

Navigating Piano Teaching Challenges: Lecturers' Perspectives on Performance, Pedagogy, and Interpretation in Henan, China

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perspectives and experiences of six piano lecturers at Shangqiu Normal University in Henan, China, as they navigate the challenges of piano teaching, with a focus on performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into the participants' performing and teaching practices, the obstacles they encounter, and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The findings reveal a common struggle among lecturers to effectively integrate the teaching of musical interpretation alongside technical skill development. While the participants acknowledge the importance of both technique and interpretation, they highlight a lack of systematic approaches and resources for nurturing students' interpretive abilities. The study introduces the concept of "topic theory" as a potential framework for enhancing piano pedagogy and facilitating a deeper understanding of musical expression. By examining the experiences and reflections of these piano lecturers, the research sheds light on the complexities of piano teaching in contemporary China and offers insights into the potential for pedagogical innovation and reform.

Keywords: Piano Teaching Challenges; Perspectives of Lecturers; Topic Theory

Introduction

Piano performance, a complex art that combines technical proficiency and emotional expression, requires not only mastery of the instrument but also a profound understanding and interpretation of the music being played (Miller, 2011). In the rapidly evolving field of music education, piano teaching plays a crucial role in cultivating musical talents and has garnered significant attention from scholars, educators, and music enthusiasts.

The core elements of piano teaching include technique and musical interpretation. Technique encompasses the training of fingers, the use of pedals, and other physical aspects of playing. In current Chinese piano education, teachers and students generally emphasize technique training, focusing on quick mastery of playing skills and the ability to play difficult pieces. This education program results in students having a high level of technique, but a lack of musical expression and artistic cultivation (Wei, 2019; Li, 2023). Therefore, in terms of teaching content, the current piano teaching curriculum is mostly oriented to skillful exercises and examinations, and students generally receive rigorous training at a young age and participate in various music examinations and competitions. This type of education stimulates students' motivation to a certain extent, but it may also lead to a lack of in-depth understanding of the nature of music and artistic expression among some students. In addition, for the existing teaching status of Shangqiu Normal University, mainly in the aspect of teachers' resources, there are a number of excellent teachers in China, most of them have received professional music education and have rich teaching experience. However, there is a large regional difference in the level of teachers. The first-tier cities are richer in educational resources, while the remote areas are relatively weak. This imbalance affects the overall quality of education. Therefore, improving teachers' overall knowledge is also a challenge faced.

Musical interpretation, on the other hand, involves the understanding and expression of the composer's intentions, as well as the performer's personal artistic choices. There are three primary perspectives on musical interpretation: formalistic, open (or subjective), and interpretive views that are in between (Silverman, 2007). The formalistic approach emphasizes strict adherence to the composer's score, arguing that the performer should reveal the inherent meaning of the music without

adding personal interpretations (Davies, 2004). In contrast, the open or subjective approach allows for greater artistic freedom, affording performers a "poetic license" to interpret the score through the lens of their unique feelings and creative thinking (Dreyfus, 2020; Zheng & Leung, 2023). The middle ground seeks to strike a balance, first following the original score to explore the wealth of information it contains, and then layering personal interpretation on top of this foundation. Silverman (2007) argues that if one only "read" the score, the result is nothing more than a product, an aural photocopy of the score. Conversely, without carefully "reading" the score, the performer can only offer purely subjective feelings (p. 9).

In the current landscape of piano teaching in China, a common phenomenon has emerged – teachers tend to analyze music through subjective feelings or encourage students to express their imagination to stimulate emotions, often lacking the support of theoretical knowledge. This "emphasizing playing rather than theory" approach has manifested in piano lessons, where teachers relatively neglect the teaching of theory and primarily instruct students to practice repeatedly to improve their playing skills. Consequently, the lack of theoretical knowledge impedes students from developing a reasonable understanding and appreciation of the piano works they perform (Li, 2017; Li, 2023; Wang, 2014).

The objective of this study is to explore the perspectives and reflections of piano lecturers at Shangqiu Normal University on piano performance and pedagogy. By investigating their experiences and insights, the research seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities in piano teaching, particularly in the context of music interpretation. It is essential to understand the teachers' concepts of piano performance, teaching, and approach of musical interpretation that they use in piano class. This understanding is indispensable for comprehending the current state of piano education and identifying areas that need improvement and remediation for the development of piano pedagogy. This study also introduces the concept of "topic theory" as a potential theoretical framework for interpreting musical works in piano performance and teaching. It aims to provide a new and broader perspective that complements and extends existing approach of musical interpretation, increasing students' knowledge both inside and outside the score, as well as improving their musical understanding and expression.

