

# Multikey Development: Central to Comprehensive Musicianship

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*By Kevin M Coan*

What do we mean when we use the phrase “comprehensive musicianship”? I look back at auditioning potential pianists for a high school choir I was once involved with. All applicants for the position had to be high school students. We were fortunate to be able to select a pianist, Faith, who was truly a comprehensive musician. Just what was it about Faith that made her a superior choice to the other candidates that also applied for the position?

First of all, Faith understood what it meant to play rhythmically. There is nothing more frustrating than having to direct a choir when the primary source of the problems lies with the pianist not being able to stay within a steady beat! Faith understood that regardless of whatever struggle she was having, she could not stop the overall rhythm to fix her little piano problems. Whenever she had to cut out for a measure or two, she always came back in exactly when the rest of the choir and instruments had reached that same beat. She understood the overarching role of rhythm in her playing.

Secondly, Faith could sight read music well. Faith was not the technically most advanced pianist that applied for the choir pianist position. She was not technically advanced enough to be playing Beethoven Sonatas or Chopin Etudes, for example. But if we handed her any music on the level of Burgmuller’s Ballade or easier, she could play it well enough to sing to on a first playing, and well enough to rehearse with after playing it through two or three more times. Faith also understood what details she could leave out until she had had more time to practice, and what elements needed to be included in her playing in order for the accompaniment to make sense to the singers. Thus, she could selectively eliminate the harder elements that were not essential to the overall structure of the song.

Faith could play in any key just as easily as any other one. Faith had been taught by a multikey system, and she had mastered the fundamental skills in each of the keys: the scale, I IV I V7 I cadence, basic chord inversions, and a two-octave arpeggio in each one. It did not faze her much when the song modulated from Bb into B major. Unlike some of the other applicants, she did not falter when I put a piece in the key of B major in front of her to sight-read.

During concerts, it was sometimes necessary to have Faith play background music that enabled the performers to walk to the platform or back to their seats without dead silence. Faith was very capable of taking the theme of the prior song and improvising a little interlude to cover such situations. I even remember one audience member asking me, “How does your pianist always know exactly how long each interlude song should be? She always ends at exactly the right time!” Well, she could end it anytime she liked, because she was making it up as she went!

What many students liked was the fact that Faith could transpose a basic accompaniment to another key if the singer needed it. OK, she had to pencil in some chord symbols in the target key sometimes, but once she had done that, she could put together an acceptable accompaniment in the new key and make it sound good. That saved a couple of my boys, who just could not sing in some of the ridiculous keys that the sheet music sometimes wanted them to sing in.

One girl asked Faith to accompany her on a piece that was written for a choir. Everything went along fine until we got to the ending of the arrangement, where the choral arrangement had a big bombastic ending that did not make sense when sung by a soloist. The singer, Faith, and I worked out an alternate ending that sounded much better in a solo situation. Faith was able to improvise the accompaniment without having to have every note written out for her.

So what were the other pianists like? A couple of them were fairly good at performing rehearsed written music. If I were the type of director that always gave the pianist ample time to prepare all music for rehearsal (which I am not!), those pianists would have worked out OK. However, they would have had to be furnished with written music for everything we did, which would have placed much more of a burden on me to produce it.

The other candidates had one or more of the following problems:

- They had problems holding a consistent beat. Some of them would become totally unnerved when they made significant mistakes and then be unable to pick up and go on from their point of error.
- They could not sight read all that well. Unless they had time to prepare each piece first, they could not sit down and just play a useable accompaniment at sight. For some of them, the necessary rehearsal time would have involved at least a week of preparation.
- Keys other than C G F and D unnerved them. One girl walked out of the audition when asked to sight read something in the key of E major.
- If asked to “make up an interlude” to connect two songs, most of them froze.
- Each of them were given a hymn in G major to play, which all could do, and then were asked to play the same hymn in F major. Most of them could not do so.
- I asked them to play I IV I V7 I, which is a pattern I use to do vocal warm-ups with, in each of the twelve keys, going upwards chromatically. Only a few of them could do that. I also asked them to play a two-octave scale, right hand alone, in each of several keys: E, Ab, B, and Db. I was quite surprised to discover how many could not do that.

To audition for the job, every student had to be able to play the Burgmuller Ballade. Every single student could do so reasonably well. They were given that information weeks ahead of time, and they were allowed (encouraged) to practice that piece as much as they wanted. Therefore, 100% of the applicants were mid-intermediate level students at a minimum. But what a difference in their preparations!

In the paper today, there is a restaurant in our area looking for a pianist to play each night. The pianist would be required to perform classical music, with or without sheet music, of his or her own choosing, for four hours each evening, using each piece no more than twice. It pays reasonably well for the four hours work too. Nevertheless, it was the only listing that enabled the pianist to focus on the performance of written music. Every other listing for a pianist or keyboardist focused on the other musicianship skills that Faith had and the others did not!

I believe we do our students a tremendous disservice if the focus of our teaching is solely on performance of written music. Do not misunderstand here; I am not advocating NOT teaching performance repertoire. It is just that repertoire cannot be the sole object of our teaching if we are going to produce students who will be able to make music an integral part of their lives. I stand proudly on the ground of “comprehensive musicianship” as the only acceptable philosophy for training young musicians. Any approach to teaching that does not have that as a fundamental goal is, in my opinion, seriously flawed right at its very root.

A normal piano student, practicing regularly and completing assignments properly, can reach the level of the Burgmuller Ballade in about five years. But what else will those same students have to show for their five years of work?

I believe we can outline the following goals for a student to accomplish during the first four years of piano study. There are quite a number of piano courses currently in active publication that have these goals. None of them is inaccessible to students of average or better ability, so these are very reasonable, attainable goals:

- The ability to sight read at the level of the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook, the easy Beethoven Dances, or the Kabalevsky Op 39 pieces
- A basic ability to play a two-octave scale in all major and minor keys, at least hands separately, but preferably hands together, both parallel and contrary
- The ability to play a I IV I V7 I cadence in each major and minor key
- The ability to sight read “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” harmonized with tri-chords, in all twelve major keys
- The ability to transpose “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” with harmony to all twelve major keys
- The ability to play a piece in any major or minor key with practice
- The ability to improvise an introduction, interlude, and coda for a song of early-intermediate difficulty
- The ability to accompany a group with a piece of choral music of moderately easy caliber that the student has not had prior rehearsal with, keeping a fundamental beat going in spite of mistakes
- The ability to perform that same piece with confidence and rhythmic security with practice

The following piano courses would all meet all of the above goals during the elementary and early intermediate levels (by the end of level four):

- Albergo – Celebrate Piano
- Bastien Music through the Piano
- Bastien Piano Basics
- Bastien Piano Library
- George – Artistry at the Piano
- David Carr Glover Method for Piano (using the Chords and Keys component)
- David Carr Glover Piano Library (using the Chords and Keys component)
- Gillock – Piano All the Way
- Noona Comprehensive Piano Library
- Noona Basic Piano/Noona Digital Piano Method
- Noona – Mainstreams Piano Method
- Olson – Music Pathways
- Pace – Music for Piano
- Pace – Music for Keyboard
- Snell – Piano Town

If we tack on a couple more years, the following courses also meet this goal by level five or six:

- Alfred Basic Piano Course
- Clark – The Music Tree
- Faber – Piano Adventures

I repeatedly am asked which methods I can recommend for elementary students. I consistently endorse the fifteen in the first list. When it all comes down to the end of the day, which of the courses are going to produce the kinds of students that I am going to want to pick for my real life musicians? The rest can go stand in line at the restaurant with their sheet music for Fur Elise!