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Bridging the gap: science serving music

by Jean-Guy Bruneau



Professor Gilles Comeau

PIANO TEACHING is without a doubt the only subject that still uses pedagogical materials from more than 50 years ago. This seemingly innocuous statement nevertheless offers a revealing starting point to explain the rationale behind the new Piano Pedagogy Research Laboratory of the Department of Music at the University of Ottawa.

As Professor Gilles Comeau, lead designer of this project — the first of its kind in Canada — notes, although piano pedagogy has been around for four centuries, almost no research has been done. This lack of empirical studies and scientific data in fact confers “cottage-industry” status on research in the field to date.

Professor Comeau’s research project is sponsored by the Canada Foundation for Innovation and a group of financial partners who together invested \$1.2 million. The research laboratory will employ a battery of sophisticated devices, including the “intelligent piano,” computers, and leading edge audio-visual software and recording equipment.

Many Questions

Professor Comeau notes that playing the piano is an extremely complex activity. He cites as an example the substantial number of related requirements, including the student’s ability to read music, motor skills, the rationality of the interpretation, memory, and emotions. To date, most piano teaching has followed a long tradition, one in which people usually rely on intuition and teaching skills based on the teacher’s own learning experiences.

Questions therefore crop up concerning piano pedagogy. How can we evaluate a teaching method? How can we choose a method that best suits the profile of a particular student? How can we best train the teachers themselves? For the moment, these questions lack clear answers.

The Dropout Phenomenon

Each year, thousands of students register for examinations at the various Canadian conservatories. But there is a hitch. For every student that completes an exam, many others quit taking piano lessons. The dropout rate is exceptionally high.

This problem could stem from the choice of teaching method, the teacher’s approach, or the student’s personal disposition. By way of exploring these possibilities, Professor Comeau argues for the need to conduct a variety of experiments within a controlled environment. The collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data may help to remove many uncertainties and dispel unfounded theories. Using time-tested teaching methods adapted to the profiles of the students, Professor Comeau expects to accomplish more, within a shorter timeframe and at a lower cost, while maintaining a higher rate of retention. This concept is of particular interest to parents, conservatories of music, and educational institutions, as well as educational decision-makers, who could then design even more relevant educational strategies — an approach that governments would surely want to examine more closely.

In the absence of such scientific rigor, says Professor Comeau, we often return to the stereotype of the gifted student to explain the performance of a student who manages to reach a high level of pianistic interpretation. Similarly, we imagine that a student who has difficulty or quits his piano lessons must simply lack talent. Both explanations fall a bit short. This research project will attempt to shed some light on the true causes of success or failure.

“The notions of students’ motivation and commitment, and their impact could, if better understood and documented, enable a greater number of students to successfully complete their training,” Mr. Comeau points out.

Multidisciplinary Research

The University of Ottawa research laboratory will lend itself to numerous other disciplines as well. The contributions of specialists in the arts, humanities, psychology, health, information sciences, engineering, and education will enable us to look at the research from various, creative points of view and dispel many uncertainties and unfounded theories regarding piano teaching.

Through video-conferencing, the laboratory will be accessible to researchers from other Canadian

universities and institutions abroad, creating a synergy that will enrich the research at hand.

This innovative Department of Music laboratory will propel the University of Ottawa to the forefront of a neglected field of science. This aspect will be of particular interest to the research community and attract students interested in an unprecedented approach.

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