

# Studio piano teaching in Australia: An exploration of the teaching materials and practices used by teachers for older beginner piano students

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the results of an anonymous survey completed by 239 Australian piano teachers in relation to the teaching materials and practices used by teachers with piano students aged 12-17, older beginners. The survey, which is part of a broader study investigating constructivism in music education, explores teacher choices and opinions of published teaching materials and teacher practice when teaching older beginner piano students.

Research investigating older beginner piano students, teaching materials and teaching practice is scant. Studies investigating studio piano teaching has primarily focused on children (under 11 years of age), tertiary students and adult learners with a significant proportion of these conducted outside Australia.

The survey asked participants, who were all studio piano teachers within Australasia, a range of questions related to the choice of, and reasons for using different teaching materials when teaching older beginners. Teaching practices were explored through specific questions that included the teacher's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of various teaching materials, approaches to teaching older beginners and the areas of curriculum missing from currently published resources.

Analysis of the survey results found that the choices of teaching materials and teaching practices of Australian studio piano teachers were motivated by a deep commitment to student progress, a strong desire for the continued enjoyment of learning and an awareness of effective pedagogy.

**Keywords:** older beginner, teaching materials, teaching practice

## Introduction

This paper discusses the results of an anonymous survey completed by 239 Australasian piano teachers in relation to the teaching materials and practices used by teachers with older beginners, students aged 12 to 17 years. The survey, which is part of a broader study investigating constructivism in music education, explores teacher choices and opinions of published teaching materials when teaching older beginner piano students.

Research investigating the pre-tertiary, one-one piano lesson is scant (Klopper & Power, 2012; Zhukov, 2004). The majority of this research has been conducted outside Australia and primarily focused on children aged 11 years and under, tertiary students and adult learners (Carey & Lebler, 2012; Chen, 2013; Chmurzynska, 2012; Daniel, 2006; Yang, 2015). Studies examining studio piano teaching related to the older beginning piano student, aged 12 to 17 years is almost non-existent (Muck, 2009).

The survey sought to determine the preferred

teaching materials selected by Australian teachers when teaching older beginners. Teachers from every State and Territory in Australia were invited to participate facilitating a random sample of the piano teaching cohort. Participants were contacted via the Australasian Facebook Hub, the Music Teacher Associations, the Association of New South Wales Regional Conservatoriums, public websites and tertiary institutions. The survey was voluntary, administered through SurveyMonkey and conducted from November 2018 to February 2019.

## Survey Design

The survey included 21 closed-ended questions that collected demographic information pertaining to the participants' age, location (by State or Territory only), number of years teaching, studio composition and size, music and teaching qualifications and preferred teaching materials. Eight open-ended questions invited participants to; elucidate the reasons for their choice of teaching materials, offer opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of selected teaching materials, outline some of the ways chosen resources were used by teachers and suggest areas of research that would be useful.

SurveyMonkey recorded the number of participant responses for each question. This paper will focus on the data accrued from participant answers to the questions specifically related to teaching materials created for beginner piano students aged twelve to seventeen years.

## Analysis

Content analysis provided a reliable process for making replicable, valid inferences from the participant responses (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). An initial analysis utilised summative content analysis, which involved counting and categorising all words of the same or similar meaning (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2004). Common themes and categories were derived inductively from the data (Hsieh

& Shannon, 2005). Each answer was then re-examined using conventional content analysis. The application of conventional content analysis involved data immersion as the survey data was read repeatedly, word by word allowing patterns to emerge (Mayring, 2004). A third examination of the data using directive content analysis and the theory of constructivism was conducted. Repeated study of the data in combination with the application of three forms of content analysis aimed to achieve consistent and rich interpretations of the data (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; White & Marsh, 2006). Researcher assumptions were moderated by multiple examinations of the data and respondent bias mitigated by the anonymity of the online survey format, which reduced the risk of participants answering to please the researcher (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

