

Get Students Excited About Learning Diverse Repertoire

With the many cultural and social changes happening in our country, teachers have expressed the need and want to create more diverse representation in their music studios through repertoire selection. Five experts share their knowledge and experience with getting their students excited about incorporating diverse literature in the teaching repertoire.

—Leah Claiborne, assistant professor of piano at University of the District of Columbia, champions piano music by Black composers in her teaching, scholarship and performances.

My primary function at the Community College of Baltimore County is to prepare students for transfer auditions so they may continue their college journey at other institutions of higher education. For this reason, the repertoire I assign is based on the audition and entrance requirements of surrounding institutions and necessarily features traditional selections along the lines of Bach preludes and fugues, classical sonatas, etudes, and larger romantic and contemporary pieces. My primary hurdle in getting students excited about learning diverse repertoire is simply making it relevant to the transfer process.

Fortunately, the contemporary component of audition requirements provides a wonderful opportunity to explore diverse repertoire. I have found that students are eager and excited when asked to research music representative of their own identity and heritage groups. It is an honor to share in their personal history through the music they choose to study. Thanks to this practical approach to diversity, my students and I have had the opportunity to explore works by under-represented groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ composers, as well as composers from a variety of backgrounds including,



for example, Bulgarian, Jewish and African American. From a pedagogical perspective, students also benefit from the unusual experience of seeing their instructor approach an unfamiliar score instead of the well-worn audition favorites. By enabling my students to incorporate lesser-known music with a strong personal connection into the audition framework, I hope to contribute toward a musical culture in which diversity is celebrated and included in the canonical repertoire.

—*Matthew Palumbo, NCTM, has a thriving piano studio in Maryland and teaches at the Community College of Baltimore County*

Growing up in Mexico, I heard fun, adventurous, and scary stories and legends from my grandparents. I treasure these memories and stories to this day. In my early music stud-

ies, I heard marvelous stories from my piano teachers as well. Alicia Monfort told stories about her lessons with Claudio Arrau and how she and her brother worked with Francis Poulenc in Paris on two-piano repertoire. Natalia Tibets told stories about her experiences studying in Russian conservatories. These stories gave me a glimpse of the world as they saw it and lived it.

Beyond simply sharing interesting experiences, storytelling gives us the opportunity to connect deeply with others through feelings of empathy. We can learn from others and strengthen or challenge our points of view. As a teacher, I have found storytelling to be very effective in cultivating excitement around new and diverse repertoire. Students are more likely to appreciate the ideas and meaning behind a piece when it has ties to a personal experience. I love telling stories that connect Latin American pieces to our culture. This

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helps bring the pieces to life and gives me an opportunity to provide a more authentic and accurate depiction of my culture.

You may feel unqualified sharing stories from cultures that are not your own. However, these stories can only be heard if they are shared, so let us each do our part to contribute to a deeper connection and understanding by telling the stories about the diverse repertoire we teach.

—*Desireé González-Miller, NCTM, is a Mexican-born, award-winning pianist and teacher serving as director of piano outreach at the University of Utah.*

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Pianists never run out of great music to play. In fact, we can't live long enough to learn half of what's available. And then there is new music and old but neglected music. Where is the time to introduce ourselves and our students to women composers, living composers, composers of color? And how do we "sell" it to our students?

My answer is, go to the internet.

I created a clickable list of seldom-played pieces—many that were already favorites of mine plus others that I discovered online. I listed only composers born in 1900 or later. For every piece on the list, I included live links to an online performance and a source of purchase.

Every student gets the link, tinyurl.com/ModernPianoMusic. They listen and send me their favorites. They all jumped into this project enthusiastically—obviously they love being in charge. Sometimes their choices are much more adventuresome than I expected, which delights me. More than half the pieces they've picked are by women, unknowns, people of color, living composers. They chose these pieces not because of who the composers were, but because of the music they heard, which, it seems to me, is the way we want it.

After the isolation of the past year, performing for live audiences is sure to raise anxiety in our students. Playing "unknown" music can turn this around. Not only can students perform without fear of comparison, but they can

bury their anxiety in the pleasure and power of being able to "sell" this beautiful music to the world.

—*Nancy O'Neill Breth, is a highly sought-after teacher, clinician and adjudicator serving students in the Maryland, Northern Virginia, and Washington, D.C. area.*

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When considering how to get students excited to learn diverse repertoire, the order of concept introduction passed down from Frances Clark comes to mind: "Sound, Feel, Sign, Name." Sound is always first in music. Getting students excited about learning diverse repertoire means getting them excited about the sounds of diverse repertoire. It is a joyful process for both teacher and students as you discover new rhythmic patterns, non-Western harmonies and surprising textures together.

My beginning students love to take musical journeys through their listening assignments. Students choose a place in the world they are curious about, and I set up a three-week listening plan to expose them to instruments and sounds from the place they selected through online videos. Students enjoy sharing what they heard in their video assignments, finding the place on a map and discussing interesting facts about the people who live there.

My intermediate students enjoy exploring music by genre. Two students, in particular, dug deeply into their chosen genres: Bollywood music and jazz that uses stride bass. The former learned a piece by ear from a Bollywood movie, and the latter wrote a report on "Fats" Waller and rearranged one of her classical pieces to have a stride bass sound.

Of course, the best ways to share the sound of diverse repertoire are to perform it, play students' new pieces for them and have students play diverse repertoire for group classes and recitals. We can set the excited tone we wish to see in our students.

—*Trevor Thornton, a native of Nashville Tennessee, enjoys an active career in piano pedagogy serving on the faculty of The New School For Music Study.*

As teachers, we regularly struggle with wondering how students will respond to certain music and then further, how can we have students be engaged and excited about the music. However, a better question might be how to get teachers excited about teaching a diverse repertoire unknown to them.

Students tend to reiterate their teachers' ideas and even their attitudes toward certain music until they are able to think critically and form their own ideas. This is perhaps the crucial reason to be mindful of the way we, the teachers, present music outside of canon for the first time. If we preface the non-canon music with doubts or a more indifferent attitude toward the music and its composer due to fear of branching out, students may follow

suit, and it will influence their outlook for a long time.

In my experience, the way I approach Chopin or Beethoven in teaching and performing is also the way I approach music I have “met” for the first time. I discuss with my students phrasing, tone production, expression and rhythmic accuracy—the same musical responses for all music. In return, we hope our students will become musicians that are convincing in what they are musically communicating regardless of whether it is something they truly love or not.

—Minju Choi Witte is an award-winning pianist and teacher based in Indianapolis whose debut album, *Boundless* (Nova Records) has garnered numerous hailing reviews. ■





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