

Improvising from Lead Charts: Attitudes of Australian Piano Teachers

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This study contends that improvisation from a lead chart, defined here as the ability to play piano from only melody and chord symbols, is a particularly important and neglected skill. A questionnaire was used to determine barriers to teaching this skill, and ways to help teachers to teach it more. Terminology—‘improvisation’ versus ‘playing from a lead chart’—was found to be an influencing factor. A majority (85%) of teachers commented favourably on the importance and usefulness of the skill, stating that it had extensive practical applications, helped in understanding other areas of music, provided enjoyment and creativity, and might help students to continue playing after lessons stop. This study found that the main barrier to teaching this skill is not teacher attitudes, but a lack of time in piano lessons, often because of exam preparation. Teachers cited needs for further training and better resources. This study revealed a disconnect between teachers’ priorities in teaching—cultivating a love of music, keeping students playing after lessons stop, and providing a broad music education—compared to the actual time spent in lessons, mainly on technique and traditional repertoire, often in preparation for exams. Problems with parental pressure and exam syllabuses which exclude improvisation are discussed.

Improvisation has always been an integral part of Western music. As Ernest Ferand (1961) writes in his introduction to *Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music*:

there is scarcely a single field in music that has remained unaffected by improvisation, scarcely a single musical technique or form of composition that did not originate in improvisatory practice or was not essentially influenced by it (p. 5).

Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this art seems diminished in keyboard training. Improvisation is rarely given adequate inclusion in music curricula (Azzara, 2002), leading to many students graduating without skills important to their careers as professional musicians (Sarath, 2002). Arguably, the average piano education in Australia now focuses almost exclusively on technical skills and classical repertoire, as required for passing exams. In her article “The Private Studio Music Teacher in Australia,” music educator Doreen Bridges (1993) writes:

there seems to be little questioning of the goals to which so many piano teachers in particular are aiming, namely the production of embryonic concert soloists. The examination system which so many teachers use fosters this goal, provides a means of motivating students to practise and reassures parents that their money is not being wasted. Or is it? (p. 275)

The term ‘improvisation’ can cover a wide variety of intentions and experiences, ranging from making small changes to a notated score, to what has been called “instant composing” (Bailey, 1992, p. ix). McPherson (1995) defines improvising as spontaneously performing creatively formulated material, which can complement existing material, or be freely constructed by the musician. Such general definitions establish a broad context; however, the chordal and accompanying capacities of the piano render it a special case. For the pianist, improvisatory skills are often more functional than creative. A modern-day pianist may play in restaurants and clubs, in bands and jazz groups, in churches or in schools; they might accompany singers or sing a long, or play for musicals. For these fields, where the repertoire is rarely classical, the ability to improvise is essential. Frequently the music is provided in the form of a lead chart (see Figure 1), with melody, chords and words but no written accompaniment, and the pianist is expected to be able to improvise an arrangement in the appropriate style. In many cases this realisation must include the melody. Figure 2 shows how the lead chart in Figure 1 might be realised. This ability also has other uses, allowing quick learning of pieces, arrangement of songs worked out by ear, and elaboration or simplification of sheet music. It also allows the performer creative input into the music being performed.

D D⁷ G Em D/A Bm Em⁷

Oh Dan-ny Boy the pipes, the pipes are cal-ling, From glen to glen and down the moun-tain-side,

Figure 1: Excerpt of a lead chart

D D⁷ G Em D/A Bm Em⁷

Oh Dan ny Boy the pipes, the pipes are cal-ling, From glen to glen and down the moun-tain-side,

Figure 2: Lead chart fully realised

Terminology is important, and can become a problem. The term ‘lead chart’ is not universally known amongst piano teachers, and the skill of playing from one has no common name. The generic term ‘functional piano skills,’ is defined by an American study (McDonald, 1989) as “specific keyboard abilities, such as sight-reading, transposition, harmonization, improvisation, and accompanying, that a pianist must acquire in order to function adequately at the keyboard”. Of these, ‘harmonization’ comes closest to the skill of playing from a lead chart, but often suggests choosing chords, and not necessarily including the melody in the arrangement. ‘Realisation,’ a term usually applied to the elaboration of continuo parts, comes closer, but is not widely used outside the Baroque context. In fact, the term which comes closest to describing the skill is ‘faking’ (Witmer & Kernfeld,

2007), which is obviously problematic. This lack of common terminology might be one of the reasons why this skill is not being commonly taught by piano teachers.

There has been a great deal of research into the general area of improvisation. McPherson, Bailey and Sinclair (1997) suggest that learning to play music should involve visual, aural and creative forms of performance:

These forms of performance are a fundamental means by which musicians learn to coordinate ear, eye, and hand and to perform on their instrument what they see in notation and hear or imagine in their mind. Training programs that do not recognise the importance of aural and creative forms of musical performance may be neglecting an important fact of training that enhances overall musical growth and that provides for more enjoyable and meaningful experiences (p. 126).

A number of recent studies have shown the usefulness and desirability of improvisation and functional piano skills to a pianist (Chin, 2002; Davidson and Smith, 1997; Kasap, 1999; Johnson, 1987; H. E. Jones, 2005). McPherson (1994) cites his own and other research suggesting that learning to improvise, along with playing by ear and other aural and creative experiences, may be an important factor in whether musicians continue to enjoy and participate in music-making after lessons cease. Additionally, research has shown that improvisation helps to develop other areas of music (Azzara, 1993; McPherson, 1995; McPherson, Bailey and Sinclair 1997; Rosevear 1996a). Several studies have demonstrated that improvisation can be effectively taught (Della Pietra & Campbell, 1995; I. H. Jones, 1997, McMillan, 1997), and several have examined and developed resources for the teaching of improvisation, jazz and functional piano skills (Rosfeld, 1989; Witmer, 1988; Zwick, 1987).

