Teaching Music with Keyboard Improvisation: A Pedagogical Journey Involving Four Older Adults

by

Lisa Tahara

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Faculty of Music
University of Toronto

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Abstract

The life expectancy of individuals has risen in the twentieth-century, due largely to improvements in health, technology, and nutrition. Accordingly, the older adult population has been increasing rapidly and, as a result, there is a need for greater attention and emphasis to be placed on their wellbeing. Research has shown that the older adult population is interested in music learning programs where they may be given the opportunity to actively create music in group settings. However, music programs have traditionally been based on notation and reading, and this approach may not be optimal for a student entering a music learning program later in life. This research study began as an exploration of how music instruction with improvisation may impact the wellbeing, enjoyment, and confidence levels of older adults.

Four older adults between the ages of 83 and 90 participated in a music learning program involving a basic curriculum and improvisation over a period of three months. Qualitative data was collected in the form of audiovisual materials, individual interviews, and through focus group sessions. Quantitative data was gathered using pre and post-test surveys to examine differences in quality of life, musical aptitude, and mood. The researcher kept a personal journal
including observations of the class and reflections on the videotapes to construct a personal narrative on her experiences in a reflective approach. At the end of the study, participants showed higher levels of confidence, and demonstrated improvement in musical and improvisational achievement. Further, their levels of enjoyment during music lessons were reported at their post-study individual interviews. The results suggest that a music curriculum involving improvisation may be an effective way for older adults to engage in spontaneous creativity while enhancing their musical learning experience.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation paper and my entire DMA degree would not have been possible without the support and guidance of the following professors with whom I have had the honour of working over the last few years:

Dr. Midori Koga, your knowledge and experience in the field of pedagogy has always been an inspiration and you have been my biggest role model. Over the years, you have helped me in countless ways and have given me the confidence to succeed as a teacher, musician, and researcher. I cannot thank you enough for all of your guidance.

Dr. Lee Bartel, your expertise in research has made a monumental difference in the direction of this paper. I am so grateful that I was able to turn to you with my endless questions. Thank you so much for your support.

Dr. Jamie Parker, thank you for being so encouraging over the years. Your ability to tell stories and your sense of humour always made my lessons very entertaining and it was a pleasure to study with you! Thank you for taking me under your wing.

Dr. Henri-Paul Sicsic, I will never forget your inspirational lessons and masterclasses. Thank you so much for your support, and for always making me strive to be a better musician.

I would like to thank Dr. Michelle Conda who kindly agreed to serve as an external reviewer and Dr. Bina John for her support on my final dissertation committee.

I would also like to thank the Dunfield Retirement Residency for allowing me to use their home as my research site. Moreover, my heartfelt appreciation goes to the participants of my
study who enthusiastically devoted their time and energy to provide me with invaluable teaching experience and lasting memories.

To all my former mentors who made a significant impact on my musical journey, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Mr. & Mrs. Olsen, Dr. Robin Wood, and May Ling Kwok, your inspiration and support helped me to believe in myself as a musician, and to realize the true beauty of a life devoted to music.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge two very special people in my life: Brent Pidborochynski and Kana Tahara.

Brent, my partner in life: you have been there for me since day one of my journey through the DMA program. In addition to all of the help that you gave me with this paper, you have always been by my side to calm me down through stressful times. You are my rock, and my foundation. Without your shoulder to lean on, I would not be where I am today. I love you with all my heart!

Kana, although we talk almost every day, I miss you so much and it makes me so sad that you are on the other side of the country. You are the best sister that I could have asked for, and I want to thank you for being my best friend who I can talk to about anything. Thank you for always pushing me to succeed!

This paper is dedicated to my mother and father. Their support through the years has made a significant difference in my life and I am so grateful to have such loving parents.
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Prelude

My musical history can be traced back to 1970 in Japan, when my late grandfather purchased a piano for my 9-year old mother and her three siblings. Although they had very little disposable income, my grandfather insisted on buying the most expensive upright piano for his children. He spent many years working hard to pay off the debt that he incurred. My grandfather never learned how to play the piano, but he had a genuine love for classical music and his desire was to share this passion with his family. Unfortunately, my uncles were not interested in taking piano lessons, and the piano was left untouched once my mother and my aunt stopped taking lessons after only two and a half years.

Despite the fact that my mother gave up her musical studies at a young age, she never lost the love for music that my grandfather instilled in her. My parents purchased a piano for my sister and me shortly after we immigrated to Canada in 1988. Although it was an old instrument that was essentially beyond repair, it was sufficient for the first few years of my studies. The piano also had several notes that would not make any sound because the strings were broken. My parents had also promised us that if my sister and I reached grade 10 in the Royal Conservatory of Music, they would buy us a grand piano.

In an effort to foster my musical growth as I quickly began working on advanced repertoire, my grandparents generously sent over their piano from Japan in the spring of 1992. I
distinctly remember when the truck pulled up with the giant box containing the piano. The black piano looked brand new and I was eager to start playing it right away.

In 1995, I turned ten and began taking lessons with a new piano teacher. He suggested that we should trade in our upright for a grand piano, given that I had just started playing grade 10 repertoire. With the trade-in value of the piano from my mother’s parents, and with the inheritance from my grandfather on my father’s side (who had passed away in 1992), my parents were able to purchase a grand piano for me. I will never forget the feeling of excitement when the piano movers set up the piano in our living room and I played it for the first time. I was stunned at the difference in sound that filled our home!

As I look back, I am deeply saddened that the upright piano from my late grandfather is no longer in our family. At the time, I was unable to recognize the historical significance of the piano that was sent over from Japan, and was not concerned that my parents had to trade it in to purchase the grand piano. More importantly, I was never able to thank my late grandparents for providing me with the chance to advance my musical studies.

Although I was born in Japan, I moved to Canada when I was two years old and, then, was only able to visit my grandparents a handful of times. My grandparents on my father’s side passed away before I was 8 years old and the last time that I saw my grandfather on my mother’s side was in 1994, when my sister and I went to visit our Japanese relatives over the summer. Over the next 11 years, my grandfather and I spoke a number of times over the phone, and he
often mentioned how proud he was of my musical achievements. Sadly, he passed away in 2005 before I had the chance to see him in person again. Since then, I have always regretted not being able to spend more time with him. I never had the opportunity to get to know him on a deeper level, and ask him to share stories with me about his younger years and his connection to music. Now, whenever I speak with my grandmother about my musical successes, she frequently mentions how delighted my grandfather would have been to hear me perform.

From the time when I was a child, I have always felt a deep connection to older adults. I believe that this is because I never had the opportunity to spend much time with my own grandparents. When I first started my DMA dissertation, I knew that I wanted to do a research study involving older adults. This paper is my way of thanking my grandparents for inspiring me to embark on this pedagogical journey.
Chapter 1

1 Foundation for this Study

1.1 Why is this Study Important to the Field?

The life expectancy of individuals has risen in the twentieth-century, due largely to improvements in health, technology, and nutrition. Accordingly, the older adult population\(^1\) has been increasing rapidly and there is a need for greater attention and emphasis to be placed on their wellbeing (Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Mehrotra, 2003).

In the last few decades, there has been an increased interest in research regarding the extent to which music affects quality of life (Clair, 1996; Coffman, 2002; Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Lee, Chan & Mok, 2010; Prickett, 1998; Ruud, 1997), and for educational programs focused on the use of music for older adults (Clingman, 1988; Cohen, Bailey, & Nilsson, 2002). Research has shown that the older adult population is interested in music learning programs where they are given the opportunity to actively create music in group settings (Clingman, 1988; Cohen et al., 2002; Creech, Hallam, McQueen & Varvarigou, 2013; Koga & Tims, 2001; Pike, 2011; Taylor, 2011). However, traditionally, music programs have been based on notation and reading, and this approach may not be optimal for a student entering a music-learning program later in life (Sawyer, 2006). Further, research involving music learning and older adults has focused on the perspective of the students, in regards to their learning experiences (Bugos, 2014; \\
\(^1\) For the purposes of this paper, the older adult population will refer to anyone 65 years of age and older
Cooper, 2001; Jutras, 2006; Taylor & Hallam, 2008; Varvarigou, Hallam, Creech & McQueen, 2013), preferences (Davenport, 1986; Flowers & Murphy, 2001; Gilbert & Beal, 1982; Truluck & Courtenay, 1999), and motivations for learning (Conda, 1997; Taylor, 2011; Wristen, 2006). Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding the learning experiences of music teachers who are working with the older adult population.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study will explore my personal learning experience of teaching older adults in a group class setting as part of a music-learning program incorporating improvisation. The main purpose of this project is to examine the pedagogical aspects of working with older adults, and to gain an understanding of the key components that make up a successful music program for this particular population.

I hope that the results of my study will make a meaningful contribution to the academic world and beyond. In particular, I would like to apply the knowledge gained to develop a pedagogical course that focuses on teaching music to the older adult population with improvisation. More generally, I hope that my research will be of interest to retirement centers, music educators, and music therapists who can create similar programs to provide older adults with the opportunity to engage in creative and enjoyable music activities. I further hope that my dissertation paper can serve as a starting point for continued research beyond the music community, in terms of hospice and palliative care for working with the older adult population.
1.3 Research Questions

Based on the existing research involving music-learning programs for older adults (Coffman & Adamek, 1999; Creech et al., 2013; Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Koga & Tims, 2001; Perkins & Williamon, 2014), my goal is to examine my learning experience as a teacher of the older adult population. Accordingly, the participants’ individual experiences will be explored through their journeys in both making music and improvising in a group setting. Therefore, this research study will address one main question: What are the perceived and observed effects of music instruction with improvisation on healthy older adults from the perspective of the student and the teacher? Through observations of the students’ experiences, insight into the following sub-questions may be revealed:

1. How do participants perceive the socio-emotional climate of the group music experience?

2. What are the perceived and observed effects of “music instruction” and “music instruction with improvisation” on the participants’ musical abilities?

3. How do participants perceive the difference between “traditional” note-based instruction and improvisation-based instruction?

4. What are the perceived and observed challenges and rewards as a teacher working with the participants?
2 Music, the Older Adult Population and Improvisation

2.1 The Aging Population

In a society with a rapidly increasing older adult population, there is need for the development of various recreational and educational opportunities, such as music programs, that can enhance quality of life during the later years. The life expectancy of individuals has been rising rapidly in the twentieth-century, due largely to improvements in health, technology, and nutrition. For example, in Canada, the percentage of the population over the age of 65 increased from 4 to 14 percent over the last century. In 2011, the older adult population included an estimated 5 million Canadians, and this number is expected to double in the next 25 years (to reach 10.4 million by 2036). By 2051, approximately one in four Canadians is expected to be 65 or over.²

![Figure 1. Historical and projected percentages of the 65 years and over population in Canada. Retrieved from: http://well-being.esdc.gc.ca/misme-iowb/indicator.jsp?indicatorid=33](http://well-being.esdc.gc.ca/misme-iowb/indicator.jsp?indicatorid=33)

According to the 2008 US Census Bureau, the world’s older adult population of 506 million people represented an increase of 10.4 million since 2007. Globally, it is estimated that the fastest growing group (the ‘oldest old’ comprised of those over the age of 80) will increase 233% between 2008 and 2040, compared with 160% for the population 65 and over (Kinsella & He, 2009).

Table 2-1.

Percent Older Population by Region: 2008 to 2040

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Region</th>
<th>65 years and over</th>
<th>75 years and over</th>
<th>80 years and over</th>
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<tr>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
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<td><strong>Sub-Saharan Africa</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Asia (excluding Near East)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>2020</td>
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<td>2040</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Near East</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
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<td>2040</td>
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<td><strong>Latin America/Caribbean</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Northern America</strong></td>
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<td>18.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Figure 2. Current and future estimations of the percentage of the population older than age 65 by region. Adapted from An Aging World: 2008 by Kinsella & He, 2009, p. 11.
What do all these numbers mean for society? With this global rise and increased longevity in the older adult population, greater emphasis and attention needs to be placed on their wellbeing and interests, including the potential for music making to support positive health and quality of life (Creech et al., 2013; Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Mehrotra, 2003). This chapter will begin by exploring the relationship between the aging population, music, and quality of life as well as how music affects wellbeing (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Perkins & Williamon, 2014; Taylor & Hallam, 2008).

Many researchers have investigated the use of music as a therapeutic tool to positively enhance one’s quality of life (Clair, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999; Coffman, 2002; Gilbert & Beal, 1982; Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Lee et al., 2010). While there are a number of studies and articles on general music learning programs for healthy older adults, there are no studies published to date that have specifically used an improvisation-based curriculum for active music making with this population.

As a researcher and pedagogue, there are some issues that must be taken into consideration while working with older adults. These include: (a) common age-related problems, such as slower information-processing speed; (b) the decline of technical facilities and cognitive abilities; (c) hearing impairment and weakening vision; and (d) memory and learning difficulties. Given these inevitable age-related limitations, the music curriculum should incorporate various activities (such as improvisation) at a comfortable pace that will help to alleviate the mental and physical pressure of common reading-based learning methods.
In the last portion of this chapter, the different perspectives on improvisation will be explored from a historical and pedagogical view. This will be followed by a discussion of the benefits of improvisation, particularly for the older adult population, studies that have been done involving improvisation and education, and several approaches to structuring a music curriculum using creative activities.

2.2 Music & Quality of Life

Music plays an important role in our lives. For example, music is commonly used in important ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and to serve as accompaniment for religious services. Music also provides entertainment in radio, television, movies, and concert venues. It serves to promote nationalistic pride through anthems at sporting events and to encourage a sense of community at social gatherings (Hays & Minichiello, 2005). In The Secret Power of Music, Tame stated:

> Whenever we are within audible range of music, its influence is playing upon us constantly, such as speeding or slowing, regularizing or irregularising [sic] our heart-beat, relaxing or jarring the nerves, affecting the blood pressure, the digestion and the rate of respiration. Its effect upon the emotions and desires of [people] is believed to be vast, and the extent of its influence over even the purely intellectual, mental processes is only beginning to be suspected by researchers. (Tame, 1984, p.14)

A number of studies reveal how music has the potential to enhance and improve quality of life, both emotionally and physically, particularly in the older adult population (Coffman, 2002; Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Lee et al., 2010). Bengt Lindström (1992) provides a basic
definition of quality of life as “the essential characteristics of life which, in the general public, is often interpreted as the positive values of life or the good parts of life” (p. 301). While everyone has a different definition as to what constitutes a better quality of life, there are several dimensions that are common with this term, including general life satisfaction, wellbeing, and physical and mental wellness (Coffman, 2002). John Flanagan, a noted psychologist and founder of the American Institutes for Research, outlined 15 factors that contribute to quality of life, and divided them into five groups including: (a) physical and material wellbeing; (b) relations with other people; (c) social, community, and civic activities; (d) personal development and fulfillment; and (e) recreation (Flanagan, 1982). It is apparent that music activities can be influential in all of these areas to promote one’s quality of life (Coffman, 2002).

