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FEATURES ▼

2 New Music and the American Pianist

By Kristin Elgersma, NCTM, with Madison McCarney

As the first step of a larger project to collect, examine and categorize post-1970 solo American piano repertoire, a research survey of United States university piano faculty members was conducted. This online survey was e-mailed to 452 piano faculty members at 217 U.S. colleges and universities. One hundred thirty professors completed the survey, for a response rate of 29 percent.

Unsurprisingly, most faculty members reported that their students do not study a great amount of 20th or 21st century music, with a quarter of all American piano students playing absolutely no music written after 1970. In general, teachers with more experience (full professors) assign more contemporary repertoire. The respondents expressed a strong desire to learn more about this music, but expressed reservations about having enough time in the traditional course of study to cover the full range of the piano repertoire.

Examination of the results offers insight into how pianists engage with the contemporary American piano repertoire, and brings to light further questions about and attitudes toward this music.

11 Chopin's Pianism and the Reconstruction of the Ineffable

By Jonathan Bellman

More than 160 years after his death, the music of Frédéric Chopin still occupies a uniquely privileged place among pianists and listeners. Numerous recordings of his music, from the early days of recording to the present, chronicle the evolving varieties of Chopin interpretation. Relatively few realize, though, that modern approaches to Chopin's music are quite different from his own style, about which his students and contemporaries had a good deal to say. The thundering, dramatic Chopin of our large concert halls would have been entirely foreign to him; intimate performance circumstances, subtleties of rubato (several different kinds), articulation, dynamics, pedaling, and even interpretive ornamentation all contributed to a pianism that was agreed to be both inimitable yet essential to his music. An informed and creative approach to Chopin interpretation, coupled with a healthy skepticism for "the way Chopin is played," produces strikingly fresh and vivid readings of his music.

New Music

And The American Pianist

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, a musician who specializes in contemporary works confides: "Most of the music we play is not great. Some of it is very good, but it lacks something. But we need to play it—not only because something great may turn up, and if we don't play it, we won't know it, but also because this is the music being composed now, and it ought to be heard."¹ This statement alludes to an enduring question for pianists and teachers in the United States: Is new music worth investigating? And, if so, what part should it play in our musical lives?

There can be a sense among performers that new music lacks legitimacy. Pianists and teachers feel uncomfortable programming unknown music, which has not yet been validated by time or by someone with more impressive credentials. Until we see that "famous concert pianist X" has played a new work by "unknown composer Z," we feel uneasy about performing the work on our own recitals, jury exams or competition programs.

As time marches on, we find ourselves increasingly confronted by the happy problem of having too much repertoire, even for a lifetime. Teachers feel a responsibility to ensure that their students have a basic under-

standing of history's great composers—a task made difficult by limited lesson time and, often, students' lack of background knowledge. New music, already suspect, is pushed to the back burner.

However, the *New York Times* article continues by noting: "It is becoming clear to more and more musicians, especially younger ones, that if they are going to have careers—or even a field to have careers in—they cannot keep playing the pillars of the standard canon over and over, spectacular though those works may be."

I sense that young musicians have a growing desire to claim a place in classical music. Though music today is famously diverse (Kyle Gann, preeminent authority on American music, calls this the "great musical story of our time");² this variety has resulted in a generation of composers that are less bound by expectations than those of, for example, the earlier 20th century. "Instead of creating works meant to resonate as grand statements through all eternity, they are doing what Handel, Haydn and Mozart did before them: writing the music that they want to write, and letting history take care of itself."³ However, it is less clear whether pianists are heading down the same independent path.

Purpose

To learn more about how pianists in the United States interact with contemporary repertoire (specifically the contemporary American repertoire⁴) we examined the role of this music in the university music school curriculum—the place where a pianist’s musical identity begins to take shape.

Based on conventional wisdom, it can be assumed that study of new music in the school setting is rare. However, there has been little academic research done on this subject. Studies in the fields of piano performance or piano pedagogy tend to focus on music from the early- to mid-20th century or on a specific composer, piece or style of composition. To my knowledge, there has been only one attempt to investigate a large amount of recent⁵ contemporary piano repertoire.⁶ This thesis by Jonathan Howard Katz is helpful, especially in providing information about young composers. However, the descriptions of the music listed are not intended to be critical or pedagogical, and pianists or teachers seeking new music would benefit from a more extensive, categorical approach. As discussed later in this article, our research has revealed a major desire among U.S. piano faculty to learn more about this repertoire, and it is clear that work needs to be done in this area.

