

A References Systematization Study in the Methodology of Group Piano Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The references for interpretation at the beginning of musical learning constitute the core of group piano teaching. Its stratification in technical, theoretical and tonal references enables an early, organized and effective approach to learning in which interpretation constitutes an agglutinating element.

The systematization of positions at the piano, resulting from the organization of technical references, is central to this article since these are essential to the viability of the execution. The remaining references, theoretical and tonal, which are transversal, complete the theoretical frame discussed here.

The proposed methodology, aimed at the 1st and 2nd grades of group piano teaching, is not intended to be unique but one of the methodological possibilities in an increasingly emerging area in Portugal, in which interpretation is the final goal.

Keywords: *Interpretation; technical references; theoretical references; tonal references; group piano teaching*

1 | INTRODUCTION

The origin of group piano teaching dates back to almost two centuries ago. Nevertheless, this typology

of piano teaching is still a reality rarely implemented and studied in Portugal. As a result, studies on this kind of teaching (Braga, 2011; Rocha, 2012) have begun to emerge only recently. The tradition of individual teaching, combined with unfamiliarity with the new conceptions of teaching piano in group, may generate suspicions about the effectiveness of this modality of teaching, particularly with regard to musical interpretation as an act of artistic creation.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the diffusion and understanding of a piano group teaching methodology designed for the 1st and 2nd grades that has been developed since 1995 in a music school in Portugal. This study does not intend to be exhaustive in the description of this methodology but rather contribute to the clarification of some of the basic procedures that govern the development of skills for interpretation in the group piano class.

The systematization proposal of a set of references for the interpretation aims to provide students with technical and analytical skills in musical interpretation. The understanding of the context underlying technical and artistic work should support performance since the beginning of learning. This understanding aims to develop skills for autonomy in musical interpretation as it prevents uniformity.

This research was based on the participant observation

and reflective analysis of the author, supported by a theoretical frame of recognized educators and researchers in the field. The study was developed at Centro de Cultura Musical (CCM), a music school with pedagogical autonomy, situated between the cities of Santo Tirso and Vila Nova de Famalicão in northern Portugal where the methodology of group piano teaching is a reality since 1995. The participants were 61 students of 1st and 2nd grades whose piano lessons were taught exclusively in group, in a piano teaching lab environment in classes varying between 5 to 10 students.

In line with Sandor's (1995) conception that argues that "technique precedes interpretation, therefore it should be discussed first", this article emphasizes the technical references, constituted by the systematization of movements that allow the expression of musical ideas. The concepts relating to these references for the interpretation were the object of an earlier study carried out in 2000 (Reis & Rocha, 2000). From its development emerged a nomenclature that has been progressively enriched as a result of the methodology evolution.

2 | REFERENCES FOR INTERPRETATION

Ultimately, musical interpretation implies the organization of sound in its four dimensions - height, duration, intensity and timbre — that result from studied and structured movements, which in turn have correspondence with the emotions. "One must simply organize the innumerable movements of the human body into a few clearly defined fundamental motion patterns, which form the essence of technique, and identify this with the visual patterns of the music itself" (Sandor, 1995, p. 4).

Hence it is possible to verify the importance of an understanding of musical symbols since the beginning of piano learning, as it reflects the ultimate intention of the composer, which is to spread his art. On piano teaching, particularly in the practice of reading and in the interpretation, this dimension cannot be forgotten. "For students to respond to what they play with feeling and understanding, teachers must help them make connections between symbols and interpretation" (Coats, 2006, p. 29).

A comprehensive and conceptual approach adopted in the process of group piano teaching aspires to understand concepts and principles that encourage the analysis of musical text that aims at interpretation, as opposed to instruction focused on performance regardless of the musical context (Coats, 2006; Fisher, 2010; Uszler, Gordon & Smith, 2000). This

kind of approach lies at the heart of group piano teaching methodologies. In this field, the concept of piano technique is understood as a chain of actions and intentions that emphasize the structuration of the gesture. This concept has its genesis in the identification of musical elements and, simultaneously, the intention of the organization of sound towards an artistic result. In other words, an idea with emotional value (Descaves, 1990; Neuhaus, 1993).