In a study conducted by VanderArk, Newman & Bell (1983), residents of a nursing home were age-matched with residents in another nursing home. Only one of the nursing homes participated in two 45-minute music sessions each week for five weeks. During these sessions, residents sang familiar songs and used rhythm instruments to perform simple accompaniments. Compared to the nursing home with no music program, the results from the experimental group showed significantly improved ratings of life satisfaction and positive attitudes towards music.

A study by Coffman and Adamek (1999) involved evaluating music participation with 52 members of a volunteer wind band for senior citizens. The researchers found that many of the participants considered music making and socialization essential to their quality of life, even rating them as high as family relationships and good health. In a similar study, Hays and
Minichiello (2005) used in-depth interviews with older adults to examine how music may enhance quality of life. The most significant findings revealed that music provides people with a source for connecting and interacting with others. Moreover, music allows people to develop and understand their self-identify. This study also suggested that music could be a type of self-therapy to maintain wellness, both mentally and physically. Hays and Minichiello discovered that one of the strongest themes to emerge was that music had a great therapeutic effect on alleviating stress. Additionally, for one participant taking keyboard lessons, the act of playing the piano alleviated the pain caused by arthritis in her fingers.

Between 2009 and 2011, Varvarigou and her colleagues conducted a large-scale qualitative study called the Music for Life Project, involving 500 older adult participants in London, England. This project investigated the social, emotional and cognitive benefits of community music making amongst older people (Varvarigou, Hallam, Creech, & McQueen, 2013). Of the 500 participants, 398 (80%) were involved in musical groups and 102 (20%) participated in non-musical activities such as yoga, book groups, or language groups. The music participants took part in weekly group sessions offered in three locations. Musical activities included choirs, music appreciation classes, steel pan workshops, and classes for keyboard, guitar, and ukulele. Data was collected in the form of questionnaires, individual and focus group interviews, video-recordings, and observations of the music sessions. The researchers found that the music group participants linked music with improvements in quality of life. Further, four main themes emerged from the data collected: (a) social benefits, indicated by participants who felt that committing to a music group gave structure to their life; (b) cognitive benefits, identified by participants who related music making to a form of brain exercise requiring high levels of
concentration; (c) emotional and mental health benefits, whereby some participants openly discussed the power of music in helping to overcome depression and to improve their confidence levels; and (d) physical health benefits, noted by specific instances of improved health, particularly from the act of singing through more complete oxygenation of the blood.

2.3 Working with the Older Adult Population

Since older adults typically have much difficulty with coordination, many prefer knowledgeable, patient, and encouraging instructors who consider their independent music making goals. Consideration of learner challenges and specific musical goals will assist educators with repertoire and exercise selection. (Bugos, 2014, p. 33)

While recent research indicates that older adults can, and do, learn new things well (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), there are certain considerations that music educators must keep in mind when working with the older adult population. First, the pace of learning is slower (Palmore, 1998). Technical facilities and cognitive abilities may decline with age, despite having played a musical instrument for a number of years. Further, information processing speed also declines with age (Abeles et al., 1998) and, as a result, educators must be cautious not to become impatient when working with older adults.

Even for those not suffering from chronic conditions such as arthritis or hypertension, there are several common age-related physical changes that older adults may be subject to, including hearing loss and weakening vision. Hearing impairment in older adults, although often mild, is widespread. In 1990, 48% of men and 37% of women over the age of 75 had problems
with hearing (Abeles et al. 1998). For older adults suffering some loss of hearing, feelings of frustration and anger may arise while participating in creative activities, where the constant act of listening and responding is vital. Visual impairment can cause thickening of the optical lens, which may lead to decreased ability to concentrate and focus on tasks (Best, 2001).

In order to structure a music learning program that will suit the demands of the older adult population, there are several factors to consider including: (a) providing constant positive reinforcement, both individually and to the group, regarding the achievement of short-term goals; (b) choosing repertoire that is familiar, and thus, more enjoyable; and (c) encouraging students to learn at their own pace.

Some less visible conditions affecting older adults are those associated with psychological problems, including memory and learning difficulties. According to Statistics Canada (2006), memory difficulty is the most common non-visible limitation for older Canadians. Older adults who are unable to adjust to age-related difficulties (such as memory retention, cognitive-motor skill disconnect, and slower response) may end up experiencing feelings of frustration and disappointment, and may wish to stop engaging in music (Taylor, 2011; Wristen, 2006). In this respect, excessive or even moderate emphasis placed on memory-associated tasks for older adults must be avoided if possible. For instance, tasks that may come easily to the majority of young children and adults, such as remembering musical letters of the alphabet, or how to read notation, may be especially challenging for older adults. This is another
reason why improvisation may be an ideal method for enabling older adults to actively participate in music without the strain of remembering notation.

When selecting repertoire for older adults in a music-learning program, it is crucial that educators consider the preferences of this particular age group. Research has shown that older adults prefer music that was popular during their early adulthood (Cevasco-Trotter, Vanweelden & Bula, 2014; Gilbert & Beal, 1982). In an effort to investigate the learning preferences and activities of older adults, Flowers and Murphy from Ohio State University interviewed 45 older adults from Ohio, West Virginia, and Virginia. While the age range of their participants spanned 25 years (from 65 to 90 years of age), the responses indicated a wide variety of preferred musical styles. Music of the 1930s and 40s was mentioned most favourably across all age groups, particularly the Big Band sound and popular standards from that era. 51% of the participants also indicated a preference for classical music. Flowers and Murphy (2001) found that the majority of their participants expressed distaste for loud/noisy, modern/contemporary, and repetitious music. The highest rated explanations that participants gave for their particular musical preferences were affective or emotional in nature, and had to do with feelings of familiarity.

2.4 Learning Styles of Older Adults

Most educators agree that not all people learn or approach learning in the same way, which may be especially true for older learners. Because of the range of ages and experiences, older adults are a more diverse group of learners than any other, and they have multiple perspectives on learning. (Truluck & Courtenay, 1999, p. 222)
One of the most important aspects of working with older adults, beyond having an awareness of their physical and mental limitations, is having an understanding of their learning styles and preferences. In the late 1970s, Bolton and Hiemstra were among the first researchers to investigate strategies on the learning and teaching process for older adults (Bolton, 1978; Hiemstra, 1976).

Adults continue to develop and learn throughout life and, as such, it is crucial to understand their learning styles. There has been little research done on the learning style preferences among older adults. In 1986, Davenport conducted a study investigating the relationship of age and gender to learning style preferences. Participants were from the Wyoming Elderhostel program in Laramie, Riverton, and Centennial, Wyoming. Of the 103 participants (including 34 males and 69 females), 91 were in the 60 - 75 age category, and 12 were over the age of 75. The results indicated that gender (but not age) was a significant factor in learning style preferences. Further, Davenport suggested that older women are more attentive to human behaviour and prefer group discussion compared to men. Older men, however, prefer audiotapes, lectures, and extensive reading. Both genders reported a preference for teaching approaches involving the use of workbooks, kits, and computer-based education (Davenport, 1986).

In 1987, Price examined a randomly selected sample of people between the ages of 18 and 55 who had taken the Productivity Environmental Preference Survey (PEPS) to investigate changes in their learning styles. The PEPS was developed by Price and identifies 16 different components of learning style and productivity. Price’s findings indicated that older adults prefer
auditory learning with more structure and that they have no preference learning either alone or with others. Further, he suggested that the results provide evidence that adults’ learning styles continue to develop and change throughout life as they age (as cited in Truluck & Courtenay, 1999).

In an extensive review of the learning style preferences for older adults, Bonham concluded that Kolb’s theory of experiential learning was the most “thoroughly developed learning style theory from a life span perspective” (Truluck & Courtenay, 1999, p. 226). As outlined by Bonham, the three developmental stages in Kolb’s experiential learning theory are: (a) the Acquisition stage, which takes place from birth and continues through adolescence and involves acquiring basic learning abilities and cognitive structures; (b) the Specialization stage, which extends from adolescence to early adulthood and is the primary time for forming style; and (c) the Integration stage, which begins at mid-career when the use of non-dominant styles begin to develop (Kolb, 1976).

James and Galbraith (1984) outline the seven theorized learning styles:

1. Print: An individual who learns best through reading and writing;
2. Aural: An individual who learns best through listening and who usually does not talk much;
3. Interactive: An individual who learns best through verbalization, especially discussion sessions;
4. Visual: An individual who learns best through observation; visual stimuli and representations are important;
5. Haptic: An individual who learns best through feel; touching everything is important
6. Kinaesthetic: An individual who learns best while moving; and
7. Olfactory: An individual who learns best through the senses of smell and taste.

In a sample involving 319 subjects, James and Galbraith (1984) conducted tests on individuals and their perceptual learning styles. Of these subjects, 55 individuals were over the age of 60. For this study, the Multi-Modal Paired Associated Learning Test (MMPALT II) developed and refined by French (1975a, 1975b), Gilley (1975, 1981), and Cherry (1981) was used. The MMPALT II is based on the theory that every person has an individual preference related to one or more of the seven learning styles listed above. The MMPALT II test uses a paired-associates testing method, measuring a subject’s ability to distinguish information in each of the perceptual learning styles. In the five subtests (Print, Aural, Visual, Haptic, and Kinesthetic), results indicated that with an increase in age, there are significantly lower scores in all five of these subtests. It should also be noted that in the age group over 60, the rank order for the top three learning styles was: (1) visual, (2) interactive, and (3) aural.

A study involving 172 older adults recruited from local church and community senior citizen groups, retirement homes, and community education groups found that as people age, their learning style preferences become less distinct (Truluck and Courtenay, 1999). This is consistent with Kolb’s theory. An interesting finding from the Truluck and Courtenay sample was that in the group of those over 75, the majority of people preferred to learn by watching, listening, and thinking, as opposed to learning through active participation and hands-on experience. It is unclear whether this trend is due to the fact that there are a larger number of people from this age group with physical limitations. A large percentage of the older adults in
this study preferred the *Assimilator* and *Diverger* styles of learning, which combine the “abstract, concrete, and reflective” styles of learning. The participants least preferred the *Converger* style, which involves active participation (Truluck & Courtenay, 1999).

### 2.5 Studies in Music and the Older Adult Population

While a number of studies have examined the positive effects of listening to music (Burns, 2001; Coffman, 2002; Gold & Claire, 2013; Gregory, 2002; Hays and Miniciello, 2005; Hirokawa, 2004; Lee et al. 2010; Mammarella, Fairfield & Cornoldi, 2007; Sung, Chang & Lee, 2010), there are relatively few that have addressed the benefits of active music making on the physical and mental wellbeing of older adults, particularly in the context of keyboard learning.

Research has shown that older adults prefer to study the piano over other instruments (Bowles, 1991; Cooper, 2001; Flowers & Murphy, 2001). In the early 20th century, the piano was a highly popular instrument, and consumers believed that “piano study improved the mind, contributed self-discipline, prevented melancholy, bred contentment, and increased general culture. It gave the dignity of accomplishment, helped one make friends and meet a better class of people, and led to community leadership” (Roell, 1989, p. 275). The older adult population of today, influenced by the musical environment and culture of their childhood and youth, still seems drawn to the piano as a preferred instrument. For this reason, it is valuable to explore the ways in which learning (or re-learning) how to play and improvise on the piano can have a positive impact on the older adult population.
Between 1996 and 1998, Dr. Tims and his colleagues conducted a large-scale study involving music making with older adults in Clearwater, Florida (Koga & Tims, 2001). This interdisciplinary project (including the fields of medicine, biochemistry, psychology, psychiatry, aging, music therapy, and keyboard pedagogy) was designed to look at the quality of life and the physical and mental benefits of active participation in music making for healthy older adults. In the first phase of the study, 80 students from Fletcher Music Centers were given written wellness inventory tests to assess general health and self-perception of their mental states. During this phase, students participated in weekly private and group organ and musicianship classes over a period of 50 weeks. Every ten weeks, students completed a psychological assessment including questions related to general health, loneliness, perceived stress, and social support. Blood tests were also administered every ten weeks. In the second phase, the number of subjects was increased to 100 and they were divided into an experimental group that participated in weekly organ lessons over a period of 20 weeks, and a control group that did not receive any organ lessons or comparable arousal-oriented individual attention. The key musical components of the organ lessons included listening, singing, and movement activities, as well as increased opportunities for ensemble performances as the classrooms held up to five or six organs. The results of this study revealed that older adults found great enjoyment in making music with their peers, and the promise of social interaction may have been a significant factor in the participants’ initial willingness to take part in the lessons. In addition, the study showed lower levels of anxiety, depression, and perceptions of loneliness, as well as higher measured levels of human growth hormone (hGH), which normally decreases rapidly as one ages (Koga & Tims, 2001). The effect on hGH levels is particularly significant, given the critical role it plays in energy level and metabolism, brain function, physical and mental health, cell replacement, and healing. It is
evident that active music making has a direct positive effect on the mental and physical wellbeing, and thus, enhanced quality of life for older adults.

Zelazny published a study in 2001 in which four older adults with hand osteoarthritis completed 16 half-hour sessions of electronic keyboard playing over a period of four weeks. Her results showed that there was an increase in finger dexterity and range of motion and strength, as well as decreases in self-reported arthritic discomfort.

Since 2002, an outreach program has been offered at a university in central USA for adults over the age of 65 who wish to study piano. This program involves classes held on a weekly basis using MIDI keyboard technology. Participants engage in outreach performance activities, and instruction emphasizes collaboration and peer learning. In an effort to learn about the older adults’ experiences with the program including potential benefits and to find out what keeps the students returning year after year, researcher Pike gathered data between 2002 and 2008 in the form of participant questionnaires, group interviews, and video tapes of classes and performances. Further, individual interviews have also been conducted with participants (all between the ages of 65 and 95) since that time. Pike identified common themes of benefits including increased technical and musical skills, peer support, and student engagement through new learning challenges associated with technology (Pike, 2011).

In 2006, Jutras investigated the benefits of piano study in 711 students aged 24 to 94 representing 24 different states from all geographic regions in the USA, with a variety of levels
of musical experience and instructional settings, including both private and group instruction. Data was gathered in the form of a questionnaire, and findings indicated benefits related to skills developed through piano study including: (a) music theory and musicianship; (b) personal benefits including accomplishment, self-fulfillment, personal growth, and alleviation of stress; and (c) social benefits including a sense of belonging and social recognition. Between the three categories, the participants rated personal benefits and the development of musical skills higher than the social benefits of piano study. The results indicate that older adults are “highly interested in improving their technique, ability, and level of proficiency on the keyboard” (Jutras, 2006). Taylor and Hallam (2008) conducted a similar study by interviewing eight older adult learners with modest keyboard skills to discover what music making and their musical skills meant to them. Some of the common themes that emerged from the data gathered include love of music, achievement and self-confidence, and wellbeing.

Between 2010 and 2011, Perkins and Williamon conducted a mixed-methods study as part of the Rhythm for Life project at the Royal College of Music in London investigating the role that music learning has on wellbeing (Perkins & Williamon, 2014). In Study 1, 98 participants were recruited through advertisements placed in posters, flyers, newspapers, and eventually through word-of-mouth. Criteria for screening included being over 50 years of age and having little to no prior musical training. Socio-economic status (SES) was determined on the basis of whether one was receiving state financial benefits, whereby a lower SES indicated receipt of one or more benefits, and a higher SES indicated receipt of no benefits. The participants were divided into three groups: music learning with a higher SES, music-learning with a lower SES, and the comparison group (with higher SES). The music learning participants
joined one of three different programs designed for beginners: a 10-week program of private lessons on keyboard, guitar, recorder, or djembe drum, a 10-week program of small group lessons on keyboard, guitar, recorder, or djembe drum, or a 10-week program of creative music workshops. All three programs emphasized enjoyment and creativity, and were learner-led. Comparison group participants were recruited from the University of the Third Age\(^3\), an “organization facilitating self-managed learning opportunities for adults no longer in full time work” (p. 553). These participants took part in a 12-week program of “deliberate learning from a domain outside of music or the performing arts (i.e., history or archiving)” (p. 553). Questionnaires were completed before and after the programs, including the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale\(^4\) (Short-WEMWBS) and the Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II (HPLPII). The Short-WEMWBS is the 7-item version of the 14-item WEMWBS scale that provides a measure of self-reported subjective wellbeing, capturing “a wide conception of wellbeing, including affective-emotional aspects, cognitive-evaluative dimensions, and psychological functioning” (Tennant et al., 2007, background section, para. 4). While results indicated that there were fewer differences between the music learning groups and comparison groups, there were significant increases in the Short-WEMWBS and the HPLPII scores across all three groups. To better understand the experiences of the older adults and what it means to begin learning a musical instrument at that age, Perkins and Williamon conducted Study 2 involving 21 older adults (31% of the 68 music learning participants from Study 1). Participants were interviewed on their individual experiences of learning to make music, and on how these experiences were linked with their wellbeing. The results were categorized into six themes: (a)

\(^3\) [http://www.u3a.org.uk]

\(^4\) [http://www.hqlo.com/content/5/1/63]
subjective experiences of pleasure; (b) enhanced social interactions; (c) musically-nuanced engagement in day-to-day life; (d) fulfillment of musical ambition; (e) ability to make music; and (f) self-satisfaction through musical progress.

Most recently, Bugos (2014) conducted a study to investigate older adult learner perceptions involving 40 participants who were recruited through advertisements placed in the radio and paper throughout the Southeastern United States. Screening criteria included no history of neurological impairment, and having fewer than three years of prior musical training. The participants (aged 60 to 86) engaged in two 16-week music programs: group percussion ensemble and group piano instruction. 45-minute weekly sessions were provided to each participant and involved technical exercises, scales, performance pieces, and written music theory assignments. After each weekly session, all participants took part in a 15-minute social activity, including individuals sharing with a group and one-on-one sharing. The group piano instruction was a basic course involving a curriculum centered on the Alfred Adult All-In-One Course. The group lesson format was designed as a cognitive training program, which meant that all exercises and activities were introduced at an accelerated pace. A cognitive training program involves intensive lessons that have a focus on using the brain to establish new learning connections (Mahncke et al., 2006). Participants were also required to practice a minimum of 30 minutes per day, or three hours per week. Data was collected in the form of a questionnaire after the completion of the program. Findings indicated that the most enjoyable component of the program was learning to play a musical instrument and reading musical notation (55%). The second highest rated component was the social aspect of the program (30%). Other factors related to enjoyment included self-fulfillment (7.5%) and the instructor’s knowledge and skills
(7.5%). When asked about program weaknesses, lack of individual attention, class size, and class duration were rated as the top limitations. When asked about their preference between group and private instruction, 50% of participants indicated that they preferred group instruction while 43% preferred private instruction, and 7% preferred a mix of both group and private instruction. 60% of participants also self-reported a change in cognitive abilities related to memory, concentration, and attention (Bugos, 2014).

There are many similarities among the aforementioned studies involving music making and the older adult population. In particular, it is evident that there are many programs in North America and Europe for older adults to engage in musical activities, including keyboard learning. However, no studies have been found which incorporate an improvisation-based curriculum for older adult keyboard learners.

2.6 Defining Improvisation

Musical improvisation has been defined in many different ways. The Latin root of improvisation is improvisus, meaning unforeseen or unprepared. The Grove Dictionary of Music (1954) defines improvisation as “the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously”. Christopher Azzara, a musician and educator who has made important contributions to advancing the understanding of creativity and improvisation in the music learning process, refers to improvisation in music as being “analogous to the extemporaneous expression of ideas in language” (Azzara, 1993, p. 328). He states that a well-developed improvisation skill allows students to express musical thoughts and ideas with understanding and meaning. This view is
similar to that of Dr. Edwin Gordon, founder of *Music Learning Theory* (1971) and the Musical Aptitude Profile tests (1965). *Music Learning Theory* is a comprehensive pedagogical method derived from the concept of audiation (Gordon’s term for the cognitive process by which the brain hears and gives meaning to musical sounds even when those sounds are not physically present). According to the Gordon Institute for Music Learning, audiation is the musical equivalent of thinking in language. As an extension of Gordon’s work, Azzara has redefined the ability to improvise to mean, “an individual has internalized (can audiate) a music vocabulary and is able to express intended musical ideas spontaneously” (p. 330). Based on this approach, improvisation can be viewed as being at the heart of musical expression and a crucial component in all types and levels of music instruction and curricula.

Patricia Shehan Campbell, co-author of *Free to be Musical: Group Improvisation in Music*, has indicated that improvisation is an essential feature of the art of making music. In the chapter, *Learning to improvise music, improvising to learn music*, she outlines three ways of viewing improvisation: (a) *Improvising to learn music*, whereby improvisation is “a means to an end” to develop musicianship in students; (b) *Learning to improvise music*, in which improvisation is the ultimate goal – evident in music from cultures where improvisation is embedded within the music; and (c) *Improvising music to learn*, whereby improvisation is used to help students discover more about their surroundings and their world (Campbell, 2009).

5 http://giml.org/mlt/audiation/
Jaques-Dalcroze, a Swiss composer, improvising pianist, theorist, conductor, and teacher, made many contributions regarding the understanding of improvisation. He is remembered most for the pedagogy he developed which features eurhythmic movement, solfège, and improvisation. Dalcroze was one of the first pedagogues to suggest that learning to improvise is similar to learning a language:

"You speak language fluently when you reach the stage of not having to think about each and every word you enunciate; you can concentrate entirely on the content of the communications. Thus it is with music, that by knowing it one no longer thinks atomistically about individual notes but rather shapes larger phrases, often in improvisatory fashion, according to what it is that one wishes to communicate."

(Dalcroze, 1921 as cited in Campbell, 2009, p. 135)

One of the world’s leading experts on improvisational creativity, Keith Sawyer, has pointed out that “the current musical culture in Western countries – one in which a highly skilled instrumentalist may be completely incapable of improvising – is historically and culturally unique” (Sawyer, 2008, p. 1). In Western cultures today, improvisation is almost completely absent from the high art tradition and, consequently, from the music education curriculum.

Until notation systems came into existence, it could be argued that improvisation was the main method for people to perform music and enhance rituals, celebrations, and all aspects of their lives. How is it then that improvisation became so far removed from what was considered a standard process within music making for hundreds or thousands of years?
When music notation systems first appeared, they were transcriptions based on the performance practices existing at that time. It was expected that performers were aware of how to perform in the genre. Composers wrote notation with the assumption that improvisation was simply a standard part of the process. However, as the centuries passed, notational systems became much more prescriptive, and this led to an increase in the number of instrumentalists and performers. As a result, this caused an increase in the number of amateur musicians. Composers could no longer assume that performers would have the necessary performance skill to improvise without clear instruction in the musical notation (Sawyer, 2008).

Robin Moore (1992), professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Texas, speculates that there are a number of factors contributing to the decline of improvisation including the effect of notation and literacy on the development of all Western music, the lack of exposure to classical music in daily life on the part of performers, and the disappearance of original social contexts for art music. By the end of the 19th century, the art of professional improvisation had all but disappeared from Western classical music (Lewis, 2004).

Theano Koutsoupidou (2005), a musicologist and music educator who specializes in childhood education and creativity, feels that a reason for the lack of improvisation in music education settings may have to do with teachers’ perceptions of improvisation. She conducted a study to investigate whether teachers use improvisation in their primary school music classrooms and whether personal factors might affect their perceptions. After distributing a questionnaire to 67 primary school teachers in London, England, Koutsoupidou found that 81% of the teachers
who used improvisation in their teaching had a positive view towards improvising. Those instructors who did not use improvisation generally reported that it was because of their own lack of experience and expertise regarding the benefits of improvising (and other creative activities).

### 2.7 The Benefits of Improvisation

Used as a pedagogical tool for older adults, improvisation in music can provide significant benefits, including eliminating the pressure of reading music notation and allowing for greater creativity in the act of spontaneous music making. Improvisation also allows students to reinforce and clarify their understanding of musical content while simultaneously developing and nurturing their creative thinking in music (Guderian, 2012).

Having to spontaneously create music without following a musical score is not an easy task and some students find it extremely challenging. However, improvising music has the potential to be incredibly rewarding for students, whether they are beginners or advanced level musicians, who may otherwise struggle with reading music. The reading approach discourages many beginner students, both young and old, as it can become overwhelming to keep up with the visual aspect of reading notes while trying to express themselves musically.

Improvisation allows students, regardless of age, the freedom to use their imaginations to realize their full creative potential. As a result, I believe that students exposed to an
improvisation-based curriculum may gain a deeper understanding of how music works and a more profound appreciation for the nature of musical creativity. Further, since music is often a collaborative practice, improvising in the context of a group setting may give students the opportunity to interact and communicate with their fellow peers while making music. This, in turn, could provide them with greater self-confidence and create a sense of community as they react and respond to one another’s creativity and musical ideas.

In the words of Tony Wigram, a renowned music therapist and scholar:

*Musical improvisation, and the ability to participate in it in social situations, has always been the property of all, not just the chosen few. Whether you are creating a multi-layered harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure on a synthesizer, or just tapping simple rhythms on a wine glass with a teaspoon, the potential to ‘join in’ with a musical experience through improvising is inborn and present in everyone.* (Wigram, 2004, p. 19)

### 2.8 Studies in Improvisation and Music Education

In the middle of the 20th century, improvisation was incorporated into a number of public school music education curricula across North America (Hickey, 2009; Lewis, 2008). At around the same time, between 1937 and 1945, one of the first known studies observing the spontaneous expressions of musicality of children was conducted at the Pillsbury Foundation School for Advancement of Music Education in Santa Barbara, California (Moorhead & Pond, 1941). This school was established in 1937 to study the music making of young children. Musical exploration and invention was plentiful among the children at the school, aged 1.5 to 8.5, who had access to a variety of musical materials and instruments from various cultures. Moorehead
and Pond observed that children found great enjoyment playing with timbre, intensity, duration, and pitch in exploratory improvisation. Moreover, the researchers discovered that when students had freedom to create sound and explore without adult guidance, both social and musical forms emerged in the school (Kderstead, 1994).

Since the Moorhead and Pond study, interest in improvisation as a pedagogical tool, particularly for children, has gained momentum (Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009; Kratus, 1990; Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010). The majority of existing improvisation programs and curricula are for children, and focus primarily on teaching improvisation either through imitation and music theory, or through a type of free improvisation, where there are no restrictions or boundaries. In post-secondary music institutions, improvisational classes are most often taught using chords and harmonic progressions.

In 1993, Azzara conducted a study on audiation-based improvisational techniques. As part of his research, Azzara worked with 66 fifth-grade percussion and wind students at two elementary schools in suburban school districts near Rochester, New York. At both settings, there was an experimental group and a control group. Prior to receiving instruction, each student was tested using Gordon’s Musical Aptitude Profile, to measure his or her music aptitude. This musical aptitude test (Gordon, 1967) involves three sections: tonal imagery (melody and harmony), rhythm imagery (tempo and meter), and musical sensitivity (phrasing, balance and style). Students were then grouped according to the results of the test. Both the experimental group and the control group received weekly 30-minute lessons over a period of 27 weeks.
However, the experimental group participated in improvisation performance activities for 10-15 minutes of their lessons each week. The improvisation activities consisted of learning selected repertoire of songs by ear, developing a vocabulary of tonal and rhythm syllables, and improvising with voices and instruments in a variety of tonal and rhythm patterns. The results indicated that the students who participated in improvisation activities showed noticeable improvement in their music achievement and music reading abilities (Azzara, 1993).

To investigate the effect of music improvisation in the classroom, Guderian (2008) conducted a study involving 46 fifth-grade students who had no prior musical training. The students were divided into two groups, a control group and an experimental group. Both groups were taught the same core curriculum to develop playing ability on the recorder. As follow-up to instruction, the experimental group was given creative assignments in improvisation and composition that required students to incorporate concepts introduced in the core curriculum. In the control group, assignments were distributed to practice the new pieces and to review new terms and concepts learned in class that day. The control group was also given sight-reading pieces at the same level of difficulty as the pieces assigned in class. Although both groups received the same curriculum and the methods of reinforcing curriculum content were different, Guderian (2008) found no significant difference in the playing and sight-reading skills among students. Further, she found that the reduced practice time for the experimental group did not negatively-affect the students’ musical understanding, playing, or sight-reading abilities.
2.9 Developing a Curriculum Involving Improvisation for Older Adults

In the process of developing a music curriculum using creative activities such as improvisation, teachers may find it difficult to assess and evaluate the success or progress of students’ music achievement. First, it is necessary to consider why it is important to include improvisation in a music curriculum, and have several clearly articulated goals to guide creative learning. To successfully establish a music education program employing structured improvisation, the teacher should have some experience with and knowledge of different improvisational practices and techniques. As Hickey argues, learner-directed free improvisation “cannot be taught in the traditional sense”; it must be “experienced, facilitated, coached, and stimulated” (Hickey, 2009, p. 294).

