



HOW TO TEACH POP MUSIC TO PIANO STUDENTS

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This is Episode 123 of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. I'm Nicola Cantan and in this show, we're talking about how to teach pop music to piano students.

Hey there. Welcome back, beautiful teachers. It is so great to be back with you again for this discussion about teaching pop music.

So last week, we talked about why you would even want to teach pop music in your studio; why you would want to include it. So go back and check that out if you're maybe not convinced or you need some backup to tell your boss or the parents in your studio or your students why you include this type of music although I doubt your students need much convincing of that.

Now, before we go any further diving into how to teach pop music and some of the methods that I use in my studio, I wanted to note that I'm going to mention a lot of different resources today. That's just the nature of the show. So I am going to mention different books and websites and stuff like that.

You can find links to all of those, the names of all of those on the show notes for this episode. So go to VibrantMusicTeaching.com/123. It's nice and handy that it's worked out as Episode 123 that the show notes are so important for. So VibrantMusicTeaching.com/123 – that will take you to the show notes. And there, I have links to all of the stuff I'm mentioning today.

So if I say something and you're like, "What was that?" It can be hard to get these things spelled right and Google them later even if you do remember what I said or how I pronounced it. So check out the show notes for links to everything we're talking about today.

Let's just go through an overview first of what it means to teach pop music because I split this up into two different categories. So I split it up into what I call pop-style music and real pop. Pop-style music is just music that sounds like pop music, right? Real pop music is arrangements of actual pop songs that people would have heard on the radio or in a film or somewhere else, okay?

So those are the two categories. And the reason I mentioned that right out front is they're taught differently; you would take different approaches to both of those and also, a lot of teachers default to the second one – the real pop, when actually, I believe they would be better off with the pop-style.



So that's why we're going to dive into pop-style first so that you can see whether that's a better fit for your student and go with that before going to the real pop. Now, I've nothing against arrangements, but often, the pop-style music is a better choice.

The reason pop-style music is often a better choice is because it's written, first and foremost, for piano and for pianos students. So while a great arranger can take a pop song and make it manageable, make it playable, make it sound great, it's easier for them to do that; it's easier for composers to write in a pop-style in the first place on the piano. That tends to make something that is technically easier, has rhythms that are easier to read or just to play. So pop-style music is often the first step for my students.

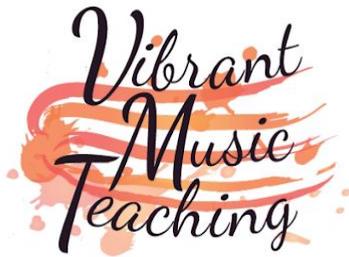
So this is best for students who don't have a specific request. Obviously, if your students come to you and say, "I want to play Bohemian Rhapsody," pop-style music is not going to cut it. But for a lot of students, what they actually want is something in a popular style. That is what they want. They might not always articulate it in that way but that is what they actually would be happiest with.

The way to assess this for your student is, first of all, if they're coming to you and they're just saying, "I want to learn some pop music," or you ask your student like, "Oh, are you interested in trying some pop music?" and they say, "Yes." But when you ask, they don't have a specific request, then this is a good option to go with and I would actually give students a choice at that stage.

In fact, before students even come to me or even make a suggestion, I would start including some pop-style books in the list of supplemental music that I sent to them. So when my students reach a certain stage of their studies; that is a lot of sounds. When they reach that stage; so for older students, it would be around Book 3; for younger students, it might be when they're graduating Book 3 of most method books; that's when I definitely be thinking about supplemental music as a matter of course, not based on a specific request, right?

So I might introduce it earlier if a student had a particular desire for it or if I had a reason I wanted to cover something or reinforce something outside of their method. But even if they don't, even if nothing like that comes up, we'd want to start including some kind of supplemental books from about book 3-ish; some stage along there.

Because I want my students to be exploring different styles of music; different composing styles, right? Every composer has their own go-to patterns and stuff like that. And if a student is just in one method book, they're only getting experience from one composer, really, or combination of composers. But they're sticking with the same composer or few composers for all of their studies.



