

CHALLENGING ELECTRONIC KEYBOARD TEACHING

Andrew Eales discusses the key issues to be considered by teachers of the electronic keyboard to individuals and small groups and makes a passionate case for its full recognition.

When Brendan started lessons with me I was in my mid teens and he was a couple of years younger than me. I was a classical pianist studying as a part time *Junior Exhibitioner* at the **Guildhall School** in London. He was the proud owner of an early model of Bontempi keyboard, complete with drum beats which sounded like somebody tapping a cardboard box with a pencil. Looking back to those days, I could not have imagined back in the early 1980s that two decades later I would have become an enthusiastic advocate for the electronic keyboard.

Within a few years, portable electronic keyboards had developed from being an educational toy to become a standard feature found in many UK homes. By the early 1990s the keyboard was considered by many to be an essential classroom music resource. Today the electronic keyboard has gained recognition and popularity as a musical instrument in its own right, learnt by countless students worldwide, played in performances at all levels, and with amateur and professional devotees of all ages.

As the dust settles on these developments it is little wonder that many feel confused or left behind by such a rapid turn of events. Is the electronic keyboard really a proper instrument in its own right? Can it be taught with the same rigour and benefits as other instruments can? And if so, what are the principal challenges that face keyboard teachers today?

Portable Electronic Keyboards – basic definition and features

First of all, let's define precisely what I mean when I talk about portable electronic keyboards.

There are a great many different electronic keyboard instruments now available, including:

- **SYNTHESISERS** used in rock and pop music
- **ELECTRIC PIANOS** used as substitutes to an acoustic piano
- **ELECTRONIC ORGANS** which appear to be declining in popularity
- **MIDI CONTROLLERS** used as “dummy keyboards” alongside computer applications and sound modules

None of these instruments are “portable electronic keyboards” as discussed in this article.

The portable electronic keyboards I am discussing come in many guises, but always include auto-accompaniment features (using full “fingered” chords or “single-finger” shortcuts) and a wide range of sounds and rhythm backing styles. Beginner models remain relatively cheap to buy, take up little space, and can be played “silently” using headphones.

One reason for its present success is no doubt that the portable electronic keyboard is specifically designed for playing music in commercial popular styles, as opposed to classical music. This facet appeals to the cultural reference point of most children taking up an instrument for the first time, and parents usually find the music their children learn accessible, enjoyable and inoffensive. Retired people taking up the portable electronic keyboard as a hobby in later life find they can quickly play songs they have known and loved for years.

The following considerations are also essential:

- Portable Electronic Keyboards, while undoubtedly a useful resource in the classroom, were not designed specifically for classroom use, and their use cannot address all the many challenges of classroom music
- Portable Electronic Keyboards are not a suitable substitute for the piano, even though they are sometimes treated as such. The playing techniques involved are quite different, as are the musical results

More Advanced Features

Often those people who dismiss the electronic keyboard as an instrument have only encountered the beginner models that found in so many school music departments and homes. It is important to be aware however that top-end models cost more than £2000, and are aimed at the semi-pro entertainer and professional market. Between the price extremes you can find keyboards to suit every purse, and as the price tag rises so generally do the musical resources on offer.

More advanced keyboard models enable the player to:

- compose and arrange their own auto-accompaniment styles rather than rely on the manufacturers' efforts
- have complete control over each instrument within the auto-accompaniment, including voicing used, mixing and effects
- use a variety of approaches to chord recognition by the instrument
- layer voices and add a wide range of effects processes
- access "registration memories" which store a wide range of fully programmable settings
- hook up a microphone and use vocal processing facilities built into the keyboard, including amplifying, adding effects and even vocal harmonies in real time
- sequence full 16 part musical productions and export them as MIDI files.
- The large backlit screen will usually be able to display song lyrics as an aid to the professional entertainer.
- Some models will even display the staff notation of each of the 16 parts within a standard MIDI file.

It is also now common to hook laptop computers up to keyboards using an audio and/or MIDI interface, and this further opens up a new world of musical possibility to the aspiring keyboard player.

Most importantly, the higher up the range one goes, the more realistic the sound quality becomes. Top manufacturers such as Yamaha, Korg, and Roland have invested in producing high quality multi-sampled sounds.