It is therefore proposed that articulation, dynamic and agogic signs, and even the concept of phrasing are treated as references to be taken into regard, both in sight-reading as in interpretation. Its relevance is crucial to understand the character of the work and to identify the elements that constitute it. "The child should be made, at the earliest possible stage, to play a sad melody sadly, a gay melody gaily, a solemn melody solemnly, etc. and should make his musical and artistic intention completely clear" (Neuhaus, 1993, p. 10).

The systematization of identifiable patterns in the score, which correspond to movement patterns in the execution, becomes a key element in the development of the piano group lesson. On the one hand it facilitates teacher-student communication in the classroom by introducing a language that intends to clarify technical concepts in the double sense of the analysis and the performance; on the other hand it facilitates the organization and evaluation of the technical progression of students by providing them with tools to analyse and find their own solutions for new situations.

From the methodological point of view, a technical approach based on the systematization of positions on the piano allows one to integrate a set of skills in a learning environment that leads to musical understanding, therefore to interpretation. This approach is not intended only as a technical skill of isolated and coordinated movements unrelated from a musical context. Its goal is not muscle development and performance ability to play a more or less difficult repertoire, but a technical development closely related to musical development.

"Piano technique is more than the physical ability to render the printed page of music accurately; it is the vehicle for interpretation, the key to music expression. Movement and meaning are so closely related to each other that the specific character of the gesture is itself part of the message conveyed" (Fink, 1999, p. 11).

In this sense, a structured system of references was

developed and organized in technical, theoretical and tonal references (Table 1) that intend to be the basis of the method of group piano teaching for the interpretation.

TABLE 1 | References for interpretation.

		REFERENCES
TECHNICAL	Simple positions	Melodic intervals Harmonic intervals Parallel movement Extensions
	Central positions	Contrary motion
	Accompaniment position	Primary chords Inversions
	Composite positions	Scale
	Chord Positions	Secondary chords Figured bass Displacement on the keyboard
	Topography	Tonality Keyboard
	Articulation	Legatto Staccato
THEORETICAL	Height	Staves Clefs Notes Accidentals Tessitura
	Duration	Rhythmic figures Time signature
	Intensity	Dynamics Accents
TONAL	Tonality	Horizontal structure • Rhythm • Melody • Melodic intervals • Scale Vertical structure • Harmony • Harmonic intervals • Chords • Figured bass Major and minor modes
	Musical syntax	Theme Phrase Motive Quadrature Agogic • Rallentando • Ritenuto • Fermata • Cadence rest

3 | THECNICAL REFERENCES

3.1 SIMPLE POSITIONS

The concept used here as simple position, was introduced by Robert Pace in the 1960s in his method of multiple keys. A simple position is the placement of the five fingers on the keyboard in order to enable a stable execution of a horizontal reference (Figure 1) or vertical reference (Figure 2) — melody or harmony.

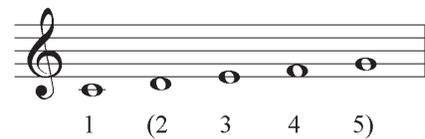


FIGURE 1 | C Position.

As it develops in both hands with the same notes, this position emphasizes parallel motion. The use of this position allows, from very early on, the performance of melodies with accompaniment within the fifth interval.

The first approach to harmony is possible by using harmonic intervals or triads in the root position, without resorting to any displacement of the hand and, simultaneously, introducing reading of harmonic patterns easily recognizable in the score.

The student, freed of the need to look for notes on the keyboard and on the staff, can focus on the execution of melodic and harmonic patterns giving priority to the balance between left and right hands — melody and accompaniment.

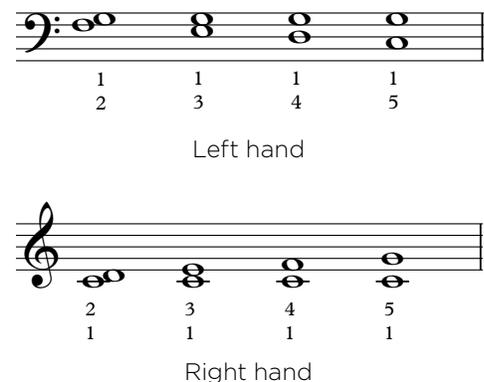


FIGURE 2 | Harmonic intervals in simple position.