Yet there is also much evidence that improvisation and functional piano skills are not being adequately taught to many music students (Chen, 2000; da Costa, 2003; Johnson, 1987; H. E. Jones, 2005; Jung, 2004; Kasap, 1999; Kou 1985, McMillan, 1995). Research has shown that teacher attitudes are mixed: some show a positive view towards improvisation (Chen, 2000; Green, 2002; Jones, 2005; Koutsoupidou, 2005), while others suggest that improvisation is less important (Crum, 1998; Da Costa, 2003), difficult to find time for (Mroz, 1982), or difficult to teach (Bell, 2003).

Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, Doreen Bridges (1984) laments:

It is a sombre thought that hundreds of thousands of people in this country have battled their way through piano and theory exams, and emerge at the end of their school days unable to play fluently (let alone sing) at sight, still dependent on a teacher to tell them if they are playing wrong notes, unable to improvise, to transpose at the keyboard, to play by ear or notate correctly a known tune, or even to remember the four pieces they learnt for the exam last year (p. 56).

Purpose and significance of the study

Research has shown that improvisation is important, useful, and desirable, and mostly not being taught. It appears that many piano teachers around the world are not confident in improvisation themselves, let alone in passing the skill on to their students. There have been relatively few Australian studies of the inclusion of improvisation in the school curriculum, and even fewer of improvisation in the private piano studio. The specific skill of improvising from a lead chart has rarely been studied in any context. The purpose of this research is to examine the current situation in Australia, and to discover how this situation might be remedied. Is it a question of better resources and training, or is it a problem with attitudes towards improvisation? By asking piano teachers themselves, the aim was to find out how to better equip future generations of pianists for a lifelong enjoyment and experience of music.

Research questions

1. What is the level of piano teachers' skills in improvising from lead charts?
2. To what extent do piano teachers currently teach improvising from lead charts?
3. What are piano teachers' attitudes towards improvising from lead charts?
4. What are the barriers to teaching improvising from lead charts?
5. What do piano teachers think would help them to teach improvising from lead charts?

Method

A questionnaire was given to 200 teachers at a Piano Teachers' Festival at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 2007. Questions asked for both numerical and open-ended written responses, providing data for both statistical and content analysis. Problems of terminology were dealt with by including a sample lead chart on the back of the participant information page, and asking teachers to consider how they would interpret it themselves in various ways, ranging from melody in the right hand and triads in the left hand (see Figure 3), melody in the right hand and accompaniment patterns in the left hand (see Figure 4), to melody and accompaniment spread across both hands (as shown earlier in Figure 2), and various styles. (The sample realisations shown here were not included in the questionnaire.) Those who could play the melody and accompaniment across both hands were considered to have the skill of playing from a lead chart.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Oh Danny Boy" in D major. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the melody and a bass clef staff for the accompaniment. The melody is written in a simple, folk-like style. The accompaniment is written as a series of triads in the left hand, corresponding to the chords indicated above the staff: D, D7, G, Em, D/A, Bm, and Em7. The lyrics are written below the melody line.

Figure 3: Lead chart with left hand triads

Figure 4: Lead chart with left hand accompaniment pattern

The numerical data were analysed using mainly descriptive statistics. The written text answers were examined using content analysis (Bryman, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Comments were analysed and categorised under similar themes. Of 184 questionnaires distributed, 120 were returned, one excluded as not a teacher, leaving 119 completed questionnaires, a response rate of 65%.

Results

1. What is the level of piano teachers' skills in improvising from lead charts?

Piano teachers showed a range of skill levels, with 70 teachers (59%) able to play fully from a lead chart. Most of these teachers (84%) worked out how to do this themselves, and 24% were taught by a piano teacher (multiple responses were allowed). One teacher added the comment: "at church I was handed a lead chart one day and I had to work it out. I was a 7th grade piano student and had no idea what to do."

2. To what extent do piano teachers currently teach improvising from lead charts?

Teachers were asked how often various aspects of music were included in their lessons on a scale of one to five, from "Never" to "Every lesson/every student." The subjects most frequently taught were technique, traditional repertoire and sight-reading, with improvisation rating ninth on a list of eleven (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of items included in piano lessons

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Technique	2	5	4.6
Traditional repertoire	2	5	4.1
Sight-reading	2	5	4.0
Music theory/analysis	2	5	3.9
Ear training	1	5	3.5
Popular/jazz repertoire	1	5	3.4
Memorisation	1	5	3.0
Music history	2	5	3.0
Improvisation	1	5	2.4

Playing by ear	1	5	2.3
Transposition	1	5	2.2

1 = Never; 2 = Occasionally; 3 = Sometimes/some students;
4 = Most lessons/Most students; 5 = Every lesson/every student

Improvisation was taught to most or all students by 9% of teachers (see Figure 5).

