

The Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate

by Janet Lopinski

In September 2005, RCM Examinations will implement the Piano Pedagogy Certificate Program. The launch of this new initiative will open the doors to an exciting new approach to the study of pedagogy. The existing Teachers' ARCT examination will be replaced by three progressive levels of examinations – Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced, each paired with a practical co-requisite – culminating in an enriched Teachers' ARCT Diploma. It is expected that the extensive study required to prepare for three levels will provide ARCT graduates with a more thorough grounding when they enter into the profession, leading to an even more rewarding and successful teaching experience.

As I reflect on my own start as a young teacher many years ago, it seems clear that I would have benefitted from such a program. My earliest experience with teaching was in direct response to my younger brother's loss of interest in piano lessons with his "real" teacher. As an inspired twelve-year old working on Grade 9 piano, I began to coach him between lessons. Over time, these impromptu sessions developed into something resembling lessons, and eventually my parents suggested that we formalize the arrangement. And so my teaching career began!

Like many other beginning teachers, my approach was based on a healthy blend of enthusiasm, instinct, intuition, and of course, imitation. My concept of teaching piano was closely modelled on the teaching style I had observed and experienced in my own musical studies – an approach not without merit – but the element of "trial and error" was certainly a factor! As "word-of-mouth" spread through the neighborhood, my class began to grow, and before long my parents' living room was transformed into my first studio. Incidentally, my brother completed his Grade 8 Piano, Grade 2 Rudiments, and Grade 3 History examinations. He is now an experimental physicist at the National Research Council, and is also an enthusiastic and well-informed supporter of music and the arts.

The Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate focuses specifically on pedagogical issues in the context of teaching students from the beginning stages up to and including Grade 2. This level provides an ideal opportunity for teachers who are just establishing their studios and for mature teachers who wish to upgrade their qualifications. The relatively narrow focus (i.e., beginning stages through Grade 2) will allow pedagogy students and their teachers to consider issues related to these levels in more depth. It also provides an opportunity for student teachers to begin their formal study of pedagogy before they reach the ARCT level.

Components of the Elementary Certificate

The Elementary Pedagogy Certificate consists of three parts: a practical piano co-requisite, a *viva voce* examination and a written examination. It is strongly recommended that candidates complete all the requirements for the Grade 8 Piano Certificate before embarking on study toward the Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate.

Part 1: Grade 9 Piano Certificate

The Grade 9 Practical Piano Certificate is required in order to ensure that candidates have reached an appropriate level of performance and musical understanding that will allow them to

effectively convey musical ideas and concepts to their students. The requirements for the Grade 9 Piano Certificate, including preparation of repertoire from four different style periods, studies, technical tests, ear tests, and sight reading, along with the co-requisite studies in theory, will encourage the ongoing development of well-rounded musicianship.

Part 2: Viva Voce Examination

The *viva voce* is an interactive oral examination that offers candidates an opportunity to discuss and demonstrate their understanding of principles of basic piano technique and fundamental methodologies used in piano teaching. During this examination, candidates will be asked to perform selections from their chosen “teaching repertoire sample” and to discuss approaches to assisting students in learning this music. The “teaching repertoire sample” for the elementary level consists of fourteen selections: four selections chosen from the candidate’s preferred beginner method, and ten selections chosen from the lists of repertoire and studies in the *Piano Syllabus, 2001 edition* (three pieces and two studies each from Grade 1 and Grade 2).

Candidates should also bring examples of technical exercises and excerpts for sight reading and ear training that are appropriate for elementary level students and be prepared to discuss their approach to teaching these skills. In addition, candidates will be asked to discuss topics chosen from the following categories:

- General Pedagogical Topics – such as structure of lessons, goal-setting, learning styles and nurturing creativity
- The Beginning Student – such as beginner methods, the first lesson and the first year of lessons
- Rhythm and Tempo
- Technical Matters – such as posture, hand position, development of finger independence and tone production
- Other Essential Skills – such as ear training, sight reading and pedaling
- Musicianship and Artistic Considerations
- The Professional Studio – such as aspects of studio management, resource materials and communication with parents

Candidates will be expected to respond to questions not only by verbalizing but also by demonstrating at the keyboard.

Part 3: Written Examination

The written examination will focus on issues related to teaching beginning students, addressing topics that lend themselves to a written rather than an oral discussion. Candidates will be expected to illustrate their answers with examples of specific repertoire selections and studies where appropriate.

Resources for Examination Preparation

Perhaps the most important resource for any student embarking upon preparation for any pedagogy examination is access to a master teacher, with whom pedagogical approaches and issues can be discussed frankly and comfortably. The advice and guidance of an experienced and inspiring mentor is an essential ingredient in successful preparation for both the *viva voce* and the written examinations.

Such advice and guidance, however, should always be coupled with thoughtful research and reading, so that students can explore a broader range of opinions and a variety of approaches. Student teachers can then apply various concepts in lessons, and discover through their own experience which techniques are most effective with different types of students.

The extensive bibliography in the Piano Pedagogy Certificate Program addendum includes many fine pedagogy books in which successful teachers share their approaches and methodologies. The use of such resources is much like the use of recordings in the study of repertoire. It is always better to listen to several different recordings of a piece and thoughtfully compare differing interpretations than to listen to and imitate a single interpretation. The same is true in the use of pedagogy books.

The following titles are of particular use in preparing for the elementary level certificate:

Bastien, James W., and E. Gregory Nagode: *How to Teach Piano Successfully*. 3rd ed. San Diego, California: Neil A. Kjos, 1988.

Clark, Frances. *Questions and Answers: Practical Solutions and Suggestions Given to Questions Commonly Asked by Piano Teachers*. Northfield, Illinois: Instrumentalist Publishing, 1992.

Uszler, Marianne, Stewart Gordon, and Scott McBride Smith. *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*. 2nd ed. New York: Schirmer, 2000.

One of the most frequently used resources in my personal library is the new fourth edition of *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). It is a very useful tool for teachers to refresh their knowledge and quickly access information as needed. The *Celebration Series, The Piano Odyssey: Handbook for Teachers* by Cathy Albergo, Reid Alexander, and Marvin Blickenstaff is another valuable source of information, particularly for preparation of a “teaching repertoire sample.”

Benefits of the Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate

The general aim of the Piano Pedagogy Certificate Program is to improve the quality of music instruction in private studio teaching, while simultaneously increasing the value placed on the private studio teaching profession and strengthening the qualifications and teaching techniques of private studio teachers. The material covered in the elementary level of the program is appropriate both for teachers who are just establishing their studios and for mature teachers who wish to upgrade their qualifications and enrich their knowledge of techniques and approaches for teaching.

The elementary level is specifically intended to provide a vehicle through which piano teachers can study pedagogy with the goal of earning a certificate as they strive to develop their full potential. Indeed, preparation for the Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate in the early stages of teaching will provide a refreshing alternative to the “trial and error” method that so many of us experienced at the beginning of our careers.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Elementary Piano Pedagogy Certificate is just one stage in the development of a student teacher. It is hoped that most will continue their studies of both performance and pedagogy as they follow their musical journeys and as their careers in the teaching profession unfold.

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Dr. Lopinski has performed as both soloist and chamber musician in Canada, Europe, and the USA and has been active as an adjudicator, examiner, and workshop clinician. She is currently on the faculty of The Royal Conservatory of Music (Community School and Glenn Gould School) where she teaches piano, piano pedagogy, music history, and theory. She is a senior member of the College of Examiners of RCM Examinations and from 1996-2002 served as Chief Examiner for Theoretical Subjects. She has recently co-authored the three-volume series Exploring Music History published by The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited.