**Piano performance: Group classes for the lifelong learner**

**Abstract**

This qualitative research presents data relating to eight amateur pianists who completed a ten-week Piano Performance course for lifelong learners at the University of [x], UK. This article discusses the development of learning through the impact of group participation, challenges faced by learners and pedagogical strategies used by the leader to create a positive and productive learning environment. The findings suggest that learning in a non-assessed semi-formal group not only informs individual practice, technique, musicianship, analytical and performance skills but also has a positive impact on other areas of the participants’ lives.

**Keywords**

Group piano sessions, lifelong learners, facilitation

**Introduction**

The history of group piano teaching can be traced back to 1815 when J. B. Logier began giving group lessons in Dublin, Ireland (Fisher, 2010). This model was replicated in Europe and the USA, and in America, rapid expansion in group instruction was accelerated by the development of the electronic piano laboratory at Ball State University, 1956. While piano laboratory teaching utilises interactive technology in addition to systematic tuition books and expert instruction in order to facilitate a group’s progress, the master class, developed by Franz Liszt, provides one-off public coaching in which a master instructs individual students. This mode of teaching is normally offered to advanced students and while it may display stimulating verbal discourse and musical performance (Schön, 1987), observers can experience difficulties in relating this knowledge to their own learning (Creech et al., 2009; Haddon, 2014), particularly if they are a different level to the participants (Hanken, 2008). However, neither of these models is suitable for a group of adult pianists learning for pleasure and working at different levels. This article discusses a third model, known to the participants as a ‘performance group’. In this setting, pianists play to the group; receive feedback from other participants as well as from the group leader; experience piano ensemble work through playing duets and trios with other group members, and pursue their own choices of repertoire.

Research on this type of group is currently sparse. Literature on adult music-making delineates benefits to ‘social cohesion, enjoyment, personal development, and empowerment’, ‘contribution to recovery from depression and maintenance of personal well-being’ (Creech et al., 2013: 87), and demonstrates enhanced wellbeing through ‘musically-nuanced engagement in day-to-day life’ and ‘fulfilment of musical ambition’ (Perkins & Williamon, 2014: 550). Large-scale surveys of adults learning piano have also identified personal, skill and socio-cultural benefits (Cooper, 2001; Jutras, 2006), and smaller samples featuring learners in diverse contexts (individual/group/workshops) have delineated similar personal, musical and social benefits (Taylor, 2010, 2011).

Literature on group piano learning has tended to concentrate on those receiving systematic training in a tutored group for learners at similar levels (Wristen, 2006; Pike, 2013, 2014), those within higher education (Daniel, 2004; Young, 2013), or older learners (Taylor, 2010, 2011; Bugos, 2014; Li & Southcott, 2015). Wristen focused on the demographics and motivation of beginner-level adult students aged 50-59, whereas Pike’s 2013 research explored the teaching strategies used by four teachers working with groups of children aged 7-13 at different levels, demonstrating the efficacy of diverse activities within a carefully-scaffolded curriculum to create musical and technical understanding which also developed independent learning and motivation. Subsequently Pike (2014) investigated teaching techniques used by novice and experienced instructors of group piano lessons for children, finding that the expert instructor designed lessons to focus on the group and possessed a range of problem-solving strategies whereas the novice appeared to apply one-to-one teaching concepts with less resourcefulness. Bugos found that in a sample of 20 adults learning piano in a group and 20 learning percussion in a group, group instruction was preferred to individual instruction, and that 60% experienced cognitive changes ascribed to participation concerning memory, concentration and attention. Participants enjoyed learning to play and to read notation and again rated the social benefits of group learning. Daniel’s research (2004) concentrated on university music students’ responses to learning piano in group lessons; while most found this highly positive, some articulated concerns relating to performing and expressing their views on performance in front of their peers, wanting greater individual attention. In Taylor’s 2010 research, a group of older adult learners (average age 65) took part in a master class, which contributed positively to their confidence, skill development and their identity as older amateur pianists. Li & Southcott (2015) identified the importance of connection to families and to the wider community to support, motivate and affirm the learning of a sample of adult Chinese pianists learning in a group as well as benefits to physical and mental wellbeing.

