

By Kristin Elgersma, NCTM

Teaching The Music Of Our Time

Contemporary Classical Piano Music For Students Of All Ages

I began studying the piano at age 4 in a small town, in the middle of Iowa farmland. It probably will not come as a shock when I confess that in my formative musical years, I neither played nor listened to a great deal of contemporary classical piano music. I would also guess I am not alone in this confession, but that the majority of pianists across the United States could make a similar claim. It is generally understood that piano students, whether young beginners or conservatory-trained advanced performers, do not typically study the classical music of our time.

A 1993 dissertation study by Colleen Hunter¹ supports this. From 1960 to 1991, Hunter found that the most frequently performed 20th-century composers in university

degree recitals were Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff and Bartók—creators of wonderful music, but not particularly contemporary to our present time.

This deficiency begins early. Piano exam syllabi, anthologies and competition lists often do not include many truly contemporary pieces. For example, the Illinois State Achievement in Music (AIM) syllabus draws heavily from works of Bartók, Kabalevsky, Khachaturian and Prokofiev for its contemporary performance requirements. While high-quality pieces, they do not represent the current variety of contemporary styles. Additionally, AIM levels 1A through 8 allow students to perform *either* a romantic *or* a contemporary piece, allowing students to bypass contemporary works until high school. This begins a vicious cycle, with young pianists eventually teaching their own students in this same way.

I did not explore truly contemporary music until I began my doctoral study. One day, while watching a documentary on the 2001 Van Cliburn competition, I saw an excerpt of George Crumb's *A Little Suite for Christmas*. The audience was transfixed by the eerie sounds of muted strings, and so was I. I ordered the score and began making my way through the unfamiliar landscape of Crumb's sound and notation.

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My audiences and students were uniformly engaged by this new music. I began to search for ways to introduce my students to contemporary composition and found that much of the standard “contemporary” pedagogical repertoire for piano was written in the first half of the 20th century. I was seeking truly contemporary music, which I consider to be works and styles common after about 1970—after, as Grove Music Online notes, “Modernism was in retreat.”²

As I searched, I found an overwhelming lack of satisfying contemporary additions to the American pedagogical repertoire. Collections by Samuel Adler, Seymour Bernstein, Mary Elizabeth Clark and Walter and Carol Noona were mostly written around 30 years ago and are outdated and somewhat unappealing to me.

The FJH Publishing Company has tried to remedy this with a series of *Contemporary Keyboard Editions*, writing, “Too often both students and teachers get discouraged with contemporary compositions because of their avant-garde sound. This series addresses that concern by providing excellent music that is both contemporary and intuitively musical.”

Two recent additions, *Contemporary Collage, Music of the 21st Century, Vol. 1, Book 2*, and *Outside the Box* by Kevin Olson and Wynn-Anne Rossi, include many wonderful intermediate pieces, discussed in more detail below.

Though it is sometimes difficult to find accessible, engaging new music for students, it is important for us to champion this cause. Students enjoy performing contemporary music and have not developed the aversion to it that plagues many adults. When I first showed a 7-year-old how to strum, pluck and strike the strings inside the piano, he smiled and said “It’s like two instruments in one!”

In preparing future generations to perform piano literature that spans four centuries, instructors must question the concentration on only three centuries worth of materials. Knowing how to access good, likeable contemporary music, knowing how to play and teach this music and moving beyond what is typically thought of as contemporary music—the not so well-loved atonal and serial styles—and discovering other contemporary idioms are keys to incorporating contemporary works into student’s repertoire.

Characteristic Techniques

Compositional techniques in contemporary music are enormously varied, and in choosing some, I will inevitably

neglect others. The five major areas of compositional style I believe are most relevant to pianists are:

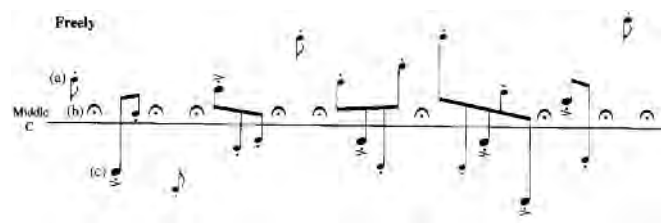
1. Notation/Organization
2. Extended Techniques
3. Sonority
4. Minimalism and Post-Minimalism
5. Continued Expansion of Music’s Language

Notation/Organization

Graphic Notation

Since 1950, graphic or unusual notation has become increasingly common in contemporary music. In this freest of styles, composers no longer use a traditional staff system, eliminating conventional pitch and length indications. Instead, lines, blocks or circles represent sound.

This technique works well for young students. For example, in “Popping Corn,” by Stephen Chatman, you can see that pitches are approximate, and volume is represented by the size of the note-heads.



