Part 3: "I've heard of that before"

Linking Theory with Practical Studies

By Frank Horvat

I recently completed work with one of my long-time students who just graduated with her ARCT in Piano Performance. The amount of years that we worked together made all of her accomplishments that much more gratifying. When I started teaching this student years ago, I made a conscientious effort to put an emphasis on theoretical studies along with piano. I anticipated that her talent would carry her through many grades quickly, so I thought it was absolutely essential to keep on top of her theory studies so she wouldn't fall behind later. In her final year of study, I was not only proud of her accomplishments at the piano, but also her excellent result of first class honours for Advanced Harmony this past May. I remember my own experience of working towards that final Harmony exam in my teenage years - boy was it tough! This along with the plethora of other theory exams that seem to pile up for the advanced student all at once is one of the inspirations of this series of articles - starting theory studies as early as possible within the practical lesson is absolutely essential in managing workload later. So in this third and final article, I want to discuss how the practical teacher can continue to assist advanced students (grade 7 to 10) to discover pertinent theoretical elements within their repertoire.

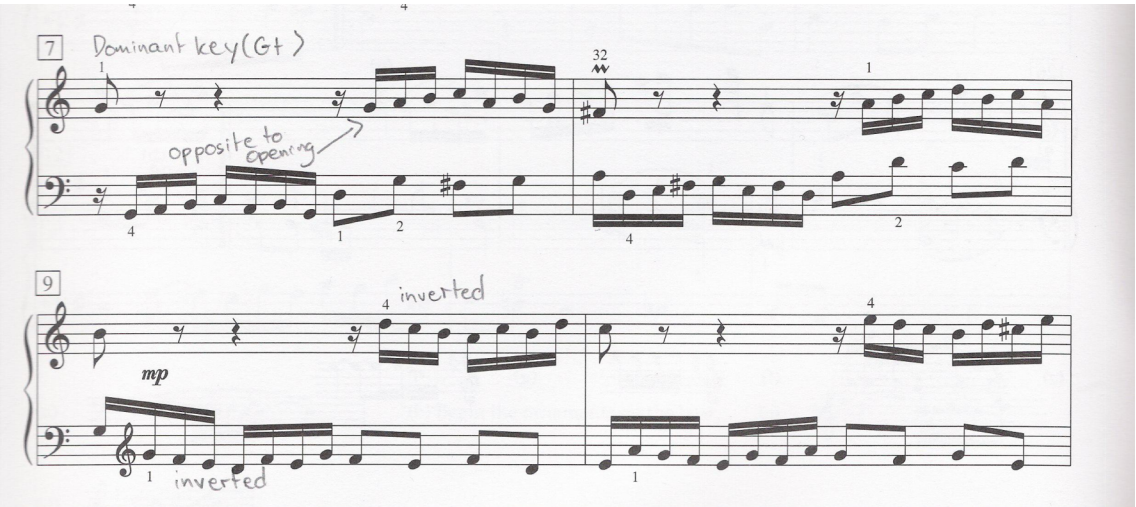
"Inventing" Counterpoint:

The study of counterpoint can seem quite complex and abstract to many. Many of you might introduce a Fugue at the Grade 9 or 10 levels using one of the many examples available from the Well Tempered Clavier and then face the daunting task of getting your student through the many technical demands of one of these works. Getting your student acquainted with the many theoretical subtleties of understanding a fugue, including the structure and relationship between the independent voices, might be far down your priority list because of time constraints. After all, there is only so much time to learn a piece and that discussion about counterpoint can become time consuming if you're having to introduce the most basic of contrapuntal components at that stage. That's why I always start that discussion earlier when I introduce Two-part Inventions at the Grade 7 or 8 levels.