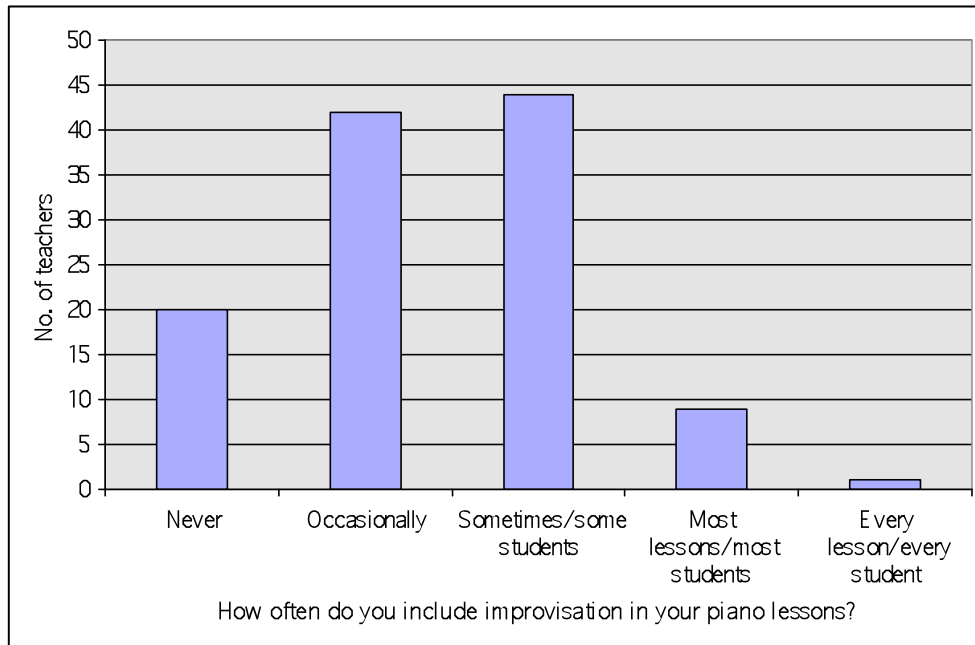


Figure 5: Frequency of teaching improvisation

The teaching of more specific improvisation skills varied more. Teachers were asked to describe the frequency of teaching how to play from chord symbols on a scale of one to five, from “Never” to “Every lesson/every student.” Sixteen teachers (14%) taught this skill to most or all students (see Figure 6).

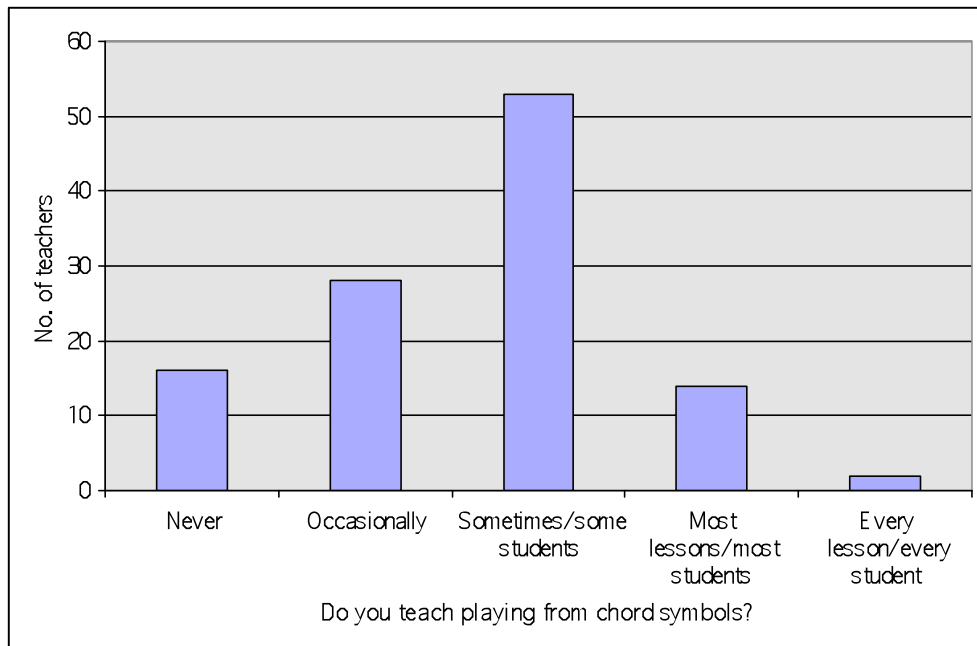


Figure 6: Frequency of teaching playing from chord symbols

When the skill of playing from a lead chart was addressed directly, it was found that 9% taught the skill to all or nearly all students, 70% taught it sometimes, and 21% never taught it (see Figure 7).

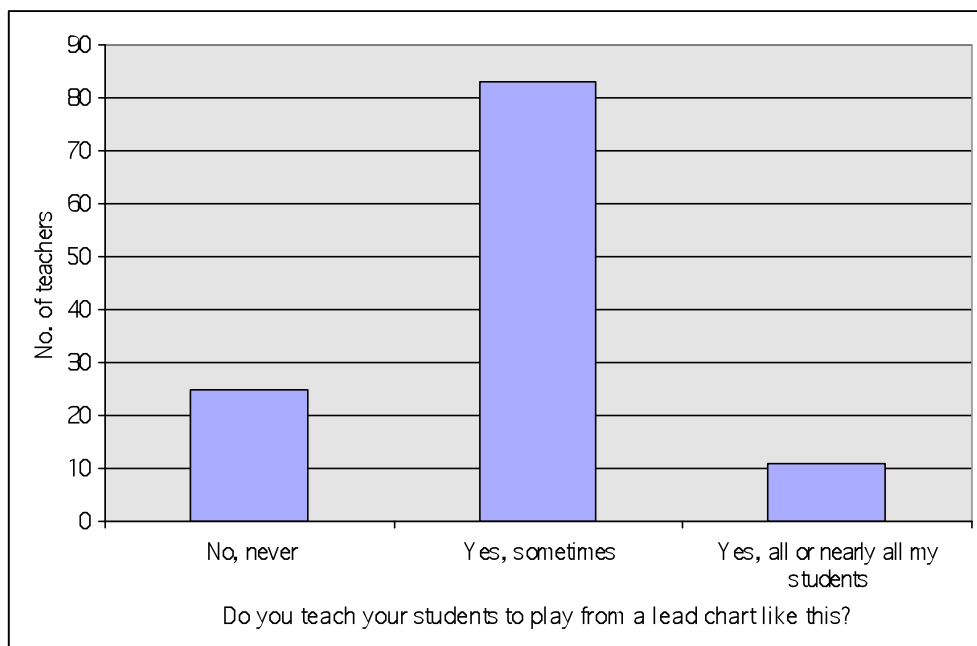


Figure 7: Frequency of teaching playing from lead charts

The 70 teachers who were able to play fully from a lead chart were more likely to teach the skill of playing from a lead chart (see Table 2).

