

# The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2024

## Breaking Free: Investigating a Decolonized, Student-Centered Alternative to the Royal Conservatory of Music Piano Syllabus

Keisha Bell-Kovacs

### What is this research about?

This research aimed to investigate pedagogical approaches to piano education outside of the Western European cultural context that is promoted by institutions like the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM). The purpose of the study was to consider teacher and parent attitudes towards the RCM examination system. This central purpose led to the following research questions:

1. What motivates parents to register their children in programs that teach the RCM syllabus and prepare them for examinations? Why have they chosen the piano as an instrument for their children?
2. What challenges are CMST piano teachers facing? What strategies have they tried to overcome those challenges?
3. Can a variety of decolonized pedagogical approaches improve teacher and student engagement with piano study?

### What did the researchers do?

The study comprised four independent components: an online survey, online interviews, lesson observations, and a two-hour in-person workshop. The researcher prepared online questionnaires for piano faculty and parents of students enrolled in piano lessons at CMST. Twelve questionnaires were completed representing twelve piano students. The survey asked questions about the decision to study the piano, the level of student engagement, and what kind of experience they had with RCM examinations. Six teachers completed a similar questionnaire geared to their teaching practices. Respondents were encouraged to provide contact information to be interviewed by the researcher for the project's next stage.

### What you need to know:

The conservatory system in Canada was modelled after European conservatories. The RCM was established in the late 1880s, within two decades of confederation, therefore the history of pedagogy in this country can be compared with British pedagogy of the same period. Piano lessons in Britain before the mid-19th century were comprised of musicianship skills that included composition and improvisation, and not simply interpretation. A scientific approach to pedagogy developed during the Enlightenment period, which saw music education broken into its discrete parts, and this form of teaching has reverberated through generations of students to the present, reified by institutions like the RCM. The cultural capital accrued by the RCM over the past 150 years has protected it from any real critical inquiry, as evidenced by the dearth of scholarly literature on the institution. This lack of critical inquiry has led to a public acceptance of RCM methods to musical instruction. Despite a statement condemning anti-Black racism which was published in June 2020, the RCM has failed to make any meaningful changes to its Western European-based music education. It continues to tout itself as the 'gold standard in music study'<sup>2</sup> with a curriculum built entirely upon Western European Art music and a mechanistic approach to teaching that is reflected in the examination requirements. A decolonized approach to piano pedagogy is one that seeks to include ways of teaching and learning music that are informed by global musical traditions and better reflect and serve students of the 21st century.

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None of the parent respondents volunteered to participate in an interview, so the aspect of the project that was looking for parent attitudes towards the RCM was not completed. Five teachers agreed to participate in 30-minute online interviews, where the researcher was able to delve more deeply into teachers' experiences with piano pedagogy and RCM examinations. Following the interviews, four teachers agreed to having the researcher observe some of their lessons. The researcher observed one lesson at the Jane Finch location, and the remainder at the Regent Park location. The students observed were chosen by their teachers based on factors arising from the interviews.

The final component of the project was an in-person workshop on improvisation for the teachers. I held a 2-hour, interactive workshop on improvisation at the Regent Park location on June 3, 2024. Three piano teachers attended. Two of the teachers participated in the research at the outset, but one was a faculty member who started teaching group piano classes in April and therefore had not had the chance to participate in the project when it began in February.

### What did the researchers find?

This research found that the RCM's status as the standard by which music education should be measured is evident in the minds of some parents and teachers, even as they acknowledge the need for other approaches. CMST piano teachers are skilled and creative pedagogues who can adapt to the needs and interests of their students. They are creating pedagogies that incorporate technology and decolonial practices as they work with their students. Improvisation pedagogy arose as a consistent area that teachers were interested in developing further. The accompanying literature review expands on improvisation and its connection to piano pedagogy.

