

“I’ve heard of that before”

Linking Theory with Practical Studies

By Frank Horvat

When explaining a new concept to a student, there is nothing more gratifying than hearing them say, “I’ve heard of that before”. As a teacher, how can you not love to hear a student say that – it saves precious lesson time that can be spent on honing other important musical skills. I especially enjoy hearing it from a theory student. A student who had been previously exposed to a theoretical concept while studying in a practical setting tends to grasp the concept more easily when it is later represented in a more formal study of theory.

As a teacher of both piano and theory, I’m an avid proponent of combining the two fields of study. In this first in a series of three articles, I will present some quick and easy ideas that you can incorporate into your practical lessons to enrich a beginner student’s theoretical knowledge.

Popular Misconceptions

Teachers often tell me, “Oh, I don’t teach theory.” I disagree. You do teach theory! Any teacher of an instrument should use the score as a means to enrich a student’s theoretical understanding. I’m often shocked to hear how many of my colleagues don’t even own a copy of the RCM Examinations *Theory Syllabus*. Even if you never prepare a student for a theory exam, I consider the *Theory Syllabus* to be an invaluable resource, outlining what should be in every student’s standard musical vocabulary.

Any practical teacher would like to see their students excel in their future musical endeavors. By giving a student a strong foundation in theoretical principles, you’ll be ensuring better exam results in the future.

I have had the challenging task of working with History I students who had no idea what Sonata Form was, yet were studying at a Grade 9 or 10 practical level. I have also taught students in Advanced Rudiments who couldn’t tell whether a piece was in the key of C major or A minor, yet they were proficiently performing Fur Elise at a Grade 7 level. Students will not grasp the basics of music theory that we, as teachers may take for granted, unless we make them aware of it.

Think of how often students (and yes, even parents and their teachers) get stressed about an upcoming theory exam because they have to digest so much new, and foreign material in such a short time. But if a student in this rushed predicament exclaims, “I’ve heard of that before!” while preparing for their theory examination, then their studies become more manageable and fun. Theory

studies and examinations need not be painted with the brush of some mundane task that must be completed simply to obtain a pre- or co-requisite. Theory is music!

Musical Treasure Hunt

A music score is a treasure trove of musical elements that can engage a student to become more in tune with the piece they are learning. Using pieces like Nancy Telfer's "Skeleton Dance" from the RCM Examinations Grade 2 *Piano Repertoire* book, you can find an extensive amount of theoretical elements to introduce to your students. If I'm attempting to inspire a student to perform a piece that is a little out of their comfort zone, often I'll create a musical treasure hunt of the score to familiarize them with it.

I start by making a hand copy of the piece. I cut out each of the 5 systems. On the reverse side of each of the 5 slips of paper I'll ask 3 or 4 questions about the musical content that the student will answer for homework. For example, I might ask what the dot refers to below the first note. Or what does the time signature tell us about the piece? I'll give one of these 5 slips of paper every week, preferably out of chronological order. Questions can be generated from comparing different lines. You could ask how bars 1 & 2 are related to bars 5 & 6? When the student has successfully answered all questions over the course of the 5 weeks, have the student organize the piece in chronological order and search for the matching piece in their *Repertoire* book. After identifying the piece and composer, congratulate the student with a little prize and perform it for them.

Using this fun and interactive theory activity, a Grade 2 student can become very astute in many areas of theory, including:

- Transposition at the octave (formally studied in Basic Rudiments)
- Articulation and dynamic markings (formally studied in Basic Rudiments)
- Chromatic scales (formally studied in Intermediate Rudiments)

The huge plus in taking this approach is that you're enticing the student to get excited to learn the piece while educating them on everyday musical terminology that will be reinforced in future theory examinations.

Manuscript Paper Is Your Friend

One of the features that I truly appreciate in the new edition of the *Preparatory Piano Repertoire* book is the inclusion of some representative scales at the top of pieces such as "Aeolian Lullaby" by Joan Hansen or "Starfish at Night" by Anne Crosby. Other than making a connection between the piece and the scale that

inspired it, it also opens up an immense amount of creative opportunities and exercises for the student to further explore scales.

For example in Joan Hansen's piece "Aeolian Lullaby", a student could easily learn the whole tone / semitone relationship that makes up the Aeolian Mode by rewriting it on manuscript paper and labeling WT or ST between each pair of notes. Another activity would be to create a new melody for "Aeolian Lullaby" based on the original scale.

Without even knowing it, a student would be sensitive to the balance composers create between chord and non-chord notes, a very good warm-up for Introductory Harmony!

Similarly in "Starfish at Night", what about having your student compose or improvise their own cascading water ripples at bars 13 and 14, purely based on the given whole tone scale?

As you can see, there is so much theory that can be extracted from pieces for beginners. But the connection between theory and practical occurs at more than the elementary level. In future articles in this series, I will explore how intermediate and advanced repertoire is rich with enlightening theoretical material just waiting to be discovered by your students.

*Originally published in the May/June 2009 edition of Music Matters
(RCM Examinations)*

www.frankhorvat.com