These findings have demonstrated that the group learning context enables exposure to wide-ranging repertoire (Daniel, 2004, Taylor, 2010); training in functional skills such as keyboard harmony (Young, 2013); access to materials and to the expertise of the instructor (Wristen, 2006; Taylor, 2011; Bugos, 2014, Li & Southcott, 2015); exposure to a range of feedback (Daniel, 2004; Taylor, 2010, 2011); motivation to keep up with the group (Daniel, 2004; Pike, 2014); greater independence in learning than in the one-to-one context (Daniel, 2004); development of self-evaluation and evaluation of others (Daniel, 2004; Taylor, 2010, 2011; Pike, 2014); ability to interact with others (Daniel, 2004; Taylor, 2010, 2011; Pike, 2014; Bugos, 2014), and exposure to a greater range of problem-solving strategies than in one-to-one learning (Daniel, 2004). The group context offers the potential to develop performance confidence (Daniel, 2004; Pike, 2013; Li & Southcott, 2015); opportunities for ensemble playing and games (Pike, 2013; 2014); validation of the self as learner and musician through social participation in a community of like-minded pianists (Taylor, 2010, 2011; Bugos, 2014), and development of self-esteem and musical self-efficacy (Taylor, 2010; Li & Southcott, 2015). However, adults also identified challenges involving pacing of sessions, bimanual coordination (Bugos, 2014) and performance anxiety.

Despite this work there is a need for further research across more varied samples and in contexts with different pedagogical orientations, particularly those departing from the piano lab or formal master class models. This study explores participation in a 10-week piano performance group as experienced by eight adults, working at different levels and with diverse performance experience. In particular, the study sought to discover pianists’ reasons for participation, attitudes towards piano playing, perceptions of the effect of participation, and considerations relating to the pedagogical approach taken by the leader.

**Context and methods**

The Piano Performance group was established through the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of [x], UK, where eight adult pianists (6 female, 2 male) met for weekly two-hour sessions over a ten-week period. None of the group were known to each other as pianists beforehand; the level set for participation by the group leader was UK ABRSM[[1]](#footnote-1) Grade 5 or above; three pianists were taking regular lessons (having taken ABRSM grades 4 and 5 within the last five years) and two were working towards graded examinations, having taken higher-level exams much longer ago, dating back to 1970. Two were aged 30-39; one aged 40-49; two aged 50-59 and three aged 60-69. One participant was also giving private lessons to beginner and intermediate-level students.

This research takes the form of a single case study, which provided the opportunity for exploration of the ‘particularity and complexity’ (Stake, 1995: xi) of the case, and of its ‘nuanced, contextualized, and interdependent’ variables (Barrett, 2014: 114). It afforded the possibility to gain ‘understanding of the dynamics present within single settings’ (Gray, 2014: 266). Data were collected through two main methods: questionnaires, and document analysis. In order to assess the needs of the group the course leader/researcher devised a questionnaire which was distributed at the first session. This sought to discover pianists’ reasons for taking part, aims for learning, what they enjoyed most and least about playing the piano, repertoire preferences, and areas that they would like to explore. A second questionnaire was distributed after the final session. This was designed to enable participants to reflect on their learning, and asked whether their stated aims had been realised, and if so, how; whether the sessions had had an effect on their practice, confidence in performance, musical understanding, self-understanding; to define the most significant development in their learning during the term; which sessions they had enjoyed the most and the least; whether the sessions had an impact on other areas of their lives; and further open-ended questions including the development of the course and space for additional comments. Detailed responses for both questionnaires were received from all eight pianists.

The researcher/course leader decided to use questionnaires to collect data as interviewing participants at the start of the course might have been overwhelming, and this method provided space for them to reflect on their learning in an unpressurised, private context. The purpose of the questionnaires was outlined in the first and final sessions. Participants could complete the questionnaires either on paper or via email; despite the possibility of ‘social desirability response bias’ (Robson, 2011: 240) in which they may desire to show themselves favourably, the detailed responses which described weakness and anxieties as well as strengths suggests that these respondents were keen to invest in and reflect on their learning. Throughout the course the leader/researcher was careful to avoid influencing participants’ responses, emphasising that the data would provide a basis for the leader to reflect on and develop her teaching as well as to potentially produce work of use to the scholarly community. Participants were informed that they were free to complete, partially complete or discard questionnaires without any repercussions; they were also reassured that their answers would be used with discretion in any subsequent written output. While participants understood that their responses were not anonymous to the researcher/leader, they also had the opportunity to provide separate anonymous feedback to the course provider at the university.

This article also draws on comprehensive notes emailed to participants by the course leader after each of the ten sessions which detailed the repertoire and aspects to consider during individual practice. The data was collated and thematically analysed through an iterative, recursive coding process by hand, and checked by an independent researcher, and the findings are discussed below in thematic categorisations that arose through analysis. The process of data analysis applied the principles of the ‘constant comparative method’ used in grounded theory (Miles & Huberman, 1984), deploying several levels of coding in which categories are drawn from the data, aiming to make the ‘subjects’ implicit belief systems explicit’ (Tansley, 2010: 419) and avoiding imposing any pre-defined conditions or limitations on the data analysis. Therefore, this process enables the researcher to ‘identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84, italics original). This method enables recognition of the idea that ‘multiple realities exist that are time and context dependent’ (Mertens, 1998: 161) and aims to expand understanding of these in relation to the context of the research. While the sample size is small and therefore the findings are not generalizable, they nevertheless raise issues worthy of consideration for educators and support the development of similar programmes.

