



ORCHESTRA

To Piano or Not To Piano

by Wes Myers

String teachers, both in the classroom and in the studio, have used piano. Not all and not always, but with any tool used by an educator it's worth exploring. Personally, I have used the piano in the classroom since I began teaching in the public school. My prior experience with piano was minimal. I learned a great deal of my piano skills "on the job." However, I would encourage any orchestra teacher to consider the positives and negatives of piano use and decide for yourself where it may be appropriate.

Benefits

Playing a string instrument in tune is a lifetime effort. Each day we encourage our students to listen to their sound and make small adjustments to achieve fine intonation. But how will students know when they have achieved good intonation? Using the piano, you can provide a pitch reference for students. This can happen at an individual note level, within the chord, or in time. You can also use a stringed instrument, but I've found the difference in tonal quality makes it easier for students to hear. A violin can blend in with the students rather than standing out. A pitch generator or tuner also works but can lack the ability to change quickly.

Piano may be most useful for our youngest students. It can reinforce the tempo and provide a leader for them to follow. Beginners often need time to develop ensemble skills and it can be frustrating to work through cohesion issues. For them, the piano can provide something to follow. If you are playing with a group, you can also lead with phrasing, dynamics, and articulation. It's much easier to play a loud forte when a piano is providing reinforcement.

One area where piano can be particularly useful is when using method books. Once again, I find myself using method books in a rehearsal setting mostly with my youngest students. Most teacher editions contain a piano part, and it contains additional music to "spice up" the music. In *Essential Elements* there are several early songs that contain a single note or use just

two or three notes. These are very useful in helping students learn and internalize the notes, but the music itself is quite boring. Adding the piano part can make playing these songs more fun. Often these piano parts are quite accessible for the moderately skilled pianist. I've also found some methods where the piano parts increase in difficulty through the book serving to help develop our piano skills as well as the skills of our students.

Drawbacks

While piano can be an excellent tool, it has its drawbacks as well. Older students may not need the pitch reinforcement, and the leadership provided by a piano may be stopping students from taking on leadership roles of their own. After the difficult season of distance learning and the hybrid model, I personally leaned heavily on the piano to help day-to-day in the orchestra classroom. My students were able to prepare quality concerts and play grade-level appropriate repertoire. However, once they went to the later grades where I did not use piano, I found that students would play behind the beat. They were waiting for someone else to initiate the note, following rather than leading. It developed timid musicians who relied on others rather than using the skills they developed.

This over-reliance on piano also stopped

the development of other skills as well. Students working on rhythm reading found themselves following rather than counting. I would assume a skill like counting was taught and learned, but the evidence was faulty. While it sounds like they understand the rhythm, your piano playing might be doing the heavy lifting. If you are playing piano daily, you may also not be developing students who understand conducting and learn to watch. Students can also miss out on other aspects of music reading. They may not actually see the crescendo or articulation marking, instead simply responding to what they hear. You may be developing fantastic listeners with good ears, but not creating whole musicians.

Aside from not developing the whole musician, you may also not be hearing mistakes that need to be addressed. I've often found rhythmic errors I never noticed or inaccuracy in pitch that was hidden behind the piano's sound. The piano, like any tool, should be used with purpose and thought.

Getting Started

Since the use of the piano has its benefits and drawbacks it's best to have it as an option but not as a constant necessity. If your reason for not using the piano is a lack of developed skills, I would suggest a few ways to slowly integrate it into your rehearsals and lessons. First, you can play single

14. LET'S READ "E"

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Let's Read E". It consists of five staves: Violin, Viola, Cello, Bass, and Piano. The Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass parts are marked with "pizz 1" and show a simple rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The Piano part is at the bottom and provides harmonic support with chords: C, Am7, Fm7, G6, and C. The score is in 4/4 time and spans five measures.

From *Essential Elements*, Hal Leonard 2004.

The piano part can "spice up" the early basic music students learn.

The image shows a conductor score for the piece "Dragon Hunter" by Richard Meyer. The score is in 4/4 time, marked "Allegro" with a tempo of 112. It features five parts: Violins I and II, Viola (Violin III), Cello, String Bass, and Piano Accompaniment. The music is in G major and consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The second measure has a second ending bracket. The third measure has a third ending bracket. The fourth measure is marked with a first ending bracket and a repeat sign. The piano accompaniment part is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).

From *Dragon Hunter* by Richard Meyer Highland/Etling Publishing 2003.
When playing from open score, consider playing just the 1st violin and bass parts.

lines in the music. Just providing reinforcement to the basses may prove beneficial or supporting a smaller section while leaving the rest to their own playing. I spend most of my piano playing reading open score and playing just the 1st violin and bass parts. This is a much more attainable skill than

expecting a full piano reduction without missing any notes. Reading an open score does take practice, but it provides full context of the individual parts making it a great way to continue rehearsing without losing important information. If the provided piano music is a reduction of the orchestra

parts you can also omit the inner notes to make it easier to play. If you are handy with music writing software, you can also write out your own piano part that meets your personal level of skill.

Conclusion

Whether you use piano consistently in an orchestra setting, never use piano, or find yourself somewhere in between, I encourage you to thoughtfully consider its use. There are many great ways to use piano that can benefit our students. There are also drawbacks that need to be considered. As I found out for myself, you can be doing more harm than good with your piano playing. I encourage you to consider all of this and find an approach that is right for you and your students.

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