

Gretchen L Hull, Piano

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Additional supplemental materials, including example syllabi and course materials may be found here:

<https://www.gretchenhullpiano.com/supplemental-materials>

Teaching Philosophy Statement: Nurturing Fellow Artists

My teaching philosophy can be summarized as serving the goal of nurturing the development not simply of good students, or even great musicians, but of *fellow artists*, and hopefully, colleagues. The path toward this goal is necessarily a holistic one with a wealth of practical applications. Music education at the undergraduate level entails the fairly unusual circumstance of a student spending up to four years or more of one-on-one instruction with the same professor, and additionally, the instruction received from one's piano professor is typically foundational to artistic development and the formation of ideal models of private teaching. It therefore follows that a positive and professional relationship between professor and student is critical, and an environment of trust, respect, and appropriate expectations is essential to cultivating a healthy morale among the studio as a whole. Furthermore, it is vital to acknowledge that the needs of students may vary; some may be upperclassmen who know the ropes well, while others may be transfer students, first-generation college students, graduate students, international students who are also acclimating to a new country, and many, if not most, will be students who are the first in their families to pursue a music degree. In the first week of classes, therefore, it is necessary to **meet with each student one-on-one** to build a fuller understanding of their own needs, goals, and prior experiences. These meetings will help prevent making assumptions that all students are arriving at the campus with a full understanding of the resources available to them or of the work that is being asked of them. Responsibilities of instructor and student must be clear, a good relationship established, and an understanding of high but attainable artistic expectations fostered to give inspiration to the gritty work that follows. Below I will address in turn the ways this overarching goal may be served by the curriculum within the following categories:

- a) technique and score interpretation
- b) performing experience
- c) career preparation
- d) tailored projects to support diverse needs

a) Technique and score interpretation

To become a fully independent artist, students must develop **technique** that accordingly liberates physical movement. My approach to technique holds common ground with most performing pianists—basic principles include **economy of motion** in virtuosic playing and **free movement** unencumbered by destructive muscle tension. Hence, technical exercises should support playing with loose shoulders, arms, and wrists, facile transfer of finger weight, nimble modulation of arm and hand weight, and playing from the keys. It should be emphasized that virtuosic technique is always practiced

at the service of deeper musical communication, that is, convincing **score interpretation** that aims beyond mere imitation, but which manifests itself clearly and grippingly in performance. Students need to cultivate skill in clarity of structure, phrasing, voicing, blend, pacing, and musically informed physical gestures. Harmonic or motivic analysis is often very illuminating, and here lie opportunities for instruction to incorporate growing knowledge of music theory in the wider degree curriculum. Critical to persisting in this thorny path to technical and interpretive excellence is a deep personal connection to the music itself. This can be encouraged by fostering a deep understanding of the **historical background** and context to a given work and with sensitivity to the student's response and existing repertoire aptitudes.

b) Performing experience

Of course, applied piano students need to be well-prepared for performing outside of the university/college. **Studio classes** give students opportunities for performance experience as well as responding positively to criticism and developing discerning ears to give helpful feedback to other pianists. Just as a healthy instructor-student relationship is crucial, so is fostering a positive and supportive atmosphere between students. Such scenarios grant students a chance to develop interpersonal skills that will serve them well in other collaborative contexts. For the same reasons, I strongly encourage participation in **masterclasses** and in **chamber music**, an enormous aid in developing sensitive ears and better rhythm, as well as providing invaluable experiences for musicians to be accountable to one another, as they will be outside of the university/college. Performance majors should be regularly encouraged to actively seek out other **performance or competitive opportunities locally and beyond**. I believe it is the duty of the instructor to establish this pattern as a norm, and to be aware of each student's progress toward this goal. Private instructors should also maintain an up-to-date listing of local, national, or international performance venues, **workshops, summer festivals and competitions** (or else delegate it as a yearly studio or G.A. project). Lastly, any keyboard program should in the course of the academic year offer students the opportunity to meet a **diverse array of guest artists**. This can be very meaningful to students as they continue to build their vision of what kind of artist they are becoming, and the guest artists themselves should reflect the diversity of the studio.

To thrive as a pianist with fulfilling work and a stable personal economy, it is also the duty of the institution to prepare piano students, whether education or performance majors, for success in their respective fields. A large part of this preparation should be reflected in studio assignments that work with, and not against, the modern classical keyboard milieu. **Recordings** have already for decades been routinely demanded of pianists as prescreening auditions for nearly every form of professional advancement, including summer music festivals, jobs, graduate schools, and competitions. Preparing for juries or even other live performances alone is insufficient practice to become accomplished in creating excellent single-take recordings. Therefore, I believe recording as a practice-aid should be a weekly routine. Furthermore, single-take, professional quality video recordings should become regular assignments (at least once a year, if not once a semester) in undergraduate education. As a student's socio-economic status should pose no barrier to recording and editing quality, the piano instructor may need to play a role in finding affordable options to borrow or rent recording equipment or to work out accessible options for students to **collaborate with university/college recording departments**.

c) Career preparation

Also crucial to success in “the real world” are the ability to **promote** oneself, advertise for wider audiences, use social media and sometimes personal websites to promote performances, **communicate** vibrantly with an audience, strengthen positive relationships with fellow performing musicians, make wise decisions about how and when to build a **private studio**, and learn how to establish appropriate patterns for collaborative and chamber work. All of these important skills need to be reflected in recital preparation, assignments, or readily available resources. **Musical versatility** is a great currency to the pianist, whether this involves becoming skilled in many genres, developing skills that allow one to have multiple sources of income, or being professionally competent in multiple keyboard instruments (like harpsichord, fortepiano, or organ). For this reason I encourage early introduction of basic **historical performance practices** and at least a rudimentary ability to sight-read figured bass. Even when relevant elective classes are not available, historically-informed performance practices can be developed when preparing any repertoire prior to the 20th century.

Universities frequently advertise positions that include **chamber coaching, teaching secondary piano, piano literature, piano ensemble, or piano pedagogy**. It is therefore prudent to ensure that all graduate students have experience assisting or taking on these duties prior to graduation. Furthermore, an **elective course** designed for piano performance majors to develop skill in chamber coaching for strings, woodwinds, and brass can be a valuable asset to set these graduates apart from others. While music education majors will graduate with a well-rounded understanding of other instrument groups, piano performance majors often lack this experience. Another gap frequently seen in piano performance programs is the habit of **practicing orchestral excerpts**. This should not be reserved only for collaborative piano majors, but integrated into lessons or studio classes.

d) Tailored projects to support diverse needs

Artistry develops best in tailored and multifaceted instruction; other components can be therefore included with **consideration of a student’s past experience, unique interests (ex. musical eras, interdisciplinary pursuits, their own cultural heritage), and current studies** (ex. in music history, theory, piano literature or pedagogy). Technical exercises may not only be tailored to the level of the student, but to the repertoire that is being studied. **Repertoire should reflect the increasingly diverse world of classical music**, and encourage representation of composers of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. **Analytic listening** to recordings of the masters also greatly assists in spurring students on to be their own teachers, so if not assigned in other current degree courses (e.g. piano literature), regular listening to a broad range of pianists and repertoire can be assigned in the studio. **Creative assignments** also play a role in maturing into independent musicians. These may involve writing or improvising one’s own cadenzas, transcribing or arranging other works for piano, or even simply adding one’s own ornamentation in appropriate contexts. Through all of these means, applied piano courses may serve in effective and practical ways to prepare the pianist for a fulfilling career, so that after graduation they may already be independent artists thoroughly engaged in the professional world.