

The Development of a Popular Piano Textbook for Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the teaching materials for popular piano for undergraduate students at regular universities. First, through a review of the literature, we found that there are few studies on popular piano teaching materials in China, and existing research is insufficiently in-depth. Academic research primarily focuses on classical piano and popular music, whereas research on popular piano mainly focuses on social research. The few popular piano teaching materials focus exclusively on amateurs. Then, through surveys and in-depth interviews with students, teachers and administrators in colleges and universities, we found that there are several key challenges and needs in popular piano teaching, including the lack of professional tutorials, insufficient support for improvisation, and the mismatch between existing resources and the specific needs of Chinese students. To address these problems, we developed a new textbook for undergraduate students of popular music, focusing on improving students' grasp of various styles, beginning with rhythm, harmony, and accompaniment, and gradually advancing their performance skills across these styles. Based on these surveys, the study recommends strengthening the curriculum, localizing instructional materials, enhancing teachers' professional development, and expanding performance opportunities for students. This study emphasizes the importance of combining technical ability with creative expression in popular music education to cultivate long-term musical creativity and performance skills.

Keywords: Popular piano education, Popular piano textbook, Popular music style performance, Textbook development.

INTRODUCTION

The construction of the popular music education system in colleges and universities must be analyzed from multiple dimensions. This is a challenging topic with good development prospects. The construction of the popular music education system in colleges and universities must be systematically analyzed from multiple aspects such as the renewal of educational concepts, the optimization of the curriculum system, the innovation of teaching methods, and the innovation of artistic practice. Only by starting from multiple aspects can a perfect popular music teaching system be constructed.

Popular piano performance is a compulsory course in the popular music curriculum system. It is both a skill course and a comprehensive course. It is a product of the combination of popular music and piano improvisation accompaniment techniques. It is widely used in the performance, singing, and teaching of popular music and school music. Liu Cong and Han Dong pointed out in "Piano Improvisation Accompaniment Tutorial": "Learning improvisation accompaniment well requires a comprehensive and solid foundation. Among them, the piano foundation, harmony foundation, and song analysis foundation are the most important and core" (Liu Cong, Han Dong, 2014).

This study takes the innovation of popular piano playing teaching methods of popular music majors in university undergraduates as the starting point, and takes college students majoring in popular music in the School of Music of the university as the experimental subjects. Following the idea of "determining the direction - raising problems - literature analysis - current situation investigation - current situation analysis - improvement strategy - summary", the research is carried out according to the following ideas: First, study the problems existing in the teaching of popular piano courses in higher normal universities and the learning needs of students; then propose the implementation method of optimizing the teaching of popular music piano courses in higher normal colleges; finally, develop a popular music piano textbook suitable for use in higher normal colleges. This article will first sort out the current research status of Chinese popular music, popular music education in Chinese universities, piano teaching, the current status of popular piano curriculum setting and implementation, and other content related to this study from a longitudinal perspective. Then, on the basis of dissecting the real background and sorting out the existing research results, from the perspective of horizontal investigation and research, we use in-depth interviews, case analysis and other methods to understand and analyze the practical problems of the popular piano course of Hunan First university and the students' needs. The learning needs are supported by relevant theories of musicology, pedagogy, curriculum and teaching theory, and the final form is to compile a popular piano book for students of Hunan First university to learn and use, to achieve the ultimate goal of improving students' popular piano playing ability and expanding their popular piano accompaniment arrangement ability.

Piano education has traditionally focused on classical piano training, often neglecting types of performance that may be more appealing and accessible to students. Currently, young students are increasingly interested in popular piano styles. However, existing teaching methods and courses may not effectively meet this demand. The challenge is to understand students' specific needs and preferences in popular piano education and adjust the curriculum to increase student engagement and learning outcomes. Without appropriate popular piano teaching materials, students' musical growth and motivation to learn may be limited, affecting their technical skill development and personal interest in piano learning.

While extensive research has been conducted on classical piano pedagogy, limited studies focus on teaching popular piano styles within a formal educational setting. There is a notable gap in comprehensive teaching models tailored for popular piano, specifically for undergraduate students in Chinese institutions. Furthermore, research on evaluating the effectiveness of popular piano textbooks remains sparse. Addressing these gaps will help in developing a specialized teaching approach that aligns with student interests, supports diverse musical skills, and enhances the overall music education framework.

This paper aims to identify problems and demands in Popular Piano Teaching and develop a Popular Piano Textbook.

METHODS

This study focuses on popular piano teaching for undergraduate students in colleges and universities, and adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to effectively achieve the research objectives. The research methods mainly include three parts: literature review, in-depth interviews, teaching material development and its evaluation.