Literature Review

Piano performance and pedagogy have been subjects of interest for researchers, educators, and musicians alike. This literature review explores the key aspects of piano performance and pedagogy, focusing on the importance of technique, musical interpretation, and the challenges faced by educators in teaching these skills. By examining existing research and insights from scholars and practitioners, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge in the field and identify potential areas for further investigation.

Piano Performance

Technique serves as the foundational prerequisite for interpreting music effectively. The greatest pianists, without exception, possess outstanding finger dexterity and skills. For performers lacking proficient technical abilities, artistic expression becomes an exercise in futility, failing to convey the profound value of music to the audience. Conversely, even with advanced technical prowess, any performer devoid of aesthetic sensibilities and literacy cannot authentically showcase the artistic beauty and value intrinsic to the piano. The skillful execution of piano performance is inextricably linked to the demonstration of music's inherent value (Chen, 2019).

However, the beauty of piano performance transcends mere technical mastery; it is also a delicate expression of musical emotion. A professional piano performer must possess a heightened artistic sensibility and a solid foundation in aesthetics. Simultaneously, the pianist should strive to interpret the aesthetic value of the musical work with greater depth and nuance, fostering a harmonious amalgamation of emotion and technique in their performance. To achieve this, the performer must cultivate an in-depth understanding of the musical score and subsequently infuse their emotions into the performance (Wu, 2020; Chen, 2019).

Authenticity and sincerity are also crucial elements of effective piano performance. As Emanuel Bach and Mozart argued, a lack of sincerity and an overemphasis on technical display can leave audiences feeling deceived (Dreyfus, 2020). To create an authentic and emotionally engaging performance, pianists must find a balance between personal expression and adherence to the composer's intentions, paying close

attention to the markings in the score, the specific stylistic requirements of the piece, and the historical context (Bratu, 2023; Jia, 2023; Wu, 2020).

Piano Pedagogy

Piano pedagogy, which encompasses various approaches and methodologies, aims to equip students with the technical skills and musical understanding necessary to become proficient performers. However, in the landscape of piano lessons at most Chinese universities, the emphasis largely remains on cultivating students' technical proficiency, while the nurturing of expressiveness is relatively neglected (Lin, 2018; Liu, 2018; Qian, 2019; Wu, 2019). Influenced by traditional educational paradigms, mainstream piano teaching methodologies have primarily trained students to become instrumental technicians through repetitive skills and stereotyped classical music repertoires (Guo & Cosaitis, 2020).

Students often face challenges such as low practice efficiency, frequent wrong notes, unstable rhythms, and difficulties in memorizing music scores, further compounded by the disparity in students' abilities (Arshinova, 2022; Wei, 2022). Over time, teaching trends have shifted the emphasis from virtuosity to musicality, then to performance, and finally to complete freedom in interpreting musical pieces (Arshinova, 2022).

When teaching musical interpretation and expression in higher education, teachers often guide students through their own subjective feelings and imagination or encourage students to visualize scenes and plots themselves. This suggests the need for careful study of the musical form, compositional background, and technical skills (Chen, 2023; Wu, 2023; Yang, 2023). Zheng & Leung (2023) also indicated that developing students' creativity in piano performance requires immersion in culturally relevant contexts and understanding the world through holistic cognitivism and abstract imagination. Holgersson (2011) substantiated these observations, but the issue may have been overlooked by previous research because interpretation is not directly discussed (Karlsson & Juslin, 2008). C.P.E Bach believed that mastering technique alone does not constitute a good performance, which consists of "the ability to convey to the listener the true content of the music" (Bach, 1787).

Piano Interpretation

The interpretation of musical compositions has been approached from multiple perspectives, with performers and theorists striving to uncover an "ideal" interpretation. Bratu (2023) believed that the ideal style most closely aligns with the composer's intentions, challenging musicians to balance those intentions with their own personal style. Interpreting a musical piece involves exploring the composer's creative vision through the musical score, necessitating the decoding of the underlying meaning behind the notation (Jiang, 2022). Otherwise, piano performance risks becoming a purely mechanical exercise.

Performers must strike a balance between sensibility and rationality in their interpretations. Emotional imagery plays a crucial role, but the work's depth also demands rational thinking and comprehension. The reason Beethoven is so celebrated in the history of music is that his works unite the spirit of classicism without sacrificing aesthetic audibility (Chen, 2019). Consequently, the process of interpreting a work should strive for a relatively accurate representation of a particular lyrical idea. Excellent performers become the embodied personification of the piece envisioned by the composer, endeavoring to capture the emotions and thoughts that guided its creation (Bach, 1753; Dreyfus, 2020).