One challenge for keyboard teachers today, then, is to keep abreast of these developments. A keyboard teacher will need to be familiar with the more advanced features of recent keyboard models in order to give sound advice to pupils and stay on top of their game.

Establishing a curriculum

Having considered what these instruments offer by way of musical possibility, our next challenge is to construct a curriculum that provides a logical approach to introducing the many skills and broad understanding that our pupils will clearly need. Electronic keyboard players have to acquire and develop a wide variety of skills in a structured manner so that they can ultimately employ a broad range of playing approaches and techniques.

A good stab at this was attempted by the group of keyboard teachers who contributed to the NAME/FMS/RCM document *A Common Approach 2002*, and keyboard teachers looking for a structure will find a coherent approach in that documentation.

My own tutor book series *KEYQUEST* provides material that ties in directly with the first four Programmes of Study within A Common Approach, making it easy for teachers to link into a nationally recognised structure. The four books in the series provide progressive and differentiated material suitable for group or individual learning, arranged in "Units" that include varied repertoire, ideas for improvising and composing, music theory, scales and exercises, and ensemble pieces.

When writing or selecting repertoire the following suggestions might be useful:

- ensure that a wide range of musical styles is embraced, including not only contemporary popular and dance styles but also country and western, Latin styles and ballroom; help pupils to expand their musical knowledge, awareness and taste
- avoid sheet music in which the letter names of notes or excessive unnecessary fingering are written
- avoid pieces in which the chords and melody always perfectly fit together; expression is created by the inclusion of discord and resolution, and where music lacks this element it is usually bland

- make sure that the core repertoire learnt contributes to the overall curriculum planning, rather than working through a random selection of well-known pieces
- Use a mixture of arrangements of music that pupils will have heard before and new pieces written specifically for the keyboard

The player's rhythmic development

Keyboard players must develop their innate sense of pulse as any musician does. The availability of auto-accompaniments can help in this, but it is important to understand that auto-accompaniments do not exist to help the player keep time. On the contrary, many children find it hard to keep time with the auto-accompaniment.

The main requirement for success here is not counting inwardly or an innate sense of pulse at all. These are essential in mastering the piece *prior* to playing it with the auto-accompaniment, and it is important to show pupils how to practise pieces in stages.

With the auto-accompaniment engaged, the main requirement of the player is the ability to listen and follow its lead. Essentially this is an ensemble skill. Rhythmic momentum is provided, as it were, *by another*, and the player is no longer able to give undivided attention to their own playing.

Some auto-accompaniment styles (for example many Jazz and Latin styles) are much harder to keep time with than others (such as simple 8 Beat, Rock and Disco), meaning that progression in rhythmic awareness and understanding must be fostered. Waltz styles and compound time also bring their own difficulties. Furthermore, keyboard players must learn to distinguish between swing and straight grooves from an early stage.

Playing chords, understanding harmony

The issue of "single-finger" chords presents another challenge for keyboard teachers.

Almost all pupils benefit from using these shortcuts in the early stages. Keyboard players need to develop some finger independence in the left hand, just as the young pianist would not normally be expected to play more than one note in each hand for perhaps their first year of lessons. Making this comparison with piano pedagogy illustrates the point that requiring beginners to use full "fingered" chords might be ill-advised.

However, the chief manufacturers have different systems for shortcut chords, and the term "single-finger" is itself something of a misnomer because many shortcuts require two or even three notes to be played. This perhaps rather defeats the point of using "single-finger" chords and can obviously be confusing to pupil and teacher alike. Unfortunately most of the available tutor books compound the problem by including pieces which require minor and seventh chords in the early stages, and it is in playing shortcuts for these chords that problems emerge.

I would suggest an alternative which helps overcome this perplexing problem:

- Begin using just major triads, in which a single note produces the full chord. This way, the player does not introduce notes which are alien to the harmony. Using major triads in single-finger mode enables beginners to use auto-accompaniments while developing some finger independence in the left hand
- Then introduce the fully "fingered" versions. Minor triads and seventh chords can progressively also be introduced, using their fully formed versions from the outset.
- Single-finger shortcuts for minor and seventh chords can subsequently be introduced where there are particular playing benefits. Bear in mind that the left hand is also used to adjust registration controls. Knowing and using a variety of fully formed chords and shortcuts can be useful in performance.
- The most important point from an educational perspective is to ensure that pupils make accurate links between what is played and what is actually heard.