John Kratus (1995), a scholar in the fields of creativity and curriculum development, has outlined a method of structuring goals by analyzing the three components that make up each creative act – the person, the process, and the product. The person component refers to the personal style that an individual brings to the creative act. The process component refers to how creation occurs. Lastly, the product component is about the result of creative activity. Kratus suggests the following long-term goals based on these three components of creativity: (a) “students will approach musical activities . . . in a creative manner”; (b) “students will express themselves musically through improvisation . . . and creative performance”; and (c) “students will apply an understanding of musical elements . . . to the production of created music” (Kratus, 1990, p. 34). While I agree that it is necessary to have a clear set of goals such as these to ensure that students learn about music through improvisation, in the context of a creative learning
curriculum geared towards older adults, I believe that it may be more effective to keep these goals general, perhaps with a greater emphasis on the *person* and *process* components.

Kratus (1995) developed a model that includes seven types of improvisation:

1. Exploration
2. Process-orientated improvisation
3. Product-orientated improvisation
4. Fluid improvisation
5. Structural improvisation
6. Stylistic improvisation
7. Personal improvisation

Regarding the first level, *exploration* is analogous to verbal babble in young children. The second level, *process-orientated improvisation*, is similar to sound exploration. In this stage, the student can begin to control the music created and this is where true improvisation begins. At this level, teachers can point out to students the patterns in their improvisations and show them relationships among the patterns they are already using. In *product-orientated improvisation*, students improvise with a greater emphasis on musical structure. Such characteristics as the use of phrases or references to other stylistic traits begin to emerge. The teacher’s role is to introduce the student to various structural dimensions of music, such as different metres, tempos, chord changes, and tonalities. In *fluid improvisation*, student’s technical performances are more relaxed and automatic. Music educators typically place an excessive emphasis on strong technique, which encourages some students to be uncreative and inexpressive performers, only able to imitate what others play to them, or to mechanically realize musical notation. The teacher’s role in this stage is to emphasize appropriate performance technique and use activities in the context
of genuine music making. In structural and stylistic improvisation, the student is aware of the overall structure of the improvisation and develops a repertoire of musical strategies for shaping their musical creations. Lastly, personal improvisation is where the student is able to improvise skilfully within a given style.

Jeff Pressing, a scholar in the study of improvisation as a cognitive process, compiled a list of the approaches to the teaching of improvisation (1988). This list is more conducive to the teaching of advanced improvisation, but is useful as a basic foundation for structuring an improvisation-based curriculum. These approaches include:

1. Embellishment
2. Patterns and models
3. Problem-solving
4. Play-by-ear
5. Free improvisation

Through Pressing’s first approach, improvisation is viewed as real-time composition, whereby performers create variations and embellishments on existing melodic lines. The second approach is defined by patterns and procedures specific to the improvisational situation, including the many figured bass and melodic embellishment texts of the 17th and 18th centuries. The third category involves “the setting of a spectrum of improvisational problems or constraints” (Pressing, 1987). In this approach, the teacher’s function is not to act as a model for imitation, but to pose problems that are intended to initiate personal responses. Pressing credits Jaques-Dalcroze (1921) as the pioneer of this approach through a series of improvisation exercises for piano. These exercises include “composition-like problems in rhythm, melody,
expressive nuance, and harmony; muscular exercises; imitation of a teacher; exercises in hand independence; the notation of improvisation just after performing it; and what may be termed an ‘interrupt’ technique” (Pressing, 1987). The fourth approach is described as the imitative self-discovery approach whereby the student is left to his/her own devices for improvisation upon being presented with a variety of important musical entities. With this method, improvisation is created mainly through imitation. This approach has been used commonly in jazz and blues since the end of the First World War. Pressing described the fifth and final approach as being based on concepts of creativity and individuality. The important pedagogical implications of this idea are found in the works of Orff, Kodaly, Suzuki, Jaques-Dalcroze, and Murray Shafer (Pressing, 1987).

Pressing’s approaches are organized through types of improvisation that exist in the spectrum from more structured to more free. It is interesting to note that in Pressing’s model, *free improvisation* is placed last on his list. Without his description, it would be difficult to assume that this definition of *free improvisation* is an approach that is the culmination of the knowledge gained from all preceding methods.

In developing an ideal improvisation-based curriculum, a combination of approaches from both Kratus and Pressing’s models should be considered in order to tailor activities for older adults. In my experience, I have found that the majority of older adults have an innate ability to improvise over a given pattern with some rhythmic and harmonic structure regardless of prior formal musical training. This in turn, provides older adults with a greater sense of
accomplishment, as they are able to create beautiful improvised melodies that are stylistically appropriate without having to give much thought to what they are doing. On the other hand, children typically spend a long time in *exploration* and *process-orientated improvisation* (Kratus, 1995). In these types of improvisation, young beginner piano students typically cannot play their music with meaning or perform well within the syntactic structure of tempo, meter, or tonality.

From Pressing’s model, this research study involved working with a combination of the second and third approach to teaching improvisation, consisting of patterns and problem solving. I believe that improvising over pre-existing patterns is the most beneficial approach for the older adult population. In this stream, they would have the opportunity to embark on problem-solving tasks in rhythm, melody, and harmony. *Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, Book 1 (Kinney, 2010) was chosen for the improvisation component of my curriculum, as I have found this method to be the most closely aligned with the Kratus and Pressing models. *Pattern Play* will be discussed further in the methodology section of this paper.
Chapter 3

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

3.1.1 Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research (involving a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods) is relatively new, but the origins date back to 1959 with Campbell and Fiske, who used a multi-faceted approach to study psychological traits. As Creswell (2005) explains, “to develop these traits, [Campbell and Fiske] suggested a process whereby researchers would collect multiple measures of multiple traits and assess each measure by at least two methods” (p. 510). Although Campbell and Fiske only used quantitative measures, their work encouraged others to begin conducting research using multiple methods for obtaining data, including observations and interviews. In 1979, Jick conducted a study involving the examination of organizational mergers to illustrate the process of triangulation. The term, as defined by Denzin (1978), is "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (p. 291). A further explanation is that “the triangulation metaphor is from navigation and military strategy that use multiple reference points to locate an object's exact position” (Smith, 1975, p. 273). Creswell (2005) states that “the purpose of a triangulation mixed methods design is to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, merge the data, and use the results to understand a research problem” (p. 514).
3.1.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research originated in the social sciences (Berg, 2009) and has become much more visible during the 1990s and into the 21st century, particularly in the field of education (Creswell, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2006) argue that there are many positive aspects about qualitative research, including the opportunities for examining the context, setting, and participants’ frames of reference. They explain that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur, so researchers could benefit from studying that behaviour within real-life settings. Through face-to-face interaction and observation, they can deepen their understanding of participants’ thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. In continuing their argument for qualitative research, Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that there is often difficulty deriving meaning and useful findings from experimental methods because of the research techniques themselves. They suggest that the presentation and setting of the data gathering method, such as a questionnaire or a research lab, may influence the participants to answer questions in a way that they think will please the researchers.
Building the framework for this study involved the consideration of several qualitative research designs, including case study. For the scope of this paper, the definition of case study as outlined by Creswell (2013) will be used:

*Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes.* (Creswell, 2013, p. 97)

Yin (2014) states that case study research is a preferred method, compared to others, in a situation where “the focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon” (p.2). In this qualitative study, the cases to be analyzed are the four older adult participants and their experiences with the keyboard-learning program over a period of three months. Further, due to the small sample size, it was deemed appropriate to focus on the lives and stories of the four individual cases, and how their involvement with music and improvisation changed as a result of the program.

According to Jean Clandinin (2007), one of the leading researchers in the field, narrative inquiry has been growing in acceptance over the past few decades. In narrative inquiry, the researcher studies the lives of individuals through their stories, and then retells the experiences in a narrative chronology (Creswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Narrative inquiry may rely on journal records, photographs, video recordings, interviews, surveys, and other data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The most distinguishing characteristic of narrative research is that personal
Due to the nature of my research questions (involving the challenges and rewards of working with older adults), narrative inquiry was one of the preferred methods for this pedagogical paper. My goal was to discuss my story as a teacher and as a researcher through my experiences in this study. Further, since I developed such a close relationship with my participants, their individual stories and experiences were a critical part of my journey.

3.1.3 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research originated in the physical sciences in the late 19th century (Creswell, 2005). There are several research designs within the framework of quantitative research including experimental and non-experimental models. In situations where it is not possible to randomize participants or where there are not enough participants to have an experimental group and a control group (as was the case for this research study), non-experimental research designs (such as a quasi-experimental design) can be used (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Further discussion of the quasi-experimental timeline series design used to structure the curriculum for this research study will be discussed in the second half of this chapter.

In quantitative research, data is gathered in the form of numbers and is typically used with the intention of generalizing the results. Data analysis consists of statistical analysis and
involves the comparison of group differences or relating variables. While there were several instruments used to collect quantitative data for this study, the results cannot be generalized to the older adult population because there were only four participants involved. Instead, quantitative data was gathered and analyzed with the intention of helping to form a more complete picture of the individual participants’ musical journeys before and after the music program.

3.2 Design of this Study

3.2.1 Participants

In order to recruit a core group of healthy older adults, a letter was distributed at the Dunfield Retirement Residency in Toronto, Ontario. Given that the Dunfield is home to residents in both independent and assisted living situations, some inclusion criteria were imposed: the participants had to be over the age of 65 and have no known or diagnosed cognitive impairments (such as Alzheimer’s disease or dementia). These criteria ensured that the participants could comprehend all questionnaires and concepts introduced in class.

A pilot study was conducted between November and December 2012 at the Dunfield over a period of six weeks with eight participants, including seven females and one male between the ages of 81 and 90. The eight participants were divided into two equal groups and given 60-minutes of instruction once a week. I did not have a prior relationship with any of the

6 See Appendix E
participants. Throughout the pilot study, my participants provided comments and suggestions to ensure further improvement in the research study design.

The actual research study took place between February and May 2013, and included four participants who had participated in at least one session from the pilot study. Prior to the commencement of the study, I met with each participant for an interview that involved a discussion of their musical background and their experiences in the pilot study. General consent\(^7\) and data usage consent\(^8\) forms were also explained in detail and signed by each participant. Given that inconsistent attendance was one of the most significant drawbacks of the pilot study, each participant in the research study was informed at the initial interview that they would be required to attend at least 20 of the 25 sessions, unless there was a medical emergency. One of the participants did not join until the third session, but this was not an issue as she had taken several years of piano lessons when she was younger. All four participants were female and Caucasian (despite the fact that gender and ethnic background were not part of the inclusion criteria). Among the four older adults, two had limited mobility, including one who used a walker and one who used a cane. In order to protect the identity of the participants, all names have been changed.

\(^7\) See Appendix C
\(^8\) See Appendix G
3.2.2 Curriculum

The research study design consisted of two types of structured lesson plans. The first type was comprised of the core curriculum and 30 minutes of individual own-work time where each participant could either work on their own piece or ask for individual help. The second type of lesson plan consisted of the same core curriculum, but the remaining 30 minutes was spent in guided improvisation activities. As indicated by Figure 4, Lesson Plan A was conducted for five sessions, and then Lesson Plan B for five sessions, and then alternated again, so that sessions 1 through 5, and sessions 11 through 15 were Lesson Plan A, and sessions 6 through 10 and sessions 16 through 20 were Lesson Plan B. After every fifth session, a 15-20 minute focus group session was scheduled.

The core curriculum included: (a) gentle stretching and breathing exercises (Clair, 1996) at the beginning of the class; (b) rhythmic and singing exercises; (c) ensemble work; and (d) an introduction to traditional beginning to intermediate piano concepts. To teach these components,
the *Adult Piano Adventures* method book (Faber, 2009) was used. This method was selected over similar series (including the Alfred, Bastien, Hal Leonard, Thompson, and Glover Adult Piano Methods) for several reasons, including: (a) use of larger font and attractive neutral colors; (b) presentation of musical concepts and materials in an orderly fashion; (c) teacher duets provided for most pieces, allowing more opportunities for ensemble work; and (d) supplementary technical exercises introduced at a relaxed pace, enabling students to feel more at ease.

The framework for the lesson plans involved an action research design in the same spiraling process outlined by Jean McNiff (2013), a leading researcher in the field of action research:

![Action research cycle diagram](image)

*Figure 5. Action research cycle. Adapted from *Action Research – Principles and Practice* (3rd ed.) by McNiff, J., 2013, p. 57. Copyright 2013 by Routledge.*

In the action research cycle of my project, the first stage was the *plan* in which I outlined each of the activities that I was going to present that day. The second stage, or *act*, was the teaching of the class. During the process of teaching the class, I *observed* each individual’s
progress and struggles, and collected their feedback through verbal, aural, or visual cues. Lastly, after each class, I reflected upon my observations and then revised the next lesson plan according to my reflections. I continued this cycle from the beginning to the end of the program with the intention that each lesson plan was structured to suit the pace and the demands of each participant in the group. Given that there were only four participants in my study, this approach was much more straightforward than it would have been had there been a larger group of individuals.

3.2.3 Repertoire

A repertoire selection list\(^9\) was distributed to each participant at the first class that included 10 to 12 choices in each category: Classical, Broadway, and Jazz. The list of popular selections was compiled based on suggestions and recommendations from the one-on-one interviews conducted with participants prior to the pilot study and the actual study. Popular selection arrangements were distributed to participants after every 3-4 sessions.

Sibelius 5.0 software\(^{10}\) was used to compose arrangements of melodies from the popular selection list for each participant. The degree of difficulty for the first arrangement was determined by my assessment of the participant during their pre-study interview. Subsequent arrangements were prepared by evaluating the rate of progress and skill level for each individual.