Objective 1: Identifying Problems and Demands in Popular Piano Teaching

1. Literature Review: This study initially uses a literature review to understand the current state of popular music education, especially popular piano instruction, within China and internationally. Sources include existing research on popular music pedagogy, instructional materials, and the challenges of integrating popular music into formal music education settings. Through this review, the study will identify gaps in China's current popular piano teaching resources, focusing on areas such as methodology, curriculum limitations, and the availability of appropriate materials. This phase establishes the theoretical background for understanding the needs specific to popular music students and teachers.

Interviews: After identifying the general issues in popular piano education, in-depth interviews will be conducted with students, teachers, and college administrators within the popular music program at a university. This qualitative approach allows for an exploration of personal experiences, challenges, and expectations related to popular piano education. Open-ended questions are designed to encourage detailed responses regarding perceived shortcomings and potential areas for improvement. The interviews will be structured to gather insights into: Students' learning challenges and preferences, Teachers' instructional approaches, resources, and limitations, Administrators' support mechanisms, such as funding and resources.

Sample Selection: A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants who are actively involved in the popular music direction within the School of Music and Dance. This targeted sample provides relevant insights that directly contribute to the development of the popular piano teaching model.

Data Analysis: Qualitative data from the interviews will be analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns or unique needs that may influence the development of the teaching textbook.

3. Educational Viewpoint: This textbook summarizes the educational concepts of three educators and provides the ideological and theoretical basis and ideas for this textbook.

John Dewey, a representative of American pragmatism, an educator, psychologist and philosopher, proposed the "New Three-center" theory on the nature of education. The core idea of "Student-centered" is to take students as the main body in teaching and education, so as to achieve the expected results and achieve the set teaching goals. This textbook is based on John Dewey's educational thoughts, designed based on interviews with students, and compiled according to students' learning needs. It emphasizes student-centeredness and pays attention to students' needs and interests.

David Pawl Ausubel, an American cognitive educational psychologist, "Meaningful Learning" is an important viewpoint of Ausubel's educational psychology. His suggestion for teaching is to first teach the most inclusive, general and persuasive concepts and principles in the subject as much as possible, so that students can organize and integrate the learning content; secondly, pay attention to gradualness. This textbook adopts the teaching theory of theory first and practice later. First, students master the theoretical knowledge of the style, and then conduct advanced exercises. The exercises are written in a progressive manner from rhythm to harmony to accompaniment and then to the performance of the whole song. The understanding is deepened step by step, and the difficulty is increased to meet the teaching concept of "Meaningful Learning".

Jerome Bruner is an American psychologist and educator. He believes that learning includes three processes that occur almost simultaneously: acquisition, transformation, and evaluation. The early stage of this textbook mainly focuses on theoretical learning and advanced step-by-step learning. In the last chapter, students need to create their own works and conduct divergent transformation thinking in order to master more music of the same style. After the one-semester experiment of using the textbook, a course evaluation is conducted to test the students' improved abilities after using this textbook. This is in line with Bruner's acquisition-transformation-evaluation learning process.

Objective 2: Development of a Popular Piano Textbook

Based on the research results of Objective 1, this study will write a structured popular piano textbook for undergraduates. The textbook will meet the needs of students and focus on practical application to enhance students' skills in the field of popular music.

Lesson Plan and Course Design: The lesson plan will incorporate popular piano techniques, such as chord progressions, rhythmic patterns, and accompaniment styles related to popular music. The course design is flexible and will be adjusted according to specific needs identified during the interview phase.

Textbook Development: A new popular piano textbook will be written, containing six popular songs representing three different musical styles. Each chapter of the textbook will focus on one musical style, and each style will contain two representative songs. The exercises will include step-by-step training in rhythm, harmony, and accompaniment texture, and then to complete song performances. Finally, students will be able to design accompaniments for songs in this style and try to create them, so that students can fully develop their popular music skills and develop their creative abilities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: Identifying Problems and Demands in Popular Piano Teaching

This study aimed to identify the challenges and specific demands associated with popular piano teaching in Chinese university-level music education, with a focus on Hunan First University. Through in-depth interviews with 15 undergraduate students (from freshmen to juniors), 3 pop music instructors, and 2 academic administrators, several key conclusions were drawn regarding the state of popular piano education.

Third-year students, having completed the popular piano course, emphasized the need for independent creativity and rhythmic expression, noting a lack of technical proficiency and structured style-based etudes. They expressed a preference for popular genres such as pop, R&B, ballad, and jazz, and advocated for materials that include chord applications, improvisation training, and music theory. Second-year students, currently enrolled in the course, acknowledged improvement in their improvisational skills but shared concerns about insufficient support for developing those skills. They proposed personalized learning plans and foundational reinforcement for students with weaker backgrounds. First-year students, preparing to begin the course, highlighted goals such as being able to accompany their own singing, arrange music, and compose across various styles. They emphasized

the need for structured materials that include music theory, arrangement, practice repertoires, and both face-to-face and video-based instruction.