Learning to play a wide range of chords is a difficult but ultimately essential undertaking. Keyboards generally recognize major, minor, diminished and augmented triads, dominant, major and minor sevenths. By the time a player has learnt these he or she will already have a far more highly developed understanding of harmony than many pianists and most orchestral players at a similar level.

More advanced keyboard models also allow the player to use the wide range of chromatically altered chords used in jazz music. It is hardly surprising that the instrument is likely to confuse one chord for another if the player is in the slightest bit inaccurate when playing them. The advanced electronic keyboard player will need to develop a clear understanding and absolute precision in their left-hand playing technique.

Introducing the Bass Clef

Music notation was not developed as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Playing the portable electronic keyboard within the musical context for which it was primarily designed does not require bass clef reading. Neither for that matter does playing the flute or the violin, although flute and violin teachers are rarely criticised for their failure to teach the bass clef!

However, learning to read and play from bass clef notation is immensely valuable to portable electronic keyboard players because it enables them to extend their skills towards a broader range of playing styles and approaches. *A Common Approach 2002* recognises that electronic keyboard players should learn to read and play from bass clef notation at least by Programme of Study 4 (equivalent to Grades 4-5). Some teachers may choose to introduce the bass clef sooner, but it is reasonable to expect that by this stage within their progression all keyboard players should have begun to expand the range of their playing to embrace the more pianistic approach alongside their use of auto-accompaniments.

Personally I prefer to introduce the bass clef as early as possible within a pupil's development. This enables pupils not only to move towards piano playing if and when they wish to and are ready, but similarly the synthesizer or organ. Learning to read and play from bass clef notation also fosters a better understanding of music theory and aids musical analysis and composition. However, I believe that the best timing of the introduction of bass clef notation will vary from one pupil to another, so must ideally be determined on an individual basis.

Ensemble playing, too!

One particular aspect of keyboard playing which has excited me in recent years is the potential for ensemble performance. At face value, electronic keyboards are among the least likely instruments to form ensembles. After all, the player can utilise auto-accompaniments to create a live performance that is wholly self-sufficient, with no need for additional players. Why would keyboard players need or wish to play music as part of an ensemble when they can have complete artistic control over the music they produce?

During the 1990s I considered a number of options for viable keyboard ensembles which would enable my pupils to gain enjoyment playing together and enlarge their musical experience. I was determined to create a format that would be true to the nature of the instrument. Fundamental to the success of our keyboard ensembles has been our early decision to follow popular music and jazz models for ensemble work rather than trying to emulate the classical orchestral approach.

I coined the name *KEYBAND!* in order to emphasise the true nature of our ensembles. The *Keyband* pieces are short, providing the basis for the music which the players themselves develop using improvisation and arranging techniques. The music fuses together the classical notion of part-writing, a jazz musician's approach to structure and extemporisation, and the popular music cultures from around the world represented on a modern digital keyboard. *Keyband* uses electronic keyboards creatively, not merely attempting to replicate other sounds or cultures, but using the full resources of the instruments to create a wholly new music.

The *Keyband* approach provides an opportunity for players to work together, learn rehearsal technique, give signals, listen to balance and contribute to group decision making. The players learn to improvise and bounce ideas off each other, arranging and developing the pieces into cohesive musical structures. All the players have an interesting melodic part to play, and all have their turn in the spotlight.

A substitute or alternative to the piano?

It is a common misconception among parents who wish their children to learn the piano that the portable electronic keyboard was basically developed as a “budget” and convenient alternative. Sometimes school teachers, heads and governors share this misconception. It is particularly unfortunate when piano teachers also appear to suffer from this same misconception.

Firstly, there are piano teachers who follow the same curriculum with their keyboard students as with pianists. They avoid chord notation, auto-accompaniments, and ignore the distinctive musical features of the electronic keyboard altogether. Students taught by such teachers often become frustrated and either stop learning altogether or find an alternative teacher who will teach them the electronic keyboard properly.

Secondly, where the electronic keyboard is regarded in this way it is likely to be denounced altogether. Those teachers intent on enforcing a traditional piano-teaching approach with their keyboard students soon realise the ineffectiveness of using keyboards in this manner.