Opening of “Popping Corn” from *Amusements, Book 2* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The actual music of the piece is different every time, and the freedom in pitch allows a focus on sound and dynamics. To encourage this, you might begin away from the piano, asking a young student to represent the notes verbally by making low, high, loud or quiet popping sounds as indicated by the score. When these “pops” are transferred to the keys, the student should make a crisp popcorn sound—a good lesson in articulation and listening.

Aleatoric Music

Aleatoric music is based on chance and/or choice. The most common form allows the performer to choose certain events and play them in any order. These works are represented as disconnected staves or graphic symbol.

Section of "Broken Music Box" from *Amusements, Book 2* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

"Broken Music Box" is a lovely beginning piece. Once again, each performance is different because the student can choose to play the boxes in any order, with any number of repeats. Its bell-like tonality provides an attractive introduction to aleatoric music.

A more advanced example is British composer Andrew Toovey's "Still." The performer chooses from 41 melodic snippets and can also choose whether to harmonize by adding left-hand drones.

Section of "Still," by Andrew Toovey: from *Spectrum: 20 Contemporary Works for Solo Piano*, compiled by Thalia Myers. © 1996 by The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. Reproduced by permission of ABRSM.

Because the character of each snippet is similar, the piece takes on a minimalist feel, exhibiting a delicate beauty. "Still" requires a mature musicality, even though it is not technically challenging. My early-advanced student struggled to know if his performance was "right." This is a different experience than performing Chopin, Beethoven or other music with centuries of performance tradition.

Improvisation

While improvisation is not a new technique for musicians, it is common in contemporary composition. Young students enjoy improvisation and don't yet have the tendency to self-edit or feel uncomfortable with their creations.

"Kangaroo Parade" supports this enthusiasm with exuberant improvisation based on a consistent, rollicking rhythm.

Example of style:

Example of style, "Kangaroo Parade" from *Amusements, Book 1* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

When teaching this piece, I asked my student to jump across the keyboard range, saying "Hop-a, Hop-a..." He created fast and slow kangaroos, old kangaroos, babies, black-key kangaroos, kangaroos going backwards and many more.

Stephen Chatman's late-intermediate piece "Earthquake" uses improvisation to represent the chaotic sounds after an earthquake.

Improvisational section, "Earthquake" from *Amusements, Book 3* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Many contemporary pieces include brief segments of improvisation, allowing the student to develop improvisational skill without becoming overwhelmed by musical possibilities.

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Extended Techniques: Inside The Piano, Clusters, Auxiliary Sounds

Contemporary composers also are known for their explorations into *how* the piano is played. Since the early years of the 20th century, many extended playing techniques have been developed, with musicians playing on the strings or frame of the instrument.

“Mountain Voices,” by Eloise Ristad, is an early-intermediate introduction to these techniques. The performer bounces a pencil eraser on the strings to create a melody,

x or √ indicates notes to be played on strings with the pencil eraser. Play very slowly and thoughtfully, enjoying the sounds.

ELOISE RISTAD

Hold the damper pedal down throughout the piece.

Opening of “Mountain Voices” by Eloise Ristad from *Contempo 2: An Introduction to 20th Century Idioms for the Pianist*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Clark. Copyright 1974 by Myklas Press. Used with permission.

then drops the pencil, so the strings buzz when struck.

Grand piano: drop the pencil or ruler on top of the strings next to lowest section. Let it bounce. Upright piano: strum these strings with the ruler.

Grand piano: leave the pencil or ruler on the strings so that each stroke on the low strings sets up vibrations.

Continue to hold damper pedal down as sounds die away.

Ending of “Mountain Voices” by Eloise Ristad from *Contempo 2: An Introduction to 20th Century Idioms for the Pianist*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Clark. Copyright 1974 by Myklas Press. Used with permission.

A late-elementary piece, Emma Lou Diemer’s “Echo Dream,” mixes flowing arpeggios with an easy extended technique: muting the strings with the hand.

Slowly, freely (♩ = 53)

Dampen strings in front of tuning pins^a

Measures 1–4 of “Echo Dream” from *Reaching Out, for Solo Piano* by Emma Lou Diemer. Copyright 2004 by The FJH Music Company Inc. Used with permission.

Students are fascinated by this unfamiliar world of sound. One of my students created an extended technique composition using things he had in his pocket: a plastic snake was laid on the strings, causing them to rattle; paper clips were attached to strings; a quarter was used to gently strum; and a pencil eraser was wedged between strings, creating a bongo-like thump.

Teachers should be familiar with common inside the piano techniques, such as:

- Strumming the strings while silently holding down keys.
- Plucking, always depressing the pedal.
- Placing something on or in the strings, such as a piece of paper. Try this with standard repertoire—a student playing a Bach Minuet will be surprised to find that paper buzzing against the strings creates an instant harpsichord.
- Striking the strings or the steel crossbar with the hand or a mallet.
- Creating harmonics by touching the strings lightly behind the dampers or in the middle of the string, while playing those notes with the other hand.