Teachers reported that while they strive to align their courses with student interests, the immaturity of China's popular music education system and the absence of specialized textbooks pose significant barriers. Most instructors rely on fragmented resources such as harmony and piano application tutorials, often adapted from American teaching systems. However, these are not well-suited to the needs and learning styles of Chinese students. Administrators shared their efforts to align course offerings with student interests and market trends but acknowledged the need for a more systematic curriculum and better instructional resources.

Three major issues emerged from this study: the lack of specialized teaching materials, inadequate support for improvisation and advanced skills, and a mismatch between Western materials and the cultural needs of Chinese students. The absence of standardized and progressive textbooks limits both teaching effectiveness and student development. This finding aligns with Li and Zhang (2018), who noted that Chinese music education relies on outdated or generalized materials that fail to support diverse student needs. There is a pressing need for structured, multi-level resources that integrate both technical and creative training.

In terms of improvisation, students across all levels reported difficulty developing spontaneous performance abilities. This challenge is consistent with findings by Li and Zhang (2020) and Haroutunian (2019), who emphasize that improvisation is a critical yet underdeveloped skill in music education, particularly in non-Western settings. Without focused instruction, students struggle to express their musical ideas confidently.

Lastly, the use of American materials creates a pedagogical disconnect. Liu (2019) argues that imported curricula often ignore local music culture and student preferences, resulting in disengagement. This study confirms the importance of culturally adapted teaching tools that reflect Chinese music traditions and student learning styles.

In conclusion, addressing these challenges through the development of localized, specialized teaching materials, enhanced improvisation training, and curriculum reform will significantly improve the quality of popular piano education. A professionally designed textbook that incorporates Chinese musical context and prioritizes creativity will offer a sustainable path forward.

Objective 2: Development of a Popular Piano Textbook

This section outlines the structured process of compiling teaching materials and designing instructional content for a new popular piano textbook aimed at undergraduate students majoring in popular music. The textbook not only emphasizes performance techniques and stylistic recognition but also promotes comprehensive musical practice through improvisation, arrangement, and composition. Drawing from student feedback and instructional needs, three representative musical styles—Pop Ballad, Chinese Pop, and R&B—were selected to guide students through a progression from stylistic understanding to creative application.

Designed for students across popular music disciplines—including vocal performance, instrumental studies, composition, and music production—this textbook offers practical, systematic, and culturally contextualized instruction. Popular music, being both artistic and practical, requires students to master not only performance techniques but also the creative logic of various musical styles. Therefore, the textbook adopts a progressive pedagogical approach, helping students understand core stylistic elements and gain the ability to arrange and compose music independently.

The structure of the textbook consists of four main sections: a theoretical preface and three style-specific chapters. The preface introduces essential topics such as chord notation, extended harmonies, and transitional arrangement techniques. Each stylistic chapter then follows a six-step instructional model: style overview, rhythm training, harmonic progression, accompaniment textures, performance examples, and arrangement tasks. This ensures a structured yet flexible learning process tailored to diverse learner needs.

Evaluation of the textbook involved expert reviews using Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) analysis. High agreement (IOC = 1.00) was found on items related to theoretical clarity, pedagogical method, and practical relevance. These findings support the work of Zhou and Lee (2020), who emphasized the critical role of a strong theoretical foundation in music education. Their research suggests that well-structured explanations enhance students' conceptual understanding and long-term skill development—an outcome aligned with this textbook's pedagogical approach.

However, the evaluation also identified areas for refinement. Moderate IOC scores on items related to stylistic diversity, rhythmic accuracy, and representation of genre-specific nuances indicate a need for improved content alignment with real-world musical practices. This echoes findings by Chen and Wang (2018), who noted that instructional materials must authentically reflect the stylistic and rhythmic characteristics of the genres they cover to support genuine student engagement and stylistic fluency.

Another challenge involves aligning the difficulty level of content with varying student proficiency. As Li and Xu (2019) emphasized, teaching materials that are either too advanced or too simplistic can hinder learning

outcomes. The book's effectiveness could be improved by offering graded levels of difficulty, ensuring a balance between technical progression and creative exploration.

In conclusion, while the textbook exhibits clear strengths in theoretical content and instructional design, targeted improvements in stylistic authenticity, rhythmic representation, and difficulty calibration are necessary. Integrating these refinements will create a more comprehensive and effective teaching tool. Grounded in educational theory and supported by expert validation, the revised textbook will better meet the needs of undergraduate students and enhance their ability to perform, interpret, and create within the diverse field of popular music.