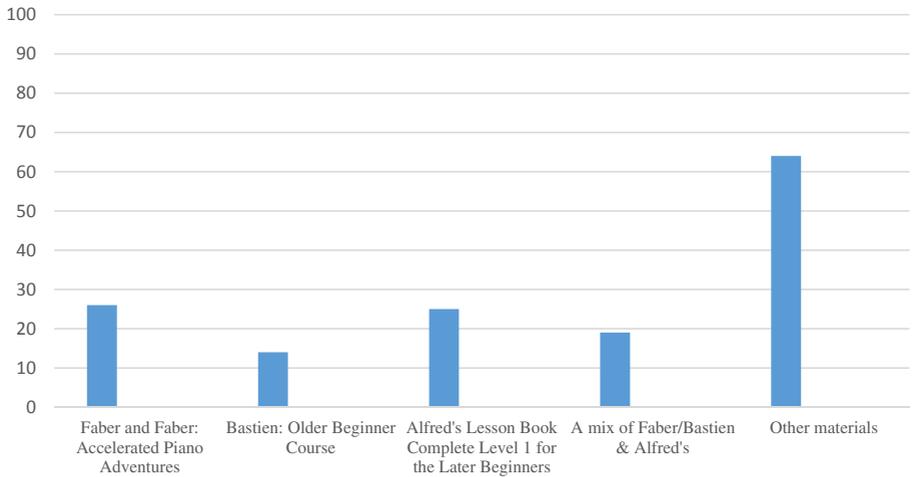
## Survey Results

Two hundred and thirty-seven Australian piano teachers and two from New Zealand responded to the 29 question survey. Questions 8 to 18 and 29 identified and explored the preferred teaching materials used by piano teachers with older beginners.

### Preferred teaching materials

Participants were invited to indicate their preferred materials for teaching older beginners. Five choices were provided:

1. *The Accelerated Piano Adventures (For the Older Beginner)*; Faber and Faber
2. *The Older Beginner Piano Course, Lesson Book*; Bastien
3. *The Complete Level 1 (For the Later Beginner)*; Alfred's
4. A mix of *The Accelerated Piano Adventures (For the Older Beginner)* by Faber and Faber; *The Older Beginner Piano Course, Lesson Book* by Bastien and *The Complete Level 1 (For the Later Beginner)* created by Alfred's
5. Other materials

**Figure 1: Australian piano teachers' preferred teaching materials for beginners aged 12 to 17 years.**

*The Accelerated Piano Adventures* and the Alfred's *Lesson Book, Complete Level 1* were preferred by 26% and 25% of participants respectively and favoured over the 13% who chose Bastien, *The Older Beginner Piano Course*. The majority of teachers (64%), used other materials and 19% preferred a mix of Faber and Faber, Bastien and Alfred's. Figure 1 summarises the participants' preferred teaching materials for beginners aged 12 to 17 years.

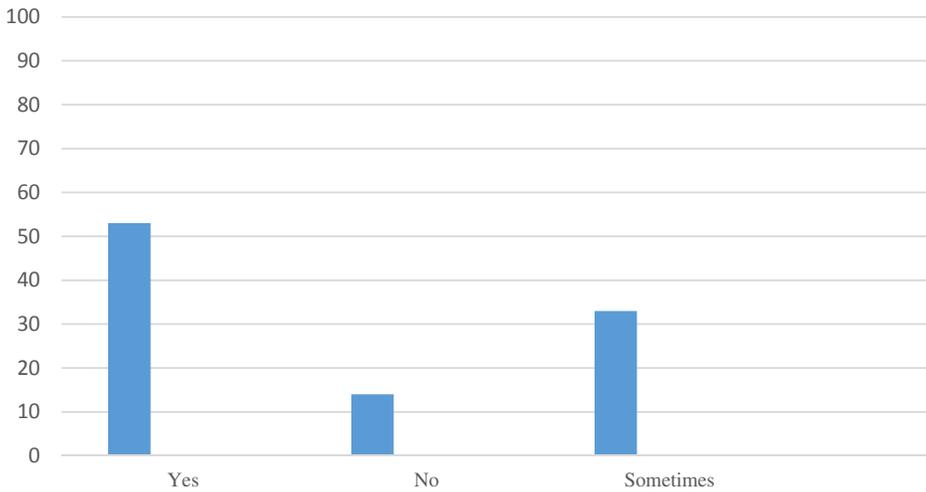
Teachers were asked to itemise the other teaching materials they used with older beginners. Many responses were vague and descriptive, for example: *a wide variety*, *the use of my own arrangements of songs*, and *internet resources*. Several participants mentioned *Piano Pronto* without identifying to which of the many *Piano Pronto* books their answer referred. The *Supersonics Method* by Daniel Mc Farlane and the *Hal Leonard Adult Piano Course* were often cited. Other comments related to the inclusion of chords, lead sheets, popular, jazz and film repertoire. Despite the ambiguity of many comments, responses reveal that most teachers did not restrict individual students to one set of teaching materials.