As the first step of a larger project to collect, examine and categorize post-1970 solo American piano repertoire, increasing access to and understanding of this music, we conducted a research survey of United States university piano faculty. The results offer insight into how pianists engage with this music, and bring to light further questions about and attitudes toward this body of repertoire.

Method

During the summer of 2011, we developed a research survey through the online site

SurveyMonkey.⁷ This survey was e-mailed to 452 piano faculty members, at 217 U.S. colleges and universities. These schools represent the widest possible variety of four-year institutions, including state universities and private colleges of every size, as well as the nation’s top conservatories. Of those surveyed, 130 professors completed the survey, for a response rate of 29.8 percent.

We asked seven questions, five of which were multiple-choice, and two open-ended. The first questions, designed to give information about the experience of the respondent, were:

1. What is your appointment?
2. How many hours of studio piano (early-advanced level or higher) do you teach each week?

The next three questions were designed to examine the amount of time university piano students spend working on 20th and 21st century American piano repertoire:

Approximately what percentage of your students’ time is devoted to studying American piano repertoire:

3. From 1900–1945?
4. From 1945–1970?
5. From 1970–present?

The final open-ended questions asked for more detail on pianists’ personal experiences with this repertoire:

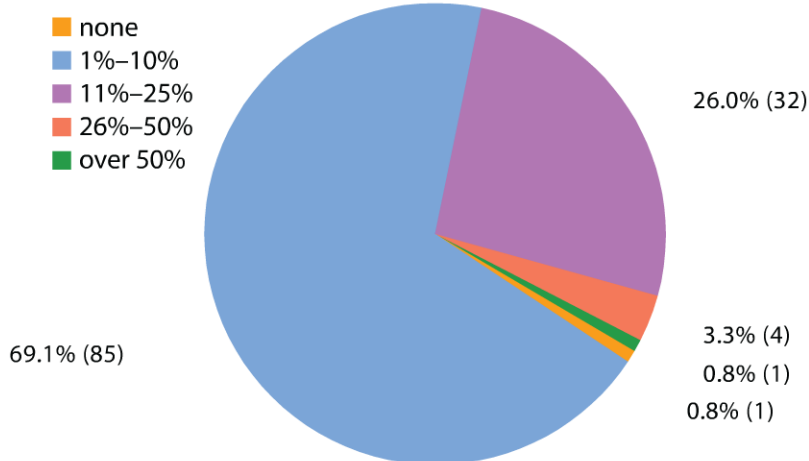
6. Would you please share any favorite pieces from the American piano repertoire, composed since 1970? Of special interest are pieces that you think are suitable for undergraduate or graduate piano majors, but please feel free to also include those that you like, but would not teach.
7. If you have any additional thoughts on teaching contemporary American piano repertoire, please share them below.

Results

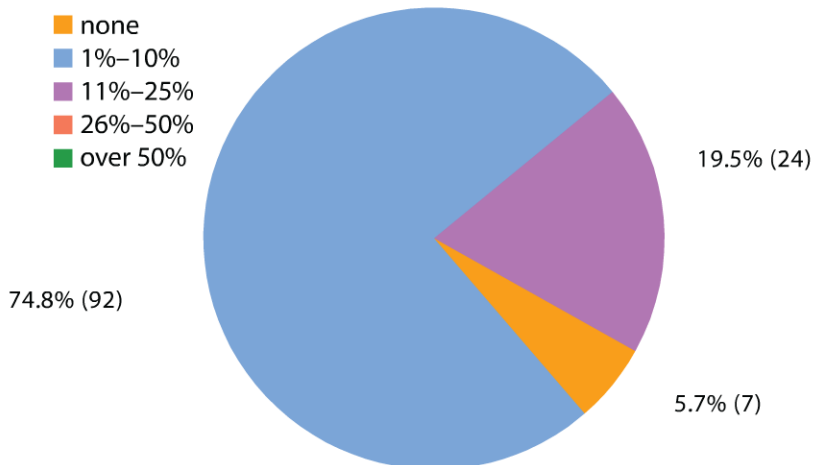
The results were not surprising. In general, university piano students in the United States do not study a great amount of 20th or 21st century American piano repertoire. Additionally, the more recent the repertoire, the less likely pianists will play it. As you can see from the three charts below, the percentage of students who spend more than 11 percent of their time working on this music falls:

