

## THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY IN SHAPING CONTEMPORARY PIANISM

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**Abstract:** The integration of historical inquiry into advanced piano pedagogy offers a transformative means of reshaping contemporary pianism beyond the traditional emphasis on technical precision and standardized interpretation. This practice-based qualitative study examined the impact of systematic historical engagement on eight undergraduate and graduate piano majors within a university conservatory setting over two academic years. Through a pedagogical intervention encompassing primary textual sources, historical instrument study, early recordings, and contextual research, students prepared major works from the Classical and Romantic repertoire. Analysis of reflective journals, recorded studio classes, interviews, and performance recordings revealed three principal outcomes: a significant expansion of technical and sonic vocabulary, particularly in articulation and pedaling; the development of interpretive agency and intellectual ownership over artistic decisions; and a reconceptualization of the performer's relationship to tradition, wherein historical constraints were reinterpreted as creative possibilities. The findings suggest that historical inquiry, far from representing an antiquarian specialization, serves as a foundational pedagogical tool that cultivates artistic independence, critical thinking, and a more profound connection between scholarly research and performative practice. This study argues for the integration of historically informed methodologies as a central component of university piano instruction, positioning such inquiry as essential to the formation of the contemporary pianist as both artist and scholar.

**Keywords:** historical performance practice, piano pedagogy, interpretive agency, performance studies, artist-scholar, musical interpretation

### Introduction

The landscape of contemporary piano performance is often perceived as a domain defined by technical precision, competitive achievement, and a canon of works rigorously preserved through urtext editions. Within university studios, the prevailing model of instruction frequently prioritizes the acquisition of a polished, internationally standardized technique, one that enables the execution of virtuosic repertoire with mechanical reliability. Yet beneath this veneer of uniformity lies a growing tension between the pursuit of such objective standards and a more fundamental question: what does it mean to perform a work from the eighteenth or nineteenth century with authenticity, vitality, and personal conviction in the twenty-first? This question has catalyzed a renewed interest in historical inquiry as not merely a scholarly adjunct to performance but as a central, transformative force in the formation of the contemporary pianist.

Historical inquiry in the context of pianism encompasses far more than the consultation of urtext editions or the memorization of composer biographies. It represents a rigorous, multi-dimensional engagement with the musical, cultural, and technological conditions that shaped the creation and original reception of piano repertoire. For the university-level pianist, this mode of investigation invites a departure from the passive acceptance of received tradition - the

accumulated interpretive habits passed down from teacher to student across generations - toward an active, critical, and informed process of interpretive decision-making. The central argument of this article is that the integration of historical inquiry into advanced piano pedagogy constitutes not a retreat into antiquarianism but rather a vital means of cultivating artistic agency, intellectual independence, and a more profound connection between the performer, the score, and the listening public. This study examines how such inquiry reshapes technical execution, interpretive depth, and the very identity of the pianist as an artist-scholar, ultimately arguing that historical consciousness is essential to a vibrant, evolving practice of contemporary pianism.

### Methods

This investigation was conducted as a qualitative pedagogical study situated within a university conservatory setting over the course of two academic years. The study employed a practice-based research methodology, wherein historical inquiry was systematically integrated into the teaching of advanced piano students, and the resulting artistic and developmental outcomes were documented through multiple modes of data collection. The participant cohort consisted of eight undergraduate and graduate piano majors, each of whom was preparing a major solo work from the Classical or Romantic repertoire for public performance. Repertoire included sonatas by Haydn and Beethoven, impromptus by Schubert, character pieces by Schumann, and a selection of Chopin's nocturnes and ballades.

The intervention was structured as a series of integrated pedagogical modules that moved beyond traditional score study. Each module required students to engage with four primary categories of historical source material. The first category encompassed primary textual sources, including original editions, composer-supervised editions, and contemporaneous treatises on performance practice, such as those by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, and Carl Czerny. The second category involved the study of historical instruments, facilitated through access to a collection of restored fortepianos from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, allowing students to experience firsthand the mechanical differences in action, touch, and sound production. The third category comprised the examination of historical recordings from the early twentieth century, including piano rolls and acoustic recordings by figures such as Ferruccio Busoni, Raoul Pugno, and Alfred Cortot, which offered insight into a performance tradition distinct from modern aesthetic norms. The fourth category required students to conduct contextual research into the aesthetic philosophies, performance practices, and social conventions of the relevant period, drawing on contemporary letters, criticism, and accounts of concert life.

