



WHY YOU SHOULD TEACH POP MUSIC IN YOUR STUDIO

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This is Episode 122 of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. I'm Nicola Cantan and in this show, we're discussing the benefits of teaching pop music.

Welcome back, beautiful teachers. It is fantastic to be back with you again and thank you so much for joining me. If it's your first time on the show, you're extremely welcome and if you've been listening to the last 121, then an extra warm welcome to you, too.

So today, we're going to be talking about pop music, and specifically, we're going to be talking about why you should even teach it in the first place. Now, if you're a teacher who already teaches pop and you're thinking, "I might just skip this one. I already do this. I already think it's beneficial." I think you might find this useful all the same because it's going to give you some logic behind what you're doing.

Maybe you already have that but it's going to give you more reasons. So if someone questions this, if you start questioning it with yourself or lose the motivation to teach these pieces, it's going to give you that back up that you need to stay at the course to keep pop in your curriculum.

And if you're not currently teaching any pop music, I'm hoping this episode will convince you to start including it in your studio. So this week, we're going to be talking about the why. But don't worry, don't panic. Next week, we will be talking about how to teach these pieces.

So if you're already on board with it but you're struggling to find the right pop music to teach or the right versions of the sheet music or just the general approach to teaching pop, we are going to cover that next week.

Today though, we're focusing on the why. So why should you teach pop music? Well, the first reason and I think the one that will occur to many of us is that it's motivating for students. If done right, it's motivating for students.

The occasional pop piece is really important for students, especially teens and maybe adults, too to have in their back pocket. They need to have some pop music so that they can play it for people. It provides the social proof.

This is especially important as I said for teens because as we enter our teenage years, we start to shift our focus away from the family. So as a kid, pretty much for most kids even though it might not seem this way at all times, your parents are the centre of your world.

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And I see that in my students, right? In a way where I don't think their parents even realize it. But their parents can say a little thing about liking a certain piece or appreciating the work they put in and it makes a huge difference to them.

And while that still matters to teenagers, it's not everything anymore. Their centre sort of shifts towards their peers, their friend groups. It's part of becoming an independent person and we shift away from the family towards our friends, generally, as teenagers.

And let's be honest, playing a Toccata, a piece of Bach, some Beethoven, some Mozart, it's not quite going to go down super well with all groups of friends. Playing a song that they all listen to together regularly is going to go down much better.

It's going to be impressive. It's going to provide that social proof. The social proof is not just important because it makes your student feel good and it makes their friends impressed with them and maybe even want to take lessons themselves. The social proof is important because it starts to build their identity as a musician.

What I mean by that is they become known in their friend group as the person who plays piano in a good way. And that starts to build that into their identity and that's what we need for them to carry music through the teenage years, to continue playing all the way through and become a lifelong musician – the dream that we all have for our students.

The other reason pop music is so motivating is because it's just satisfying to play stuff you know. You do this, too, but maybe the stuff that you know are the Beethoven sonatas. Great.

I remember learning the Pathétique and I loved learning that. And the reason I loved it was I knew it. I knew it already. I already love the piece of music. And that's how your students feel about these pop songs. And it's really satisfying to play those things that you heard someone else play, that you've heard on your speakers, that you would listen to in your earbuds every day. To then be able to put that into action is a great feeling and we can't underestimate that.

So that's the motivating side of things and I think that's super important; possibly one of the most important areas. But there are some other hidden benefits to teaching pop music and to your students learning it that I don't think always get the credit they deserve.

The first one is that it provides opportunities for singing for your students. So often pop music, and we'll deal with this next week a little bit, but often pop music, it doesn't sound all that amazing when you play the melody because it can be like two notes.

I remember, total side note tangent, but I remember being on the Kodaly summer program that I sometimes do here. It's a Kodaly one week summer camp sort of thing for teachers.



And my teacher in that, she was riffing on translating things into solfa and she said, or my favourite, and she's saying it and it's, "Mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, re, re, re, mi, re, do," basically.