(Figure1 Textbook Cover)



Figure 2. Rhythm Exercises

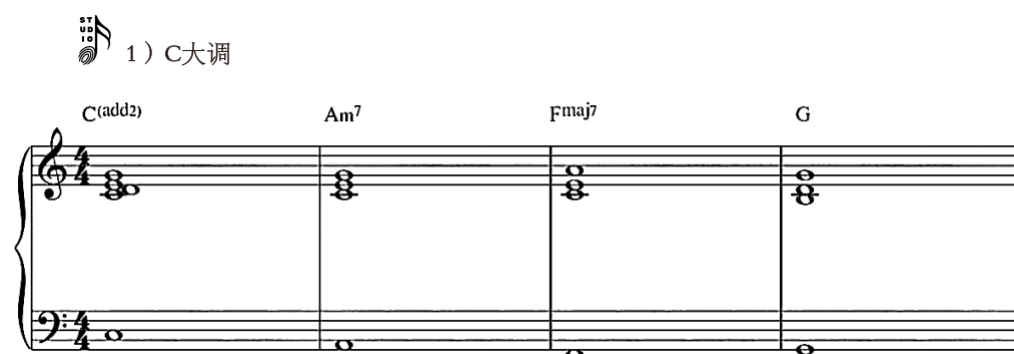


Figure 3 Chord Progressions



Figure 4 Accompaniment Textures

 练习1: The Beatles《Yesterday》。演奏时，注意演奏的速度与情绪表达。（本首歌曲的伴奏整体以柱式和弦为主。）

Yesterday

John Lennon & Paul McCartney

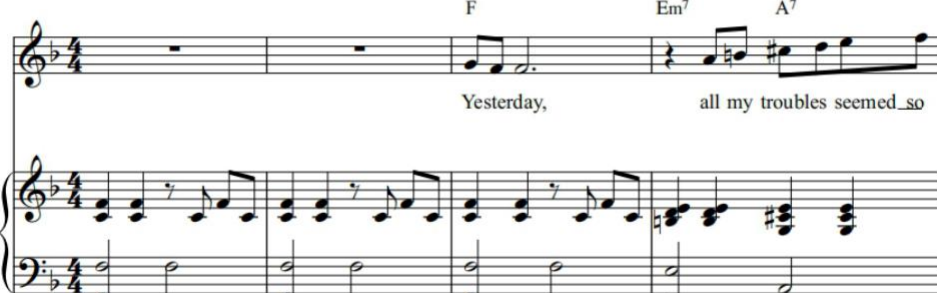


Figure 5. Performance Examples

这世界那么多人

王海涛 词
Akiyama Sayuri 曲



Figure 6 Arrangement and Composition

CONCLUSION

This study addressed a critical gap in music education by developing and evaluating a specialized popular piano teaching textbook tailored to the needs of undergraduate students in normal universities. Grounded in empirical research, including interviews with students, instructors, and administrators, the study identified key challenges in current popular piano instruction—namely the lack of professional teaching materials, inadequate support for improvisation and stylistic diversity, and a misalignment between Western educational resources and the cultural context of Chinese students.

In response to these findings, a new textbook was designed with a strong theoretical foundation and a systematic pedagogical structure. It emphasizes stylistic understanding, rhythmic accuracy, accompaniment skills, and creative development through arrangement and improvisation. Focusing on three core styles—Pop Ballad, Chinese Pop, and R&B—the textbook provides students with genre-specific exercises and performance tasks to build practical and expressive skills progressively.

Expert evaluations of the textbook revealed notable strengths, particularly in its theoretical clarity, instructional design, and integration of practical learning. However, areas for improvement were also identified, including the representation of rhythmic nuances, stylistic authenticity, and better differentiation in difficulty levels to support students at varying stages of proficiency. These findings align with established research in music education, which stresses the importance of culturally relevant, level-appropriate, and creativity-oriented materials.

Overall, the textbook serves as a meaningful step toward advancing popular piano pedagogy in China. It not only supports students in developing technical competence and creative expression but also provides a scalable model for curriculum innovation in popular music education. Future iterations of the textbook should incorporate feedback from ongoing classroom implementation and continue to evolve in response to the changing landscape of popular music and student needs.

Author Contributions

Lusi Wang was responsible for the conception and design of the study, development of research instruments, data collection, analysis, textbook design, and overall project coordination. She also led the interpretation of results and formulated the pedagogical framework for the popular piano teaching material.

Krisa Daoruang contributed to drafting and reviewing the research report, providing editorial support, ensuring academic clarity, and refining the structure of the final manuscript.

Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted independently and was not influenced by any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be perceived as potential conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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