves in throughout their lives. It is also hoped that they will continue to enjoy performing music beyond their music lesson years. It has been a sad fact of the past that many students, once they have discontinued lessons, have given up playing all together. This is a true indicator that this person did not really enjoy playing or did not acquire the musical skills that would encourage them to continue playing. A reason for this may have been that creative element was missing in their music education. Other reasons may be the lack of ensemble playing or not learning repertoire that the students really enjoyed. It is the ambition of all piano teachers that their students love and continue to love playing the music throughout their lives and that they have the skills and knowledge to cope with the musical challenges that they face. It is the ambition of musicians themselves, that they feel confident to take opportunities that come their way, knowing that they have the skills and knowledge necessary. If a well-rounded music education is provided to students, there is a greater chance that these ambitions will be achieved.

About the Author

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comprehensive program that includes performance, technique, aural, theory, music appreciation, improvisation, composition and arrangement. She trains teachers to use the Sykes Piano Program and runs a support program for Sykes Music teachers. She is also the director of the Julia Sykes School of Music with 300 students and 8 teachers. She currently has 60 piano students of her own that she teaches.

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