With the use of simple positions, the transposition is done without difficulty, becoming a reality since the beginning of the learning process. To do this, the student just needs to change the position: for example, playing in G position a melody that was learned in C position.

The systematization of simple positions also enables the practice of improvisation within a clearly defined tonal context. The essential elements that characterize and define the tonality — tonic, subdominant and dominant — are present in this position. The use of simple positions allows the execution of melodies with accompaniment of

children's songs or elementary songs, provided they do not exceed the fifth. However, when the scope of the melodies exceeds this range, which is not uncommon, it is necessary to use extensions.

Extensions result from the displacement of one or more fingers to neighboring notes of the initial simple position (Figure 3). These notes, which can gradually extend to the octave, are called superior or inferior extensions depending on the displacement being developed for higher or lower registers. Initially the sixth extension is sufficient to the extent that it allows the execution of a large portion of children's melodies, being simultaneously a solution to perform chord inversions.

Soon the difficulty level of the repertoire requires the execution of seventh chords in the root position or an octave in the melody. The student must respond to the increasing degree of difficulty of the repertoire, which requires the recognition and practice of extensions up to the octave.

3.2 CENTRAL POSITION

The combination of two simple positions with a shared note in the center is called central position (Figure 4) and takes the name of the middle note — the middle C position corresponds to the central note being C. This position favours contrary motion through the coordination and integration of the right left hand movements.

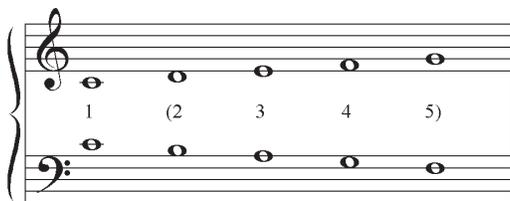


FIGURE 4 | Middle C position.

The central position establishes a direct correspondence with the corporal scheme. In other words, the mental representation of the body that manages movement: "we move our bodies according to the way we think of them, not necessarily according to the way they actually are" (Mark, Gary, & Miles, 2003, p. 11). This position, by providing and encouraging symmetrical, balanced and integrated movement of the two hands, constitutes a development factor for the student. In another perspective, it allows technically performing melodies beyond the scope of the fifth without displacement of the hands or the use of extensions.

3.3 COMPOSITE POSITIONS

Both music reading and piano playing cannot be confined to the use of simple positions with or without extensions. In performance we must consider melodies where the seven notes of a scale are used. Likewise, the displacement along the length of the keyboard must be considered. To this purpose it is necessary to create the notion of composite position. This more complex reference results from the combination of two simple positions connected by a finger crossing (Figure 5), the result of which is the scale position.

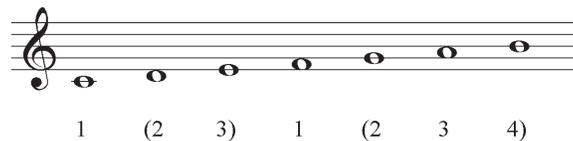


FIGURE 5 | Scale position.

The C scale combines two simple positions, the C position (up to E) with the F position (up to B), articulated with a finger crossing. This position is reproducible in the higher and lower octaves. Most scales fall into this position. The scale fingering organization into two groups — [1 2 3] [1 2 3 4] — is considered by Taylor (1981), as a fundamental guiding for fingering.

For the execution of the scale position and systematization of the reference it is also important to consider the notion of topography of the keyboard for the different major and minor keys. It is understood by topography, the tactile sensation that the student experiences with the sequence of black and white keys and the position that the hand has to take in every moment of the performance. This concept is essential in decision-making regarding fingering (Chronister, 1986; Clark, 1992; Coats, 2006; Lilliestam, 1996; Riemann, 2005).

3.4 ACCOMPANIMENT POSITION

The accompaniment position refers to a primary chord progression — I, IV and V for major keys (Figure 6) and i, iv and V for minor keys — with the use of inversions so that hand displacement beyond the sixth extension is not necessary. The chords used are: tonic in the root position, subdominant in the second inversion and dominant seventh in first inversion with the omission of the fifth. The systematization of this position is accomplished in the most common keys in the repertoire allowing

the identification and immediate execution of these chords, at the same time it significantly contributes to the success of the exercise of sight-reading.