- ▶▶ From 30.1 percent studying American repertoire from 1900–1945
- ▶▶ To 19 percent studying American repertoire from 1945–1970
- ▶▶ To 12.2 percent studying American repertoire written after 1970

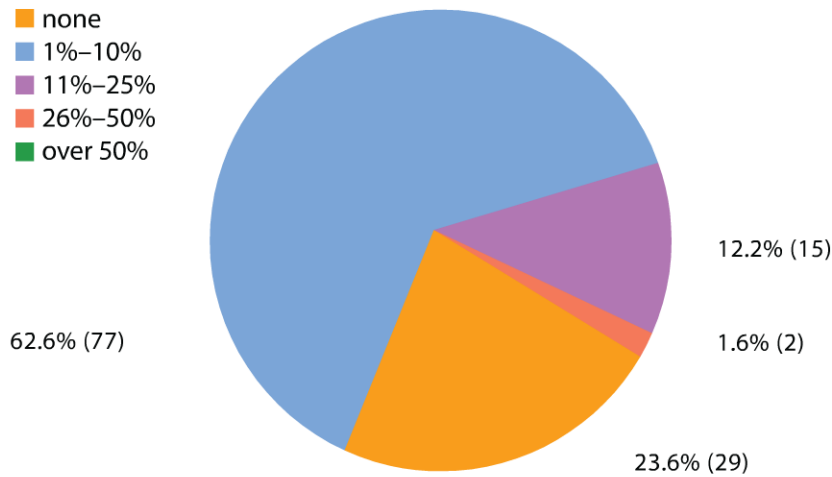
Approximately what percentage of your students' time is devoted to studying American piano repertoire from 1900–1945?



Approximately what percentage of your students' time is devoted to studying American piano repertoire from 1945–1970?



Approximately what percentage of your students' time is devoted to studying American piano repertoire from 1970–present?



At the same time, the percentage of students who spend absolutely no time playing this repertoire rises:

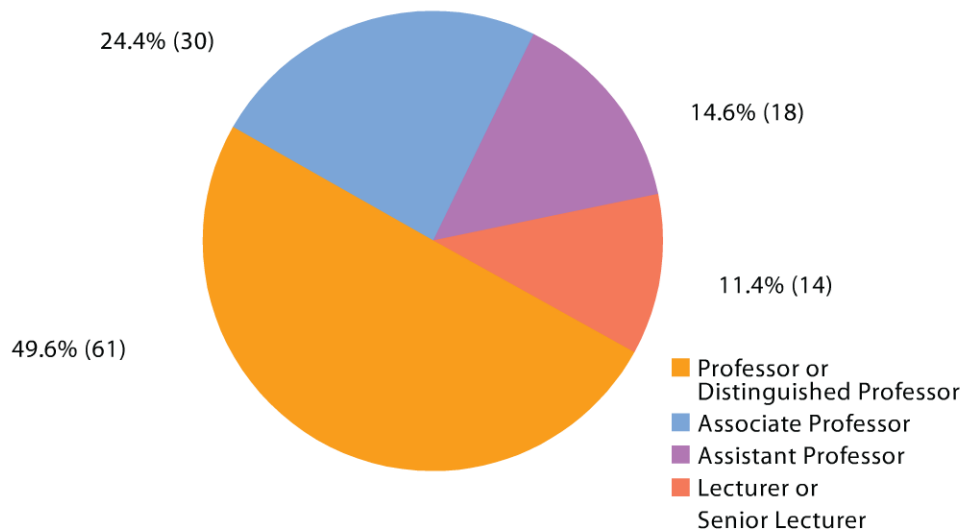
- ▶▶ From 0.8 percent in the music of 1900–1945
- ▶▶ To 5.7 percent in the music of 1945–1970
- ▶▶ To 23.6 percent in the music of 1970–present

This last number is most striking: Nearly a quarter of all music school pianists study none of the music of their own country, of their own lifetime. This has far-reaching implications for the future of our profession. If pianists are not taught new music, do not hear it in their teacher's studio classes and do not see it programmed in their peers' recitals, then it is likely that they will not make new music a part of their future musical lives, whether as performers, teachers or audiences.

New Music And The American Pianist

We were curious to know if these statistics were consistent across all levels of teacher experience and looked more closely at the results for each level of appointment.