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\(^9\) See Appendix J

\(^{10}\) http://www.sibelius.com/products/sibelius/5/index.html
3.2.4 Improvisation

*Pattern Play* gives us a way to begin cultivating musical sensitivity and responsiveness from the very beginning! It bypasses the need for skill or experience or even competence, and gets right to the essence of music making – sensing tones, and responding to them. (Kinney, 2015)

*Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano* (2010) is a series (with six books) co-created by Forrest and Akiko Kinney. I was personally introduced to the series by Forrest Kinney at a workshop that he gave in Toronto, Ontario in May of 2011. The pieces in the *Pattern Play* books evoke many different moods and imagery in music, and include varying styles from world music to classical and jazz. This series is geared towards anyone over the age of four who is interested in learning how to be creative at the piano. Over the past four years, I have used the *Pattern Play* books with a number of my students (ranging in ages from 5 to 65), and have received positive feedback. For the purpose of this research study, only Book 1 from the series was used.

In each *Pattern Play* selection, there is an underlying pattern, which serves as the harmonic base for that particular piece. Each pattern also has a variation, which means it moves to a different harmony. In most cases, the teacher or parent would begin by playing this pattern (in the bass range of the piano). The student is given specific parameters depending on the style and mood of the piece (for example, white keys only) and he/she is invited to play a melody in the upper range of the piano. In a group setting, this series has positive implications for emphasizing the social and interactive aspect of music making. This particular kind of music
making creates a genuine sense of community within the group, which is one of the most important aspects of life for the older adult population, particularly for those who may be suffering from feelings of loneliness or depression.

According to the creator of *Pattern Play*, there are a number of additional advantages in using this improvisation series for teaching music. Kinney (2015) states that students can learn and emphasize basic musicianship skills (including technique, phrasing, rhythm, and memorization) through the process of improvising with the pieces in *Pattern Play*. By improvising music through *Pattern Play*, students begin to relax at the piano as there is no emphasis placed on note reading, and they begin to audiate the sounds they are creating. As their motions become more relaxed, students begin to hear their music in longer lines rather than individual notes, thus developing their sense of phrasing. Since each piece has a specific rhythmic pattern, students’ sense of timing and rhythm naturally improves as they tune in to the pattern with which they are playing. Once a student realizes that the majority of music is simply made up of different patterns, memorizing becomes much easier and thus this series helps them to recognize harmonic and rhythmic patterns in other pieces of music they may be learning. Lastly, students can learn about music theory because every piece introduces a different mode or scale and allows the student to experiment freely within the context of the given mode (Kinney, 2015).
Pattern Play provides a short but informative section on music theory, to further clarify the pattern for each improvisation piece. I found this type of explanation particularly beneficial for older adults:

Music Theory ⇒ Creative Possibilities

Music theory comes alive when we remember its original purpose: to generate new creative possibilities. The musical materials discussed below can all be used to create your own music.

Fifths

The PATTERN and VACATION of this piece are both made of fifths, pairs of notes that are five letter names apart such as G and D. Fifths are used in accompaniments all over the world, as you will hear in many of the pieces in this book. You can easily make your own PATTERNS with fifths, as shown at the bottom of this page.

Pentatonic Scales

The five black keys in each octave on the piano form a pentatonic scale. Pent means “five” and tonic means “tunes.” This scale is also heard in the music of many cultures throughout the world.

The first measure of the PATTERN features G♭ in the bass. This bass tone lends a distinct flavor and environment to your black-key melodies. The black keys then become a scale called G♭ major pentatonic. When E♭ is featured in the bass we call the scale E♭ minor pentatonic. The PATTERN of this piece shifts back and forth between these two distinct musical worlds.

Major and Minor Scales

Playing F and B (C♯) with the black keys creates a familiar seven-note scale. With G♭ in the bass, the seven tones make the G♭ major scale. With E♭, the scale becomes E♭ minor.

Figure 6. World Piece Solo from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 7. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Co., Limited.

The first piece in Pattern Play Book 1 is called World Piece. I chose this piece as the first selection used in the improvisation segment of my curriculum because of its’ simple yet beautiful tone:
Duet (Bass)

World Piece

Like each one of us, each piece of music has its own heartbeat—it may be fast or slow, agitated or calm, lazy or energetic. We can play music with others by sharing a common beat.

Repeat both the Pattern and Vacation as many times as you like and cycle between them many times. Feel the liveliness of the music’s heartbeat and your partner will be able to feel it too.

**Pattern**

![Pattern Diagram]

**Vacation**

![Vacation Diagram]

Figure 7. *World Piece Duet (Bass)* from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 4. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited.

In this piece, the student is instructed to play any black keys while the teacher plays the pattern in the bass. The mini keyboard diagram is provided for each pattern. The simplicity of the instructions provides an opportunity for any student, even one with little musical background, to improvise and create music spontaneously.
Melody

Listen to your partner's beat for a while, then create melodies using black keys. Use one or both hands.

While using the Pattern Play series with the participants in this study, I found that the pattern that they most enjoyed improvising with was Blues on Black:

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Figure 8. *World Piece Duet (Treble)* from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 5. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited.

Figure 9. *Blues on Black Duet (Bass)* from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 8. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Co., Limited.
This blues pattern is based on the E-flat blues scale, which is comprised of all black key notes and one white key:

![Melody](image)

**Figure 10. Blues on Black Duet (Treble) from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 9. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Co., Limited.**

This simplistic E-flat blues scale and the popular blues beat is likely what makes this pattern most appealing among older adults who grew up listening to the early masters of blues music.

### 3.2.5 Classroom Keyboards

Four Yamaha P-105 digital keyboards were used for the duration of the research study. The P-105 Yamaha keyboard has 88 keys with graded hammer standard weighted action which makes the low end feel heavier and the higher end feel lighter, just like the keys of an acoustic piano. The P-105 also uses Yamaha’s Pure CF sound engine, which means that the piano’s sound was recorded from Yamaha’s CFIIIS concert grand piano. Although the P-105 keyboards have several features (including changing the sound of the keyboard and the use of a detachable damper pedal), these features were not all used for this research study. Participants used detachable headphones during each individual working segment that allowed them to not be
distracted by their classmates. In terms of the classroom layout, the keyboards were placed against the walls with two instruments on each side.

3.3 Data Collection
3.3.1 Qualitative Sources

The four basic types of qualitative sources outlined by Creswell (2014) were used for this research study, including interviews, audiovisual materials, documents, and observations. There were several advantages and disadvantages for each data collection method that was used.

3.3.1.1 Interviews

One of the main advantages of the qualitative interview is that it “provides an opportunity for the researcher to listen to the views or experiences of one respondent for an extended period of time and to ask probing questions to explore ideas further” (Harding, 2013, p.22). Additionally, they provide participants who may be too shy to discuss certain thoughts in front of their peers, with privacy and comfort. Creswell (2005) suggests that while there are many benefits in conducting qualitative interviews, there are also some limitations, including the presence of the researcher that may affect how the interviewee responds.

Individual interviews were conducted with each participant both before and after the research study. Pre-study interviews were not audio-recorded (due to technological issues), but
data was compiled through interview questions and conversation. The interview questions\textsuperscript{11} were designed to gather information on participants’ prior musical background and musical interests. Given that prior musical knowledge was not an inclusion criterion, it was pertinent for me to obtain information that would determine how the lesson plan would be designed for the first class. Participants were encouraged to share any additional information that would assist in adapting the lesson plan. All four post-study interviews were video recorded and transcribed. While there was no specific time length allocated for each interview, all four post-study interviews were approximately 20-30 minutes in length. Participants shared stories from their past and discussed their experiences and thoughts about the program, including their desire to continue their piano studies. In addition to one-on-one interviews, focus group sessions were conducted at specific points throughout the program as outlined in figure 4.

Focus group sessions were first used for research in 1926 when Emory Bogardus used this type of interview to develop a social distance scale (Lichtman, 2013). Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (2007) outline a list of some of the common uses of focus groups that are directly related to this research study. They suggest that focus groups stimulate new ideas and creative concepts, and generate impressions of programs, which in turn may assist in the design of future questionnaires or other research tools. In my research study, it was fascinating to observe the interaction between my four participants during each focus group session and to see how they encouraged each other to openly express their thoughts.

\textsuperscript{11} See Appendix D
The focus group sessions were scheduled to occur after every fifth session in the research study timeline design.\textsuperscript{12} As such, in sessions 5, 10, 15, and 20, the last 15 minutes was set aside for these focus group sessions, whereby participants were encouraged to share their thoughts about how the classes were being instructed. There were four lead questions\textsuperscript{13} for the focus group sessions in both lesson plans A and B, with one additional question regarding participants’ experience with improvisation-based instruction in lesson plan B. All focus group sessions were conducted in the same room that the research study was held in, with participants facing away from their keyboards but still seated at their benches. One of the main advantages of the focus group sessions was that it allowed participants to interact with one another and to feed off of each other’s responses. Through this collaborative format, participants were encouraged to be open and honest in a way that they may not have felt comfortable with in a one-on-one setting.

3.3.1.2 Audiovisual Materials

The primary data gathering method for this research study was videography. Creswell (2014, p. 192) states the following advantages of audio-visual materials:

- may be an unobtrusive method of collecting data
- provides an opportunity for participants to directly share their reality, and
- it is creative in that it captures attention visually

\textsuperscript{12} See Figure 4
\textsuperscript{13} See Appendix J
A Sony HD camcorder model HDR-XR150 was used to record all classes held between February 18 and May 31, 2013 in addition to the four individual post-study interviews. The camcorder was mounted on a tripod and placed on a shelf at the front of the class due to the lack of space in the back of the room. Upon completion of the study, all video files were uploaded onto a secure external hard drive. The video files were viewed using Bose noise-cancelling headphones to ensure accuracy while being transcribed. One of the disadvantages of the video recordings is that it was often difficult to interpret facial expressions and hear comments that were muttered under the breath when participants had their backs turned towards the camcorder device.

All participants were informed prior to signing their video consent forms that this research project was to be a learning experience for me as a teacher, and that I would observe the video recordings to study how I could improve as a pedagogue. While there was a clear distinction in the relationship between myself as the teacher with the participants as my students, I believe that there was always an understanding that this was a mutually beneficial project. In an attempt to keep the observations as objective as possible, participants were reminded at the start of the program that they were being videotaped, but to not pay any attention to the recording device.

3.3.1.3 Documents

A journal report was written after the end of each class that included in-depth reflections and observations. In an attempt to be as precise as possible, all statements were recorded quickly,
without any grammatical corrections. Once six months had passed after the last session of the research study, I began observing and transcribing each video recording. At that point, viewing the video recordings provided me with the opportunity to revisit and relive the experience of teaching and working with the participants in my study. After the completion of each video transcription, I wrote a reflective report. These reflective reports were used together with the self-report journals written during the research study to illustrate a full account of my experiences throughout this research study.

3.3.2 Quantitative Sources

3.3.2.1 Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life Index

The Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life Index (QLI) (Ferrans & Powers, 1984)\textsuperscript{14} was used to measure levels of quality of life. The generic version QLI questionnaire was used for the purpose of this study. This version is divided into two parts: the first measures satisfaction for certain aspects of life, and the second measures importance for those same aspects. Each section includes two full-length pages of questions. The questions are structured using a five-point Likert scale. The five responses represent the degrees of agreement for satisfaction in each question pertaining to quality of life. Questions no. 11, 12, 21, and 28 were deemed to be too personal or sensitive and were omitted from the questionnaire. These questions pertained to religion, sexual activity, and employment status. A black marker was used to cover these questions and the participants were informed that the questions were omitted to protect their privacy.

\textsuperscript{14} See Appendix F
On their instrument website\textsuperscript{15}, Ferrans & Powers have indicated that the self-administered questionnaire takes approximately 10 minutes. During the pilot study, each participant required 15-20 minutes to complete just the first part of the questionnaire. Thus, it was determined that for the actual study, only the first part of the questionnaire (that is, measures of satisfaction with certain aspects of life) would be distributed and completed by the participants. Given that the second half of the questionnaire was not distributed, the overall quality of life score could not be measured using the scoring description provided by Ferrans & Powers on their website.

3.3.2.2 Gordon’s Primary Measures of Music Audiation

The purpose of the Primary Measures of Music Audiation\textsuperscript{16} test is “to act as objective aids to teachers and parents in helping each child make the best use of his music aptitudes by providing the child with appropriate opportunities and instruction” (Gordon, 1979, p.1). While the Primary Measures of Music Audiation test is typically used with young children in kindergarten and grades 1 through 3, I chose this test as one of my data-collecting measures for its’ simplicity. I had no intention of putting my elderly participants under pressure or having them feel discouraged by trying to complete a difficult music audiation test. Gordon’s Primary Measures of Music Audiation was determined to be the best measure of discovering the basic tonal and rhythmic aptitude level of each participant.

\textsuperscript{15} https://www.uic.edu/orgs/qli/overview/overviewhome.htm
\textsuperscript{16} See Appendix G
The Primary Measures of Music Audiation test is comprised of two components: tonal and rhythm. One does not need to know how to read language or music to complete these tests. Each question contains two phrases and students are required to draw a circle around the pair of faces that are the same if the musical examples sound the same, and circle the pair of faces that are different if the two phrases sound different. Typically, these tests are conducted through a pre-recorded audiotape. However, for the purpose of this research study, I played the short musical phrases on a keyboard for my participants instead, to avoid any unnecessary challenges with technological devices and difficulty of hearing. Each test is described as taking 20 minutes with a total of 40 to 45 minutes to administer the complete Primary Measures of Music Audiation. During the pilot study, I realized that it took much longer to administer (and replay when requested) each musical example. Therefore, in the actual study, it was decided that the number of musical examples would be reduced from 40 to 20 in both the tonal and rhythm tests.

3.3.2.3 Short Mood Questionnaire

The short mood questionnaire\(^{17}\) that was distributed at the end of each class was modeled after Lorr and Wunderlich’s Semantic Differential Mood Scale (1988). The questionnaire was constructed using a semantic differential scale format. Five bipolar moods were used to determine how the participant felt immediately after each class: Cheerful-Depressed, Energetic-Tired, Good Natured-Grouchy, Confident- Unsure, and Relaxed-Anxious. In addition, each participant was asked to rate their overall level of satisfaction with the class using a seven-level Likert format ranging from 1 (extremely unsatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). All participants

\(^{17}\) See Appendix I
were instructed to complete the short mood questionnaires honestly (regardless of mood) and quickly in order to ensure data validity.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis proceeded in a case study design. In order to make sense of the text and image data, all of the collected information was read through several times. Readings were made on three levels as described by Mason (2002): literally, interpretively, and reflexively. Once each document had been read through a minimum of three times, the data was coded into categories by hand for analysis in the side margins of each report. Through this process, several integrated themes emerged answering all of the research questions outlined at the beginning of this paper. The next step involved separating all of the data into the chosen themes for each participant. The narrative approach was used to impart the experiences of my participants’ stories as well as my own. The final step in data analysis involved making an interpretation of the findings.