In contrast, Dreyfus (2020) discussed Mozart's desire for audiences to forget the composer and be convinced that the performer is the true source of musical ideas, suggesting that the quality of the composition itself, rather than a distant "reading" of the score, guarantees musical sincerity. The notion of "fidelity to the work" (*Werktreue*), advocated by Carl Maria von Weber, introduces an ethical dimension to textual fidelity: the composer leaves us their text, which serves as a substitute for their intentions. To present the text without alteration or deletion is to be faithful to the text and, thus, to the revered composer (Dreyfus, 2020).

Topic Theory

Topic theory, introduced by Leonard Ratner (1980), offers a framework for understanding and interpreting musical works. It suggests that music consists of a fixed set of "musical-emotional" topic symbols. For example, emotional orientations such as *galant*, *empfindsamkeit*, etc.

correspond to fixed musical materials. Sometimes musical emotions are not limited to abstract feelings, but also evoke social memories that guide the audience's senses. Classical era composers used characteristic figures, or topics, to evoke specific musical styles, gestures, and expressions drawn from various aspects of eighteenth-century European culture. These topics were intentionally employed and would have been easily recognized by contemporary listeners.

The application of topic theory extends beyond the Classical period, with theorists like Kofi (1991) and Dickensheets (2012) demonstrating its relevance and categorization in 18th and 19th-century music, as well as ongoing research into 20th and 21st-century works. While traditionally focused on compositional aspects, topic theory's potential for informing performance and pedagogy has gained attention. Hatten (2004) argued that understanding expressive meanings conveyed by topics can guide performers in making informed interpretive choices. Similarly, Schrempel (2010) suggested that teaching students to recognize and interpret topical references can foster deeper engagement with music and enhance interpretive skills.

Despite the growing interest, the application of topic theory to piano pedagogy remains largely unexplored. While existing research highlights the potential benefits of incorporating topics into piano teaching (Schrempel, 2010), there is a need for more empirical studies investigating its practical implementation and impact on students' interpretive abilities.

The present study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of piano lecturers on the challenges and opportunities of integrating topic theory into their teaching practice. By examining the experiences and insights of these educators, the research seeks to shed light on the potential of topic theory as a pedagogical tool for enhancing students' interpretive skills and fostering a deeper understanding of musical expression. The findings may have implications for the development of piano pedagogy and contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of theoretical frameworks in music education.

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives and reflections of piano lecturers at Shangqiu Normal University on piano

performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. The research sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by these educators in their teaching practice.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the piano lecturers' perspectives on piano performance, pedagogy, and interpretation?
2. How do piano lecturers approach the music interpretation in their performances and lessons?

To address these questions, the study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and reflections, providing rich and nuanced insights into the complexities of piano teaching.

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and reflections of piano teachers at Shangqiu Normal University regarding piano performance and pedagogy. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their flexibility and ability to elicit rich, detailed responses from participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This approach allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences and insights while maintaining a focus on the key themes of the study.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants in this study were six senior piano lecturers from Shangqiu Normal University, selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and extensive experience in piano performance and teaching. The selection criteria ensured that the participants possessed a high level of proficiency in piano performance, with a minimum of ten years of professional teaching experience. Additionally, they had amassed notable achievements and awards in their respective fields.

To maintain confidentiality and encourage open and honest responses, the participants were informed in advance that their identities would remain anonymous throughout the research process. To protect their privacy, each participant was assigned a coded identifier based on the order of their interview dates: Lecturer 1 (L1), Lecturer 2 (L2), Lecturer 3 (L3), Lecturer 4 (L4), Lecturer 5 (L5), and Lecturer 6 (L6).

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and the key themes identified in the literature review, including piano performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. The interviews began with questions about the participants' personal experiences in piano performance and teaching and progressed to more reflective questions about their teaching practices and the challenges they faced in fostering students' interpretive skills. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher engaged in an iterative process of coding and theme development, constantly comparing the emerging themes with the research questions and the literature to ensure the coherence and relevance of the findings.

During the data analysis process, multiple initial codes were identified through systematic coding of the interview data (Table 1). These initial codes were then organized into broader sub-themes and themes. The table below provides a detailed example of how initial codes were translated into themes.