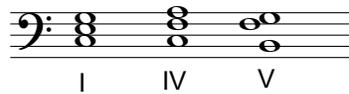


FIGURE 6 | C major chords in the accompaniment position.

The systematic training of primary chord progressions in the accompaniment position in different keys enables the harmonization of the majority of popular tunes, whilst facilitating transposition. This position also enables different types of accompaniment beyond simple chords, among which accompaniment in broken chords and Alberti Bass are emphasized. This constitutes an important tool for building awareness of tonality, essential in building skills for harmonization, improvisation, sight reading and, consequently, for interpretation.

3.5 CHORD POSITIONS

Similarly to what occurs in the simple positions that quickly become insufficient to address the complexity of the natural evolution of the repertoire, also in the position of accompaniment the need for evolution in its complexity arises. The secondary chords — ii, iii, vi and vii⁹ for the major keys and ii, III, VI and vii⁹ for the minor keys — are approached immediately after the primary chords in accompaniment position are mastered. However mainly the inversions of triads and of seventh chords are studied (Figure 7). With this practice students become familiarized with the structure of chords and their positions, as well as their functions and figured bass in a tonal context (Table 2).

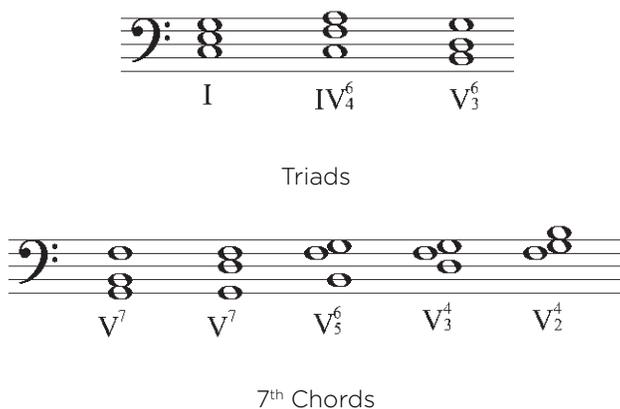


FIGURE 7 | Chords positions.

TABLE 2 | Chord positions references.

	INVERSION	POSITION (CIPHERING)	LOCALIZATION OF THE TONIC	FINGERING
TRIADS	Root Position	(5) (3)	Bass	LH - 531 RH - 135
	1 st Inversion	6 3	Upper note	LH - 531 RH - 125
	2 nd Inversion	6 4	Middle note	LH - 521 RH - 153
7 TH CHORDS	Root Position	7	Bass	LH - 53(2)1 RH - 12(3)5
	1 st Inversion	6 5		LH - 521 RH - 145
	2 nd Inversion	4 3	Upper note of the 2 th	LH - 421 RH - 134
	3 rd Inversion	4 2		LH - 431 RH - 124

LH - left hand

RH - right hand

The chords position is also useful to solve the fingering in the melodies that go beyond the fifth, allowing a stable execution, as it happens in the simple position. All these positions make an easy displacement on the keyboard possible. The student moves from one position to another using a hand position shift, a finger crossing or a finger replacement.

The identification and use of the chords becomes a practical reality and not a theoretical one, integrating analysis of students' routines, even at an early stage of their musical learning. By developing mechanisms for identifying and implementing chord with both hands and in various types of accompaniment, the student promotes balance and independence of the hands with obvious implications for the interpretation. On the other hand, awareness of the functionality of harmony promotes an effective understanding of musical construction, particularly in identifying the moments of tension and relaxation, which enables an interpretation that may or may not be inspired but is certainly informed.

4 | THEORETICAL REFERENCES

The organization of theoretical references for interpretation took into account the structuring of the elements of music theory based on three of the characteristics that define sound — pitch, duration and intensity (timbre was left out of this study). In this way a direct relation was established between musical symbol and sound. This procedure promotes the systematization of the knowledge about musical notation as well as the understanding of the musical code, contributing to the acquisition

of skills in the field of analysis. With systematic practice of analysis from the first lesson, students acquire skills that allow them to clarify the musical text by identifying and decoding its elements. This procedure provides an understanding and awareness of the work that results in musical literacy and ultimately in interpretation.