For this research study, a general inductive approach was taken throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. Defined by Harding (2013, p.13), “an inductive approach begins with the particular and moves to the general; the researcher does not start with what is already known about a subject but instead with data collection and analysis.” This approach was chosen (over a deductive methodology) for its’ exploratory nature.
Chapter 4

4 Their Stories

During the course of my research study, I had the incredible opportunity to build a unique and close relationship with all four of my participants. Each individual had led a long and interesting life and added a different dimension to the group as a whole. It was inspiring and eye-opening to work with such remarkable older adults. These are the stories of Barbara, Eleanor, Martha, and Patty.

4.1 Barbara, the Leader

B: I’ve always regretted not continuing to be able to play the piano and so I’m here because I’m trying to do this, to create, to fulfill that ambition which I’ve had for many years. (March 8, 2013)

Barbara was born on October 23, 1931. She spent 10 years learning piano during her early education in England. She enjoys listening to classical, particularly music from the Baroque period, and her favourite composers include Johann Sebastian Bach, Vivaldi, and Mozart. As a young girl, Barbara sang in a choir at school and was already familiar with solfège singing, but had had no prior experience with improvisation.
From the time that I spent with Barbara, I would describe her as being incredibly self-disciplined, independent, sharp-witted, modest, and respectful. She was always eager to take on new challenges and strive for bigger goals. Barbara had worked as a legal secretary at a large Bay Street law firm, and was very confident about everything that she had achieved in her personal and working life given that she “worked all [her] life”, “lived on [her] own”, and “battled [her] own battles” (March 8, 2013). However, as a perfectionist, she became easily frustrated and irritated whenever she could not play through her pieces: “Generally speaking, I just get mad at myself when I make a mistake!” (March 11, 2013)

Despite being satisfied with all aspects of her life, Barbara had no confidence in her piano-playing abilities at the beginning of the program, which was perhaps magnified by the fact that she had difficulty recalling the skills that she had learned as a child. Nevertheless, Barbara worked tirelessly throughout the course of the program and she was proud to have accomplished more than she thought she ever could at her age.

“It’s like night and day!” Barbara exclaimed when asked to describe how she felt about her piano abilities before and after the program:

B: *That’s what amazed me more than anything else, that at my age, I was able to get all that back... over the years I’ve thought, ‘I wonder if I sat down at the piano if I could do anything’ and I mean I put it now to you, your program. Definitely. It inspired me to get to the point where I really felt comfortable. This has been an absolute education to me because I’d never sat down and actually gone through all those processes with the notes and all that theory. At the lessons I was given a piece, [the teacher] would play the...*
pattern and then I would be told to struggle away trying to copy her, and get it learned. And then of course we had to practice but I mean it was totally different. I mean, totally unrecognizable! I mean, your way, your process of teaching is obviously much better because you learn more theory and I didn’t get any theory at all. I mean, this was all an education to me, that’s why I found it particularly interesting! (June 4, 2013)

I gained an immense amount of knowledge about teaching while working with Barbara, and I am grateful that she was such an inspiration for both her classmates and me. By the end of the program, she joined me in offering words of encouragement to her peers. “It’s like riding a bicycle! Once you get at it again, it all comes back!” (May 27, 2013)

4.1.1 Taking Charge of her Musical Spirit

B: When they offered this [program] here, I was just so thrilled to get back to it because I’ve always wanted to get back into [piano]! (May 31, 2013)

Music was always a part of Barbara’s life and she was especially grateful for the opportunity to rediscover her piano-playing abilities:

B: [This program] has piqued my interest again! You know, I’m just amazed at how it sort of came back to me. To be able to read the music – it’s always puzzled me – that I’d still be able to read the music. (June 4, 2013)
From the beginning, Barbara was almost always the first to arrive to class and consistently practiced the most among her peers. She often made a point of mentioning how much time she had devoted to practicing for class and was apologetic when she felt that she had not adequately prepared: “I feel really guilty when I don’t make it down here to practice…” (March 8, 2013) and “I didn’t practice this weekend, see, I didn’t have any time.” (March 11, 2013)

After spending two days learning a new solo piece for an in-class recital that she had chosen on her own, Barbara explained that she had spent a long time practicing, but “it was mainly hands separate though, so not a lot of time was spent hands together”, and added, “it took me a long time to figure it out!” (May 27, 2013)

Before and after each class, Barbara enjoyed talking with me about what music she had listened to that week and what concerts she had been to. In fact, for a period of time she was attending more concerts than I was as she was a subscriber to the Tafelmusik series. We often spent time discussing favourite musicians and composers as well as upcoming musical events around the city.

18 http://www.tafelmusik.org
As the program progressed, Barbara gained confidence in her musical abilities. “I definitely feel like it’s coming to me much more easily now than when I first came. It’s such a long time since I sat at the piano!” (April 1, 2013)

4.1.2 Demanding Personal Excellence

Despite the gradual increase in her musical abilities, Barbara was critical of herself, especially at the beginning of the program for her inability to remember the musical skills she was taught decades earlier. “I know the whole action of playing the piano. It’s ridiculous! It’s been so long since I’ve been at it – I’m just amazed at how stupid I am, how I feel.” (February 25, 2013)

In the first session when I introduced an arrangement of Eine Kleine Nachtmusik (Faber, 2009, p. 46-47), I gave the participants some time to practice on their own. As soon as I asked Barbara how she was doing and if she had any questions, she frustratingly replied, “I can’t even show you because I’m not doing it right. It’s so fun, but I don’t even recognize the tune!” (February 22, 2013)

When I began conducting the in-class recital performances, Barbara was the most outspoken of the group about her negative feelings towards performing in public, constantly feeling “hopeless in performances” (March 18, 2013). Whenever she had to perform, she would become nervous and “fall apart at the seams” (March 18, 2013):
B: I used to have to play hymns at school for evening prayer and they always had to give me a hymn that I could sing because I would’ve just completely collapsed. I would start out fine and then they would have to just carry on without me. I just can’t play in a group setting. I really can’t. I’m very nervous . . . I had the music and still couldn’t do it . . . I just can’t do something in front of a group of people. I mean you saw when we were doing it as a group together - I was lost! (March 18, 2013)

Even after reassuring Barbara that it was alright if she made mistakes or lost her place in the music during performances because I would be able to help her, she replied, “No I know, but that’s just typical of me. . . I don’t know what it is. I just have no confidence in doing it in front of anyone else. I always admire people who can sit down in front of the piano in a big concert hall and play!” (March 18, 2013)

Several sessions later, while working on *Canon in C* (Kinney, 2010, p.32), I had Barbara play the bottom part for us as an ensemble because I had just finished listening to her successfully play through it during the individual practice session. When we tried it as a group, she lost her place and became frustrated: “This is me - I’ve fallen apart. I’m sorry, dear. I’m useless doing anything together” (March 29, 2013).

Although she always chose difficult repertoire and was often the first volunteer to perform, Barbara continued to have anxieties about in-class recital performances. After her performance on April 1, she cried out, “I’m hopeless playing to anyone else!” but then in an
effort to lighten her own mood, she went on to state that she “was as nervous as a cat in a hot tin roof!” which made the rest of us have a good laugh.

On April 19, Barbara stopped in the middle of her in-class recital performance of *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring* (J.S. Bach, arranged by Lisa Tahara), because she had lost her place. She immediately said, “Forget it!” with exasperation. Later on during that class, she explained to her peers, “It’s just no good. I was hopeless at school - I couldn’t play in front of anybody!” At the next class on April 22, Barbara’s reaction after her in-class performance was that she “was so nervous!” She continued, “I think it’s because I’m just so . . . conscious. What do you do to get over that? I mean this goes back to my childhood you know. I’ve carried this along with me all these years! It’s awful! It really is.”

What happened between April 22 and the end of the program is remarkable: Barbara stopped making negative comments about her performances during the in-class recitals altogether. Her increased musical confidence was evident after her performance of the theme from the Trout Quintet (Schubert, arranged by Lisa Tahara):

E: *Oh my goodness that was brilliant!* (Applauds)
B: *Well it’s only one hand.*
E: *How do you read the music and know what you’re playing down there?*
B: *Well because I’ve done it all before! . . . You know, 10 years of music.*
E: *Can you just tell me how you can actually read it and play it at the same time?*
B: * . . . It’s just practice!*
On May 20, Martha enthusiastically applauded Barbara as she finished her in-class recital performance and Barbara told her, “It’s amazing – you know, I never learned this sort of thing before. You know, it’s very interesting!” At the last class on May 31, when I asked to hear her play through *Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring* (J.S. Bach, arranged by Lisa Tahara), she explained, “I’ll be honest with you – It wasn’t until I came in today that I got the tune. You know when you practice it slowly it sounds like a different piece but it suddenly clicked today!” It appeared that her apprehension about performing in public had subsided and she could now focus on the enjoyment of making music rather than having to worry about her nerves.

### 4.1.3 Taking Charge of her Physical Limitations

Beyond commanding personal excellence, there were some barriers related to physical limitations that Barbara had to overcome. These limitations likely added to her frustration and pessimism as she continued to push herself to learn more repertoire:

B: *You know what my problem is? I’ve got cataracts and I’m going to go to the doctor in a couple days’ time. I think that’s one of my problems: I’m very shortsighted. I can read perfectly without my glasses, but I’m having difficulty… hopefully I’m going to get an upgrade… That’s one of the reasons why I’m starting to lean forward like this because I’m not really seeing it that well for me.* (March 29, 2013)

Two weeks later, Barbara stated, “*My eyesight is getting so bad that I can’t see.*” (April 19, 2013)
In regards to being severely right-hand dominant, Barbara frequently verbalized how frustrated she was with her left hand for not being able to keep up with her right hand: “My left hand is not as dexterous as my right hand, believe me…” (March 25, 2013) Several weeks later, she explained, “the problem is if you’re right-handed, you’re much more dexterous with your right hand than your left. I mean, I have a problem doing anything with my left hand!” (April 19, 2013). Until the end of the program, Barbara continued to be aggravated at the difficulties she faced with coordinating between the hands: “I’m always horrible with the left hand (May 24, 2013)… I’m trying to get hands together but it’s sort of tricky” (May 27, 2013).

Despite her frustrations with her own playing, Barbara always had kind and supportive comments for her friends in the class. She also helped to reassure the others with constant encouraging remarks that demonstrated how powerful the social aspect of learning in a group setting could be.

4.1.4 The Encouraging Leader

As the youngest but most attentive student in the class, I often thought of Barbara as the glue that held the group together: She took command of the group aspect and offered the most constant verbal encouragement to the others, particularly for their in-class recital performances. Also, she was almost always the first to respond whenever I directed questions towards the group as a whole. Nevertheless, she constantly took it upon herself to be aware of when her classmates were not contributing any answers and would urge them to participate by saying things like, “OK Patty, come on!” (February 25, 2013)
When I asked the group to choose their next in-class recital performance pieces, Barbara encouraged her classmates to have first choice for repertoire: “You want us to choose something? So, Patty and Martha, what would you like?” (March 29, 2013)

From time to time, Barbara seemed annoyed by Eleanor’s constant questioning, but she was also incredibly supportive of her classmate. During the first focus group session, Eleanor expressed how difficult it was to learn how to play the piano for the first time at her age of 87, and Barbara’s response was, “it’s a challenge for you, but I think it’s a good challenge for you! I mean it gets your brain going!” (March 8, 2013)

In one of the last sessions, there was one moment between Barbara and Patty that truly demonstrated Barbara as an encouraging commander and caring friend:

P: I don’t think I’ll ever put it together.
B: Oh, you will Patty, you just have to persist.

P: I know that but see I play half by ear and half by note, that’s bad.
B: No, it isn’t, it’s good. It’s great!

P: It’s interesting, but I have difficulty.
B: I know, but you’ll be OK Patty, don’t worry! (May 20, 2013)
4.1.5 The Model Improviser

While there were many special moments during my program, one of the highlights was while improvising with my participants during one of the first sessions. It was the first time that I had introduced the pattern that ended up being their favourite for improvisation, *Blues on Black* (Kinney, 2010, p. 8). I spent a few minutes explaining the pattern and the E-flat blues scale that they would be using for improvisation. For matters of discussion, it would be beneficial to note that the E-flat blues scale consists of all black keys and only one white key, ‘A’. After completing my introduction of the pattern, I asked the class who would like to volunteer to improvise with me first and then we would try it as a group. As expected, Barbara immediately responded, “I’ll try!” Once I began playing the pattern, she instantly joined in, playing with various rhythmic patterns on various parts of the keyboard. As I watched the video of this segment, it was delightful to see how natural and poised she looked and to see how she was able to improvise with such confidence on her first attempt. At the end of our duet, the others wildly applauded Barbara and she excitedly blurted out, “I felt like Dave Brubeck!!” (March 15, 2013)

Barbara continued to be an inspiration to her classmates especially during the improvising sessions. As a teacher, it was a pleasant surprise to see how much enjoyment Barbara received from improvising given that at our initial interview, she had indicated that while she would participate, she would not be too interested in improvising. Throughout the program, she described improvising as being “really fun!” (March 15, 2013), “fascinating!” (March 18, 2013) and “really enjoyable!” (April 1, 2013)
Although she had “never done [improvisation] before in [her] life” (June 4, 2013), her journey with improvising was an experience on its’ own:

B: Well, when we first did [improvisation], I admit I was a bit puzzled. As the program progressed, it became much easier... I mean, I’d never experienced it before... the first time, the first couple of times I probably didn't go, and then I thought, ‘oh I can go faster than that – I can do it double time or triple time!’ (June 4, 2013)

Not only was Barbara able to gain enjoyment out of the creative aspect of improvising, she was able to integrate her newly acquired musical concepts into her improvisations. “I was trying to create a different way of those few keys that we had, not just doing the same things but trying to dart around.” (June 4, 2013)

Improvisation also proved to be an eye-opener for Barbara and the world of jazz musicians. “It’s really interesting… there’s a lot more about jazz, you know what I mean?” (March 18, 2013) She added:

*It’s just very interesting because it’s a concept that I’ve heard played, but I never really understood. I just always thought, ‘isn’t it wonderful that these people can do that?’ But I mean, it’s sort of opened up a new experience for me... knowing that it’s actually not that difficult, really... it’s very interesting!* (April 1, 2013)
4.2 Eleanor, the 87-Year-Old Beginner

E: I’ve never taken piano lessons before in my life, so I know nothing about it . . . we always had a piano and my husband . . . played really really well. The kids all learned to play too and there was too much going on and I just let them all get on with it, so I never experienced anything like this, so it’s incredible! (March 8, 2013)

Born on January 27, 1926, Eleanor was the only participant who had never taken a piano lesson in her life. She was incredibly enthusiastic about the group class since she never thought that she could start a new activity so late in her life. During the course of the program, I developed a close relationship with her through her own journey in music.