I didn't do it accurately but I would have had to do far too many mis and you would have been bored listening to them. But it was; what's it called? That's What Makes You Beautiful. I don't think that's the title. But anyway, you'll know the song and it's basically mi for the whole thing. It's the gist of that.

So a lot of pop songs are like that. They're just the same note over and over in a particular rhythm. And it's the singer's emotion and inflection and the words that make it interesting as well as all the accompaniment that's going on. And so, to play just that on the piano is super dull and not going to be satisfying because it doesn't sound like anything.

So the reason pop music can provide these opportunities for singing is because it's pretty easy to convince your student that that sounds not very good because you can play it for them and say, "I'm playing this accurately now but it's not going to sound amazing."

Play it for them and then say, "So what would really be better is if we took this accompaniment, expanded that into both hands and then you sang the melody. That's what's going to sound really good."

And as we all know, singing has huge benefits for our students to develop their aural skills, their general musicianship and so many more benefits besides including, again, helping them to become lifelong musicians because they can get involved with choirs and all sorts of singing projects if they're not embarrassed about it.

So, yes, singing may take a bit of convincing for some students who are embarrassed about it, especially those teens. But it's totally worth it and pop music can help you along the way.

Another benefit of pop music is to give your students opportunities to play with others. We all know, as pianists know that it can be lonely. It's a pretty lonely instrument. Most other musicians get to play in orchestras, singers are in choirs and we're just over there in the practice room practising by ourselves.

If you play pop music though, you have more opportunities to get involved because you don't fit into the orchestra most of the time in school. However, if there are bands going on, you can fit in but you're going to need to know how to play pop music, how to play in that style, how to play it from a lead sheet.



So it means you can get involved in bands in school or outside school with your friends. It also means that at parties, you can accompany sing-along. That might not happen at all teenage parties, but definitely, at family parties, that is happening.

And if you have some pop songs that you can add into the mix along with some Christmas carols for Christmas parties, you can be the accompanist; you can be the go-to pianist in that circumstance. And again, that builds the identity as a musician. It helps our students step into that role.

You can also end up accompanying choirs because of pop music. Now, not all choirs sing pop music but a lot of school choirs actually do, at least where I am, they do do a bit of pop. And in general, especially for like school assemblies; I know for graduations, a lot of primary school graduations, they'll have the 6th class sing.

In fact, we did that in my 6th class back when I was graduating primary school. Gosh. That's a while ago. We had to sing as part of our graduation and the songs you sing are normally pop songs. That's what we go for because it's simple, because the kids like it mainly and because it's fun for the parents, too.

So I believe we did the Beatles. But most of my students now; I'm not that old, it wasn't contemporary. But most of my students now, it tends to be a much more recent song because the teachers occlude into that.

And I've had several occasions, different students where they asked me to learn that song, if they could learn that song and then they played it for their teacher and their teacher said, "Oh my gosh. You should play while we all sing." So they end up accompanying the choir.

That's an amazing experience for them. They're so chuffed with themselves and they should be. That's awesome. And again, they become that go-to pianist for their whole class.

Another reason to teach pop music is it's an awesome opportunity for practical music theory. Music theory that is not in a workbook, that is not just prescribed by you because you say it's important, that is actually directly related to what they want to learn.

So when you learn a pop song, you can take it out and you can get them to highlight all the primary triads, right? It's going to be most of the song in most cases. They're going to highlight all of the primary triads; they're going to find all the scale passages and circle them and name the scale that was used.

We can get them to circle all the common left-hand patterns and then find them in their classical pieces, too, and match them up. You can get them to find the unexpected chords and learn about what the composer was doing there. You could also get them to name the



key and point out modulations. It depends on their level but there's going to be so much material in there for learning – for learning music theory.

And it's, yes, that exists in their classical pieces. But it feels more practical to them when it's in a pop song and they get it more. And again, you can relate that back to their classical pieces so that they understand that, actually, all of this is a lot more connected than they first thought.