**Findings**

Discussion of the findings of the first questionnaire is followed delineation of considerations arising from this data which informed the approach taken by the course leader. This is followed by a presentation of the structure of the sessions and content analysis, leading to the findings from the second questionnaire.

**Initial findings: Questionnaire 1**

***i) Reasons for participation***

Five participants hoped to gain performance experience, improve confidence and performance skills. While one of these had no performance experience and ‘wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone’, others with more substantial and varied experience which included choral accompaniment also sought to gain confidence. One pianist who did not state performance experience as a goal expressed the desire to be ‘part of a group of other piano players/lovers’ which suggests interest in sharing experience: ‘to compare ideas about technique, etc. and to have some fun!’ Two others shared this social perspective, wanting to ‘meet other players that could hopefully stay in touch with to play duets/trios’ and ‘to learn from the challenges others face’.

Some pianists also expressed a more inward, individual perspective: ‘self-improvement’; ‘to bring some focus to my practice/playing’ and ‘to learn to put more emotion into my playing’. Pianists hoped to see improvement resulting from receiving ‘help from an experienced educator and pianist’ which might also inform one participant’s piano teaching. Three pianists noted that ‘even with lessons, it is hard to keep motivated’; the class would ‘give me a goal to practice the piano a lot more!’ and provide ‘the incentive and self-discipline to start playing again on a regular basis’.

These responses suggest that participants anticipated performance improvement, social and motivational benefits, and professional input. The nature of the group was perceived to enable both communal and individual goals.

***ii) Aims for learning***

When asked about their aims for learning in these sessions, respondents tended to elaborate on their previous answers. Those mentioning performance hoped to gain greater ease, to ‘learn techniques to enable me to focus on the music rather than on my nerves’ and ‘to produce playing that’s enjoyable for other people to hear, rather than just something I do on my own’. This highlights the social context of learning, which was supported by interest in broadening repertoire through discovering new styles. Participants hoped to achieve improvement in specific areas such as ‘greater accuracy and listening, interpretation’, technique and teaching skills. They also hoped for progression, to ‘have some repertoire i.e. play pieces from beginning to the end!’ and for the restoration of lapsed skills: ‘to return to accompanying when I feel more capable and confident’. Another participant hoped to ‘gain more patience in trying to master new pieces, take more time and consideration, perhaps also realise my limitations!’ This suggests that the sessions could be used to develop a realistic assessment of ability and align this with appropriate repertoire.

These responses suggest that pianists hoped to develop performance skills, broaden repertoire, improve teaching, regain and restore skills, increasing their expertise, and to develop self-evaluative skills.

***iii) Enjoyment in piano playing***

When asked what they enjoyed most about playing the piano, participants identified a ‘different activity’, in which ‘a different part of my brain is used!’ Pianists appreciated ‘the concentration it demands’; ‘practice is very absorbing and when playing the piano, everything else is forgotten about. It is also a good outlet for a variety of emotions’. This could create a particularly intense ‘experience of taking me completely outside of myself and the world around me and help me release – also puts me in touch with deeper emotions’. One participant enjoyed expressing these emotions in song-writing at the piano. Two others articulated sensory enjoyment through the ‘tactile pleasure in mastering the keyboard’ and through ‘the sounds of the music, the vibrations in my fingertips’. Three pianists also enjoyed a sense of achievement ‘when a piece is mastered and can be played well’, noting ‘the rewards of regular application over time’. This connected to practice, which was enjoyed as a process: ‘the structure/discipline of learning a piece’, creating ‘insight’ and ‘improved listening’.

These responses suggest that as well as providing an absorbing focus which could divert them from other concerns, piano playing connected to deep emotions which could also be expressed through song-writing. Participants also noted sensory appreciation, and enjoyment of progression.

***iv) Negative aspects of piano playing***

In response to the question ‘what do you enjoy least about playing the piano?’ the majority of responses concerned issues of progression: ‘not improving, repeating errors’; ‘when I can’t master a piece/a difficult passage – especially when I’ve been trying to for years’, and frustration: ‘working on sections which stubbornly refuse to improve can drive you mad’. This could be exacerbated by time: ‘it is frustrating to return to pieces you have enjoyed and find that they are no longer under your fingers’. While one pianist experienced ‘feeling annoyed when I can’t find time to play’ and another disliked instances of not being able to play, the other negative points concerned practising: ‘sorting out fingering which still works at the final speed also gets me hot under the collar’; physical discomfort from neck and shoulder problems, and performance anxiety (three respondents). Additionally, coming to terms with personal limitations could be challenging: ‘it is also quite hard to accept that however hard you try, a great deal of music is always going to be beyond your skills’.