The other thing is that they're only seeing the same musical typography, right? The actual look of the music is exactly the same in all of their pieces. And if you get too ingrained in that, it can be really hard to read music in other ways later. So we want to introduce them to pieces that show different sizes of the grand staff and different styles of music notation.

So when it gets to that stage and I'm going to be introducing some kind of supplemental book to my students, the other thing I'm trying to do here is give them choice. So I always give them a choice of their supplemental book so that they can start to take ownership over their studies even if they are younger.

So when they do reach this stage, what I do is send through a list of possible supplemental books that they could start to learn from and included in that list, whether they've asked me about pop or not, are going to be some pop-style books. I also, with most students, especially on the older side, say ten and over, I'll include something in there that's actually a real pop book.

So we'll get to that in a moment but I'd include one of those as well so that they have that option. And if it's something that appeals to them and they haven't said it to me, they know that I'm open to that.

In terms of the actual pop-style books that I like, the best ones by far; I've been recommending them for ages; are Spotlight Solos and other Piano Pronto or Composer Community books. So basically, books from the Piano Pronto site, but my absolute favourites would be the Spotlight Solos Series by Jennifer Eklund who's the creator of Piano Pronto.

There's four levels of the Spotlight Solos. So there's Easy, then Spotlight Solos 1, then Plus, then 2. So there's four levels in there and when students love these, and a lot of students do, and when they do, they really love them. I mean, these will be the pieces that they go ahead and learn by themselves.

They love that there are performances from Jennifer on YouTube as well so they can be inspired by those and listen to some of the rhythms because they are going to be a bit more rhythms that you do intuitively at that level rather than purely by reading at least if you're learning them at that sort of late beginner stage. They are going to need to listen to some of them to get a feel for them and I think that's totally fine. They then associate that back with the notation.

Another option that I would include into the mix here is Supersonics Piano, which is by Daniel McFarlane. Daniel's a composer over in Australia. I believe it's Sydney, but don't quote me on the city. But anyway, he's over in Australia and he writes these pieces.

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Now, they're not really what I would call pop. What they are is highly patterned and basically, not to be reductive, but they do sound a lot like video game music in a lot of cases. And some students who are asking you for pop, what they want is something to impress their friends and these pieces will fit the bill if their friends all play computer games and they like that sound, right?

So that would be another one again to use in the mix. What I hope you're getting from this though is that you have to let your student choose. You have to give them options and allow them to listen.

Listen at home; you don't have to spend the whole lesson doing it although I think it's fine to take some lesson time to do this if your student isn't listening at home. But mostly, I would send a list through to the parent and ask them to listen to it during the week and let me know.

Parents are usually pretty excited by this. They feel like they can get involved, actually, and I find they do follow up with it because they can see how important it is for their child to be able to choose things, right? So they actually really appreciate this about my studio and I often have them come back to me and say, "I could see that it meant a lot to her that you were taking her input," and that kind of thing.

So sending that list through to parents, letting them know that you want to hear back by a certain day and having the student listen through to all of these things because you just don't know and they don't have the vocabulary to describe what they're actually after. And often, what they are actually after is pop-style, not real pop.

But let's get to that real pop. What do we do when our students really do want to learn pop music? Well, let's start with the books because I said I would sometimes mix those in with my recommendations for supplemental books alongside some pop-style music and other stuff, by the way. So different classical options, different arrangements; all sorts of stuff mixed in that I think a little bit of this, a little bit of that; I'm trying to get to what my student is most inspired to learn.

The real pop books that I like; there are only a few. So there's Hal Leonard's books, which are called Pop Piano Hits but I find if you type in "and More Hot Singles," you'll get a better search result there. So that's the link that I've included in the show notes for this episode. Those are current hits arranged for piano.

Then there is the ChordTime, FunTime, ShowTime, BigTime Series, which are the supplemental books that go along with Piano Adventures. If you're not familiar, they call it the PreTime to BigTime library although there are hits additions of those books. They have different themes, right? So they have a rock and roll one; they have a pop one.