### Teachers' use of chosen teaching materials: Sequence

Participants were asked whether they followed the sequence provided in their preferred teaching materials for older beginners. The majority of teachers, 53%, indicated that they always used the chosen teaching materials in the order set by the creators. Almost a third, 34%, sometimes followed the order provided in the teaching materials and 14% never followed the order set by the authors. Figure 2 provides a summary of participant responses.

Teachers who altered the sequence of learning presented in the teaching materials were invited to explain why they changed the sequence of learning from that set out in their chosen teaching materials. Many respondents stated that the sequence of learning was altered in order to accommodate the student's repertoire choice. Participants emphasised the importance of choosing repertoire that the student found *relevant* and *engaging*.

Teachers also presented various pedagogical explanations for a departure from the sequence provided in the chosen teaching materials.

**Figure 2. Do you use the teaching materials in the order provided in the book?**

The addition of extra material to reinforce skills or accelerate the student and the skipping of material to accommodate prior learning and student progress was mentioned frequently. Other comments referred to the inclusion of improvisation, chord charts, pop music and the importance of stimulating student motivation. Responses illustrate that teachers considered the needs, motivation and musical development of the older beginner when choosing and utilising teaching materials.

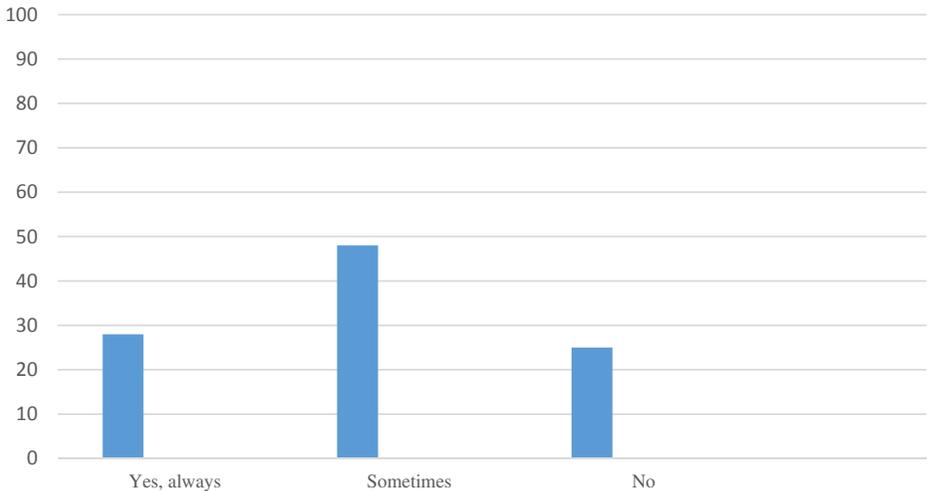
### Teachers' use of chosen teaching materials: Using multiple books

Teachers were asked to indicate whether they used more than one set of teaching materials or method books when teaching older beginner students. Almost half the participants, 48%, stated that they sometimes used more than one book. Other responses were split between 28% of participants who always used more than one book, and 25% who never used more than one book with older beginners, refer to Figure 3.

Teachers were asked to explain their rationale for using more than one set of materials with older beginner students. Repertoire, student motivation and pedagogy featured prominently in the explanations provided by participants. Comments cited the importance of using *relevant, appealing repertoire*. The need to supplement repertoire options with popular and jazz styles were noted alongside unclear statements such as, *variety* and *genre*. Generalised comments related to pedagogy included: *meeting the needs of the students, enabling student progress, remediating or challenging students and technical development*. Participant responses suggest that the teacher's use of multiple books or parts of books is guided by teacher objectives to meet the needs and interests of each student.