The data showed that some parents see the RCM examination curriculum as essential or at least beneficial for student musical outcomes. The piano was not chosen specifically as an instrument of study, but as a vehicle for music learning based on the availability of lessons at the CMST. None of the 12 respondents chose piano lessons for their children based on the piano specifically, but for the student's interest in learning music, or availability of lessons. One respondent felt that the piano was a 'traditional and respected instrument.' None of the respondents had a student who had taken the RCM exam, but four believed that following the RCM examination curriculum was an essential component of music study. Two of these responses indicated that the RCM provided an 'international standard' and a 'standardized assessment' of music training. One respondent indicated that although there were many ways to develop musically, the RCM route would lead to more professional and educational opportunities in the long term.

The teacher survey focused on three primary areas: experiences with the RCM curriculum, musical priorities in their teaching practice, and the role of parents in student success. The results of the survey indicated that teachers had strong opinions about the RCM, either positively or negatively. All were able to acknowledge some of its benefits, which were to do with organization of repertoire by level. All the respondents indicated that the curriculum fell short regarding musical diversity, contemporary music, and improvisation pedagogy. The six respondents have been teaching from 2 – 30 years, and all had either RCM grade 8, a Bachelor of Music, 10 or more years of playing experience, or all the above. All the teachers had experience teaching RCM curriculum. Less than half of the respondents believed that the RCM offered the students flexibility in the repertoire choice. Two respondents felt the RCM gave the students a systematic structure for learning, while two others appreciated the ability to use the exams for

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## Final Report - 2024

goal setting purposes. The remaining two respondents appreciated having a repertoire conveniently compiled according to difficulty, which they could use in their studios. When asked about the system's weaknesses, five of the six respondents noted a variety of issues, such as a lack of cultural diversity in the repertoire, a disconnection between repertoire and theory, history, and technique. The costs associated with exam preparation – books and fees, were also named as a detriment. When asked about the most important musical skills necessary for student development, the top three responses were: rhythmic performance, learning repertoire, and technical proficiency. Composition ranked the lowest, followed by improvisation, sight reading, theory, and aural skills. There were mixed responses from teachers when asked about student needs and the RCM — one respondent stated that “it pushes a very specific kind of music and music practice upon learners,” while others indicated that it either did not, or it only met needs of students who responded to a ‘traditional style of learning.’

Five of the six respondents agreed to an online interview. The interview process was designed to understand more about the teachers’ pedagogical practices, experience with the RCM, parents and how they dealt with challenging teaching situations. All the teachers interviewed taught their students in thirty-minute weekly sessions. While all respondents engaged in exam preparation, it was not a large aspect of their teaching. All the respondents designed their lessons to their students’ needs. For students who were less interested in playing the piano, some teachers worked on a range of musical activities, like beat making, watching mini documentaries about composers, using digital applications like Piano Maestro, or music making with other instruments. Other respondents who prepared students for examinations made efforts to include genres like gospel or jazz in the lessons. Respondents used various modalities in their teaching, such as using the ear instead of reading notation or incorporating singing and solfege in lessons. Every respondent noted the desire to include more improvisation in their teaching. They discussed the outcomes they experienced when they had attempted this, and student hesitation was often a factor. Teachers considered their student’s mental and emotional well-being as part of their work, using terms like ‘playing for joy’ or ‘connection with others’ when discussing their goals for their student’s musical development.

I observed four teachers’ lessons with six students both at the Regent Park and Jane Finch locations of the CMST. The students ranged in ability from early elementary to grade 10 RCM. All the lessons observed demonstrated teachers’ ability to meet the needs and interests of their students. Three of the lessons that I observed incorporated aspects of improvisation pedagogy ranging from a traditional jazz approach which involved using patterns over ii-V-I chord progressions, to narrative-based free improvisation. One advanced RCM student expressed the most hesitation towards improvising. Another teacher gave their student the option of playing another instrument when they expressed a lack of interest in the piano that day. This was also an advanced student who improvised with the teacher, but also expressed hesitancy to do so, citing the desire to ‘not make any mistakes.’