Table 2: Effect of teacher ability on teaching the skill of playing from lead charts

Do you teach the skill of playing from lead charts?	No. of teachers	
	Able to play from lead charts	Not able to play from lead charts
No, never	11	13
Yes, sometimes	49	34
Yes, all or nearly all my students	10	1

3. What are piano teachers' attitudes towards improvising from lead charts?

The survey asked separate questions about the importance of *having* the skill of playing from a lead chart as against the importance of *teaching* the skill. Teachers agreed that it was an important skill to have, with 75% agreeing that “all pianists should be able to play from a lead chart;” 90% agreeing that “playing from a lead chart is a useful skill in many musical fields,” and 77% agreeing that “the ability to play from a lead chart might help keep my students playing after lessons stop” (see Table 3).

Table 3: Teacher attitudes on importance of having the skill of playing from a lead chart

	No. of teachers				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral /unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
All pianists should be able to play from a lead chart	2	9	17	57	27
Playing from a lead chart is a useful skill in many fields	1	2	8	50	49
The ability to play from a lead chart might help keep my students playing piano after lessons stop	3	2	15	59	32

The importance of *teaching* improvisatory skills showed varying results. Table 1 showed the frequency of teaching 11 subjects which might be included in piano lessons. A question about the importance of those same 11 items revealed similar results: on both lists, improvisation came 9th of 11 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Teacher ratings of the importance of items included in piano lessons

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Technique	1	5	4.6
Ear training	1	5	4.3
Sight-reading	1	5	4.3
Music theory/analysis	2	5	4.0
Traditional repertoire	1	5	3.9
Memorisation	1	5	3.6
Popular/jazz repertoire	1	5	3.5
Music history	1	5	3.3
Improvisation	1	5	3.1
Playing by ear	1	5	2.9
Transposition	1	5	2.8

1 = Not at all important; 5 = Extremely important

As with the frequency of improvisational skills, the importance of improvisation varied according to whether teachers were asked about improvisation generally or playing from a lead chart specifically. When asked about the importance of including improvisation in the piano lesson, on a scale of one, “Not at all important,” to five, “extremely important,” 33% of teachers gave the skill a rating of four or five. When asked more specifically about the skill of playing from a lead chart on the same scale, teachers’ answers were more favourable towards the skill, with 57% rating it either four or five. A comparison of these results can be seen in Figure 8.

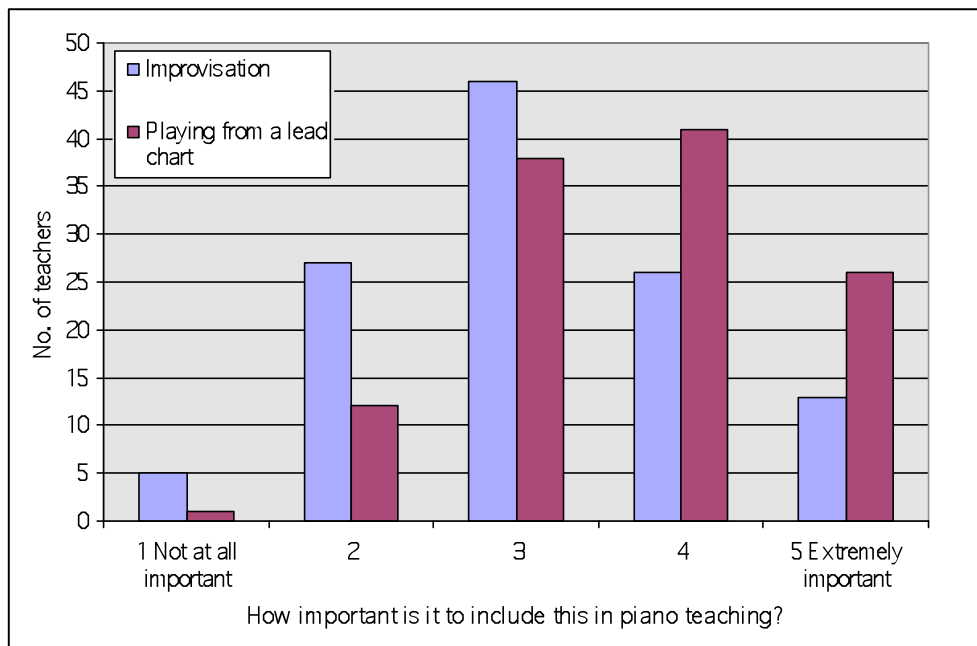


Figure 8: Comparison of the importance of improvisation and playing from lead charts

The 70 teachers who were considered able to play from lead charts rated the skill more highly than other teachers (see Figure 9).