What is your appointment (if not currently teaching in a university, choose past appointment)?



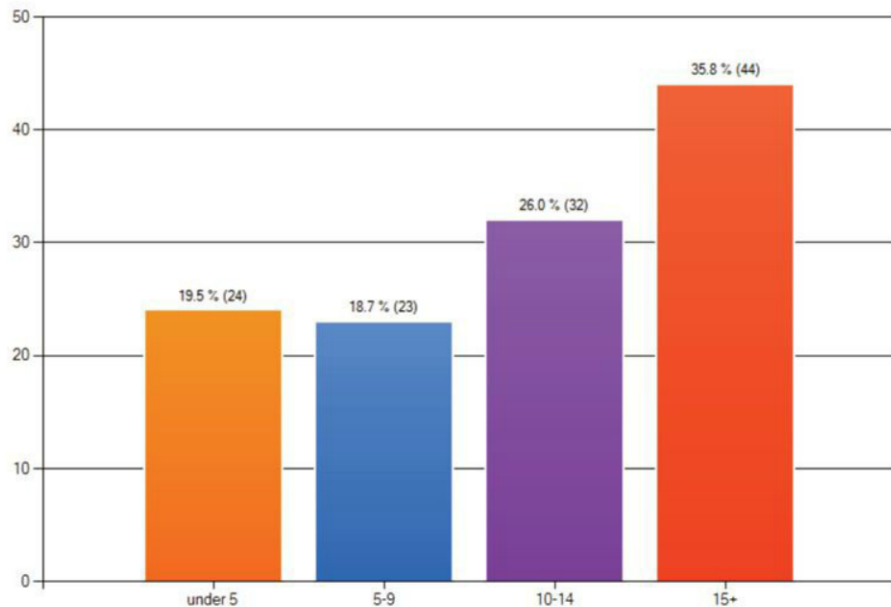
As can be seen in the chart above, half of the respondents have attained the level of full or distinguished professor. One quarter are associate professors, with 14.6 percent assistant professors and 11.4 percent lecturers or senior lecturers.

The chart below indicates most respondents do a significant amount of studio teaching, with 61.8 percent teaching 10 or more hours per week, and 35.8 percent teaching 15 hours or more. From these numbers, we can see these are experienced teachers.

We can also examine the amount of contemporary repertoire that these professors' students play by looking more closely at the results for each level of appointment. Interestingly, the responses reveal that professors at higher ranks, presumably with more teaching experience, assign more 20th and 21st century music. In question three, we see this upward trend:

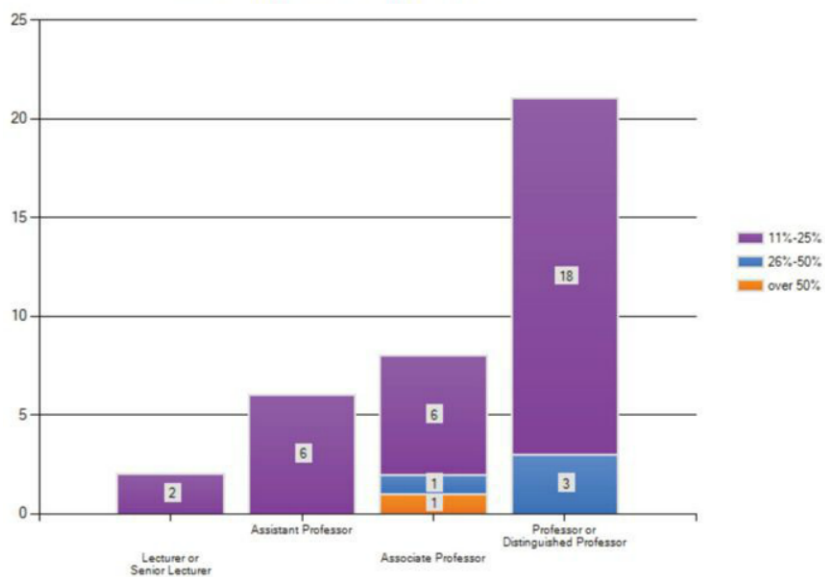
- ▶▶ 14.3 percent of students of lecturers spend more than 11 percent of their time studying American repertoire from 1900–1945.
- ▶▶ 26.6 percent of students of assistant professors spend more than 11 percent of their time on this music.
- ▶▶ 33.3 percent of students of associate professors spend more than 11 percent of their time on this music.
- ▶▶ 34.4 percent of students of full or distinguished professors spend more than 11 percent of their time on this music.

