

LEARNING THE PIANO IN FANTASIA

I'm just back from a visit to Fantasia. (Fantasia, as some of you may know, is a small country on the planet Largon, which orbits Star 446193B in the Lion's Head Galaxy. Don't ask me how I got there and back – it's classified.) Fantasia has a problem.

The problem is this. Countries on the planet Largon have different means of communication, and over the last century or so a planetary lingua franca has grown up. Largonians from different countries communicate with each other by playing the piano. Fantasians, who have no musical tradition, find this difficult. However, Fantasia needs to take its place in the modern world, where international communication is becoming increasingly important, and the Fantasian government therefore decreed some time ago that all young Fantasians must take piano lessons for two or three hours a week. Unfortunately this program has had little success: Fantasians regularly leave school, after seven or eight years of musical study, unable to play a note.

Musical education in Fantasia proceeds on somewhat traditional lines. The majority of piano teachers are in fact unable to play the piano. In their music lessons, pupils learn the names of the black and white notes, memorize the names of the different major and minor keys, study musical notation, and take turns to translate lines of sheet music into Fantasian. Most pupils find these lessons boring and pointless. The syllabus is quite demanding, especially at higher levels. In order to pass the examinations which will enable the more musically oriented young Fantasians to enter University and train as piano teachers, candidates must give correct answers to a large number of questions testing knowledge of musical theory and the ability to transcribe long passages of sheet music. Ability to play the piano is not tested. It is widely recognized in Fantasia that the present system is unsuccessful, and a number of younger teachers who have travelled abroad have suggested changes to the approach. These involve pupils actually practising the piano, the use of recordings of piano music in the classroom, and the engagement of teaching assistants from piano-playing countries to support the local teachers. While some progress has been made in these areas, there is little overall difference; young Fantasians still leave school, after seven or eight years' study, unable to play the piano.

Knowing my interest in education, some of my friends in the Fantasian government asked me if I had any suggestions about what could be done. I told them that I did not feel competent to comment in detail on a situation about which I knew little. However, for what it was worth, my view was as follows. First of all, Fantasia is spending a great deal of money on giving children piano lessons and getting nothing for it. This is clearly pointless: one does not go into a shop, put a large sum of money on the counter, and walk out empty-handed. In these circumstances the country is faced with a perfectly simple choice. It can stop paying for piano lessons and spend the money on something else: roads, hospitals, sports facilities or whatever. Or it can spend the money differently and get something for it. If Fantasia wishes to go down the second route, I suggested, radical action is needed, and it should consider the following seven-point plan.

- **1 Immediate action.** Since there is no point at all in having piano lessons given by teachers who cannot play the piano, compulsory music teaching should be

abolished for the time being, and these teachers should be given something else to do. Where there are teachers who can play the piano, these should offer voluntary music lessons only to those pupils who wish to learn and are prepared to work at their music.

- **2 Teacher education** The training of piano teachers should be completely reorganized under the direction of suitably qualified specialists, home-grown or imported, who are capable of establishing a program which will bring future teacher-trainers and teachers up to an appropriate level of practical competence in both piano-playing and pedagogy. The purpose is not to produce either academic theorists or concert pianists at native-playing level. What is needed is trainers and teachers who can play well enough and confidently enough to pass on their knowledge and skills, and who have been trained in appropriate practical methods of doing this. As many as possible of the existing non-piano-playing teachers should be sent on intensive courses to enable them to reach a minimum acceptable standard. As the stock of competent teacher trainers grows, increasing numbers of adequate teachers will emerge from the system, and nation-wide piano teaching can gradually be reintroduced. Bear in mind that this is likely to take several years.
- **3 Methods** In teaching methodology, to a great extent you get out what you put in. If what you put in is translating musical notation into Fantasian, that is what you will get out: the ability to translate musical notation into Fantasian. If you want to get out piano playing, you must provide appropriate input. Effective piano playing requires both knowledge and skills, and teachers must therefore be trained in methods which achieve a balance between these two elements: in particular, methods which do not prioritize theory over practice. Most importantly, teaching should aim to produce, and encourage, modest success, not perfection. Perfectionism in musical education is disastrous – learners never achieve the standards required, are continually corrected for small mistakes, and end up discouraged, unmotivated, and unwilling to try. (Many of the teachers who 'can't play the piano' actually can play – but their education has convinced them that they cannot.)
- **4 Materials** This is not a serious problem. There are excellent materials available for practical piano-teaching, published in many countries all over Largon. The important thing is to make sure that, as musical education is restructured, these are adopted in preference to the over-theoretical materials traditionally used in many Fantasian schools.
- **5 Syllabus** The traditional Fantasian approach is to put a great deal into the syllabus. This looks good to outsiders ('See how much we teach in our schools'), but it is totally counter-productive. There is far too much to learn, and in their efforts to tick all the boxes, teachers cannot actually teach anything properly. In learning a musical instrument, where confidence is crucial, the key is to do more with less. The syllabus should contain just enough essential material for pupils to be able to work at it at a reasonable pace, master it, and establish a core repertoire of music that they can play easily and with confidence. This will give them a solid basis on which they can build in the future, and which will provide most of what

they will need for practical purposes. (International communication on Largon takes place almost entirely in the key of C major in 4/4 time.)

- **6 Time** If Fantasia wants its young people to learn the piano, it must allocate the time necessary. Only the most gifted and motivated pupils can learn the piano in two hours a week. Five hours a week is probably reasonable for most learners. Anything less, and the money spent on musical education will continue to be wasted.
- **7 Examinations** Fantasians who urge reform are regularly told 'Well, yes, of course, we'd like to teach children to actually play the piano, but we have to get them through the exams, so that they can get into university.' The examination system has a stranglehold on music education in Fantasia. As long as the examinations require a knowledge of theory and no command of practical skills, this will necessarily be reflected in the classroom. So this part of the system must be radically overhauled along with everything else.

'But this will mean finding more money,' my friends objected, 'out of the over-stretched education budget' 'Yes, very probably,' I said. 'But that doesn't mean it will cost more, in real terms, because you will get something for it. Which is more expensive: a bicycle for 1000 Fantasian Grotniks, or half a bicycle for FG500? The half-bicycle is more expensive, of course, because you get nothing useful for your money. At the moment you're spending billions of Grotniks on half a bicycle.'

Is all this feasible? Yes, I think so. I believe that if Fantasia took these steps, it would have large numbers of reasonably competent piano players coming out of its schools in ten years or so. Will it happen? It's hard to say. There are considerable obstacles in the way. Change on this scale requires the political will to invest for the long term, with little visible short-term benefit. Attempts to replace existing structures typically run up against institutional opposition: those in charge may be comfortable with the status quo, which gives them power and prestige, and may be very unwilling to accept major upheavals which could threaten their position. And in education in particular, unsatisfactory structures tend to be very stable: those who succeed in learning by bad methods are the ones who get to the top; once in authority, they are likely to feel well-disposed to the methods by which they learnt, and see little reason to change them. We will have to wait and see. I'm off to Fantasia again in 2020. I'll let you know.