Table 1: *The process of coding and generating themes*

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial codes
Performance Experiences and Strategies	Imaginative Engagement	Imaginary scene, emotions, storytelling
	Authentic Interpretation	The intention of composers, original score, avoid excessive personal processing
	Technical Proficiency	Technical training, timbre and quality of the notes, systematic techniques

Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes related to the participants' experiences, perspectives, and reflections on piano performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. The findings are presented in three main categories: (1) Performance Experiences and Strategies, (2) Teaching Experiences and Approaches, and (3) Reflections on Piano Pedagogy.

Performance Experiences and Strategies

Participants shared their perspectives on approaching and processing musical pieces during performance, focusing on imaginative engagement, authentic interpretation, and technical proficiency.

Imaginative Engagement. Participants highlighted the role of imagination in shaping their performances. After accurately playing the notes from the score, L1 expressed a preference for processing music by imagining the story and visual scenes, immersing himself in the character's

experience. He described constructing a vivid scene, envisioning details such as the time of day, season, weather conditions, and setting (private or natural landscape). By integrating himself into this imaginary scene, akin to an actor portraying a role, L1 aimed to feel and resonate with the emotions, as if retelling the story to himself.

This approach resonated with L4's idea of inferring a piece's meaning through listening and visualization, to address harmonic direction and emotional expression. By immersing themselves in the imagined world of the piece, they aim to create performances that resonate with audiences on an emotional level.

Authentic Interpretation. “Authentic interpretation” involves fidelity, accuracy and respect for the original intent and context, whether in law, literature, art, philosophy or music. In music performance, and especially in piano performance, “authentic interpretation” refers to playing in a manner that is as faithful as possible to the composer's original intent and historical context. During the interview, L1 argued, “authenticity” should be the cornerstone of performance. The context means that performers should not engage in subjective processing without first developing a comprehensive understanding, as a performance lacking true comprehension of the piece would be inauthentic. Specifically, he explained,

Concerning terms on the score, such as “forte” or “piano,” I usually ask students the question, “Why are you playing as ‘forte’ and why are you playing as ‘piano’?” The student always replies that it is because the score is marked “forte” and “piano.”

He believed that this response was “inauthentic” because the students did not understand the deeper meaning behind the terms “forte” and “piano.” Therefore, he suggested that the key to performance lies in exploring and studying the work at a deeper level to achieve true comprehension.

L5 shared a similar view, emphasizing faithful adherence to the original score and the composer's intentions, rather than overly complex personal processing without guiding principles. She mentioned that deviating from the score by performing randomly, altering tempos, or employing complicated processing might create more issues. Furthermore,

she pointed out that classical music is characterized by discipline, whereas romantic or post-modern pieces are particularly prone to including interpretations as the performer deems appropriate, some of which can be unpleasant. Therefore, she believed that the processing of certain pieces should be moderate to avoid shortcomings, flaws, or negative impressions from the audience, regardless of the performance setting.

In closing, both L1 and L5 argued that performers should strive to be faithful to the composer's intentions and the inherent meaning of the musical work, rather than engaging in excessive personal interpretation without a deep understanding of the piece. They emphasized the importance of exploring the work at a deeper level to achieve an authentic interpretation.

Technical Proficiency. In addition to the aspect of musicality, participants also highlighted the importance of technique. L2, L4, and L6 emphasized technical training in their interviews. L2 argued that while technique is an integral part of piano performance, serving the music, it is crucial to focus on the timbre and quality of each note during playing. Therefore, from the outset, there should be no differentiation between technique and musicality, as they are inseparable.

L6 also stressed that the core of performance is mastering more scientific and systematic techniques. Both L3 and L5 agreed on the importance of first focusing on technique, accurately reading the score, and mastering the notation before grasping the appropriate style of the work's composition period. This includes understanding the composer's style, life experiences, and the overall characteristics of that period's compositions as a means of investigating the work's meaning and interpreting its style accurately. For example, when learning adaptations or original compositions of Chinese works, considering the regional elements and stylistic nuances is essential.

Teaching Experiences and Approaches

After sharing their perspectives on performance, the participants transitioned to discussing their experiences and approaches in piano teaching. This section is divided into exploring musical meaning and stimulating imagination.

Exploring Musical Meaning. The participants shared their experiences in guiding students to explore the meaning behind the musical score. L1 described how he explains the details of the score to his students, pointing out that when they encounter terminology on the score, they often mechanically interpret it without considering the deeper meaning behind dynamics and expressive markings. He further emphasized that music is an expression of mood or emotion, and dynamics serve as signs of emotion; therefore, it is crucial to analyze the piece from an emotional perspective. He mentioned, "For example, anger requires a 'forte', and 'excitement' requires a 'forte' as well, which are two completely different emotions. So how does the listener understand whether you are playing 'excitement' or 'anger'?"