### Teachers' chosen teaching materials: Different students, different teaching materials

Teachers were asked whether alternative teaching materials were chosen to accommodate the varied needs of different students. The majority,

**Figure 3: Do you use more than one method book with older beginners, aged 12-17?**

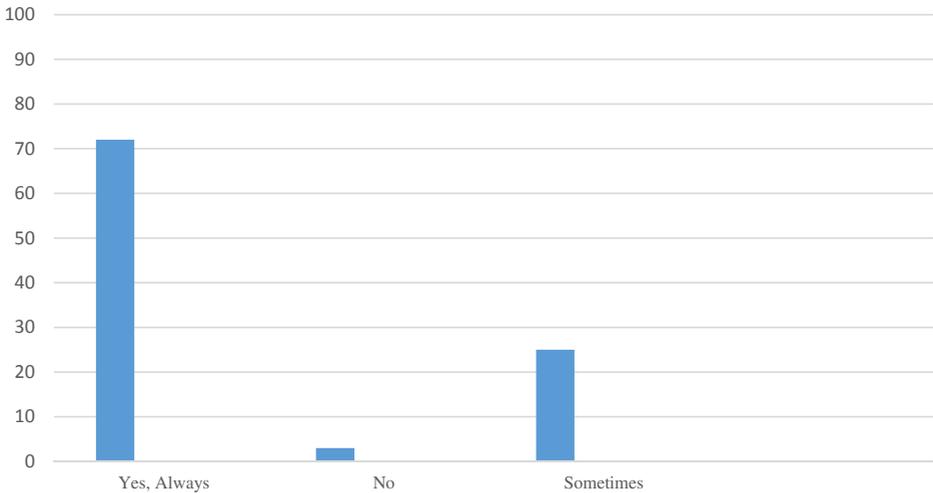
72%, stated that they rarely or never used the same materials with every student, 24% indicated that they sometimes used alternative materials for different students. Only 3% used the same materials for every student. A summary of the responses is provided in Figure 4.

Short answer responses revealed repertoire choice as a significant consideration for using a range of teaching materials to accommodate different students. *Variety* or *variety of repertoire* was mentioned without elaboration by many teachers. *Student tastes, preferences* and *interests* strongly influenced repertoire choice and almost every response cited the importance of *customising* or *tailoring* the teaching programme to *suit individual student's needs*. Smaller numbers emphasised visual presentation and the importance of age and stage appropriate materials. The need for the teaching materials to connect with individual learning styles was mentioned and reference made to student goals, motivation and engagement. Responses demonstrate an endeavour by teachers to motivate and facilitate student learning through the careful and varied choice of teaching materials.

### Strengths of teaching materials for older beginners

The strengths of the materials chosen for teaching older beginners was then explored. A range of responses from one word comments to detailed descriptions were provided. Participants identified repertoire as a strength of their preferred teaching materials. Remarks included: *good repertoire, fun pieces, variety, interesting pieces* and *real music*. Other comments referred to the *relevance* of repertoire, *meeting the needs of each student* and the inclusion of *jazz, popular and contemporary music*. A small number commented on classical repertoire. Although responses related to the positive aspects of repertoire were often unclear, comments were predominately student centric.

Another perceived strength of the teaching materials chosen by participants related to pedagogy. Preferred teaching materials were described as *logical, suitable, well-structured* and the pace at which new skills and concepts were introduced, appropriate. Participants commented favourably on the foundational skills covered

**Figure 4: Do you use different materials for different students?**

in their chosen teaching materials. A smaller proportion observed that the language used to explain musical concepts and skills was *suitable* and *easy to read*.

Other comments referenced the content of the teaching materials. Many teachers valued the inclusion of piano technique, chord playing, improvisation and aural. Some found the approach to music reading and theory effective. The inclusion of backing tracks, CDs, online audio files or video clips were considered a strength. In contrast, a small percentage of participants stated that they; *don't use method books, I write my own materials* or found the materials *too narrow, irrelevant* and *dated*.