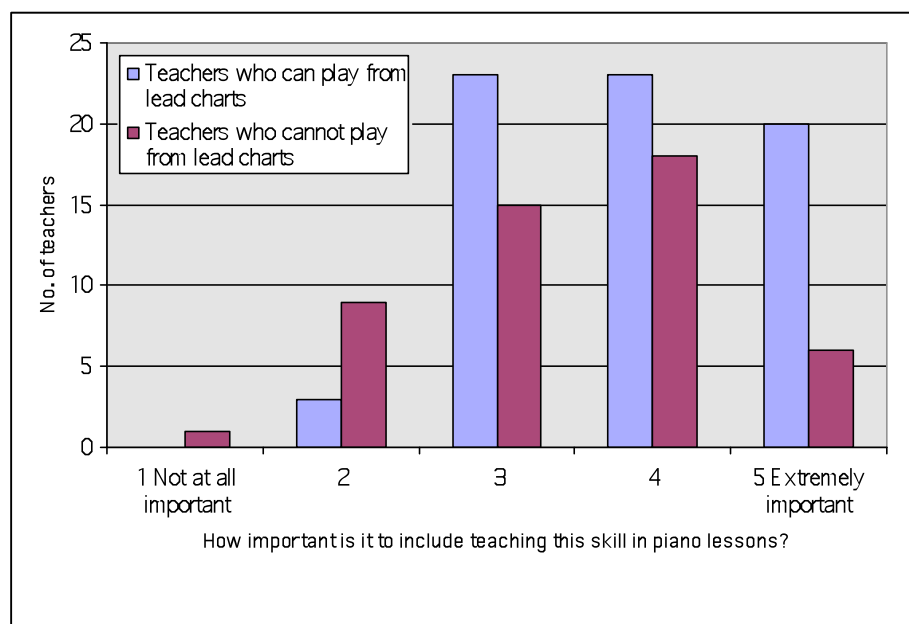


Figure 9: Effect of teacher ability on rating the importance of playing from lead charts

The question “Would you like to be able to teach your students to play from a lead chart?” gave results very favourable towards this skill: 49% of teachers claimed they already taught the skill, and 50% said they would like to teach it. Only one teacher selected “No, I would not like to.”

Two separate questions provided text answers about the importance and value of playing from a lead chart: Question 16, “Would you like to be able to teach your students to play from a lead chart? Why? Please comment” and Question 18, “How important do you think it is to include teaching this skill in piano lessons? Why? Please comment.” The written answers to these questions have been combined for analysis. A total of 101 teachers provided answers to either question 16 or 18 (85% of the sample), of whom 44 answered both questions (in the following analysis, these teachers have only been counted once).

The most commonly described advantage of playing from a lead chart, with 43 mentions, was the practical application of the skill. As one teacher described it, “It makes a pianist more versatile in the ‘real’ world where playing and singing in a group with friends or school or church setting or nursing home etc. is so important & enjoyable!” Another teacher wrote “It is a skill commonly needed for contemporary music. Music is often provided with just lead sheets, especially now on internet.” Other teachers described its usefulness in ensemble playing and accompanying, with several teachers describing its usefulness in their own lives.

The next most frequently-given comment, with 34 mentions, was that playing from a lead chart helped learning in other aspects of music. A wide variety of other musical elements were given, including theoretical aspects such as harmony, chords, cadences, analysis, structure and harmonisation; physical aspects such as

co-ordination and keyboard geography; performance aspects such as interpretation, phrasing and sense of musical style; and other general aspects of music such as aural skills, sight-reading and composition. One teacher described it thus:

So that students can realise what's under their hands, to think harmonically and provide the practical application to what they learn on paper, thus reinforcing theoretical work. In addition, it also makes them think how chords are constructed rather than just reading and allows them to explore accompaniment styles and keyboard geography. It is the converse of what they are usually required to do – i.e. recognise patterns from the page; here they are given the symbol and need to fill that out in black and white! The two go together and it shows that often times most compositions are written out improvisations. It is a starting point for their own composing and analysis and style.

There were 28 comments about the enjoyment the skill provides, with many comments along the lines of “adds to their overall enjoyment of music,” and “I think it would make playing the piano more fun.”

The importance of freedom, creativity and expression inherent in this ability was also mentioned by 17 teachers. Comments included that students feel “they are contributing something of themselves to the music,” “it gives them freedom to explore music in their own moods and styles and also opens the door to composing,” and “I think creativity is important and self-expression. Music is a language. You don't learn to speak by learning poems off by heart.”

Another commonly perceived benefit was a broader understanding of music, mentioned by 15 teachers, with such comments as “broadens student's skills. Makes for a more rounded musician,” and “Good to learn all different aspects of playing and approach to music.” Along similar lines, the advantage of including a broader variety of repertoire was also mentioned by eight teachers.

A variety of other reasons were given as to the importance of playing from a lead chart, including building confidence and independence (11 mentions), the possibility of keeping students playing after lessons stop (six mentions), and the relevance of this skill given the age in which we live (nine mentions): “It's a vital part of today's practical music making. The teacher's role is to help equip a student for ‘music life’ for now.”

4. What are the barriers to teaching improvising from lead charts?

Barriers to teaching the skill of improvising from lead charts were explored in three ways: teachers were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with statements proposing reasons not to teach this skill; they were asked an open question about barriers to teaching the skill; and, with the anticipation that time might be an issue, they were asked to consider factors influencing what to include in a piano lesson.

For the majority of teachers, the barriers to teaching the skill that were suggested in the questionnaire were not contributing factors. To the statement “If I teach my students to play from a lead chart, they might stop playing classical music,” only 9% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed. To the statement “Playing from a lead chart is cheating,” only 4% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed. Teachers were also generally optimistic about the effectiveness of teaching playing from a lead chart, with only 15% agreeing that “Not everyone can be taught to play from a lead chart.” Exam preparation seemed to be somewhat more of a barrier, though not for all teachers: to the statement “I am too busy preparing my students for exams to teach them anything else,” more than a quarter of teachers (29%) agreed or strongly agreed, 16% were neutral, and 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The frequencies and means of these responses can be compared in Table 5.