L2 believed that technique is intrinsically linked to the overall image and story context of the work, and thus, technique cannot be discussed in isolation. She would guide her students and provide them with ample analogies to foster a sense of imagery, asking them, "What did you think of when you played this piece?"

In addition to associating stories and images with the piece, L3 and L5 noted that when explaining the piece to students, it should be discussed and analyzed in terms of the style of the time period, the composer's personal experiences and stylistic tendencies, and the internal musical structure of the work. L3 also stated that she would assist students in understanding the background information of the piece and encourage them to proactively learn about it, which could lead to discovering how they should approach interpreting similar works.

L4 and L6 highlighted the importance of respecting their students' individual creative thinking, particularly when addressing the musicality of a piece after resolving technical challenges. They refrained from imposing a specific emotional interpretation onto their students. L6 suggested that each individual would have their own unique experiences and potentially differing perceptions of a work's overall style. Unless a student's interpretation deviated drastically from the established norms, she would respect and encourage their creative exploration of the piece. This approach aligns with the belief that nurturing students' artistic individuality and allowing them to develop their own interpretive voices is essential for fostering well-rounded musicianship.

Stimulating Imagination. From the narratives shared, it is evident that "imagination" plays a crucial role in interpreting musical works. Regarding how to stimulate students' imagination, L1 placed great emphasis on storytelling and visual aspects, guiding students to visualize imagery and immerse themselves in the musical scene to find the appropriate mood and approach to processing the work.

L2 believed that music, art, and fine arts are interconnected. Although fully comprehending the composer's thought process at the time of composition may be impossible, gaining a general understanding of the work should allow for an overall interpretation that aligns with the intended direction. She elaborated,

By making the music feel like a story, there is a psychological rhythm and an emotional flow, like when we speak and finish one sentence, and the next one is already there, so it's easier to process the piece, and it will be fluid and full of energy.

L3 utilized background knowledge and audio materials to stimulate students' imagination of the composer's situation and mindset during the composition process. This approach aimed to facilitate a more accurate grasp of the composer's emotions and ideas, thereby enabling a more nuanced interpretation of the work.

The lecturers' insights into their teaching practices highlight the significance of guiding students through an exploration of the musical meaning and stimulating their imagination. By combining theoretical understanding with creative expression, piano teachers can foster a deeper connection between students and the works they perform, ultimately enhancing their interpretive abilities and overall musicality.

Reflections on Piano Pedagogy

After describing their conceptions of performance and teaching, the participants concluded their interviews by reflecting on areas for improvement and growth within piano teaching. This section is divided into two parts: interpretive teaching methods and holistic and diverse approaches.

Interpretive Teaching Methods. Participants identified several challenges in teaching musical interpretation. L1 believed that the primary

aspect of piano teaching that needed strengthening was the interpretation of music. He mentioned that if he did not hear a sense of musicality in a student's playing, he would shift his attention to addressing their technique, as he thought that if a student could genuinely convey the emotion of the piece, they must have employed the appropriate technique. The lack of musicality in students' performances was a common observation among the participants. They generally felt that students were often engaged in a "mechanical" approach to training.

Regarding how to guide students in interpreting music, L2 found that the broader context and culture of music still need to be explored and understood. She thought that we were learning music, not just technique. We are not just playing the piano but interpreting music.

However, in further discussing this aspect, L1 acknowledged a lack of detailed materials and a systematic approach, saying,

I usually guide my students based on my subjective imagination or encourage them to visualize what they want, which can partially serve the purpose, but I'm not sure if that's too far from the 'original intent' of the musical score.

Holistic and Diverse Approaches.

The need for a more holistic and diverse approach to piano pedagogy emerged as a common theme. Regarding the current state of teaching in universities, both L2 and L5 believed that diversity in teaching methods should be strengthened, advocating for the incorporation of various pedagogical approaches and exposing students to a wide range of different works. They also suggested absorbing more Western theories and pedagogies, such as analyzing the structure, harmony, and texture in a piece.

L5 expressed a desire for newer and more systematic teaching methods, noting that the current teaching system felt outdated. She shared an example from her own training, where she had learned to keep her fingers high when playing since childhood, and she still taught beginner students using the same method, despite its potential limitations.