5 | TONAL REFERENCES

The notion of tonality is an essential reference for interpretation as it is the only system considered universal in western culture. The methodization of this reference is materialized with a systematic practice for the awareness of tonal centers. These are articulated in: (1) vertical structures, with emphasis on chord progressions and cadences where the notion of the relationship between tonic, dominant and subdominant is structured; (2) horizontal structures, such as scale, with emphasis on the concept of tonic and leading-tone, as well as the relationship between major and minor.

The understanding of musical syntax cannot be neglected in the teaching process. This is true not only for the interpretation but also in the process of speeding up reading skills. The identification of musical structuring elements as themes, phrases, motives, the notion of quadrature and others in formal context, allows the student to identify meaningful sets of notes in the musical context as well as predict the sound result implicit in the score, essential conditions for interpretation.

6 | METHOD

6.1 PARTICIPANTS

The sample for this study was drawn from piano students of 1st and 2nd grades at CCM with ages between 10 and 12 years old, that consisted of 61 students distributed over 5 classes of the 1st grade (33 students) and 4 classes of the 2nd grade (28 students), of the municipalities of Vila Nova de Famalicão and Santo Tirso.

6.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted at CCM between September 2011 and February 2012.

The structured activities taken into account to obtain data regarding musical understanding, autonomy in interpretation and technical development in the approach of the repertoire, that resulted from the systematization of references presented here

(technical, theoretical and tonal), involved four different situations: (1) summative assessment; (2) self-assessment of the development of studied repertoire; (3) Class audition with mandatory repertoire; (4) finger technique assessment.

6.3 ACTIVITY 1

The summative assessment data consisted in the results of three public evaluation procedures conducted by a panel appointed by the direction of CCM, consisting of at least three teachers. These auditions were held in November, December and January.

6.4 ACTIVITY 2

Data regarding self-assessment of the studied repertoire emerged from clarification and quantification of musical development, systematized in a self-assessment checklist (Table 3). In this checklist three stages of development were considered. In its turn, the stages were subdivided into three levels. These levels intended to establish a correspondence with the necessary steps throughout the study of a music piece: (1) reading stage — levels 1, 2 and 3 — aims at the basic knowledge of the piece; (2) improvement stage — levels 4, 5 and 6 — regards the understanding of musical syntax; (3) concert stage — levels 7, 8 and 9 — corresponds to the acceptable development level to present the piece in public.

TABLE 3 | Self-assessment checklist.

STAGE	DEVELOPMENT LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
Reading	1	I can play with separated hands
	2	I can play hands together
	3	I can play without stopping
Improvement	4	I can play with dynamics
	5	I respect phrasing
	6	I can play by heart
Concert	7	I can play with balanced hands
	8	I can play with the correct tempo
	9	I can communicate the character of the piece

The data was gathered in February and concerned the entire repertoire studied in the period in which the study was carried out (five months). The primary goal was to assess the capability of construction and maintenance of an assorted repertoire.

6.5 ACTIVITY 3

The imposed repertoire for the audition in the class

was constituted by three pieces with different levels of difficulty: one was easy, one other had a medium difficulty level and the third was difficult. The three pieces were presented in the class to the students that proceeded with sight-reading. The audition took place in the next class, three days later.

6.6 ACTIVITY 4

The dexterity assessment in finger technique was based on scales speed achieved by students. The scales were executed with metronome, in quavers (two in a beat) and in parallel motion according to table 4.

TABLE 4 | Criteria for scale execution.

GRADE	MAJOR SCALES	MINOR SCALES	NUMBER OF OCTAVES
1 st	C and G	-	One
2 nd	C, G and D	A and D	Two

7 | RESULTS

7.1 ACTIVITY 1 – SUMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The results of public auditions evaluated by a jury are presented by grade and by class.

It was established a success rate, expressed in percentage, calculated from the results of simple arithmetic average of the awarded scores (Table 5). The results showed high success rates.

TABLE 5 | Success rate per class.