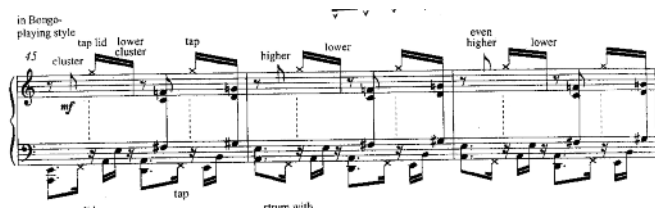
Auxiliary Sounds

A related technique is the addition of auxiliary sounds: vocal expressions, clapping, stomping or striking the instrument. Generally, auxiliary sounds are indicated by an “x,” and include instructions from the composer.

Many pieces of various levels include tapping or knocking, such as “Monkey Business” for beginners,

Measures 1–3 of “Monkey Business” from *Amusements, Book 1* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

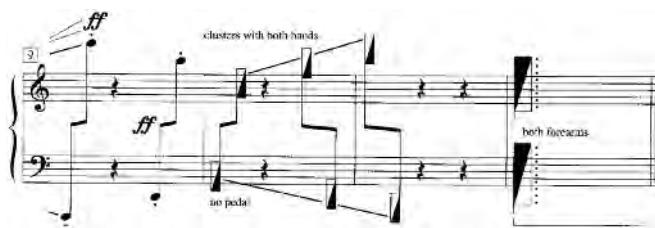
or “Rhythms from the North Country” for early-advanced students, which uses auxiliary sounds and inside the piano techniques to create a bongo-like groove.



Measures 29–30 of “Rhythms from the North Country” by Gwyneth Walker. Copyright 1987 by E.C. Schirmer Publishing. Used with permission.

Clusters

Many contemporary pieces include clusters, which are formed by playing adjacent keys—from a few keys played with the fingers to enormous blocks of sound played with the entire forearm. This is fun for all ages—even beginners can create a huge sound with clusters, as in “Freak Out.”



Ending of “Freak Out” from *Amusements, Book 2* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Many pieces for older performers, such as *Amiable Conversation* by Henry Cowell, also gain rhythmic drive through clusters.

Sonority: Focus On Sonority And Color, Pedal, Sympathetic Vibrations

As extended playing techniques opened up new sound possibilities, many composers became increasingly interested in sonority, color and evocative musical language. One common technique is creating sympathetic vibrations in the strings. The pianist silently depresses keys with one hand while playing with the other or holds down keys with the sostenuto pedal while playing with both hands.

Stephen Chatman’s “Halloween Trick” is an easy example of this sound.



Measures 1–3 of “Halloween Trick” from *Amusements, Book 1* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

When my student began “Halloween Trick” he had not learned about sharps, so I taught by rote. Once he memorized the hand position, it was easy for him to read by interval.

Two intermediate pieces using sympathetic vibration can be found in the previously mentioned FJH Contemporary Keyboard Collections. “Ring Rhythms,” by Wynn-Anne Rossi, switches silently held notes back and forth between the hands.



Measures 1–3 of “Ring Rhythms” by Wynn-Anne Rossi, from *Outside the Box: Ten Contemporary Solos* edited by Phyllis Lehrer (Copyright 2008 by The FJH Music Company, Inc.) Used with permission.

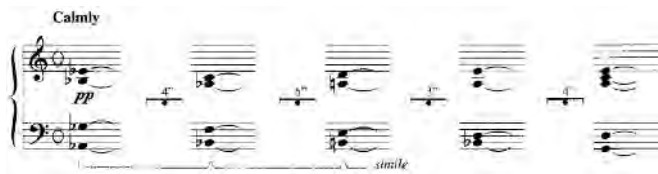
“Solar Flares,” by Kevin Olson, conjures up images of swirling suns, stars and planets.



Opening and middle section of “Solar Flares” by Kevin Olson from *Contemporary Collage: Music of the 21st Century, Vol. 1, Book 2* edited by Helen Marlais. Copyright 2008 by The FJH Music Company, Inc. Used with permission.

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“Earthquake,” by Stephen Chatman, is another intermediate piece. Previously mentioned for its use of improvisation, it exhibits an evocative soundscape common to contemporary composition, with tolling chords,



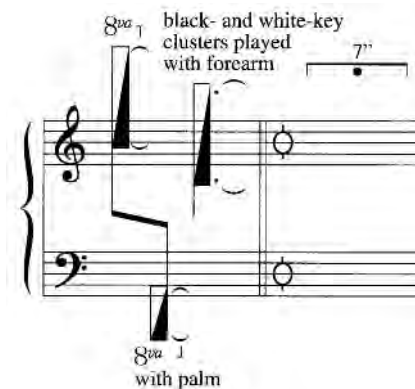
Opening of “Earthquake” from *Amusements, Book 3* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

swirling patterns,



Middle section, “Earthquake” from *Amusements, Book 3* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

and forceful clusters.