Again, these responses demonstrate that the participants have considerable emotional investment in their learning. They experience negative feelings when confronted by areas outside their competence (which they may be working to overcome without any help from a teacher) and have concerns relating to progression, being able to practice, specific elements within practice, physical discomfort, performance and accepting their own limitations.

***v) Musical preferences and areas to explore***

Participants were asked to state which styles of music they liked. These comprised jazz (4 pianists), baroque music (2); romantic music (2). Participants were also asked whether there were aspects of technique or repertoire they would like to explore. While jazz was noted by three respondents, others mentioned accompanying, classical repertoire, duets/trios, memorisation: ‘can’t even play Happy Birthday with confidence’; use of sustaining pedal: ‘I use by instinct, never really taught but I suspect there are rules I ought to know about’, and ornamentation.

***Discussion: Questionnaire 1***

The findings presented above reflect those of other studies on adults learning piano and those taking part in group learning. While Wristen (2006) found that the most-frequently stated goals for participation in group learning were to increase or gain skill, these findings suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, as participants had elected to participate in a performance course, that it was specifically the potential for gaining performance experience and confidence that attracted most of the group. Wristen’s respondents were also keen to learn piano as an enjoyable hobby and wanted to play for/with family and friends; participants in this study, however, were keen to be part of a group and to share ideas. While both sets of respondents stated aims which could be described as personal growth, the pianists in this study emphasised the motivational aspects of the group course. These participants highlighted the social context of learning plus individual aims for improvement, whereas other research has emphasised the importance of family members (Taylor & Hallam, 2008; Li & Southcott, 2015). The findings of enjoyment in piano playing broadly correlate with those of Wristen, Taylor & Hallam, although these participants also made connections to emotional expression through song-writing and sensory pleasure through the instrument. Negative aspects of learning also align with the findings of Taylor & Hallam (2008) and Bugos (2014) particularly concerning difficulties and frustration created by expectation of motor skills, self-expression and progression. Repertoire preferences have hitherto been unexplored, and represent an area for further study.

**Organisation of the sessions**

The findings presented above suggest that the participants possessed varying degrees of performance experience and confidence, diverse repertoire preferences and learning aims. This presented challenges for the researcher/course leader, who had previously given informal occasional coaching sessions to varied groups of learners but had not delivered a ten-week group piano class. In this section, I discuss some considerations arising from the data, my approach as leader and the structure of the sessions.

***i) Considerations arising from the questionnaire responses***

The group presented different levels of ability, attitudes to performance, and musical preferences. The diverse personalities, ages and patterns of attendance (some members could not attend every week) could create potential for variance of emotional and practical investment in the course. Furthermore, varied levels of ability might create competition, or possibly frustration, and differing attitudes towards performance and experience of tuition needed approaching with sensitivity as even those with greater performing experience might not be comfortable with open critique and discussion of their playing. Different preferences for repertoire might also be a cause for disengagement, and, apart from inevitable differences of personality, members might possess varied and not necessarily disclosed expectations for themselves and for the group. While a number of positive considerations also informed the orientation of the sessions, such as the richness of experience and breadth of repertoire that participants might share, the negative considerations created awareness of the potential for vulnerability, both individually and for the group; fluctuation of confidence, input and commitment, and the need to facilitate not only individual musical development but also the growth of the group with sensitivity, discretion and enthusiasm. Therefore, an approach informed by these considerations was enhanced through application of relevant research findings.

***ii) Approach***

Research findings on adults learning music affirms the importance of social contexts through the ‘interplay of personal identity formation and group dynamics … in sustaining musical participation’ (Veblen, 2012, p. 244), and through reflection on connections between music, life events and related feelings as well as music’s influence on identity formation and communication of the self to others (Hays & Minichiello, 2005). In teaching contexts, researchers recommend consideration of adults’ previous learning experience and associated expectations (Jutras, 2006; Dabback & Smith, 2012; Creech et al., 2013) and of participants’ physical and mental states and demands on their time (Myers, 2012). Experts also advocate dialogue with participants concerning instructive content (Jutras, 2006), the use of scaffolding to develop independent learners (Dabback & Smith, 2012) and the importance of creating an environment in which learners feel ‘supported and unthreatened’ and can progress ‘while not being afraid to make mistakes’ (Perkins & Williamon, 2014, p. 565).

The descriptive text promoting the course highlighted the collaborative potential of the group, its informal orientation, and the possibility for developing understanding of practising and performance as well as for extending knowledge of repertoire (solo, duet and trio). Therefore, avoiding a strongly master-apprentice construct of teaching was an imperative; while some sessions might adopt a framework similar to that of a masterclass with consecutive performances and discussion (as advocated by Lee (1981) and Burkett (1982) for advanced-level students), the emphasis on inclusivity and participation would be threatened by a one-dimensional instructive orientation.