How many hours of studio piano (early advanced level or higher) do you teach each week?



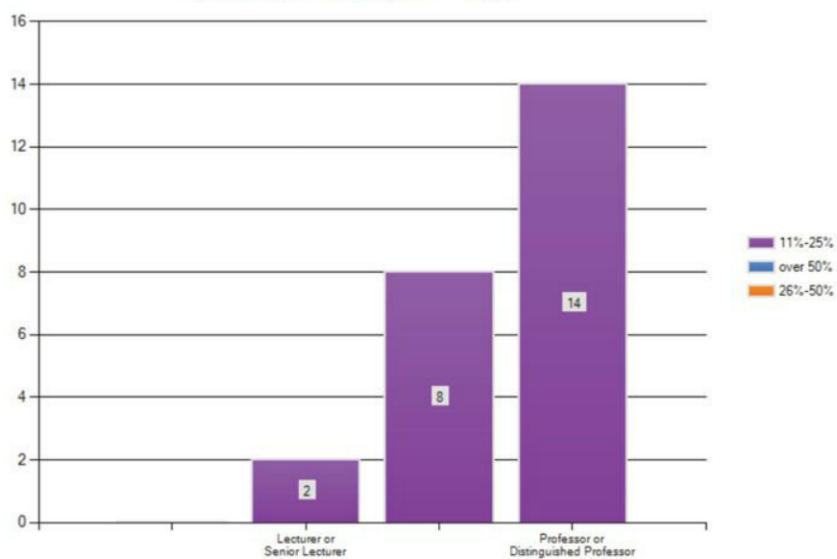
New Music And The American Pianist

Approximately what percentage of your students' time is spent working on American repertoire from 1900 - 1945?



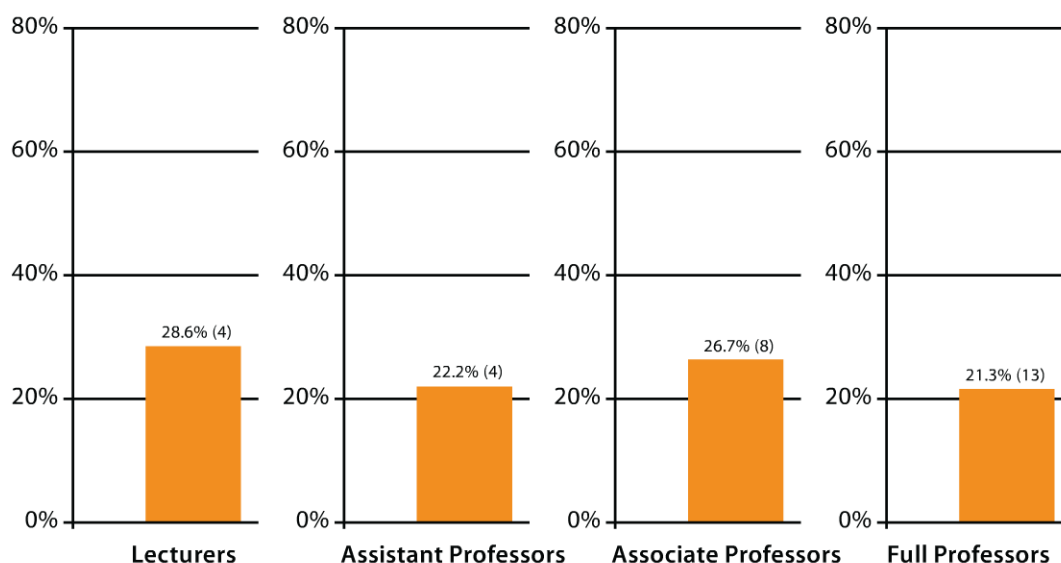
Question four has a similar result, with students of lecturers (14.3 percent) and assistant professors (0 percent) less likely than associate professors (26 percent) or full professors (23 percent) to spend more than 11 percent of their time studying American repertoire written between 1945–1970.

Approximately what percentage of your students' time is spent working on American repertoire from 1945 - 1970?



In question five, the percentage of time students spent on American repertoire after 1970 is more consistent, regardless of the professor's appointment. However, students of lecturers spend the least amount of time with this repertoire, with 28.6 percent of students playing none at all, compared to those of assistant (22.2 percent), associate (26.7 percent) and full (21.3 percent) professors.