Both L3 and L6 referred to the phenomenon of relying on the same monotonous technical training methods they had learned long ago when

they became teachers themselves. They believed that their previous learning experiences had shaped their current teaching practices, leading to a replication of outdated approaches. They acknowledged this as a problematic issue and expressed a desperate need to absorb and understand more diverse teaching perspectives and methods.

L4 further indicated that the current teaching style is rather monotonous, highlighting that as each teacher's professional knowledge and abilities are limited, they risk becoming stagnant without continual learning and growth. She also felt that the exploration of the meaning behind musical structure and harmony is lacking in teaching, which greatly limits the comprehensive interpretation of musical works in performance and pedagogy.

In summary, the participants recognized the need to strengthen the teaching of musical interpretation, while also diversifying their pedagogical approaches and drawing from a broader range of theories and methods. By embracing innovation and continuously expanding their knowledge and skills, piano teachers can better equip themselves to guide students in developing a deeper understanding and more nuanced interpretation of musical works.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of piano teachers in relation to performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. The discussion is organized around three main themes: (1) Insights Into Performing Experiences, (2) Reflections on Teaching Experiences, and (3) Reflections on Teaching Experiences.

Insights Into Performing Experiences

The lecturers commented on the importance of imagination in shaping their performances, utilizing personal experiences and feelings to visualize imagery and narratives. Prior research has underscored the role of imagination in developing musical expression, informing various performance elements such as timbre, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing (Wang, 2018). In abstract music, where the guidance of text, poetry, and visual cues is absent, imagination becomes even more crucial. As noted by some participants, natural scenes or sounds are often employed as stimuli to evoke imagination and foster emotional expression (Zorzal & Lorenzo,

2019). However, caution must be exercised to ensure that imagination does not become excessively subjective or disconnected from the inherent clues within the piece itself, such as characterization based on stylistic representation and internal structural elements. As Doğantan (2014) suggested, performers can enhance audience engagement and emotional resonance by synthesizing the work's background and content with the artistic concepts expressed through the instrument. However, in the interviews, teachers tended to be more subjective in their use of imagination. When exploring the meaning behind the piece, they only made general references to the contextual information and the internal structural elements of the score. They did not delve deeper, particularly in terms of how these elements balanced with each other.

The participants also referred to the need for "authenticity" and "virtuosity" as foundational elements of their performances. Music integrity serves as the basis for performance (Chen, 2019). The concept of "authenticity" mentioned by the participants refers to possessing a musical understanding of the work, rather than merely playing the notes mechanically. It involves exploring the musical meaning underlying the notation, respecting the text and the composer's intentions, and then expressing the piece through the lens of one's perception and comprehension. Davies (2004) noted the importance of students learning not to express themselves excessively, as this tendency can overshadow the authentic representation of the work. Elliott (1995) asserted that performance can be a creative endeavor rather than merely "re-creative," with the depth of a performer's interpretation hinging on their fidelity to the original work, its historical context, cultural traditions, and heritage. According to Silverman (2007), the interpreter must strike a balance between utilizing the score as a means of unique expression while simultaneously respecting its underlying intentions. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply analyze the structural elements within the score and explore information from external sources related to it, rather than just playing the notes skillfully.

Technique remains an indispensable foundation that cannot be overlooked. Even with a rich imagination and adequate understanding of the work, the musical works cannot be adequately expressed and interpreted without the support of skillful technique. Performance ability is built upon the foundation of playing skills, enabling skilled performers to coordinate the intricate movements of their limbs and produce a smooth

playing style (Fraser, 2003). Simultaneously, the participants mentioned that different stylistic works from various periods necessitate the adaptation of techniques to suit the specific stylistic demands. Wu (2020) also described the importance of piano technique in performance, suggesting that "emotion depends on the intensity of playing." It is essential to focus on technique while maintaining an understanding of the work, combining technical elements with emotional aspects to deliver a truly captivating performance to the audience (Wu, 2020). A professional performer possesses the ability to interpret a musical work in all its nuances and on multiple levels, presenting the composition in a manner that profoundly moves the listener while adhering to the historical trends and restoring the work to its highest level of authenticity.

As shown above, to integrate these three elements in piano performance, it is especially important to first find a balance between personal imagination and the meaning of the original score, which is also a key issue in piano learning and teaching. The previously mentioned topic theory can be considered a viable approach. The symbols of a given topic provide a structured framework for understanding. This framework helps the performer to find space for personal imagination based on an understanding of the score and the composer's intentions. For example, through recognizing topics such as 'Hunt' and 'Pastoral' in a work (Monelle, 2006), the performer can freely express personal feelings and imagination based on an understanding of the given topic without deviating from the core structure and meaning of the work. They can then choose appropriate techniques to express all the ideas.