Coats (2006) advocates an approach which aligns with that of the mentor-friend construct (Lehman et al., 2007) in which the teacher enables experimentation and learner autonomy; moving away from lecturing and modelling towards discussion and student demonstration, expressing ‘openness, flexibility, caring’ (Coats, 2006, p. 134), relinquishing teacher authority. This starting point was informed through the work of Benson (1987) and Higgins (2008). Benson provides in-depth discussion of planning, leading, creating empathy amongst group members, stages a group may proceed through, skills and techniques for creative group work, and ‘the group worker’s deadly sins’ (Benson, 1987, p. 161) which include ignorance, the need to control the group, fear of failure, comparison and attachment to the past. Higgins emphasises the need for active engagement with music making, consideration of the ways in which group members are invited to participate in a ‘space that invites change’ (Higgins, 2008, p. 394), and the idea of ‘safety without safety’ which may enable participants ‘to reach beyond, to exceed, both the facilitator’s and their own preconceived limits’ (ibid., p. 395). This could relate to performance, collaborative work and to the social interaction of group members. Reflecting on these findings, the leader-researcher also noted that her role would change according to the activities undertaken in the sessions.

***iii) Structure of the sessions and content analysis***

The first session began with group members introducing themselves, followed by discussion of logistics, aims and objectives. Pianists were encouraged to share their views on how they would like to use the sessions, and then each member, including the leader, performed a prepared piece of their choice. Having accomplished this rite of passage, tension dissipated and the group talked more freely about their musical identities and the challenges of performance. Sessions 2, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 focused on performance and group discussion of pieces chosen and performed by each individual, while sessions 3 and 4 featured duets, trios, and work on carefully selected scales and arpeggios, tailored to each participant. Ensemble work concentrated on pedal, leading, balance and ensemble, practice and rehearsal, playing/imagining the other part/s, keeping going, and listening to the whole rather than individual preoccupations. Scale work involved awareness of use of hand, wrist, arm and body, finger-weight and evenness, relationship of key contact and sound production, clarity, mental focus, possibilities to manipulate scales e.g. staccato/legato, varied dynamics, one hand legato and the other staccato simultaneously, and consideration of the benefits of these methods. Discussion of warm-ups included the possibilities and relevance of scales, studies and improvised games. In session 8 the group played two classical minuets in relay formation, discussing tempo, style, articulation, dynamics, balance and ornamentation. The other repertoire, chosen by group members, included 17 romantic pieces, nine twentieth-century, six baroque, four classical and three jazz pieces.

Thematic analysis of the detailed notes written by the course leader sent to the group after each session revealed that the most prevalent focus of work on solo pieces was expressivity, followed by preparation/practice, technique, pedal, mindfulness, ornamentation, memorisation, learning from recordings/videos, discussion of piano-related books and films, and comparison of examination boards. The notes also contained positive motivational feedback as well as practice points and preparation information for the week ahead, and were presented as concept-based rather than critiquing the individual pieces/players. As the range of ability and previous performance experience was varied, the notes were structured to provide all participants with transferable ideas of relevance whatever their level. Surprisingly, the notes contain less focus on performing itself than might be expected. While the quick field notes made by the leader at each session provided detail on individual performance which could be used to inform future discussion relating to individual/group development, participants were acutely aware of their approaches and anxieties relating to performance and more attention was given to discussion of this in the group than in retrospective notes. As the sessions were not recorded the analysis cannot therefore be considered fully representative, but provides some idea of the group’s concerns.

Discussion of expressivity included shaping melodies and accompanying parts; the importance of harmonic tension/resolution in creating intrinsically-connected rather than arbitrarily-imposed shape; the need to go beyond the composer’s notated markings; variation of repeated material; using different shaping simultaneously in right hand and left hand; showing unusual notes/harmonies; expressivity in spread chords, rubato, phrasing; using the text of a song-based piece for emotional connection; writing words describing character on the score, and using recording to check audibility of dynamic differences.

Discussion of preparation focused on learning strategies; use of hands-separate and hands-together practice; checking notated terminology, signs and symbols; using analysis for pattern recognition; devising creative practice strategies; using mental practice; slow practice; analysing weak areas; breaking pieces into chunks, marking up the score and memorisation strategies.

Technical areas included independence of hands, particularly playing the left hand softly to accompany melodic passages in the right hand; performing three-against-two rhythmic patterns; using rotation for broken octaves; adaptation of chords featuring impossible stretches; techniques for practising ornaments/fast runs/big leaps/hand-crossing, discussion of physical tension and making flexibility of wrist and arm movements integral to learning, as well as considering gestures to enhance performance communication. Approaches to pedalling included selective rather than constant use; omitting pedal to discover where it was essential, and applying *una corda* for tonal variation in addition to soft playing. As with expression, participants considered informing their playing through watching/listening to recorded performances.