Table 5: Teacher attitudes about reasons not to teach playing from a lead chart

	No. of teachers					Mean
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral /unsure	Agree	Strongly agree	
I am too busy preparing my students for exams to teach them anything else	17	43	18	27	5	2.6
If I teach my students to play from a lead chart, they might stop playing classical music	26	57	20	7	3	2.2
Not everyone can be taught to play from a lead chart	24	42	29	15	2	2.4
Playing from a lead chart is cheating	56	48	5	2	2	1.6

More information was revealed on barriers towards teaching students to play from lead charts in the answers to Question 15, “If you don’t usually teach your students this skill, why not? Please comment.” There were 52 teachers who gave reasons why they usually do not teach reading from a lead chart. A further nine teachers described barriers towards teaching the skill in other text answers on the questionnaire. These 61 teachers’ comments have been combined for analysis. Barriers described included time constraints, exam syllabuses, student age or skill level, and teacher confidence.

By far the most common barrier to teaching playing from lead charts was the issue of time. Of the 61 teachers who provided text answers on this subject, 35 (57%) mentioned time or other priorities as a factor. Comments included “Not enough time in the lesson” and “other pianistic skills take higher priority for students I teach and the time available.”

Ten teachers mentioned exam syllabuses directly, with such comments as “No time in lesson. Especially if preparing for exams” and “Not required in exam syllabus, eisteddfod or concert repertoire.” One teacher wrote “I think the skill is v.

important, but sometimes lesson time just goes with those doing traditional repertoire for exams.”

For 12 teachers, student age or skill level was a factor. Some taught only beginners, and some stated that they only teach this skill to their older, more advanced students: “Usually teach my older students i.e. Grade 3 & above. I have a lot of K-Yr 4 students!”

Teachers’ confidence in their own improvisational skills was given as a reason by ten teachers, with such comments as “Not confident. Capable but would need guidance,” and “I have not developed this skill so I don’t teach it often.”

There were seven teachers who felt that their students were not interested in learning this skill. Comments included “Those in senior grades display no interest/need for this,” “they are not interested,” and “only those students who bring this type of music to the lesson.” Four teachers felt that teaching this skill was not necessary: “If they asked me, I would but in traditional repertoire the issue never arises,” and “Generally, there is so much music already written with accompaniment that it is not necessary. Alternatively, I rewrite the music for the student with accompaniment.” Another three teachers had not considered the possibility: “I ‘did it myself,’ & I guess I assumed that others would also do so if interested. I had never considered that this was something to be taught - thought provoking!!?”

Because it was envisaged that time would be an important factor, a question was designed to explore teachers’ overall aims in teaching. Teachers were asked to rate the importance of nine items which might have an effect on what is included in piano teaching. Teachers rated most highly “cultivating a love of music,” “giving students the best chance to keep playing after they stop having lessons,” and “giving students a broad musical education,” and rated last “preparing students for the possibility of the concert stage.” The rankings of averages are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Importance of factors in teaching piano students

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Cultivating a love of music	3	5	4.9
Giving students the best chance to keep playing after they stop having lessons	3	5	4.6
Giving students a broad musical education	3	5	4.6
Focusing on classical performance and technique	1	5	3.7
Passing exams	1	5	3.7
Meeting parent expectations	1	5	3.1
Preparing students for the possibility of all types of professional piano work	1	5	2.8
Preparing students for a possible musical career	1	5	2.7
Preparing students for the possibility of the concert stage	1	5	2.5

1 = Not at all important; 5 = Extremely important

5. What do piano teachers think would help them to teach improvising from lead charts?

There were 82 text responses (69% of the sample) to open-ended the question “If you would like to be able to teach this, what would help you to do so?” Comments covered three main areas: teacher training, resources needed, and some references to exam syllabuses.

The subject of teacher training was strongly represented, with 41 teachers (50% of written comments) referring to a need for external help of some kind. The most common suggestion was workshops, lectures or masterclasses, suggested by 16 teachers. Another eight teachers described their need to learn or practise more on their own, some suggesting learning from books, listening to recordings, and watching educational DVDs. The subjects needed in teacher training were also described: 11 teachers described a need for more understanding of theory, with seven teachers specifically mentioning a need for a better understanding of chord symbols. Help with various musical styles was mentioned by seven teachers, and six wrote of a need for help with teaching strategies.

A need for better resources was specifically mentioned by 26 teachers. The need for a structured, step-by step approach or method was mentioned by 19 teachers. One teacher wanted a book “with very simple, step by step instructions. I already have one but it starts at a more advanced level.” Another teacher was more specific: “There are plenty of jazz tutors around, but I would really love to see a non-jazz tutor on improvisation!” (teacher’s emphasis). Repertoire was mentioned by 13 teachers, with an emphasis on appealing, graded material. When asked on a separate question about resources, 65% of teachers agreed “I would teach my students to play from lead charts if I had better/more resources.”

Exam syllabuses were mentioned specifically by 19 teachers. Five of these suggested the inclusion of playing from lead charts in exams, with one of these teachers suggesting it might help to publicise the skill more. One teacher who wrote “Not enough time in the lesson. Too busy preparing for exams” as a barrier to teaching the skill, added a further comment later in the questionnaire: “Hopefully [this research] will translate into changes in the current archaic ways of teaching and have syllabuses updated.” On a separate question, teachers were asked directly about including this skill on exam syllabuses. To the statement, “I would teach playing from lead charts if it were required for exams,” 72% of teachers agreed, 8% were neutral, and 20% disagreed. One of the teachers who agreed wrote in the margin “or not choose that syllabus.”