Eleanor’s late husband loved music and had played piano for decades. Their five children all took piano lessons while growing up, but Eleanor never had the time because she was always “too busy in the kitchen” (May 3, 2013). Aside from taking up piano for pure enjoyment, one of Eleanor’s goals with the program was to be able to play for her family, including her 10 grandchildren:

E: I can tell you we all enjoyed it! . . . It’s just sort of a thing that I had never thought of until I came here and I thought ‘oh well! I always listened to a lot of music that was going on in the house that I should surely be able to do something!’ I really enjoyed it and I do thank you and if you can ever possibly come back, I’ll be here! (June 5, 2013)

Working with Eleanor as an 87-year-old beginner was truly inspiring, and I was delighted to see the positive impact that the piano lessons had made in her life: “I just think it’s fun – all
these new things!” (April 1, 2013) Eleanor often liked to talk about the musicians that the Dunfield had brought in to provide entertainment for the residents and how she especially liked to watch the pianists now that she knew the basics of how to play the instrument herself: “Well, they have had a few more people in the evening playing the piano or playing something, which I enjoy thoroughly because this has got me sort of into music! I love to watch them play!” (May 3, 2013)

Towards the end of the program, Eleanor’s achievements were evident in her progress through the in-class recitals. As one of her own-choice repertoire selections, she chose My Favourite Things from The Sound of Music. On May 13, she played just the right hand and just the first page. Two weeks later, she played this selection again but with both hands playing both pages.

As the newest learner, Eleanor was often frustrated with her level of playing compared to her classmates, and she always viewed the others as having an advantage. In addition, Eleanor had recurring pain in her left shoulder and minor arthritis in her fingers, so it was often challenging to work with her on a technical level. Despite her frustrations from being the only participant who had never learned how to play the piano before in her life, Eleanor was proud of her classmates and inspired by their achievements and performances. Motivated by her peers, Eleanor challenged herself by constantly setting goals that helped her to persevere until the end of the program.
4.2.1 Beginning from Scratch

E: Well, I feel for me . . . I basically don’t know any of it. (March 8, 2013)

For most people, it would be difficult to even think of taking up a new musical instrument as they’re approaching their nineties. Eleanor faced many challenges and obstacles along the way since everything was brand new for her. Some of the concepts that were recalled without too much difficulty for the others required more of Eleanor’s concentration and attention. She often asked seemingly simple questions such as “Are the black keys used much?” (March 15, 2013) and “What do you call it sorry? What’s a half step? How would you go about getting a half step and does that mean the notes are heard closely together? A half step?” (May 13, 2013)

Although she was constantly motivated and inspired by her classmates, Eleanor was uncomfortable being the only one who had to “learn from scratch” (June 5, 2013). When asked about her general thoughts about the program at her post-program interview, Eleanor replied:

Well, I think it’s fun! I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t fun! Just tell me, do you think it’s better to teach one person or... I mean I know it’s an awful lot to teach because you have to teach everyone the same thing... my thoughts were that everybody else was better because they had all played the piano when they were younger, so it wasn’t that difficult for them to look at a piece and to be able to play a note, which I could never grasp. That was my only thought of it. It’s better for people to have started out with a little more info. It must have been hard for you!
Several minutes later when I asked her what she may have liked or disliked about the program, Eleanor replied:

*My only thought was that it’s very hard for you when we’re all at a different stage. You know what I mean? It must be difficult because it must be maddening when somebody can’t do it at all and somebody… is really quite good at playing the piano, makes a little bit of a difference.* (June 5, 2013)

Beyond the difficulties that Eleanor faced with learning everything for the first time, she constantly struggled with coordination between her hands, and expressed how challenging it was on numerous occasions: “I just can’t get anything done with the second hand…” (March 8, 2013); “My problem is to do the two hands . . . that’s the difficulty!” (March 15, 2013); and “The left hand . . . is really difficult!” (March 22, 2013)

Although she continued to suffer problems with her left hand, Eleanor never gave up trying to overcome her difficulties with coordination: “Can you just tell me – because I have difficulty on the left hand getting it in – is it best to perfect with the right hand and then hope that you can get your left hand working with it?” (April 19, 2013) Despite her persistent efforts, Eleanor’s left hand caused continual distress: “I can’t seem to watch them both! Why is it the hardest thing to do is the left hand . . . it really is!” (May 24, 2013)

As an 87-year-old beginner, Eleanor’s biggest hurdle was to be able to play piano with both hands and read music without having to look down at the keyboard. Although this obstacle
persisted throughout the program, Eleanor constantly told us how much she loved bringing music into her life and that she wanted to share her new piano playing abilities with her family and friends.

### 4.2.2 The Goal-Setting Beginner

E: *I have a piano – got it tuned while I was away this summer and it’s so old but nobody ever plays it! And I think ‘well you know... maybe why can’t you get going?’ And... so this is what I’m hoping... you know, I realize that I have a ways to go!* (March 8, 2013)

From the beginning of the program, Eleanor established her goals and worked hard to achieve them. She frequently mentioned the piano she had at her family cottage: “Not that I think I will ever be entertaining a crowd of people but you know at the cottage, if I have the kids up there, I’d love to be able to play something!” (June 5, 2013) Towards the end of March, Eleanor told the class:

*I’m going down to my son’s in New York next week, and he has a piano and I would love to go down there and show him how to play the piano, so I just chose a few that I thought I could play that I’ve been practicing. I come up here on my own and practice on my own because I’m going to sit down and play and he’s going to be surprised! These are the ones I’d like to play: “Jingle Bells”, “Give my Regards to Broadway” and “Oh the Saints”!* (March 22, 2013)

Unfortunately, it turned out that Eleanor’s son no longer had his piano and she was unable to show off her newly developed piano playing abilities. “I felt so badly because I had
really rehearsed the pieces I was going to play for my son in New York but he didn’t have a piano and I couldn’t play them for him!” (April 5, 2013)

As evident from the pieces that she chose to play for her son, Eleanor was particularly fond of playing melodies that she recognized:

E: Sometimes when I get at the piano and I know the tunes, I’m able to put them together even though I can only do it with one hand . . . But when it comes out as being a tune that I know, I get really excited! (June 5, 2013)

Besides Barbara, Eleanor was the only participant who practiced regularly between classes. She genuinely enjoyed the time that she was able to spend with the keyboards: “I like to come up here and fiddle around on this myself, on these keyboards!” (May 27, 2013) On the last day, Eleanor told the class, “I’ve been up here quite a bit – you wouldn’t be able to tell from my playing, but I’ve really enjoyed it! Nobody’s usually up here. I thought these were great, didn’t you? I thought the pianos were great!” (May 31, 2013)

Since one of the first classes where she exclaimed, “I have a long way to go!!” (February 22, 2013), Eleanor demonstrated that perseverance and enjoyment is the key to learning anything new regardless of age. “It’s just great, I couldn’t have done it without you so I appreciate it! Really, no it’s been great!” (June 5, 2013)
4.2.3 The Inspired Beginner

By the first few sessions, Eleanor had made it clear to the class that she was a beginner and how much she admired her classmates for being able to recall how to read music and play the piano with relative ease. The others were a constant inspiration for Eleanor:

E: I felt that the others all knew so much more than I. Maybe this is my problem . . . I always feel that they know so much more and can do so much more than I can, but you know, I try and that’s why I keep coming a few times a week to come up here to do something hard for me . . . but I think it does take a while, doesn’t it. (June 5, 2013)

Eleanor was in awe of her classmates who all had prior musical experience and could read their music and play the piano without having to look down at their hands. Throughout the program, her main concern was that she was unable to play at ease because she could not keep her eyes on her hands but also on the music at the same time. “How do you read the music and know what you’re playing down there? Can you just tell me how you can actually read it and play it at the same time?” (May 13, 2013)

Eleanor was most inspired by Barbara who she felt was completely at ease with her keyboard geography and often flooded her with compliments, calling her performances “marvelous!” (April 22, 2013), or making remarks such as, “oh my goodness, that was brilliant!” (May 13, 2013) In the second to last class, she told Barbara, “[your performance] was marvelous! You were looking at the thing - you weren’t looking at anything. You knew exactly where to go! God, how do you do that?!” (May 27, 2013) Later that class, Eleanor turned to both
Barbara and Martha and exclaimed, “I don’t know… I was just so impressed with the both of you!”

One of the highlights in Eleanor’s story was from her performance on the last day. She had worked hard to prepare for the in-class recital, and after managing to play her selection with both hands, Barbara applauded and told her, “and you didn’t look at the keys!” to which Eleanor replied with a look of wonder in her eyes, “no, I didn’t! You’re right!” (May 31, 2013) Eleanor realized that she had finally learned the ability to read music without having to constantly look down at her hands to find the notes.

4.2.4 Beginning to Improvise

Although she was enthusiastic and outspoken about performing and practicing, Eleanor was not comfortable verbalizing how she felt about improvisation until the end of the program. Her experiences in improvising are well documented in the videotape recordings. In the first few sessions, Eleanor sat at her keyboard reluctant to join in and just enjoyed the creations of her peers. “That was really good!” (March 15, 2013) she exclaimed to Barbara after she had finished improvising for the first time. On March 25, shortly after we started improvising as an ensemble, Eleanor looked over at Barbara and started joining in. Barbara was improvising with half notes and Eleanor started by joining in with quarter notes. One week later, Eleanor was laughing, clearly enjoying herself while participating in the improvisation activities.
During our post-program interview, when asked about her experiences with improvisation and creating melodies spontaneously, Eleanor replied, “it was a bit beyond me, I must say! I couldn’t do it!” but then when I reminded her that in the last month and a half, she started joining in, Eleanor said, “yes.. I got into it… it’s true! I do remember that… I guess you’re right!”

4.3 Martha, the Commentator

M: I remember crying to get a piano... I came home one day and I thought ‘hmm... Something smells funny’ and the piano had been in storage and it was there in the living room. Surprise! I think my dad really liked surprises. (June 5, 2013)

Martha was born on March 8, 1927 in Moosejaw, Saskatchewan. She took piano lessons for about seven years and went as far as grade 6 in the Royal Conservatory of Music piano exams. When she started high school, she quit taking piano lessons but continued to play music with her best friend who played the clarinet.

After moving to Toronto, Martha got married and worked as a nurse but also returned to school for a Masters in Theological Studies as a “mature student” (June 5, 2013). One of her degree requirements was to take up either voice or an instrument, so she took private piano lessons for a year and a half. Martha was very close with her family and frequently mentioned her grandchildren, including one who was working on his Masters of Music degree at McGill University for double bass.
Martha enjoys listening to classics (that is, Broadway and movie tunes) and as someone who attended church all her life, sacred music. Throughout her life, she gained considerable experience performing in church choir settings. Prior to the program, Martha had never improvised but was open to the creative possibilities of making music without a score. Of the four participants, Martha was the only one with a piano in her apartment: a Heintzman upright piano that she and her late husband had bought for their four daughters in the 1960s.

Martha was the newest participant in the group, who initially did not wish to commit to a three-month long program. She decided to join after she heard positive comments from her peers who had attended the first few classes. Although she was often frustrated at herself, Martha was a sweetheart who often gave me hugs at the end of class and thanked me profusely for my help while telling me how much she enjoyed the class. On May 24, Martha entered the room without saying a word and came up to give me a big hug. This was the first class after my second doctoral recital that she had attended together with Barbara and Eleanor. After she released me from our embrace, Martha took my hands and excitedly said, “Congratulations! What a wonderful performance! And your trio, great!”

4.3.1 The Personal Critic

M: You’re not alone [Barbara], I was at a recital as a child, a beautiful pink dress like Gone with the Wind, got up to the piano, and had a complete blank. The teacher I thought they might have a copy of it or something somewhere, and I just had to… (Sigh) those experiences last, don’t they... (March 18, 2013)
Even though her musical progress was evident, Martha was her own worst critic. Since her early childhood years, she was not comfortable with playing in front of an audience. Upon resuming piano lessons as a mature student, she declined performing in public and regrettably said that “it was too bad, because [my teacher] was so great and I was a sissy when it came to the big performance!” (June 5, 2013)

Martha’s reluctance towards public performing was evident in the classroom. Among the participants, she enjoyed the headphone feature on the digital keyboards the most: “Nobody else can hear it? Great!” (February 25, 2013) Martha was constantly concerned that her playing was disturbing others during the individual practice sessions, asking questions such as “is my [keyboard] noisy?” (March 18, 2013), “is my earphone working? I can hear but can anyone else?” (April 8, 2013), and “how do I get [the keyboard] to be quiet? I just don’t want to disturb anyone!” (April 19, 2013) On May 3, she exclaimed, “I don’t want anybody to hear me… isn’t that silly!” (May 3, 2013)

In our many in-class recitals, Martha’s anxieties towards performing in public and being heard by her peers were demonstrated by the fact that she never volunteered to play first. On April 5, when I asked the class who would like to perform first, Martha’s response was, “to get it over with you mean?”

Beyond her apprehension towards performing for her peers, Martha struggled with some of the concepts introduced in class. She found the theory aspect of the curriculum to be
challenging, especially in the beginning of the program. She expressed her frustrations at the first focus group session on March 8, “Now, is theory separate? In our era (while pointing to herself and her classmates), I also don’t remember theory… it was a different course. It was always something else.”

Although assigned theory homework from class was minimal, Martha struggled with having to re-learn such details as note-values and basic musical terms that she had not come across in several decades. When I asked what her lessons were like as a child at her post-program interview, her response was, “I guess it was what we saw, we didn’t identify as theory. It was just scales, or arpeggios, or… I’m not sure how much aural, I mean how much we would do it without the music.”