Mindfulness involved discussing the concept plus considering awareness of conscious/subconscious interpretive choices, physical state, and techniques for avoiding ‘auto-pilot’ including focusing on specific emotions that the player hoped to project. Pianists also considered self-belief, highlighting positive aspects and finding things to enjoy in the learning process. In performance, showing understanding and appreciation of the notes and expressive features might enable connection with the music rather than preoccupation with performance anxiety; likewise, when playing ornaments, as well as discussion of their musical representation and realisation we considered how they could enhance a piece, rather than be viewed as tests of endurance.

The group also discussed recordings, piano-related books and films, and various examination boards. Participants shared and received information and resources and could follow-up the ideas in their own time.

The content analysis represents a considerable number of individual foci which arose in every session (and more will have occurred which were not itemised within the notes). While further research is needed to delineate more precisely the relationship between teaching strategies and learning outcomes, these findings provide a starting point and could inform the development of pedagogical approaches to group piano learning contexts.

**Further findings: Questionnaire 2**

A second questionnaire was sent to pianists after the final session. This was designed to enable participants to reflect on their learning, and asked whether their stated aims had been realised, and if so, how; whether the sessions had had an effect on their practice, confidence in performance, musical understanding, self-understanding; what was the most significant development in their learning; which sessions they had enjoyed the most and the least; whether the sessions had an impact on other areas of their lives, and other open-ended questions including development of the course and further comments. The responses were analysed as detailed earlier and the findings are discussed below.

***i) Realisation of aims***

Six pianists said that all their aims were realised. For the others, while one was not free from nerves, s/he understood what to work on; and in relation to the aim of returning to accompanying it had been positive ‘to really try and refine a few pieces rather than learning a lot of music all at once’. All participants detailed aspects relating to practice, confidence in performance and musical understanding which are discussed below.

***ii) Practice***

All participants wrote about improvements to their practice. It was noted that the session leader had ‘encouraged the group to reflect on what we want to achieve; how to enjoy it, and how to approach problem areas’. Some pianists outlined increased commitment: ‘I am definitely doing a lot more practice with more concentration/reinforcement of the detail’ and most focused more during practice, spending ‘more time working on single pieces rather than course through a number at each sitting’. Practice was also now preceded by technical work: ‘I am ashamed to say I haven’t played any warm-up exercises for many years and now I make sure I do at least 15-20 minutes of scales etc.’

Reflection on participation led one pianist to observe that the sessions have ‘made me look at how I practice differently and how I analyse a piece’, and for another, ‘increased my motivation to actually understand what I am playing rather than just playing it’. Pianists acknowledged that this led to a more analytical approach to problem-solving, more focused work (starting at places other than the beginning, working on smaller chunks, marking in fingering, observing performance directions) and using ‘a variety of ways now i.e. start from end, only play main notes to gain a sense of direction … feeling I can be more creative in interpreting the piece, pedal techniques, ways to tackle, for example, scales or jumps’. Participants noted greater patience, improved listening skills, increased confidence: ‘I have more of a belief that I will get there in time!’ and were enjoying the process and the results more than previously. These processes ‘opened up new possibilities in my perception of how and why I play like I do’, thereby generating greater self-understanding. The weekly notes emailed to participants were a ‘really useful resource’ to be stored and applied to future problems. The benefits of new working methods were also evidenced through comments relating to progression: one participant noted that the class had ‘informed a huge variety of issues in relation to technique – thing I had long forgotten about or perhaps never even have fully realised – mistakes I have been making over the years’; another felt that ‘I feel I am on the way to retrieving lost skills/knowledge,’ and a third player was aiming to take a performance diploma.

These comments suggest that the sessions created better understanding of how to practice, greater awareness and application of a wider range of techniques, greater enjoyment, self-belief and patience, and progression, thereby enabling participants to realise their aims.

***iii) Confidence in performance***

Participants possessed considerable variation of previous performing experience, some having had many more opportunities to play in concerts and experience of performance exams than others. All but two noted increased performance confidence through participation in the session. One pianist felt that ‘I had never performed publically before, and no, they haven’t increased my confidence …it makes me realise I don’t want to perform publicly though so that element doesn’t matter to me’. Another experienced ‘a little bit less’ confidence, but felt that ‘this is a curve and I am changing the way I play (not much actual performance experience yet)’. Participants noted that performance confidence depended on the piece and on practice, but found that techniques discussed in the sessions facilitated performance: ‘concentrating on conveying the enjoyment in and love of a piece shifts the emphasis away from any technical difficulties’.