Based on the results from the data collection activities described above, the focus of the teacher workshop was improvisation. A 2-hour, interactive workshop on improvisation was held at the Regent Park location on June 3, 2024. Three piano teachers attended. Two of the teachers participated in the research at the outset, but one was a faculty member who started teaching group piano classes in April and therefore had not had the chance to participate in the project when it began in February.

# The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

## Final Report - 2024

I had the teachers begin with a reflexive exercise, where they wrote about their subjective experiences with improvisation before we discussed what the concept meant to them. I shared briefly about how musicianship skills like composition and improvisation were part of European piano pedagogy until the mid-nineteenth century, when Enlightenment paradigm shifts favoured a more technical approach. I then demonstrated how I would teach a typical WAM etude using improvisation with an early elementary student. After a short break, we shared ideas around pedagogy and the need to connect with one another regularly as piano teachers.

### How can you use this research?

This research project is useful for understanding parent and teacher attitudes towards RCM piano pedagogy. The literature review indicated that there has been little critical research on piano pedagogy and the RCM in Canada. The results of this project demonstrate that piano teachers at the CMST are already grappling with its main research question: how can we break free from a Western Art Music approach to piano pedagogy? They are using techniques and modalities in their teaching that are not reflected in the RCM curriculum. They use aural skills with students who want to learn popular music without a score. They teach students how to make beats which they can use as standalone music, or accompaniment to their piano or other instrumental playing. They encourage students to improvise across a spectrum of improvisation pedagogies, ranging from a strict jazz style to free improvisation.

Despite this abundance of pedagogical creativity, one or two teachers still held traditional beliefs regarding an RCM-type of musical education. Further research could study whether their creative approaches were a response to a lack of student engagement with traditional piano methods, or whether the teachers believed these other modalities were essential to their student learning. One teacher expressed this tension as playing 'like robots' versus 'playing for joy,' where the RCM represented 'robotic' playing, and pop, gospel, and jazz were 'fun.' The sweet spot would be to celebrate all genres of music equally and use a variety of modalities to teach.

As improvisation seemed to rise to the surface of this project, I realized that improvisation pedagogy is by nature a decolonial musical practice. The two main obstacles that teachers face were time, and student hesitation. Because the CMST offers lessons in 30-minute segments, there is limited time in which a student and teacher can improvise. This becomes compounded when the student is hesitant because there would not be enough time to help the student become comfortable. Group piano classes were discussed briefly earlier, but as mentioned, they were not part of this project, however the problems teachers faced with these classes were a recurring talking point. CMST needs to sit with the teachers who teach and have taught these classes and work out a way for them to be more effective and enjoyable for all participants. The teachers at the Regent Park location see one another in passing, but expressed a desire to meet and share their experiences that would help their teaching.

### About the researchers

Keisha Bell-Kovacs is a scholar-artist who writes and performs in the jazz idiom but is influenced broadly by musics of the Black Atlantic diaspora. She is a 3rd year PhD student in jazz studies at York University whose research is at the intersection of jazz history, postcoloniality, and identity in Canada. Her interest in

# The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

## Final Report - 2024

decolonization informs both her piano, pedagogy and university teaching practices. She is a research associate at the Harriet Tubman Institute and the Centre for Engaged Research on Latin America and the Caribbean. Her first album *Caribbean Yellow* is a collection of pieces based on the work of Jamaican Poet Laureate and author, Olive Senior.

For more information, please visit [www.keishabellpiano.ca](http://www.keishabellpiano.ca)

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### About the Helen Carswell Chair

[The Helen Carswell Chair in Community-Engaged Research in the Arts](#) is a partnership between York University's [School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design](#) and [Community Music Schools of Toronto](#). This partnership is dedicated to community cultural development in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. We facilitate and conduct rigorous academic research which explores the benefits of community music programs and the links between music and learning. The goal of our work is to significantly benefit children from high-risk neighbourhoods and to fortify community music programs globally through publications and knowledge mobilization. We especially seek to engage and help drive new knowledge and practice to community-based groups serving children in the Jane and Finch community.