- The keys on a keyboard are far lighter than on a piano, and this lack of cushioning/weight makes accuracy more difficult, not easier.
- “Touch Response” is velocity based, requiring a different finger technique to that used for the weighted keys of an acoustic piano
- Plug-in pedals do not emulate the sophisticated techniques possible using a piano’s sustaining pedal.

Before concluding that these aspects of the electronic keyboard make it an inferior instrument to the piano, it is important to consider the flip side of the argument:

- Touch Response on a keyboard can be used not only to influence the dynamic of a note but also its timbre. So for example a mellow sound could become a bright sound if the key is depressed more quickly. In the hands of an experienced and capable musician this can be used to great expressive effect.
- As well as being used as a sustaining mechanism, a pedal used on a keyboard can be used to alter dynamics, or as a switch to control a wide range of other sounds and effects.

Piano teachers sometimes become so focused on denouncing the many considerable weaknesses they perceive in electronic keyboards that they overlook their strengths. Instrumental learning is volitional by nature, and only by understanding the comparative nature of electronic keyboard and piano playing respectively can we guide and advise pupils towards musical learning outcomes that satisfy their personal interests and aptitudes. It is surely one of our responsibilities as teachers to undertake to do this as impartially and selflessly as we are able, and with as accurate an understanding as is possible.

Assessing good electronic keyboard playing

For many musicians and teachers, assessing the quality of an electronic keyboard performance poses the biggest challenge of all. We all understand that keyboard players – unlike many other musicians – can produce professional-sounding results after just a few lessons (and surely this is a good thing!), but how are we to recognise and give credit for the musicianship and skills demonstrated by the more advanced player?

I suggest looking for the following characteristics:

- Assured melodic playing with a musical sense of phrasing, enhanced by effective use of touch response
- Good rhythmic momentum, with right hand rhythms and auto-accompaniment well integrated
- Improvisation, with original melodic, harmonic and rhythmic ideas seamlessly integrated throughout the piece
- Accurate and assured chord formations and changes, perhaps including extensions and advanced harmonies
- Auto-accompaniment fills used to emphasise phrasing and accompaniment variations to highlight structure
- A confident command of the instruments resources (e.g. voice changes, voice effects, harmony or chorus features, registration memories)
- If some material has been pre-sequenced, does this enhance the live aspects of the performance?

So where does all this lead?

A final challenge for keyboard teachers today is to show their pupils that playing for fun – while immensely valuable – need not be the end of the story. For the gifted player and committed musician, there are many opportunities for further development.

A committed keyboard player will usually want to explore not only the most advanced electronic keyboards but also synthesisers, pianos, and other instruments, both as a solo player and a member of groups or ensembles.

The wider world of music technology is another popular option. Linking keyboard to computer, pupils can explore a host of new musical possibilities, including audio recording, MIDI sequencing, composing, playing and producing fresh musical tracks, using virtual synthesisers, and so on.

At a higher education level, keyboard players can develop their skills by following courses in:

- Music Technology A' Level
- Music Technology diplomas and degrees
- Higher performing skills (e.g. taking graded exams and diplomas)
- Vocational training in sound recording and music technology
- Higher education courses in popular music

Future careers for these musicians might include:

- Teaching the keyboard
- Professional entertainment – live performance
- Writing and arranging songs
- Composing for film, television, advertisements, etc.
- Record producing, sound engineering and studio production
- DJ work; composing and producing dance tracks
- Product development
- Music Industry – management, support, etc

Conclusion

Portable Electronic Keyboards are legitimate and popular musical instruments in their own right, which can be taught and played expressively, and to a high level of musical accomplishment.

It will no longer do to dismiss portable electronic keyboards or marginalise their use to the hobbyist market. Electronic instruments in general and keyboards specifically now contribute to a great deal to both amateur and professional music-making within our society. As educators we have a duty to provide high quality learning experiences for pupils which are relevant to the culture of our time.

Too many music teachers still believe that the electronic keyboard is at best a beginner's introduction to music and that players should be encouraged to move on to "better things" as quickly as possible. This is simply untrue, and I trust that having considered the points I have made above you too will now look at how challenging electronic keyboard teaching can be – both for the teacher and for the pupils!

This article is revised and expanded from material originally published in the book :

Ideas In – Music Out (National Association of Music Educators, 2004. ISBN 0-9505789-4-0).

This excellent booklet also features superb material from some of the most important figures in music education, covering a range of subjects relating to the theme of music technology). Highly recommended reading!