Pianists also noted a collaborative atmosphere for this development: ‘the group is not competitive (no one is playing the same piece) so no pressure and low embarrassment factor. It is good that even the more accomplished of us feel they can “have another go”.’ And ‘knowing that people who appreciate the problems involved and are aiming for similar goals enjoy your performance is a real tonic … knowing that you can play in front of others and not break down is a real confidence booster’. This led to feeling ‘more confident about how my playing sounds’, an exam performance that was ‘easier than before the course’ and for one player, a vastly improved sense of confidence: ‘I have relaxed into performing in the group and enjoy what I play in the moment far better than when I first started. My first public performance in two years was yesterday and it was my first EVER standing ovation! The relaxation techniques really did work!’

Performance also developed awareness of individuality: ‘it has also made me recognise that everybody will perform the same piece differently and rightly so as we have our own different styles and feelings about the same piece which is good’. This pianist felt that ‘it has given me a sense of ownership when I perform now’, and ‘I do think more about the audience now and ask myself if I am enjoying playing the piece and if not why not’.

Therefore, the sessions helped create understanding not only of coping with the demands of performance but also experience in putting ideas and techniques into practice in the setting of a supportive group with mutual goals, as well as informing wider perspectives on the nature of performance and relationship between piece, player and audience.

***iv) Musical understanding***

Participants were asked whether the sessions had changed their musical understanding. The responses suggest that the sessions informed contextual, structural and interpretive understanding.

Contextual understanding was created through the facilitation of ‘a much more rounded approach to my musical understanding and a greater depth and enthusiasm to learn more about the pieces, the period they were written in, the composer, how ornaments would be played, etc.’ Two other pianists recalled a group discussion on ‘*Sturm und Drang*’ and comparison of different editions.

Structural understanding was informed through analysis, for example, focusing on key relationships, cadence points, and in one example, the idea of conversations within a piece. One player felt that ‘I have learned to approach analysis in a more objective way and the way that I learn phrases and passages of music is more structured and “musical” than before’. Through these processes, participants learnt from each other. One pianist noted that ‘I have learnt to look at the music others were playing and to understand the challenges the score presented without having to learn the piece myself’. Another observed that this ‘changed my musical understanding … I have a better understanding of what questions I should ask myself about a piece, even if I don’t yet know all the answers!’ This also created a more positive approach to learning: ‘I can easily feel overwhelmed/defeated by a piece and this course has helped to break pieces down and make me look at them differently and take a more organised/structured approach to practising’.

These comments suggest that the sessions enhanced participants’ contextual, structural and interpretive understanding and provided pathways to facilitate their development in individual practice.

***v) Self-understanding***

Participants were asked ‘have these sessions changed anything relating to your self-understanding (e.g. attitude to yourself as a learner, or as an observer), and, if so, which areas have developed and how?’ Responses demonstrated reflection on practice and awareness of variance of approaches: ‘As an observer I notice that everyone has his or her own style and approach to playing the piano’. It was also noted that ‘it is easier to spot errors in other people’s playing than in your own and even ways in which their playing can be improved! Applying the same keen ear to my own playing is less easy.’ However, the experience could encourage persistence in learning: ‘I do feel that I am more determined to improve now and less likely to feel intimidated by others playing to a much higher technical standard’. Participants were also aware of the reciprocal nature of the group: ‘it has also been good to encourage other people who play really beautifully but are very critical of themselves’.

Two other pianists provided powerful examples of increased self-understanding. One observed that ‘I am acutely aware how I have been putting myself under pressure to play pieces that are simply beyond my range!’ and was able to reflect on the origins of this habit in childhood, having been ‘pressurised to reach a standard that I was simply not capable of (I was taught by my aunt who wanted me to be better than all her other pupils!). This was an impossibility – the pressure itself made me excessively nervous’. This player ‘benefitted greatly from discussing this in sessions. It’s okay just to be okay!’ The other pianist discovered that ‘I have a completely different attitude to learning music (much less confident and more self-critical than in other disciplines) and that this is something to work on’. These examples demonstrate that the reflection afforded through group participation can be a powerful tool for enhancing understanding and assisting the development of positive approaches to learning.

***vi) Significant developments***

Participants were asked to detail the most significant developments in their learning that they would ascribe to the course. While some noted progression in musical interpretation: ‘I believe my listening skills and appreciation of others’ interpretations has improved to the extent that I take on board other people’s views and try different ways to produce new music’, others highlighted technical aspects: ‘the insight that a lot of regular routine exercises and practice of technique can improve performance – I had previously just stumbled through things, got bored and moved on’. This participant recognised that ‘it required a lot of time in learning and I don’t really have that right now. But this will be stored for when I have’. Another pianist noted becoming ‘more analytical in how I look at and practice a piece. I ask myself more questions, I also feel that I can be creative when I practice’. However, it was also observed that ‘the class has taught me … that I need [a] more structured approach to learning’, which would be gained through some lessons. Another player felt that ‘I have much more belief in my ability to master technical difficulties and my playing has a better structure’. Finally, ‘a shift from thinking about what I’d like to communicate rather than playing what’s on the page with no mistakes’ suggests a significant conceptual change.