### Weaknesses of teaching materials for older beginners

Teachers were invited to identify any weaknesses or aspects absent from their preferred teaching materials for older beginners. Some participants intimated nothing was missing. A small number were unsure, did not teach older beginners, registered not applicable, wrote their own

materials or were extremely negative about all published materials. The majority of responses deemed the quantity and quality of repertoire relevant to each student's interests and musical preferences inadequate. Comments on the dearth of songs that the *students liked, listened to and wanted to play*, concern about the lack of modern and contemporary pieces and a desire for more songs that *interest and engage students* featured prominently. Participants observed that there was little repertoire that matched the *teen* age group with the beginner skill level. Mention was made regarding the lack of Australian content.

Apart from the mention of a deficit representation of popular and jazz genres, comments related to repertoire were extremely vague. It was not clear what participants meant by a need for; *more modern pieces, more contemporary songs, more repertoire that is interesting, current music* and *impressive pieces*. Contemporary and modern appellations may describe popular songs, jazz pieces or twentieth and twenty-first century art music. Relevant, interesting and current are open to

subjective interpretations. Despite the ambiguity of these responses, the data suggests that repertoire selection is of foremost importance to teachers of older beginners.

Participants also identified weaknesses in the pedagogy of existent teaching materials. A small number commented that the materials created for older beginners are too tied to notation. Some identified the pace of books as too fast, others as too slow. The scarcity of easily available lead sheets, lack of creative exercises, need for improvisation activities, poor representation of aural and technical work featured in many responses. A few comments stressed the need for sight-reading materials and activities that promoted theoretical understanding. Overall, many teachers found areas of weakness or absence in the content, repertoire and pedagogy provided in the current teaching materials for older beginners.

### Teaching practices with older beginners

An opportunity for teachers to describe the learning experiences they used with older beginners and outline any additional teaching resources that would be useful was provided. Participants answered with either a description of their teaching practice, a list of the materials used with older students, a single word answer without qualifying the response or a list of teaching materials that would be useful for teaching older beginners.

The importance of relevant and interesting performance pieces was a significant consideration for many teachers. A need for a wider selection of popular and jazz repertoire and the scarcity of songs with which students were familiar was highlighted. A request for relatable classical music and piano duets was noted by a small group. Responses articulated the difficulty of sourcing pieces that students *like or want to learn*.

Comments regarding aspects of pedagogy were featured as participants underscored a need for additional materials to inspire and interest the

student. Reference was made to the adaptation of teaching materials by teachers to either consolidate learned skills, remediate, challenge or extend students. Some teachers mentioned the creation of their own compositions. The requisite to include aural skills, technical development, chord playing, lead sheets, improvisation, composition, theory and music reading as part of the teaching content was cited frequently.

### Other comments regarding older beginners

The final question of the survey invited teachers to provide additional comments about teaching older beginners. Participants reiterated that the teaching content should include a mix of technique, music reading, aural skills, improvisation, chords and composition. Teachers referred to the challenges of teaching older beginner piano students, identifying the disconnect between the older beginner's physical skills which often lags behind their understanding. A significant number observed that the beginner student aged twelve to seventeen learns differently from younger students. Other comments alluded to difficulty of motivating teenagers.

### Summary

A total of 237 Australian and two New Zealand studio piano teachers participated in the survey. Survey responses revealed that teachers preferred and continually sought repertoire that the student would find relevant, interesting and contemporary. The need for additional repertoire, suited to the older beginner in the jazz, popular and film genres was frequently mentioned. An overwhelming number of responses referred to repertoire, teaching content, pedagogy, student motivation and positive student outcomes. The method of approach and degree to which these areas are covered in any set of teaching materials appeared to strongly influence each teacher's choice of materials for their older beginner students.

A consensus regarding the core content essential for learning piano emerged. Aural skills, note reading, technique and theory were considered foundational for playing the piano. The need to incorporate improvisation, chord playing and composition in the piano lesson was voiced persistently.

Responses made by piano teachers exhibited a deep commitment to their students and an enthusiasm for teaching piano. Observations and statements made by participants throughout the survey reveal a cohort of teachers whose choice of teaching materials for older beginners is both considered and informed.

This study provides a portrait of pre-tertiary studio piano teaching in Australia. Survey responses indicate that the choice of teaching materials and teacher practice is motivated by an awareness of effective pedagogy and a desire to facilitate student progress, achieve positive student outcomes, motivate and inspire each student's enjoyment of learning.

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