Reflections on Teaching Experiences

The lecturers indicated that they guide students to explore the deeper meaning behind the musical score and terminology, drawing inspiration from the stylistic context and structural elements of the work, while simultaneously respecting each student's individual creativity. In Western classical music higher education, one-on-one instruction typically emphasizes technical aspects over interpretive elements, often prioritizing the imitation of the teacher's interpretation rather than encouraging the student's exploratory interpretation (Holmgren, 2020). Elliott (1995) highlighted the importance of students critically reflecting on the different layers of meaning within the musical works they interpret and perform, before, during, and after playing and listening to the music (pp. 62-63; 98-

99). However, it is common for students to explain their approach to dynamics and expressive markings solely based on the terminology indicated in the score, without comprehending the underlying rationale.

Consequently, the teacher's ability and methodology for interpreting music play a pivotal role in their teaching. Holmgren (2020) mentioned in his research that the conditions for learning music interpretation are centered on students achieving a high degree of autonomy, influenced by the three key aspects of teaching: students' and teachers' understanding of music interpretation, students' experience of interpretive freedom recognized by the teacher, and the expectation for students to explore interpretive methods. To achieve their goals, piano teachers should consciously cultivate their own creativity while broadening the depth and breadth of their interpretations of musical works. Additionally, in universities, the traditional piano course is often based on teaching by example, utilizing the "indoctrination" method, which can result in poor independent learning ability and low student motivation (Wei, 2022).

The lecturers emphasized the importance of stimulating students' independent imagination, training their imaginative thinking, and storytelling within piano lessons. Imagination is recognized as a prerequisite for connecting different musical activities and for musical creativity in listening (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Peterson, 2006). Piano teachers should allow their students to exercise imagination and initiative, thereby developing their creativity in performance, which is closely related to their personal knowledge and experiences (Zheng & Leung, 2021).

By guiding an exploration of musical meaning while nurturing imaginative expression, piano teachers can foster a deeper connection between students and the works they perform, ultimately enhancing their interpretive abilities and overall musicality. Therefore, it also requires piano teachers to have a certain level of musical and even cultural knowledge. The results of the interviews showed that the teachers also used some strategies to guide their students' imagination and creativity, but they did not mention more specific details about these approaches. Topic theory provides a new perspective and method to piano teaching. Through in-depth analysis of the topics contained in a particular work, students can gain a more solid understanding of the cultural background and emotional clues, and then add their own personal emotions and

understandings to their performances. In addition, once the students have a direction in analyzing and interpreting the piece, they can also increase their motivation to practice and the confidence in playing.

Implications for Piano Pedagogy

The participants believed that strengthening the teaching of music interpretation is crucial, suggesting that most students' performances lack a true expression of the music's meaning, often appearing "mechanized." However, within the specific teaching process, they acknowledged a lack of detailed materials and a systematic approach to provide more nuanced instruction beyond general background information and the composer's biography. In performance settings, students frequently rely on their instinctive perceptions of music and personal imagination to process the score or, after understanding some general contextual information, establish the overall stylistic approach for the piece or imitate existing interpretations by renowned pianists.

Moreover, the participants highlighted a phenomenon in universities where students primarily study to fulfill examination requirements, practicing mechanically and often neglecting to explore the deeper meaning of the music. Such an informal course of study, focused solely on accomplishing assigned tasks, limits students' ability to develop a comprehensive musical or piano culture, effectively rendering them as "manufactured products" with limited independent capabilities (Abdumutalibovich, 2020; Arshinova, 2022; Ganz, 1999). Furthermore, issues such as varying student abilities, unreasonable teaching material content, insufficient piano teachers, and limited, outdated teaching methods necessitate diversification and enrichment of pedagogical approaches (Li, 2023; Liu, 2023; Wei, 2022).

The lecturers also noted a general lack of support and a systematic approach to guiding students in interpreting and analyzing the musical content of works, with a tendency to rely on their subjective imagination and understanding. Teachers often "impose" their interpretation onto their students' minds, as students may initially struggle to grasp the complex nuances of the works (Silverman, 2007). Rosen (2002) asserts that the greatest teachers do not impose interpretations but rather strive to understand the student's preferred approach and enhance the effectiveness of their interpretations. However, this is challenging for teachers, as they

naturally impart their style and interpretive approach, having developed their own over time. Simultaneously, students' lack of initiative in interpreting music stems from factors such as inertia, preferences, intellectual background, musical literacy, and experience, necessitating continued guidance from teachers.