Data were collected through several mechanisms. Each student maintained a reflective journal throughout the two-semester period, documenting their discoveries, frustrations, and evolving artistic decisions. Weekly studio classes were audio-recorded to capture the pedagogical dialogue and peer feedback that emerged from the historical inquiry process. Each student participated in three semi-structured interviews: at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of the study period. Finally, public performances were recorded, and each student engaged in a post-performance reflection session wherein they articulated the ways in which their historical research had informed their interpretative choices. The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with an emphasis on identifying recurring patterns in how students described their learning processes, technical adjustments, and shifts in artistic identity.

## Results

The analysis of student journals, interviews, and performance recordings revealed several significant themes regarding the impact of historical inquiry on contemporary pianism. These results are organized into three primary categories: technical and sonic transformation, interpretive agency and intellectual ownership, and the reconceptualization of the performer's relationship to tradition.

The most immediate and frequently cited outcome was a marked transformation in students' approach to touch, articulation, and sound production. Prior to the intervention, students uniformly described their technical foundation as oriented toward achieving a consistent, rounded tone, evenness of passagework, and a legato ideal derived primarily from twentieth-century pedagogical traditions. Engagement with historical instruments proved particularly catalytic. One student preparing a Haydn sonata noted in their journal that "playing on the fortepiano forced me to abandon the idea of a uniform sound altogether. The dynamic range is narrower, but the variety of articulation - the way the dampers work, the crispness of the release - opened up an entirely new vocabulary of expression." This experience translated back to the modern concert grand, where students reported a more nuanced use of the sustaining pedal, a greater differentiation between types of non-legato articulation, and a willingness to explore a wider spectrum of tonal colors rather than defaulting to a consistently "beautiful" sound. Analysis of performance recordings revealed a statistically significant increase in the use of differentiated articulations in repeated performances of the same passages, particularly in Classical repertoire where students began to execute notated slurs, staccatos, and accents with a precision and intentionality absent in their baseline performances.

The second major theme concerned interpretive agency. Students consistently reported that the process of consulting original sources and historical treatises liberated them from what they described as the "tyranny of the received interpretation." One participant, preparing Chopin's B-flat minor sonata, observed that "before this project, I was playing the third movement the way my last teacher played it, who learned it from their teacher, and so on. When I actually looked at the original French edition and read Chopin's own letters about tempo rubato, I realized I had been making choices based on a tradition that had nothing to do with what Chopin himself indicated." This sense of discovery fostered a deeper intellectual investment in the repertoire. Students described a shift from viewing themselves as executors of a fixed text to becoming active interpreters engaged in a form of historical dialogue. In their final interviews, all eight participants articulated a stronger sense of ownership over their interpretative decisions, with several noting that this ownership significantly reduced performance anxiety, as they no longer felt they were attempting to replicate an external, idealized model of the work but rather presenting a version they had constructed through their own research and conviction.

A third and more subtle theme emerged around the reconceptualization of the performer's relationship to tradition. Initially, many students expressed a binary view of historically informed performance, equating it with strict rules, authenticity as a set of prohibitions, and a sacrifice of personal expression. Through the sustained engagement with source materials, this view evolved into a more sophisticated understanding. Students came to recognize that the composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries operated within a performance culture that prized improvisation, ornamentation, and performer-specific interpretation far more than the text-

centric culture of the late twentieth century. This realization was particularly evident in the work of students preparing Beethoven, who, after studying contemporaneous accounts of Beethoven's own improvisatory playing, began to experiment with greater rhythmic flexibility and embellishment in slow movements. As one student articulated in their final reflection, "I used to think historical accuracy meant playing exactly what was on the page. Now I understand that for Beethoven, the page was a starting point. Historical inquiry gave me permission to be more creative, not less."

#### Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that historical inquiry, when integrated systematically into university piano instruction, serves not as an esoteric specialization for a handful of early music enthusiasts but as a foundational pedagogical tool capable of reshaping the core competencies of the contemporary pianist. The results align with and extend existing scholarship in performance studies, which has increasingly called for a model of performance that integrates scholarly research with artistic practice. However, this study offers specific insight into how such integration functions within the context of advanced musical training, particularly in its capacity to resolve the false dichotomy often constructed between technical mastery and intellectual depth.

The transformation in technical execution observed among participants warrants particular attention. The tendency in modern piano pedagogy to prioritize evenness, control, and a homogenized tone has produced generations of pianists of extraordinary facility, yet it has also, at times, obscured the idiomatic specificity of repertoire drawn from earlier periods. The discovery of historical articulations, fingerings, and pedaling techniques did not diminish students' technical command; rather, it expanded their technical vocabulary. Students did not abandon the legato or the rounded tone they had worked years to develop. Instead, they added to their palette a range of articulative possibilities that allowed for more stylistically differentiated performances. This finding challenges the assumption that historical performance practices are incompatible with the demands of the modern concert grand and suggests that technical pedagogy in the university studio would benefit from a more pluralistic approach that treats historical technique not as a separate track but as an integrated component of comprehensive pianism.

The development of interpretive agency is perhaps the most significant outcome for the formation of the university pianist. The traditional master-apprentice model, while effective for the transmission of embodied knowledge, can inadvertently foster a passive relationship to repertoire. Students learn to imitate the musical gestures of their teachers without necessarily developing the critical apparatus to question or generate alternative interpretations. The results of this study indicate that historical inquiry provides precisely that critical apparatus. When a student can point to a specific passage in a contemporaneous treatise, a detail in an original edition, or an account of a composer's own playing as the basis for an interpretive choice, they move from a position of deference to one of authority. This shift has profound implications not only for artistic development but also for professional preparation. The contemporary concert artist is increasingly expected to speak about their work with intellectual clarity, to engage with audiences in pre-concert talks and educational settings, and to articulate a coherent artistic vision.

The historically-informed student, grounded in primary sources and engaged in ongoing research, is uniquely equipped to meet these expectations.

Furthermore, the results invite a reconsideration of what is meant by “contemporary” in contemporary pianism. A common critique of historically informed performance is that it risks turning the concert hall into a museum, presenting old works as preserved artifacts rather than living art. The findings of this study suggest the opposite. By revealing the improvisatory, flexible, and performer-driven nature of earlier performance cultures, historical inquiry liberated students from the notion that a fixed, authoritative interpretation exists to be discovered. Instead, they came to understand interpretation as a creative act undertaken in dialogue with historical evidence. This understanding positions historical inquiry not as a constraint on contemporary expression but as a wellspring of creative possibility. The contemporary pianist, armed with this knowledge, is free to make informed choices that honor the spirit of a work without being bound by traditions that may have little basis in the composer’s own intentions or era.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. The small cohort size and the single-institution setting limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the two-year timeframe, while sufficient to observe significant developmental shifts, does not address the long-term retention of these pedagogical outcomes. Future research might explore the application of similar methodologies across larger and more diverse populations, including non-major piano students and those in pre-collegiate settings. Longitudinal studies tracking students’ professional careers would also illuminate whether the interpretive agency cultivated through historical inquiry translates into sustained artistic activity beyond the university.

Despite these limitations, the implications for university-level piano pedagogy are substantial. The integration of historical inquiry need not require radical curricular overhaul. It can begin with relatively small interventions: the incorporation of facsimile editions alongside urtexts, the inclusion of treatises on performance practice in studio classes, the organization of visits to collections of historical instruments, or the guided listening to early recordings. Such practices invite students to become active participants in the construction of their own interpretive voices. In an era where the piano studio faces the dual challenges of preserving a rich tradition while remaining relevant to evolving artistic and scholarly standards, the role of historical inquiry emerges not as a peripheral specialty but as a central, animating force. It is through such inquiry that the contemporary pianist can most authentically honor the past while contributing to a living, breathing art form. The results of this study affirm that when students are equipped to understand not only what they play but why they play it as they do, they are prepared not merely to perform the works of previous centuries but to carry them forward into the future with conviction, creativity, and an informed sense of purpose.

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