Discussion

1. Piano teachers’ skills in improvising from lead charts

Piano teachers in the sample showed a range of skill levels in improvising from lead charts. A little more than half of teachers in this sample (59%) were able to play from a lead chart, defined as being able to spread the accompaniment across both hands (see Figure 2). Most of those who had some facility with this skill worked out on their own how to do it, rather than being taught by a teacher. This suggests that for teachers in this study, improvising from lead charts was generally not included in their own past training. Teachers who had the skill themselves were more likely to teach it to their students and to consider it of higher importance.

The definition of this skill used in this study, the ability to spread the accompaniment across both hands, was necessarily limited. It is difficult to ascertain pianists’ skill levels with any clarity in a questionnaire alone. What was not addressed at all in this study was the idea of how long it takes a pianist to come up with such an accompaniment: a single play-through, a few tries, or a few practices? In reality there is a continuum of skill levels here. Other types of improvisation from lead charts were also not examined here: playing without including the melody, for example, as would be appropriate for accompanying a soloist. Further research might examine these aspects of playing from a lead chart more closely.

2. Prevalence of teaching improvising from lead charts in piano studios

When teachers were asked about how often they included improvisation and related skills in their lessons, specific skills such as playing from chord symbols and playing from lead charts were said to be taught more often than improvisation as a general skill. This is the reverse of what might have been expected, if playing from chord symbols and playing from lead charts were considered subsets of improvisational skills. Clearly these differing results indicate is a difference in how teachers are interpreting the terms. This suggests differing perceptions, possibly of improvisation as a more general, creative activity, and the skill of playing from a lead chart as a more functional skill.

While only a small group of teachers (9%) taught playing from lead charts to most or all their students, roughly two-thirds of teachers stated that they teach the skill 'sometimes' (70%). This suggests that 'sometimes' might be given a broad interpretation by some teachers. It seems likely that playing from lead charts is not currently included in piano lessons with any great frequency.

3. Attitudes of piano teachers towards improvising from lead charts

When exploring teachers' attitudes, results again varied according to whether teachers were asked about improvisation as a general skill, or the specific skill of playing from a lead chart. The general skill 'improvisation' was ranked ninth in importance in a list of eleven aspects of piano teaching (the same ranking as for the frequency of teaching those eleven items). This is consistent with previous studies (Crum, 1998; da Costa, 2003) showing that 'improvisation,' when described generally, was rated of low importance. However, when the specific skill of playing from lead charts was addressed in this study, results markedly more favourable towards this skill were achieved. This may suggest that studies which use only the term 'improvisation' may not adequately describe either the teaching of, or attitudes towards, more specific functional skills. This has implications for future studies of functional piano skills. The issue of terminology is clearly a real one.

The majority of teachers agreed that that all pianists should be able to play from a lead chart (75%), that it is a useful skill in many fields (90%), and that the skill might help their students to keep playing after cessation of lessons (77%), a factor which they considered very important. Content analysis of written answers revealed that teachers held attitudes which were very favourable towards the importance and usefulness of playing from lead charts. Overall, the majority of teachers (85%) teachers made positive written statements about the skill. These covered the points of its usefulness in real-life music participation, its value as creative expression, its importance as part of a broad understanding of music, and its efficacy in increasing in understanding of other musical aspects. Teachers agreed the skill was important to *have*; however the importance of *teaching* the skill was less high, though still favourable (56% of teachers rated its importance as four or five on a scale of one to five). These results are consistent with previous findings (Mroz, 1982; Rosevear, 1996b) that while attitudes towards improvisation are positive, this willingness does not always transfer to the actual teaching of the skill.

It seems clear from these results that teachers are convinced of the importance of the skill of playing from lead charts. They believe that it is an important and useful ability, and presented convincing arguments in its favour.

4. Barriers to teaching improvising from lead charts

The suggested barriers to improvisation in the questionnaire did not turn out to be major factors. Very few teachers thought it would stop their students playing classical music (9%), thought it was cheating (4%), or thought it was a skill that

could not be taught to all students (15%). What then, are the barriers to teaching improvisation from a lead chart?

Half of the teachers in the sample (51%) provided text answers as to why improvisation from lead charts was not included in piano lessons. Some teachers suggested student age or skill level as a barrier: this skill does, after all, require a certain amount of technical and theoretical proficiency, and so may not be easily learned by beginners. Some teachers described their own lack of confidence in improvising from lead charts as a factor. But by far the most common barrier to teaching improvising from lead charts was lack of time, specifically lack of lesson time. Many teachers expressed the difficulty of including all the aspects of music they want to in the limited time available. More than a quarter of teachers (29%) agreed that being too busy with exam preparation was a factor. It is clear that any solutions to the problem of teaching improvisation from a lead chart will have to take the time factor very much into account.

5. Assistance in the teaching of improvising from lead charts

Teachers' thoughts on what would help them to teach this skill more in their lessons revealed two main themes: teacher training and better resources. According to teachers, professional development is needed in the areas of understanding chord theory and symbols, strengthening teachers' own improvisation skills, and in strategies for teaching the skill. Suggested methods of delivery included workshops, masterclasses and private lessons. (It is worth noting that these teachers were at a workshop at the time of filling in the questionnaire, and so possibly had a preference for that style of learning.) It was clear that teachers were very interested in receiving further training to equip them in this area. This mirrors similar findings in the United States (Bell, 2003). The need for good teaching resources was also addressed, with an emphasis on a need for a structured, step-by-step teaching method with ample graded repertoire. It is also clear from teachers' comments that any such resources will have to take into account the limited lesson time available. The finding that so many teachers who have this skill worked it out for themselves may be an encouraging factor here: it may be a skill which may be learned mainly at home, with only occasional focus during lesson time. It is perhaps also possible that student attitudes will help: this skill is most applicable to contemporary popular music, and it would seem likely that there would be a certain positive motivation amongst students to learn to play the music of their own generation.