Therefore, as mentioned by the participants, to better lead their students in interpretation, teachers need to acquire a broad range of musical knowledge, interpretive styles, and continuously improve their teaching methods. In this regard, topic theory (Ratner, 1980) emerges as a valuable approach that analyzes the structural characteristics of music and its relevant cultural context. It provides a more historical and cultural aspect to the piece, and the substantive symbols contained in it offer solid points of reference for understanding. By providing detailed contextual and cultural clues, topic theory can enlighten both teachers and students, enabling them to better interpret works and ground their imagination in substantiated directions, enhancing the depth of interpretation and expressiveness of performance.

Participants frequently observed students mechanically processing playing methods based solely on terminology without understanding the underlying rationale. As Schrempel (2010) noted, descriptions like "exciting music" for loud and fast passages often lack nuance and systematic explanation of the associated emotions. The subtleties of musical emotion can only be grasped with a deeper understanding of musical structure. Notably, research suggests that musical expressiveness can indeed be taught, beginning with identifying cues to emotional expression within the music (Schrempel, 2010). The overall emotional tone of a piece is typically established by its defining qualities outlined in the score, which also determine the work's dynamic shape and progression (Davies, 2004). If musical expressiveness is an objective property of music, a performance will be appropriately expressive as long as it achieves these relevant properties. Consequently, performers should explore the meaning of the score and play according to its guidelines. Topic theory equips performers and interpreters with the tools to explore and understand the meaning within and beyond the structure of a musical piece, facilitating a comprehensive analysis and expressive rendering of the composition. Recognizing and analyzing the different topics in the score allows teachers to enrich the content and guide students to focus not only on the technical aspects but also to deeply

understand the cultural and emotional aspects of the work. In this way, teachers can guide their students more accurately, avoiding subjectivity and confusion in their explanations.

In summary, the findings highlight the need for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to teaching musical interpretation, supported by diverse pedagogical methods and a broader integration of theoretical frameworks like topic theory. By embracing innovation, expanding knowledge, and fostering creativity, piano teachers can better equip themselves and their students to develop a deeper understanding and more nuanced interpretation of musical works.

Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives and reflections of six experienced piano teachers at Shangqiu Normal University on piano performance, pedagogy, and interpretation. The findings underscore the importance of balancing technical proficiency and artistic expression in piano performance and highlight the need for a more holistic approach to piano pedagogy that nurtures students' expressive and interpretive abilities. The participants' accounts reveal the challenges they face in teaching musical interpretation, such as the lack of systematic approaches and reliance on subjective imagination. This stresses the need for piano teachers to cultivate their own creativity and broaden their interpretive skills to better guide their students.

A key insight from the research is the potential of topic theory as a framework for enhancing students' interpretive skills in piano pedagogy. By exploring the intrinsic characteristics of musical works and their historical and cultural contexts, topic theory offers a comprehensive approach to understanding and interpreting music, rather than a formal analysis limited to the interior of the piece. The findings have significant implications for piano education, calling for a paradigm shift that moves away from a mechanistic focus on technical skill development and towards a more holistic approach. However, when teachers use topic theory in their classes, they may face a lack of understanding of the concept because it involves knowledge beyond the scope of the existing syllabus and traditional textbooks. Therefore, piano teachers need to continuously expand their knowledge and skills, seeking diverse pedagogical approaches and interpretive frameworks. Further research into the

practical application of topic theory in piano pedagogy is needed, including the development of strategies and resources to support its integration into teaching practice. For instance, it is necessary to train teachers on this theory and conduct workshops and seminars to help them master its application in practice. Additionally, sharing results and experiences after using this method, and evaluating students' learning and performance to get their feedback on the interpretation and expression of piano pieces is essential. While there may be challenges and barriers, analyzing specific topics and symbols in a musical work through topic theory can help students gain a deeper understanding of the inner structure and associated cultural background. Moreover, topic theory is related to musicology, semiotics, cultural studies, and other disciplines, which can broaden the knowledge of both teachers and students. It promotes integration and mutual inspiration between different fields. By embracing these insights and exploring new pedagogical approaches, piano educators can work towards nurturing a new generation of pianists who are both technically proficient and deeply expressive in their performances.

Research Ethics Declaration

This study was approved by the Universiti of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) on 19 January 2022, with Reference Number: UM.TNC2/UMREC_1721.

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