They're hits ones, which are the current pop ones that you'd be looking for in this category. Don't start at Pretime. I don't think they even have PlayTime; I think they start at the next level. So those are all just different levels of the same types of books.

However, either of those will give you current hits. So they're good options; they're pretty well-levelled. The only criticism I have sort of at both of them, but definitely more so of the Hal Leonard one and More Hot Singles; the Pop Piano Hits ones, is that they're too long. They should have arranged them and cut them down at the same time.

I understand the inclination to go for the full song, but in most cases, that's not what students are after here. The reason you would want the full song is if you're going to sing-along with it. But these arrangements include all of the melody so they're meant to be solo piano arrangements and I think they could be trimmed down at that level.

Especially, like I say, the Pop Piano Hits Hal Leonard ones; they're quite an easy level, right? They're really, really readable for a late beginner even a beginner student who's a little bit older. And yet, they're several, several pages long. And I just think it's too much.

So I would like to see them cut down. Of course, you can trim them down yourself with your student but that's only if the student is on board. And once they see that that's the real arrangement, they're going to want to play the whole thing. That's the reality.

Now, another thing alongside this that I wanted to mention was the Phillip Keveren Series. This is going to be not current hits. It's going to be for, mostly for your adult students or for younger students who want to play some specific oldies such as The Beatles Book or musicals or stuff like that.

Those are beautiful arrangements. I absolutely love Phillip Keveren's work but they're not current so just note that. They're great for adult students who want to play pop though because they can pick out one of the particular ones if they don't have a specific request.

If your adult student doesn't say, "Oh, well. I really do like show tunes," or whatever, then I would go for just the-- and this is for your students that's a little bit further along. But one of my favourite books is just called Best Piano Solos and it is just a collection of really well-known pieces from all different eras arranged by Phillip Keveren beautifully for piano.

Now, that's a piano solo level so that's like an intermediate type of book but he does also have within that series, there is the easy piano version. It's not super easy. That's one of those things with levels that annoys me.

I wish they wouldn't use those words "easy piano" because it makes it sound to the student, especially adults who are so sensitive about these things, makes it sound to them like, "Oh,



this should be easy for me. It's marked as easy." But it doesn't mean beginner; it absolutely does not.

Anyway, that's a side; a bit of a tangent but there's three options for you there in terms of real pop books. In most cases though when it comes to real pop, I'm not using a book. So those are the ones that I would include along with a mix of supplemental books. But if a student wants to learn real pop music, more than likely, they have a request for me. They tell me they want to learn X, Y or Z. They will tell me something specific.

Now, I have a few sites that I love to go to first for specific requests. However, you will end up Googling around if they're not on those. So this is the order that I go in; hopefully, it's useful for you.

So let's say a student comes to me and they say they want to learn Another One Bites the Dust, okay? So Another One Bites the Dust; great. Here's what I do. I'd go to fmsheetmusic.com, which is Jennifer Eklund again under a pseudonym.

So Jennifer Eklund arranges pop music there and she does it on a separate site because it's under copyright. So she has to do it under the licenses on music notes and I believe it's Sheet Music Plus. So she has that site to link those together so that you can go to one spot and get her arrangements, which is really, really handy.

So that is the first place I would look because I know that if I find a piece there, the arrangement is going to be playable, accurate and sound good. And that is not a given when it comes to pop piano arrangements so I'd start at Jennifer Eklund's site, fmsheetmusic.com.

Then I'd go to Noviscore because again, they have separate levels of those and most of them are really well-arranged. It's a bit more streamlined; it's cut down. But if you find something that your student is after there, you're more guaranteed of it being a quality arrangement.

And then, I would go to Google. I don't bother going specifically to Sheet Music Plus, Music Notes etc. I would just Google it and look at the various options that are coming up there. They'll be on all those sorts of sites.

But in terms of the difference between Sheet Music Plus, Music Notes, Sheet Music Direct; I don't see any huge massive ones, to be honest, and it's all about the specific arrangements on each one unless you have a discount on one of them and you have a preferred one, maybe you want to go there first. If you can save a bit of cash, that's always worth it.