I learned about how important using Bach's Two-part Inventions can be to understanding his contrapuntal and fugal language in my third year Counterpoint class with Walter Buczynski at the University of Toronto back in my student days. For a yearlong course, he spent the entire first semester having us analyze nothing but Two-part Inventions. At first, this teaching

technique confused me since the "grand daddy" of all counterpoint studies tends to be based around Bach's Fugues. But it quickly made sense to me in the second semester when we finally got to those fugues yet we continued to refer back to the Inventions. Just as many musicians claim that you really don't know Chopin's works without studying his Etudes, one can make the same type of linkage from the Invention to the Fugue. So I always make it a point of including the study of at least one Invention at the Grade 7 or 8 level, especially if I know that student has the will and talent to move on to Grade 9 or higher and tackle a Fugue.

A very popular work in the RCME Grade 7 Piano Repertoire Album is Bach's *Invention No. 1 in C major*. The first thing I often get my students to identify is the location of all the entries of the main subject. Using coloured pencils to bracket their start is always useful so it's easy to spot when performing the piece. I particularly like pointing out how the subject evolves throughout a piece. This can take place in the form of modulation or the subject inverting, a frequent occurrence throughout this piece. We can also observe the interaction between the two voices, specifically how the soprano first enters, then the bass. That of course is done in reverse to start the middle section at bar 7, also going to the dominant key area. The sequential Episodes are another important facet of an Invention that is so valuable to acknowledge, especially with elongated subjects (bar 3) and a change in tone colour to minor (bar 11 and 12). Sensitivity to chord vs. non-chord notes can also be pointed out by observing the balance of both types of sonorities. These and many other basic elements can easily be pointed out to a student thus increasing their understanding of the composition.



Excerpt from Bach's *Invention No. 1 in C major*, Grade 7 Piano Repertoire Album, demonstrating manipulation of order of entries and inversion.

I find that when I'm preparing students for their Counterpoint exam, one of the hardest aspects for them to appreciate is how the individual line moves

and progresses, as it's own entity throughout the polyphonic texture. Getting your students to appreciate the horizontal complexities of an Invention and Fugue can be achieved by using technology. Many students these days are familiar with a variety of pieces of music sequencing software. Programs like *Garage Band* allow a student to take an Invention or Fugue and assign different instruments to the individual voices. This allows them to hear each of the voices as it's own unique part as their computer plays it back to them.

This activity along with other points of contrapuntal analysis will allow your student to become familiar with the important points of multi-voiced textures. These observations within two-part inventions will lay excellent foundation for the future practical study of fugues and also the more formal study of Counterpoint.

Discovering important historical works not for your instrument:

In the second article of this series, I discussed in detail how important it is to introduce your intermediate student to the great composers of music history and periods in which they lived. For the grade 7 and 8 practical student, I often do my best to keep this activity going, especially for students who I know might go on to Grade 9 and 10 studies. By the time my piano students reach grade 7 or 8, I expect them to possess enough of a basic knowledge to hear and describe what makes the Baroque different than the Classical or Romantic. This allows me to help them explore the great works that they will study in more formal history studies later - especially those works that do not involve or significantly include the piano.

Here are some non-piano works that I like introducing my students to:

- **Beethoven's Fifth Symphony** - Having my students experience all four of the movements is so important. I find the diverse expressive "Beethovian" moments are an excellent influence in the learning of his piano sonatas. A further appreciation of form is another important linkage. Just imagine the great service you'll be giving that Grade 7 or 8 students since that will be one the works they will study later at the History I level.

- **Mozart's Marriage of Figaro** - Another masterpiece that my Grade 7 and 8 students can appreciate if they're studying a sonata by Mozart. The shaping of phrases, the cantabile nature of the melody, and the specific definition of melody vs. accompaniment is so important in performing Mozart effectively on many instruments. Appreciating the glorious writing of the vocal parts from this great opera can have an

obvious stylistic influence on an instrumentalist. Students will find the madcap nature of the plot fun and entertaining. Lending the DVD of this work also gives them an early sneak peek at a work they will have to study at the History II level.

If you are a teacher of an instrument other than the piano, I might suggest what I just suggested for piano students, which is to introduce your students to great masterpieces opposite of your own instrument. For example, voice students might benefit from an exploration of the life and piano works of Chopin. Perhaps violin students would benefit from an exploration of the life and lieder of Schubert.