Percentage of respondents whose students spend absolutely no time studying American repertoire from 1970–present:



In questions six and seven, piano faculty were asked to speak more directly about their experience with the American contemporary piano repertoire.

Question six asked respondents to list specific composers and pieces they would recommend for their students. A total of 105 different composers were mentioned. Of these, only eight were mentioned a significant number of times, with the top-ranked composers noted below. An additional seven composers were mentioned five to 10 times.

Composers Mentioned Ten or More Times

- 1. William Bolcom 56 mentions
- 2. Lowell Liebermann 46 mentions
- 3. Robert Muczynski 33 mentions
- 4. Frederic Rzewski 28 mentions
- 5. George Crumb 22 mentions
- 6. John Corigliano 19 mentions
- 7. John Adams 11 mentions
- 8. William Albright 11 mentions

Composers Mentioned Between Five and 10 Times

- 1. Samuel Barber 8 mentions
- 2. John Cage 7 mentions
- 3. Robert Helps 7 mentions
- 4. John Harbison 6 mentions
- 5. Leonard Bernstein 5 mentions
- 6. Morton Feldman 5 mentions
- 7. Ned Rorem 5 mentions

This leaves 90 composers, most (63) mentioned only once or twice. It is striking that there are only 15 names⁹ that play a major recurring role in the post-1970 American repertoire of U.S. piano students. Additionally, the fact that so many composers were suggested only once or twice reveals that the current body of piano music is very diverse, fulfilling noted musician-philosopher Leonard Meyer's prediction that

"Our time would be characterized, not by the cumulative development of a single style, but by the coexistence of a number of alternative styles in a kind of 'dynamic steady-state.'"¹⁰

Similarly, respondents suggested many specific pieces, but mentioned only a small number more than five times. The most recommended were:

Specific Pieces or Sets of Pieces Mentioned Five or More Times

1. William Bolcom	Rags (in general)	21 mentions
2. Lowell Liebermann	Gargoyles, Op. 29	16 mentions
3. Robert Muczynski	Desperate Measures, Op. 48	13 mentions
4. Frederic Rzewski	North American Ballads	13 mentions
5. William Bolcom	Etudes or New Etudes	12 mentions
6. John Corigliano	Etude Fantasy	11 mentions
7. Lowell Liebermann	Nocturnes	10 mentions
8. William Bolcom	Ghost Rags (specifically)	9 mentions
9. George Crumb	A Little Suite for Christmas, A. D. 1979	9 mentions
10. George Crumb	Makrokosmos, Vol. 1 and 2	9 mentions
11. William Bolcom	Bagatelles	7 mentions
12. John Adams	China Gates	6 mentions
13. Robert Helps	Three Hommages	5 mentions

In the final question of the survey, respondents were asked to volunteer additional thoughts on playing or teaching the post-1970 American piano repertoire. The comments were overwhelmingly positive, for example:

- ▶▶ "I believe we need to promote American music on an increasing level as it is 'our' music; it is American."
- ▶▶ "It's essential for students to view piano music as something that continues to evolve."

▶▶ "It's important for piano students to work on and perform the works of living composers for a number of reasons: relevance, fluency in contemporary (including popular) idioms, kindling of a possible specialty, and professional opportunities in contemporary music."

▶▶ "I wish that the study/performance/teaching of contemporary rep (not just American rep) would become as essential to a degree program as the study of Bach and Beethoven."

Many respondents expressed a desire for better access to this body of repertoire:

- ▶▶ "It is sometimes hard to acquire scores and recordings of these works."
- ▶▶ "It's hard to keep up new compositions (they are so many!!), so it will be great if we have some guideline or database that we could use as reference."
- ▶▶ "A resource book with 'good' teaching and performing pieces is needed. There are lots of pieces being composed, but sorting through them (and even remembering them, consistently) is challenging."
- ▶▶ Having studied a great amount of contemporary piano literature, I still find it difficult to sort through the huge amount of repertoire available to give good recommendations for my students."