Often, the best approach for pop songs is to do part of them or all of them by ear. And so, this is where pop songs can be an amazing opportunity to improve your students' aural skills. Instead of doing bland interval drills over and over, disconnected exercises, they can just work on this pop music, these pop pieces by ear, learn them by ear and naturally develop their ear.

They're going to have to if they're going to navigate through it. And yes, maybe if you play a major 2nd, they won't be able to tell you whether it's a major 2nd or a minor 3rd. But they can use it practically and that's what's more important. So pop music is an awesome opportunity for playing by ear.

It's also an awesome opportunity for your studio to stand out. I talk a lot about having a superpower as your studio as a business. And your superpower is the thing that you do that's amazing that other people don't do. It's why people seek you out above all other teachers. And pop music can be one of those things.

It can provide a smart marketing opportunity for you if other people around you don't teach this or don't teach it well. Now, teaching pop songs absolutely does not need to be part of your core identity for you to do it at all, but consider making it so.

Consider making it something that you talk about on your site and tell prospective parents about because parents are more included to this than you think. A lot of parents who seek me out do ask about this. They ask about what types of music they learn and whether they'll be able to bring in their favourite songs and they really appreciate that their kids can bring in their music because, in a lot of cases, they remember their own lessons where they couldn't.

And if you're the teacher where you welcome them to bring in their own music, that makes a big difference. And they can make you stand out from the competition if you're in a heavily teacher-populated area.

I've saved the most important benefit in my view for last – the message. When you teach pop music, when you allow your students to bring in requests or you request requests from them for pop songs and you teach in any genre they want, you're sending a message to them.



The first part of that message is that your music, their music is valuable that you think that their music counts. And too often, we send the opposite message in traditional music studios. We send a message that our music; no, it's not really our music, right? But classical music is better. It's at this level and it's what we learn here because it's more important or better or on some other plane, right?

And pop music, "That's just what you listen to at home, that's what your mom likes. Yeah, great. But we don't learn that here because it's not up to par." That's what we're saying. And we don't mean it, but when we segment off different genres of music in that way, we are sending that message.

So when we open them up, and I've been saying pop music the whole time here, but I'm really meaning if they want to learn punk, if they want to learn reggae, if they want to learn rock; whatever their preferred genre is, if we say, "You can bring in requests. You can let me know what you want to learn," we're saying that their music is just as valuable.

We're also telling them that their opinion is valid, that the music that they think sounds good, their opinion is valid. We don't overrule it. We don't say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. But that's actually not good because of these reasons that I don't like it."

Now, yeah, your student might bring in some truly awful music. But if you are open to helping them to learn it because they love it, you're telling them that they can have opinions about music, that they are musical at their core and that what they think matters.

And the last part of that message is the biggest one, which is that they matter. They matter to you. This will help you forge better connections with your students because by being open to the music that they want to learn, you're saying that they matter to you. The student does. And that actual person that they are an individual and that you value who they are as an individual. And that is so, so important.

So your action step for today for this episode, I want you to let me know why you do or why you don't teach pop music at the moment. Maybe I've changed your opinion; maybe I haven't. Let me know either way. I'm very open to different opinions on this.

But if you already teach pop music in your studio, tell me why you do. If you don't do it, tell me why you don't. And maybe one of those reasons is that you don't know how and we will help you with that next week.

But for now, tell me why you do or why you don't over in the Facebook group or on the show notes for this episode at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/122.



Next week as I mentioned, we're going to be looking at how to teach pop music to students and how to find out what they want to learn. So I'll see you back here for that one. Bye for now.

If you want more creative teaching strategies, you should definitely check out the Vibrant Music Teaching membership. We just released a brand new course called *Creativising Classics* that will give you ideas for making even your classical music more creative and teaching it to your students in a fun way.

Go to [VMT.ninja](https://vmt.ninja) to sign up today.