Limitations of the study

This sample was limited to those who were financially and practically able to attend a two-day conference in Sydney, and were likely to be teachers already motivated to improving their teaching practice. It also seems likely that teachers who were more interested in improvisation, and therefore probably more positive in attitude towards it, were more likely to complete the survey. These factors would be likely to have the effect of skewing the results to be more favourable towards improvisation. Social desirability bias is also likely to have had an effect (Krosnick,

1999). However, despite these limitations, there does seem to be a range of attitudes expressed by teachers, leading to some useful results.

Implications for practice

Time is a question of priorities. If lesson time is limited, then teachers need to be all the more deliberate about what that time is spent on. Perhaps piano teachers would benefit from taking some time to clarify their long-term goals for their students, and consider how best to achieve those goals within the time available. It is necessary to reconsider whether goal outcomes are matched by actual teaching practices. If, as this study suggests, teachers' highest priorities are cultivating a love of music, keeping students playing after lessons stop, and giving a broad music education, then perhaps more of an emphasis on aural and creative forms of musical performance would be appropriate, as suggested by McPherson, Bailey and Sinclair (1997). If preparing students for the possibility of the concert stage is the lowest priority, perhaps less time might be devoted to classical repertoire and associated techniques. There may be some benefit from professional development focusing on helping teachers to find practical strategies for achieving their long-term goals for their students.

Such issues cannot be addressed without consideration of the prevalence of the exam system in Australian piano teaching. Thousands of students sit AMEB exams every year in Australia, in which the primary focus is usually on technique and classical repertoire. Regardless of teachers' best intentions to include a range of elements in a piano lesson, once a student is enrolled in an exam, it becomes an ethical priority to prepare that student adequately, and to ensure that the experience is a positive and hopefully successful one for the student. Under such circumstances, priorities are likely to rotate around the upcoming exam, and 'teaching to the test' becomes difficult to avoid. The AMEB has recently introduced a new "Piano for Leisure" syllabus, with more contemporary repertoire included, but there is even less of a focus on skills other than repertoire (students can choose between ear training and sight-reading, instead of doing both), and there is still no requirement for playing by ear or improvisation of any kind. This syllabus does have the advantage of requiring less repertoire and technique, allowing teachers the option of including other non-examined aspects of music in the piano lesson. There are some specialist jazz and contemporary syllabuses that include improvisatory skills, such as AMEB's Contemporary Popular Music syllabus, but these are not as widely used as the mainstream piano examinations.

Parent expectations also need to be considered here. How much pressure are teachers receiving from parents for their students to achieve recognised standards, that is, to pass exams? As Bridges (1993) puts it,

Whether teachers like it or not, many of them are slaves to the system; some depend on the exam syllabus in order to know what to teach, while others who would like to teach more creatively are forced to conform through

parental pressure, as well as through the desire of children to match their peers in acquiring certificates (p. 275).

How much do parents understand what is and is not being examined for such certificates? How much do they assume such exam syllabuses provide a complete music education, and how reasonable are such assumptions? Perhaps teachers need help with educating parents in what can be included in a music education, and about what will benefit children in the long-term in their musical development.

Does the responsibility lie with teachers, parents, or exam boards? Australian piano teaching seems locked in a cycle of exams for the sake of exams, with many piano students never playing again once lessons stop, and others going on to become piano teachers who perpetuate the problem. A way out of this cycle needs to be found.

Recommendations for future research

Further research seems warranted regarding the inclusion of improvisation and functional piano skills in Australian piano lessons. More quantified information than has been achieved here, from a larger sample size, would be valuable on exactly what improvisational and functional skills teachers have, and to what extent they are currently being taught. A study including interviews and observation might be helpful here.

Further research into resources for the teaching of improvisation and functional piano skills would also be of benefit, with consideration of how structured and methodical such resources are, how much lesson time is taken up, and how much the student can do on their own in home practice. An investigation of the inclusion of functional piano skills in piano teacher training in Australia, at university and other levels, also seems warranted. A study of lesson length, and what can be practically achieved in various time frames might also be of benefit. (It is conceivable that longer piano lessons may not necessarily lead to a broader coverage of music, but instead to a deeper coverage of the same few aspects.)

The issue of definitions of specific improvisational and functional skills also warrants further investigation. It is possible that the lack of common terminology is a contributing factor in the non-teaching of some piano skills. Without the sample lead chart and definition process included in this questionnaire, how many piano teachers would have known what was meant by what was described here as ‘improvising from a lead chart’? If a skill does not have a commonly-accepted name, is it less likely to be included in syllabuses, less likely to be asked about by parents or students, less likely to be addressed in professional development, less likely to have resources written about it, less likely to be taught?

On a broader level, and given the time factor, research into teaching priorities seems warranted. What are teachers’ long-term goals for their students? How might time be best spent to achieve those goals? How much are our exam systems helping

or hindering those goals?⁹ How much impact do parent attitudes have, and how can this be addressed? By examining such questions researchers may be able to provide valuable practical support to piano teachers in Australia.

About the Author

Susan Deas has been teaching piano for fifteen years, and also teaches other piano teachers improvisation and playing by ear. She has been a professional pianist and organist for two decades, and has directed, conducted and arranged for many groups and occasions. Susan is a popular lecturer in music appreciation for Sydney University, WEA, Musica Viva and Pacific Opera. Her training includes a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Music, and a Master of Music Studies (Studio Pedagogy), as well as an A.Mus.A in Musicianship. Susan is on the Council of the Music Teachers' Association of New South Wales.

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