When expressing reservations about working with this repertoire, the most frequent area of concern dealt with finding time include newer music in the traditional course of study:

- ▶▶ My particular students are weak music readers and know very little standard repertoire to start with."
- ▶▶ So many students entering music degrees seem to have an incredibly limited knowledge of even the core repertoire. I find it more essential to acquaint students with this music and these composers before emphasizing too much of the new."
- ▶▶ I find our students are well challenged to learn and perform works by Ives, Griffes, Copland, Cage, Cowell—in other words, works composed before 1970. This is more than enough for them generally. . . there is only so much you can do in four years."
- ▶▶ "Only a handful of my students have built enough traditional repertoire for me to be able to 'afford' to spend our precious time together on contemporary music. With all my respect to contemporary composers, I feel that after graduating, a student who studied Chopin and Debussy in depth will know how to decipher Crumb, but one who studied mainly Crumb during school

years, won't know what to do with Chopin and Debussy."

Discussion

The results of this survey lead back to our opening question: How does the contemporary American repertoire fit into a pianist's life and training? The established method of pianistic instruction is chronological, with the student expected to understand the development of music throughout history before investigating current composition. As one respondent noted, "a student who studied Chopin and Debussy in depth will know how to decipher Crumb, but one who studied mainly Crumb during school years, won't know what to do with Chopin and Debussy."

This statement reveals a common perception of contemporary repertoire: that it is somehow not made up of the same fundamental elements of music as that of Chopin or Debussy and does not develop basic musical understanding in the same way as the earlier repertoire. While the respondent's point is not without merit, we could say the same about a student who focuses only on playing Bach—that the student won't know what to do with Chopin or Debussy. Certainly, teachers should work to ensure variety in their students' repertoire. Still, we spend significant time nurturing our students' understanding of baroque keyboard music and very little developing their conception of new music.

Even if it is possible that "after graduating, a student who studied Chopin and Debussy in depth will know how to decipher Crumb," this lack of experience with new music may result in a student's never having heard of Crumb. He or she will probably not view it as important to seek out and will have even more trouble discovering less well-known new music. In examining the results of the current research survey, it is clear we are developing a nation of pianists who are largely uninformed about the music of their own time and place.

I am not suggesting teachers neglect the piano repertoire of the past, but rather encouraging pianists and teachers in the United States to do much more to support the music of the present. By doing so, we will offer our students a different kind of musical experience. As one respondent wrote, this is “our music.” Playing new music requires a pianist to take ownership of interpretive decisions. It allows pianists to make critical judgments about music—it is difficult to say anything unique about a well-loved Schumann piece, but new music can be looked at with fresh eyes. It may include direct collaboration with composers. The experience of playing new music involves performers in the creation of our current musical narrative, and develops a vital sense of artistic confidence.

Much work needs to be done for pianists to easily approach the diverse, abundant, contem-

porary American piano repertoire. The authors are currently working to develop more resources that increase access and understanding—to help pianists and teachers find a place in their lives for new music, as we claim the contemporary piano repertoire as ours. ◀◀

Notes

1. Kozinn, A. (2010, December 28). For Players of New Music, a Constant Search for Keepers. *New York Times* (New York, NY). Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/29/arts/music/29repertory.html?ref=music>.

2. Gann, Kyle. (2007, April 25). “The New-Music Narrative, Interrupted.” *Post-classic: Kyle Gann on Music After the Fact*. Retrieved from http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2007/04/the_newmusic_narrative_interru.html.

3. Kozinn, A.

4. For reasons of time and manageability, the authors have chosen to limit their study to repertoire written by composers who do the majority of their work in the United States. American, in the context of this article, will refer only to this repertoire, and not to that of the greater North, Central, or South Americas.

5. Stanley Butler’s (1973) *Guide to the Best in Contemporary Piano Music, Vol. I and II* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press), provides an annotated list of earlier piano repertoire, written between 1950–1973. In these volumes, Butler categorizes music from around the world.

6. Katz, J. H. (2011) The piano repertoire project: an annotated reference to solo piano music by composers born since 1970.

(Doctoral thesis). Northwestern University.

7. <http://www.surveymonkey.com>.

8. One hundred and twenty-three completed the survey online, while six responded via personal e-mail.

9. Also striking is the lack of gender and racial diversity of these top 15 composers.

10. Meyer, L. (1967). *Music, the Art, and Ideas*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Kristin Elgersma is assistant professor of piano at the University of Idaho’s Lionel Hampton School of Music. She is an active performer, presenter and researcher at the local, national and international levels. Her current research into the post-1970 American repertoire is supported by a University of Idaho Seed Grant.



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