If you are going to one of those sites though, make sure, make sure, make sure to play it yourself. So don't download it, don't buy it until you've looked at the preview and played it



on the piano because sometimes there can be some wrong keys stuff in there and it doesn't even sound like anything; it's going to be really disappointing. So I always make sure to play through as much as they give me of the sample there so that I can see whether it's decent or not.

Another option to go with is to work on the pop music they request that your student has given you by ear or using a lead sheet. So if the music isn't on one of those sheet music sites or you just can't find a good arrangement of it or you want to take a different approach, I would oftentimes look up a chord chart or a lead sheet for that or work it out from scratch by ear together with my student.

We're going to be talking about that a bit more next week. So we're going to be covering lead sheets in-depth next week and looking at that specific area separately because it's a whole other can of worms, right? So we'll dive into lead sheets on the show next week in Episode 124.

Now, before we finish up and wrap up this pop music discussion, what I wanted to do is answer three common questions that I get and I see other teachers asking in general about teaching pop music.

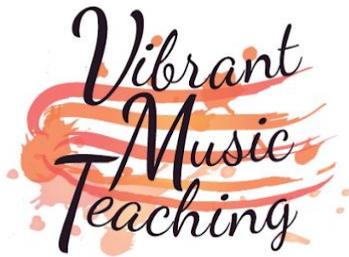
So the first one is what if the rhythms are too hard? Because this happens a lot, right? You open up the sheet music with your student and they just cannot digest the rhythms. Either they've been transcribed poorly or they just are sort of complicated to read.

Here's the thing; you shouldn't be reading them in most cases. The rhythm of the melody should be felt. It should be your student playing it as they know the song. So this was a request from them; I assume they know the song, right?

So just encourage them to use their ears and use the sheet music as a guide rather than as an exact measure of the rhythms. It's going to sound better and more authentic and it's going to just give them a better result with less hassle. And it's totally fine; you have my permission to do some of the rhythms by ear even if they're reading it otherwise.

Okay, next FAQ is what if the reading is too hard? What if the only arrangements you can find are too difficult? Well, sometimes you can simplify it with your student and you can work with them in the lesson to do that together. In a lot of cases though, I think you're better off turning it into a lead sheet and working that way if the reading, in general, is too hard for your student.

That can be a great experience for them and I think they'll learn a lot more than if you just cut out some of the notes and simplify things for them in between lessons, okay? So we're going to that approach in next week's episode when we talk about lead sheets because I will detail how to create a lead sheet from sheet music.



Last FAQ is what if my student doesn't have requests? I sort of covered this at the start and that is my answer. But I wanted to go through it here or specifically mention it here because it does come up a lot again.

So if your student doesn't have any specific requests but they say they want to play pop music, the best option is to send them a list of supplemental books and suggestions and see what they come back to you with or a list of sheet music from somewhere like F.M. Sheet Music.

Find a few different things. Be as wide as you can with that list that are all at their level and just go back to them and say, "Which one of these? You pick one." There's no wrong answer there and you're going to get a better sense of what they want and they don't have to come up with a request.

A lot of students are either they really just don't know much music. That could happen quite a lot. Or they're shy to tell you. So if you keep asking them over time, they will eventually come up with requests. But in the beginning, they can be reticent to do so. So I think sending through that list with links to listen or watch certain pieces or books is a great option and you're going to get some feedback that way on what they actually like.

So your action step for this week is to let me know what your favourite pop resource is. Have I talked about it today? If so, you can just chime in and let me know you're also a fan of one of these things. If not, please let us know what it is. You can let us know on the show notes for this episode at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/123 or over in the Facebook group; either place and we'd love to hear from you.

As I mentioned, next week, we have our lead sheet discussion coming up where we're going to be looking at where to find great lead sheets and how to use them in your studio. That's in Episode 124. I'll see you back here then.

If you need more support in your teaching when it comes to things like teaching pop music or anything else, then we have just the community for you. Go to VMT.ninja to sign up to Vibrant Music Teaching membership and get all the support and resources that you need.