GRADE	CLASS	SUCCESS RATE
1 st	A	85,9%
	B	90,5%
	C	93,3%
	D	100,0%
	E	74,3%
2 nd	A	80,7%
	B	70,7%
	C	80,0%
	D	65,6%

7.2 ACTIVITY 2 – REPERTOIRE SELF-ASSESSMENT

In the elapsed time in which the study took place, the activities of repertoire self-assessment allowed obtaining indicators of the number of learned pieces, as well as the success rate in performing this repertoire. For the 1st grade there was an

average of 35 learned pieces per student. For the 2nd grade, the average was 11 pieces per student. This difference was due to the larger size and complexity of the repertoire approached in the 2nd grade, which required more time to study.

The results found regarding the development of the repertoire were expressed numerically according to table 3 – self-assessment checklist. The value with the highest number of occurrences (mode) was 9 (Concert stage – I can communicate the character of the piece). The outcome for this level of achievement resulted in an expressive percentage of 48% for the 1st grade and 25% for the 2nd grade. Has also been established a success rate per class (Table 6).

TABLE 6 | Success rate per class in repertoire self-evaluation.

GRADE	CLASS	SUCCESS RATE
1 st	A	81%
	B	72%
	C	89%
	D	86%
	E	74%
2 nd	A	54%
	B	53%
	C	63%
	D	31%

7.3 ACTIVITY 3 – CLASS AUDITION WITH MANDATORY REPERTOIRE

In this activity the results suggested a clear trend towards a more developed stage of interpretation. Most of the pieces presented were classified at concert level (Table 7), with only one piece of the 1st grade and three of the 2nd grade that were not presented.

TABLE 7 | Percentage value of the development level achieved in the mandatory repertoire.

GRADE	CLASS	PIECES NOT PRESENTED	READING STAGE	IMPROVEMENT STAGE	CONCERT STAGE
1 st	A	0%	4%	22%	74%
	B	0%	5%	19%	76%
	C	7%	20%	33%	40%
	D	0%	13%	7%	80%
	E	0%	67%	19%	14%
2 nd	A	0%	13%	10%	77%
	B	0%	20%	7%	73%
	C	0%	19%	24%	57%
	D	17%	56%	0%	28%

7.4 ACTIVITY 4 – DEXTERITY IN FINGER TECHNIQUE

Tempo in scales performance ranged from crochet = 50, referring to students who, despite knowing the topography of tonalities, revealed more difficulties in motor coordination, to crochet = 200, concerning students with motor skills above average (Table 8).

TABLE 8 | Average tempo in scales performance per class.

GRADE	CLASS	MAXIMUM TEMPO	MINIMUM TEMPO	AVERAGE TEMPO
1 st	A	160	80	119
	B	190	110	156
	C	170	100	130
	D	200	140	161
	E	160	80	114
2 nd	A	180	110	160
	B	160	50	126
	C	200	100	157
	D	160	50	102

From data analysis it is possible to extrapolate that in the conditions required, the average speed goal for scale playing in 1st and 2nd grades is situated between crochet = 120 and crochet = 150.

8 | CONCLUSION

Providing students with a system based on the identification of keyboard topography, allows the stable execution of harmonic and melodic patterns. To a large extent it may promote self-regulation in motor coordination development, as well as increased technique resources. On the other hand, the choice of fingerings becomes a decision-making process that suggests the promotion of autonomy in interpretation, sight-reading, transposition, harmonization and improvisation.

The combination and systematization of technical, theoretical and tonal references discussed in this paper seemed to be effective in building and developing skills for interpretation in group piano lessons. This systematization also suggests being of great importance in developing awareness of the relationship between musical symbols, kinesthetic response and aesthetic response. Its systematic approach since the beginning of the instruction is considered essential, as these are relationships that transform a score into an object of artistic enjoyment.

“Every language has a vocabulary and grammar of

its own which one must comprehend in order to be articulated and expressive” (Goodkind, 2004, p. 158). Perhaps, this is the essence of interpretation: mastery of a set of references that allow transforming an abstract code into something that arouses emotions.

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BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Eduardo Rocha obtained a Masters degree in Music Teaching at the Portuguese Catholic University. Since 1983, he develops his teaching activity at Centro de Cultura Musical (Portugal) in several areas, among which group piano teaching, in which he was a pioneer in his country. He began research in this area in 1995 and since then investigates, implements and develops methodology in this piano teaching modality.