Therefore, pianists experienced developments relating to practice, interpretation, technique, self-belief, insight into the relationship between their ability to invest time in learning and the outcome, and changes in ways in which performance was viewed.

***vii) Sessions enjoyed the most and the least; suggestions for future classes***

Participants appreciated the variety of formats, with some highlighting ensemble work: ‘tuning-in to another’s abilities and interpretations whilst playing gave me quite a buzz!’, while others enjoyed discussion and the range of repertoire: ‘the comments from others in the group and advice from you leading to huge improvement in such a short time is really encouraging for us all. It is great to hear such a wide variety too’. Pleasure in the group was expressed by several participants: ‘I have also enjoyed the support and encouragement of other members of the group and the chance to compare ideas and common problems’.

The only negative comments were two relating to the anticipation of playing in front of everyone in the first session, and one suggesting that the sessions could be divided, with a performance part and a second part with a different format, as it was felt that two hours of performances was demanding. This idea will inform future development of the sessions, in which participants suggested they would like to explore chordal progressions, expression, examination repertoire, sight-reading techniques, memorisation, approaches to learning new pieces, composition, relating repertoire to particular historical periods, and more small tasks involving technical work and ornamentation. When asked for suggestions for improvement, participants felt that the sessions were working well, but could include more exercises, duets and short tasks to prepare for the following week, and one participant felt that the class could be extended: ‘I find two hours a bit short .. I had just got into the swing of the session then it was over!’

***viii) Impact on other areas***

Participants were asked whether the sessions had any impact on other areas of their lives. While three pianists noted increased piano practice and therefore less time for other pursuits, another participant realised that ‘I can do other things better … they make me realise I don’t need to be good at everything – piano is one thing I’ll never excel in! but can enjoy for relaxation and discovery and pleasure’. One participant reported feeling ‘much more positive generally. It took a bit of courage to actually sign up for the course. Finding that I could cope and seeing improvement week on week has given me quite a boost’. Enhanced well-being was expressed by another player: ‘coming to the classes at a rather difficult period in my own life has been sustaining, helped me keep a sense of balance’. And another pianist felt that ‘it has greatly affected my approach and attitude to being a piano teacher i.e. increased my confidence and enthusiasm…I now feedback to my pupils skills/knowledge I have gained from the course and feel confident in doing so!’ This participant noted feeling ‘in a rut prior to the course … and now I feel motivated’. The experiences gained through the course also transferred to other musical activities: ‘I have always used the piano as a song-writing instrument … and I’m hoping the confidence gained in performing in the course will help me perform in front of others with my songs’.

Therefore, the group appears to have facilitated increased motivation, wellbeing, self-esteem, evaluation of the place of musical activities in relation to other areas of life and ability, confidence in teaching, and in performing other musical material.

**Discussion**

The findings of Questionnaire 2 again broadly concur with other research on group piano classes discussed during the Introduction, demonstrating personal, social and musical benefits. This study found that among the small sample, aims detailed at the start of the course were generally realised. Participants experienced benefits of group piano classes and applied these, for example, to their teaching, and through using new strategies and techniques in their practice. Additionally, while gaining experience and confidence in performance, participants also developed greater self-belief, for example, articulating understanding of the validity of individual responses to music, as well as positive persistence in learning. Participants also developed contextual, analytic and interpretive understanding as well as greater self-understanding and increased motivation. The course also had an impact on other areas of the participants’ lives, on well-being and creativity, and transferability of concepts enhanced other learning and performing.

**Conclusion**

This study has built on previous research to explore the experiences of a sample of amateur adult pianists taking part in weekly group classes. While it provides data relating to their initial aims and reflection on these at the end of the ten-week course, it also uniquely details the approach taken by the course leader. The findings concerning aims and enjoyment in playing (Questionnaire 1) broadly concur with those of Taylor & Hallam (2008) and Wristen (2006). Repertoire preferences present an area for further study. Analysis of the findings of Questionnaire 2 demonstrates that participants were able to apply the points discussed during the sessions (also detailed in the course notes) which led to developments in a number of areas, and therefore, this learning context and mode of development can be valuable for learners with varied experience at different levels of performance. The lack of detailed empirical work on approaches chosen by course leaders presents a substantial area for further study. While Lee (1981), Burkett (1982), Coats (2006) and Fisher (2010) provide recommendations for group teaching based on their personal experience, there is a need for exploration of the orientation and approach taken by leaders concerning teaching styles, repertoire, use of individual and ensemble work and learning outcomes among varied groups of participants with different aims for learning. Therefore, this study provides a starting-point for future research.

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