

Piano ensembles – the art of playing together for students and professionals

A Brief Historical Introduction

“Keyboards Duets, whether for one instrument or two, are among the most enjoyable forms of music making in which pianists take part.” Howard Ferguson

Historically, piano ensemble is known to be a highly appreciated category within the noble art of piano playing. The first known piece for one piano four-hands “A Fancy for Two”, was composed by an English, Thomas Tomkins, at the beginning of the 17th century, according to one source. Based on Maurice Hinson’s book “Music for More Than One Piano” the first discovered piece for two keyboard was “For Two Virginals” by Giles Farnaby. The score of his piece is still available and quite playable. As time went by and as the keyboard continued to evolve and improve, more composers wrote music for piano ensemble. Among them two of J. S. Bach’s sons is worth mentioning, as well as Haydn, Türk and Clementi.

And not to forget the first piece composed for six-handed piano was written by one of Bach’s grandsons, Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Bach in the first part of the 19th century.

In the American piano history the flamboyant virtuoso Louis Moreau Gottschalk was most famous for arranging “Monster Concerts Series” for six pianists playing on six grand pianos! And as the 20th century imitation of these concerts we can mention the Piano Six, a group of the top Canadian pianists who tour Canada introducing Classical music to the remote communities.

What is a piano ensemble?

I choose to define it quite widely: more than one pianist playing one piano or more

1 piano – 2 players

1 piano – 3 players

1 piano – 4 players

2 pianos – 2 players

2 pianos – 4 players

2 pianos – 6 players

3 pianos – 3 players

etc, etc, etc

Due to economical reasons, it might be easier to find music composed or arranged for 2 pianists playing one piano than the other combinations. But if you are willing to spend some time searching for the music, I'm sure that you'll find something "old new to use". And why not arrange for or adapt some repertoire to some of your pupils? After all, a teacher is the one to know the pupils, and if the pupils are playing an easy level it shouldn't be too much trouble for the teacher to create something special tailored to this particular student's ability.

Why it's important for students to play in piano ensembles?

1. To be a piano pupil or-student is fairly lonely – even if the trend has been promoting group teaching for quite a while. I'm convinced that a majority of the pupils studying piano do meet their teacher in a private situation – just the two of them. This of course, gives advantages in very many ways.

2. Teaming up with a fellow student is healthy: you have to stick to another musician and keep the same rhythm and tempo.

"To play in a duo is one of the best ways of getting the sense of rhythm. Rhythm is infectious in the same way as most of the children's diseases!" Josef Lhevinne

3. For many of the pupils it can be quite embarrassing to attend a lesson without being as prepared as the fellow next to him or her.

4. I've also experienced – an ensemble repertoire can be of great importance for the pupil's decision of continue to play or not. Over the years I have not noticed any student quitting playing in the school orchestra!

5. And that because you have to be at least two to play the music correctly, and you have to use other skills (social and communicative).

"If you're infected by the chamber musical virus, no harm is done! The result will be of great joy and pleasure for yourself and others around" Reimar Rifling

6. And for many of the pupils it's easier and more relaxed to perform as a part of a group and not as a soloist.

7. Playing in ensembles first can built up confidence for playing solo later on.

8. Develops an excellent ear by making a student listen more to his partner and trying to blend. Almost like singing in choir where not solo abilities are required, but the ability to sound like your next door singer.

List of Repertoire

Let's take a look at this comprehensive list of piano ensemble pieces.

It is designed in basic three levels- elementary, intermediate and advanced. Each of these three levels has subcategories.

Elementary level:

- a. Mostly five notes in the primo part;
- b. pieces based on popular melodies;
- c. Scandinavian;
- d. Classical;
- e. General repertoire

Intermediate:

- a. Level A
- b. Level B

Advanced:

- a. Level A
- b. Level B
- c. Level C

Here are a few performance comments on the pieces:

Imari Hannikainen (Finnish composer): *Melancholic waltz* (from his Children's Pieces op 31) is also an easy and popular pieces. Easy Level, Edition Fazer, Helsinki, 1928. I especially like the way the measures are marked: every measure has a circle with a number inside it, that is easy to follow. I find the title useful as it expresses more than just plain happy and sad. I would even suggest for the same students to play the piece twice, and the second time switch the parts. So the accompanying person can play the sing beautiful melody and vice versa.

Oistein Sommerfeldt (Norwegian composer): Three small pieces op 78 - *Lullaby*, *Short Valse*, and *Angry Kids* - are good music and fun for young pupils, influenced by Norwegian folk music. In the *Lullaby* we find a bit of a contrapuntal texture and both parts have a great opportunity to sing. *The Short Valse* reminds us the *Melancholic Valse* we just played.

Angry Kids is a dissonant piece and teaches a particular articulation called martellato. For Kevin who also plays violin it was very easy to achieve this short, loud, aggressive touch.

Lis Langberg Hansen, a woman composer from Denmark chose to compose in American genre of rag. *Summer Rag* (from her 3 rags for 6 hands) always is a success for pupils and teachers. Late elementary/Intermediate level. Here instead of primo and secondo, the pianists are numbered- pianist 1, 2 and 3.

Tonally, the *Rag* takes the students to various keys-from starting C major to the key of subdominant-F major and suddenly to the key of unrelated E flat major. It eventually returns to the initial key of C major. So, as you may see, it is a good theory drill too.

Steve Dobrogosz (Sweden): *Middle March* (from his Marches for 4 hands), one of three pieces - all are very melodious music, with a slight touch of "cross-over". The meter is 9/8,

unique for a march!!!! He indicates playing with pomp. It reminds me music by Edward Elgar, also pompous and majestic.

Interesting is titles for primo and secondo: the composer indicates them as treble clef and bass clef parts.

Thomas Beck, Norwegian, first published by Music-Hu - Set in Oslo in 1946. *Bridal Tune for Lisa* (from his Dances op 24), is a very good piece and is great for a recital as well. Based on Norwegian folk melodies, it strongly reminds Grieg's folk tunes. Teaches students to be very sensitive to the constant change of tempo- Andantino-Vivo-Andantino-Un poco sostenuto-Piu mosso e vivo-Andantino-Vivo-Andantino.

Also, develops a good sense for *rubato* and how much of *ritenuto*, *rallentando* and *fermata* they need to achieve. A

Oddvar S. Kvam, *Reception Waltz*, for one piano six hands, a piece with possibilities for "staged performance", a fun piece and often very popular. Teaches students piano choreography and freedom on stage, because they don't have to sit statically at the piano. It is great experience that might be compared to operatic singers who sing while constantly moving on stage or actors who move while they read/perform their script. This piece is easier to memorize to be able to do all these stage movements and raising their glasses. Requires a good focus and attention and knowing each other's parts. IA

The full list of repertoire can be obtained upon request from

ELIN PERSSON

elinpers@online.no

and

Dr. Saida Kafarova

saida@mail.utexas.edu