Middle section, “Earthquake” from *Amusements, Book 3* by Stephen Chatman. © Copyright 1989, 2005, The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

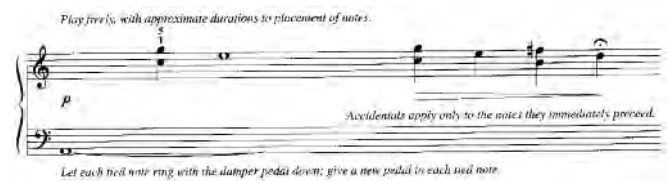
These pieces are wonderful teaching tools, encouraging students to listen, engage emotionally and be dynamically expressive.

Minimalism And Post-Minimalism

Minimalism has been hugely influential in American music and was developed in the 1960s, with experimental pieces by Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Phillip Glass. Minimalist compositions feature repetition, restricted pitch and rhythmic materials and static harmony over a long duration.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, composers responded to this by developing post-minimalism: music with minimalism’s steady beat and diatonic tonality, but with ideas from many musical sources. As post-minimalist composers work in shorter forms, these pieces are more feasible in performance. Students relate well to the post-minimalist sound, as it is often similar to pop or movie music.

An early level example of this style is “Open Spaces,” by Kevin Olson.



Opening of “Open Spaces” by Kevin Olson, from *Outside the Box: Ten Contemporary Solos* edited by Phyllis Lehrer. Copyright 2008 by The FJH Music Company, Inc. Used with permission.

“Water Droplets,” by Wynn-Anne Rossi, is an intermediate composition. It was challenging for my student to find patterns, as the music wanders freely over the keyboard; however, its nostalgic beauty is worth the effort.



Measures 1–2 of “Water Droplets” by Wynn-Anne Rossi, from *Contemporary Collage: Music of the 21st Century, Vol. 1, Book 2*, edited by Helen Marlais. Copyright 2008 by The FJH Music Company, Inc. Used with permission.

Morris Pert's "Corona" is an energetic early advanced piece that features post-minimalist characteristics of steady, repetitive motives and diatonic tonality in a fiery setting.



Measures 1–3 of "Corona" from *Voyage in Space: 20 Pieces for Solo Piano* by Morris Pert. Copyright 1978 by Josef Weinberger Ltd. Used with permission.

Continued Expansion Of Music's Language: Harmony, Rhythm, Meter (Changing, Unmetered)

No discussion of contemporary composition would be complete without mentioning the continual expansion of musical language. Many people assume that all new music is written in the harmonically confusing style associated with atonality and 12-tone technique. While developments in the harmonic and tonal system in the 20th century did lead to an unprecedented exploration of dissonance, composers today draw from centuries of inspiration. Students should understand that atonality does not characterize all contemporary music.

The 20th century also saw developments in rhythm and meter, as can be seen in many of the previous pieces. Shifting accents, changing meters and polymeter are used to create unpredictable patterns and metric ambiguity.

A beginning example with changing meter is from Samuel Adler's *Gradius I*.



Measures 1–6 of "No. 9 Happily and Quite Fast" from *Gradius, Book 1* by Samuel Adler. © Oxford University Press Inc., 1971. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

Two final recommended pieces are for more advanced students. William Albright's "Robot Drummers from Hell" features meter change, dissonance and moments of elementary improvisation in a toccata-like setting. "Rebellion," written by Lajos Huszár for the *Tarka-Barka* collection, is an impressive work that brings together a number of contemporary techniques: clusters, changing meter, expanded harmonic language and dramatic character changes. An effective performance requires a strong sense of virtuosic showmanship.

Conclusion

It is both a privilege and a responsibility that we, as musicians, are able to engage with the music of our time—a privilege in that we have the opportunity to be in an ongoing conversation with composers and audiences, and a responsibility in that we have the means to present this music to those around us. I hope this introduction to some of the best contemporary pedagogical music available will inspire you and your students to seek new sounds, and you will be richly rewarded for doing so. ♪

Notes

1. Hunter, Colleen M. 1993. A study of repertoire performed in degree recitals by piano performance majors at selected U.S. schools of music. DMA thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City.
2. Botstein, Leon. "Modernism." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/40625> (accessed November 13, 2010).

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BONUS BYTE

For more information about common, inside the piano techniques, see Adam Bowles's extended piano technique website: <http://www.lunanova.org/PianoET/>.

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