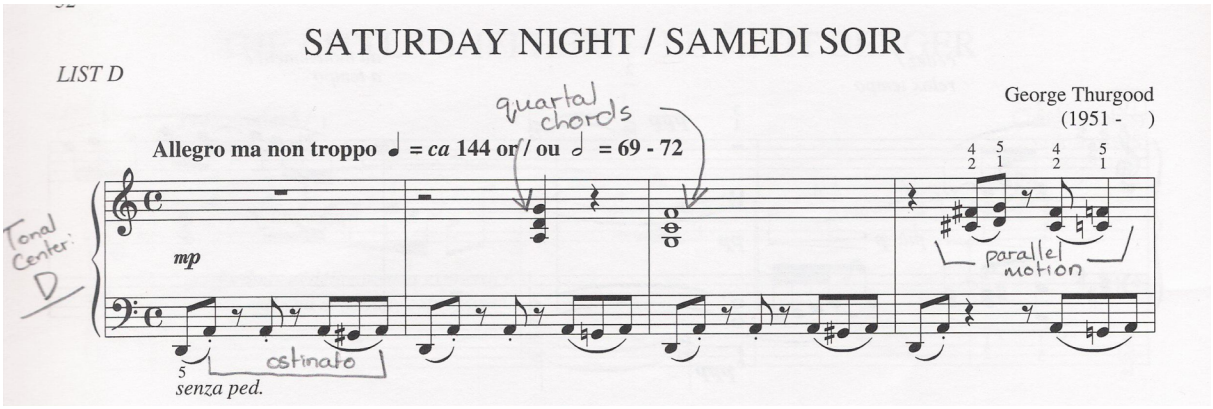
Analyzing Characteristics of 20th Century Composition:

When students begin more advanced study of Analysis, they often face a challenge of having to cover the many subtle nuances related to the traditional structures like the fugue or sonata, never mind all that harmonic analysis as well. The RCME Theory Syllabus also outlines a number of concepts that must be included in the student's knowledge base related to compositions of the 20th and 21st century. This extensive list can be hard to digest in a rush-rush situation in preparing for a theory exam. That's why I always make it a point of using a lot of the terminology when teaching more modern works in earlier practical grades. If I'm teaching my piano student a piece that is based around a whole-tone, blues scale, or one of the modes, I make sure that they're aware of it. If I'm teaching my piano student a piece that employs cluster or polychords, I make sure that they're aware of it. If I'm teaching a piece that employs a drone, parallel movement or aleatoric elements, I make sure that they're aware of this terminology.

When teaching Grade 8 piano students, a popular piece for them to study is George Thurgood's *Saturday Night*. The piece is a treasure trove of modern compositional techniques, including a variety of quartal and 7th chords, parallelism, and ostinato. I label these terms in the student's score so when they play it, they will always associate that technique with what they see and play. I also make it a point of talking about a 'tonal center'. Many students think that if there is no key signature attached to a piece, then it's automatically in C major and A minor. But many modern composers don't use key signatures even though a tonal center is clearly evident. Recognition of this detail will allow a student to feel a return of opening themes more easily, or observe a modulation to another tonal center.

For a student at the ARCT level trying to finish those theory co-requisites, not getting bogged down in a study of something completely foreign can

save your student a lot of study time and improve their chances of a successful mark.



Excerpt from Thurgood's *Saturday Night* (work listed in the RCME Piano Syllabus - Grade 8), demonstrating a variety of modern compositional techniques

I would like to conclude this series of articles encouraging all practical teachers to incorporate as much theoretical components into your teaching as possible. Not all the ideas I've presented might be easily incorporated into your teaching style or routine. But I encourage you to attempt some, or be creative in thinking of your own ways you can bring theoretical understanding to the forefront. It doesn't have to be too laborious for your student or too time-consuming in their lesson - any little bit helps. You'll know your efforts were worth it if you ever hear a student utter in the future that gratifying phrase, "I've heard of that before".