Martha was the only participant who expressed how she felt with words and symbols on her short mood questionnaires. At the end of class on March 8, she explained, “I did not put in the time that I would like to… but things will get better!” while handing in her questionnaire.

Figure 11. Martha’s short mood questionnaire from March 8, 2013.
March turned out to be a frustrating month for Martha: “Ah! Frustrated isn’t on [the questionnaire]!!” (March 11, 2013); “Is there a place for ‘confusing’? I was completely bothered today. It’s one of those days… Tomorrow’s a better day, right?” (March 22, 2013) On March 29, she turned to me and said, “you don’t have ‘frustrated’!” while filling out her short mood questionnaire and then added, “frustrated . . . you want numbers and that’s not a number . . . but thank you so much!” while handing it in:

Please rate your overall satisfaction with the group session today on a scale of 1 (extremely unsatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Figure 12. Martha’s short mood questionnaire from March 29, 2013.

Martha constantly struggled with what she felt to be “two different worlds” (April 5, 2013) for her between learning how to play the piano and learning the theory concepts. “If it’s the music, I’m as happy as I can be. If it’s the theory, trying to figure out the other thing…” (April 5, 2013) as she threw her hands up in frustration.

On April 5, Martha felt more optimistic at the end of the class:
Although there was a moment midway through the program when Martha realized that “gradually it’s clicking!” (April 19, 2013), she continued to feel that “[her] pace [left] a lot to be desired.” (May 24, 2013) Interestingly, I found that her frustrations towards the end of the program were based on how she performed at the in-class recitals since most of her initial struggles with theory had disappeared.

Martha would frequently make remarks whenever she played incorrect notes during her performances: “I’m lost!” (May 17 & 20, 2013), “that doesn’t sound right…” (May 24, 2013),
and later that same class, “that sounds wrong, doesn’t it?” (May 24, 2013). Even on the last day of the program, Martha continued to feel frustrated for making mistakes. She provided a running commentary during her performance of *When the Saints Go Marching In* (Faber, 2009, p.85):

“Oh no, I’m terrible! . . . Forgot the left hand, oh dear . . . where’d that go? Sorry everybody . . . oh where am I?” (May 31, 2013)

After she finished playing, Martha was visually agitated and asked me, “now what do you do when you’re not getting the right notes? Just go on??” And added, “some days it works, and some days it doesn’t work.”

![Figure 15. Martha’s short mood questionnaire from May 31, 2013.](image)

4.3.2 **The Cheerleader**

M: *When it’s something that you like, it works well!* (April 8, 2013)
Despite her frustrations towards her own playing, Martha was incredibly supportive of her peers. She adored her classmates and was often inspired by the pieces they were playing. Martha regularly showered them with compliments and words of encouragement. When Patty first performed _When I Fall In Love_ (Young, 1952, arranged by Lisa Tahara) for an in-class recital, Martha whispered, “ohh I like that!” (April 8, 2013) and closed her eyes while singing along. Martha especially enjoyed ensemble playing and appreciated the time that we spent playing as a group. “That was lovely!” (April 5, 2013) she exclaimed after we all played the _500-Year-Old Melody_ (Faber, 2009, p. 78-79) together.

At the beginning of class on May 3, Martha asked, “What happened to our friend [Barbara]?” When I told her that she had left a note saying she could not make it due to a medical appointment, Martha’s response was, “Aww!” Later that class, Patty started sight-reading _Edelweiss_ (Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1959, arranged by Lisa Tahara) and Martha immediately turned to her and said, “I love that! Nice, Patty!”

Towards the end of the program, there was a memorable moment while improvising as an ensemble. It was the first time that Eleanor had confidently joined in to improvise with noticeably fluid and creative melodies and Martha called out, “something behind me is sounding good!” (May 17, 2013) in reference to Eleanor’s playing. Later that month, Martha told Eleanor with a smile on her face to “be brave!” (May 31, 2013) when she appeared nervous about having to perform for the in-class recital.
On May 24, Barbara performed *The Entertainer* (Faber, 2009, p. 142), one of the most challenging pieces from *Adult Piano Adventures* that she had chosen on her own accord. After she finished playing, Martha was so thrilled that she pointed at Barbara and exclaimed to Eleanor and me, “With TWO HANDS! Two hands!!”

### 4.3.3 The Improvising Commentator

*M: The first [improvising pattern] we ever did was the catchy one!* (March 29, 2013)

The first time that I introduced *Blues on Black* (Kinney, 2010 p. 8), Martha immediately fell in love with the captivating rhythm of the pattern and started tapping along. She did not join in for the first few sessions, but delighted in listening to the rest of us and commentated on her peer’s creations: “Great!” she exclaimed as Barbara finished improvising. When I improvised with Martha on her keyboard, she was reluctant to join in but turned to me and said, “You’re great!” (March 18, 2013) Later that month, she was still unwilling to improvise and preferred to try and play along with the written-out pattern in the book. At one point, she asked Barbara, “What do I do?” (March 29, 2013)

It was not until towards the end of the program that Martha became much more comfortable with improvising. On May 24, I ended the class with *Blues on Black* (Kinney, 2010 p.8), playing the pattern on the lower portion of Martha’s keyboard. It was a thrill to see Martha smiling while she improvised with different rhythms, articulations, and a variety of notes using a
wide range of the keyboard space. After we finished, she turned to me and excitedly said, “All I need is you!”

4.4 Patty, the Entertainer

P: The summertime is a good time to have this kind of thing because then you could have the keyboard on the balcony and play . . . I don’t take this thing too seriously, but I’d like to play a little better and a little more because I love music and I can carry a tune! None of my friends could ever sing because they couldn’t carry a tune . . . but listen, you can’t have everything and you take what you can out of it . . . sometimes it’s good, sometimes, even if it’s not good, it’s achieving something! (June 4, 2013)

Patty was born in 1922 in Listowel, Ontario. We celebrated her birthday as a class on March 11, 2013. When asked by Martha how old she had turned, Patty replied, “91… but some days it feels like 95!” That day, we all sang and played Happy Birthday.

P: My father had the opera on every Saturday afternoon. It was sort of a way of life, you know… my father’s family were all very musical, most of them were pianists... so everyone was interested and everybody did a little bit. (June 4, 2013)

Patty began taking piano lessons when she was about 6 years old and continued until she was 12 or 13. She described her first piano teacher with a slight tone of exasperation:

We had a lady, she was a graduate ATCM and she thought that was the limit. She was an elderly lady and . . . had done this all her life. She wasn’t a very good example now that I look back on it... she could spend half an hour trying to figure out which note you should
play! ‘Does this one go to this one?’ ‘Or does that one go to this one?’ She was getting older. (June 4, 2013)

When Patty was young, she got as far as her A.T.C.M., the Associate of the Toronto College of Music. Given that Listowel was a small community of 3000 people, the only available musical activities were Christmas and church concerts. In her early childhood years, Patty and her family enjoyed singing both at home and in the community. Upon getting married, she moved from Listowel, to Stratford, Kitchener, Guelph, then Toronto.

Although she was the oldest person in the class, Patty was young at heart and quickly gained a reputation as the class entertainer. She had a youthful sense of humour and regularly told jokes that made the class burst out into laughter. She frequently hummed along to the songs that we were playing, and sang other short tunes that were either related to current events or memories from her past. Despite being the most soft-spoken student in the class, Patty was also the most enthusiastic storyteller. She enjoyed having an audience to share her memories of familiar tunes, dates, and events from her life.

Before the program began, Patty stated that she would not feel comfortable improvising. As such, I did not encourage her to join in like I did with the other participants. To my surprise, midway through the program, Patty’s initial unwillingness to participate had disappeared: “I’m improvising already!” (April 1, 2013)
There are few people who would think of taking up a musical instrument again in their nineties. As the oldest student I’ve ever had the opportunity of working with, Patty was an incredible inspiration not only for myself but also for her classmates in the program. Despite the fact that there were some inevitable limitations related to her age, she persevered and was able to rediscover her love for playing the piano. At her post-program interview, she described her feelings towards the program with enthusiasm: “I enjoyed it, I really did and I looked forward to it!”

4.4.1 The Entertainer’s Limitations

P: I enjoyed [the class] while I was doing it and probably would’ve practiced more if I had a piano in my own room. But... I haven’t been particularly well this winter, so I’m not interested in coming out to practice you know... (June 4, 2013)

Although she was a remarkably youthful 90-year-old, Patty faced several physical limitations that had an impact on her progress in the program. From time to time, she struggled to find the energy to participate. Instead, she would sit quietly at her keyboard while regaining her strength; “You’ll have to forgive me today… I’m half asleep!” (March 11, 2013)

On top of her lack of energy, Patty struggled with her poor eyesight. She often brought two pairs of glasses to class: “I haven’t got the right glasses for this! My glasses are due to be changed and I’m having trouble…” (February 22, 2013) Several weeks later, she exclaimed,
“I’m having difficulty with my glasses… I keep switching from one pair to the other!” (April 1, 2013)

Patty’s poor eyesight may have been the key factor in her frustrations towards reading music: “I feel frustrated… I can’t tell a B from a G!” (March 29, 2013) Three days later, when I asked if she needed any help, she replied, “it’s my glasses… I’m getting the accents mixed up with the notes!” (April 1, 2013) Later that month, she exclaimed (with a tone of exasperation), “it’s not me or you, it’s the glasses! It’s frustrating today” (April 29, 2013) as she switched from one pair of glasses to another.

In addition to the obstacles she faced with her physical limitations, Patty was very critical of herself, particularly after her in-class recital performances that she felt were “terrible” (April 15, 2013), and “not quite [wonderful]” (April 29, 2013). Furthermore, she would often remark that she “didn’t do very well” (May 13, 2013).

P: I would’ve liked it to be a little more intense, you know, I didn’t practice very much. In the beginning I was very excited about trying to play again, or learning to play again and I thought it was excellent, but I would’ve liked more of it… more time, more lessons. Twice a week was good, but I think I could’ve accomplished more if I’d had more time with it. If I had a piano in my room. . . ! You have to be very intense and make sure you come down and practice! (June 4, 2013)

Although I had assumed that Patty struggled with the theory aspect of the curriculum, especially towards the end of class when she declared, “I don’t understand the word, tonic… I’m
absolutely lost” (May 13, 2013), she expressed during her post-program interview that they
“didn’t have that much theory, it was just sort of an extra thing… I could’ve used more!” (June 4, 2013)

At our post-program interview, upon asking Patty how she felt about her piano abilities
before and after the music sessions, she replied:

Well, I think I’ve improved a bit! Not a lot, but a little bit.... And I’d like to read more
easily... I need to take one note at a time, but I’d like to be able to sit down and play by
sight, more than practicing with the notes.

Despite her physical limitations and frustrations with her piano playing abilities, Patty
never missed an opportunity to showcase her fondness for singing and her unrivaled ability to
play by ear.

4.4.2 The Singer

P: I like to hear someone else play, and then I play by ear and follow with them, usually!
(May 3, 2013)

Since her early childhood days, Patty had “a habit of playing by ear” (May 3, 2013). Throughout the program, she was able to play the songs that she recognized with ease, and also enjoyed singing along. Naturally, when asked about the pieces that she enjoyed working on the
most in the piano program, she replied, “any of the pieces that we did from the book like..*As Time Goes By, Over the Rainbow*… that was good because I knew all the melodies.” (June 4, 2013)

Patty particularly enjoyed humming and singing along to the *500-Year-Old Melody*:

![Figure 16. 500-Year-Old Melody from Adult Piano Adventures by Faber, 2009, p. 78-79. Copyright 2009 by Dovetree Productions, Inc.](image)

While the book describes this tune as having “many different words written through the centuries, including an Italian song, Spanish hymn, Polish and Swedish folk song, and Israeli anthem” (Faber, 2009, p. 78), it was Patty who described the significance of this melody: “It’s a very popular hymn in Hebrew. Even in the Sunday service… it’s an Israeli anthem, that’s why it’s so popular...” (April 5, 2013) At the end of that class, Patty spoke up again:
You know why this was so familiar to me? This class? That’s the national anthem… Hatikva. The melody I know, the words not always. You know, it’s interesting because when you’re flying into the airport in Israel, that song comes up on the loudspeaker and people are crying, sitting with tears in their eyes. It’s very touching… It brings back a lot of memories to a lot of people – people who are returning for a visit and they hear that music, they’re sobbing. I guess you have to be born in that country to make you feel so moved by it, but everybody on the plane had tears, it’s really something. (April 5, 2013)

Between April 5 and the end of the program, we played through the *500-Year-Old Melody* (Faber, 2009, p.78-79) numerous times, and it was evident that Patty had left a lasting impression of this piece on her classmates. Barbara commented that this piece “is sad, it’s very sad.” (April 15, 2013)

Aside from her fondness for singing along with the popular tunes such as *Edelweiss* and *When I Fall in Love*, Patty would often sing random statements, which was perhaps also related to her unparalleled sense of humour. “Someone’s knocking at my door!” she sang in a charming voice as Martha knocked on the classroom door (February 25, 2013).

Despite her excellent ability to sing and play by ear, Patty was fairly pessimistic about her reading skills, which were not as developed in comparison: “Well, I find that I know the melody and I’m playing by ear… that’s not the way to play… you’re supposed to play what you see!” (May 3, 2013)
In her younger years, Patty was likely taught a traditional note-reading based approach, as she frequently criticized her inability to read music more efficiently. In the second to last class that she attended, Patty shared her frustrations with Barbara, “See, I play half by ear and half by note, that’s bad!” to which Barbara replied, “No it isn’t, it’s good, it’s great!” (May 20, 2013)

4.4.3 The Comedian

Patty often made humorous remarks at her own expense, whether it was related to her singing or her frustrations that stemmed from her ability to only play by ear. Perhaps it was a self-defense mechanism, but from the first time that we met as a group, Patty charmed us with her comedic personality. In one of the first sessions, I had just finished introducing quarter rests and told the students, “since you’re all still looking at Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, you can look for your quarter rests”, to which Patty’s response was “I’d like to rest now!” (February 22, 2013)

Throughout the remainder of the sessions, Patty continued to deliver memorable one-liners that made us all burst out into laughter such as “it’s funny how you don’t forget things, but you don’t remember them either!” (March 11, 2013); and “finish off? I haven’t even started!” after I had told the class “to finish off, we’ll have our questionnaires.” (March 22, 2013)

Patty particularly enjoyed joking around with When I Fall in Love, one of the pieces that she chose to play from the Own-Choice Repertoire List. “At this speed, I’ll never fall in love!”
and later on that day in reference to her own performance of the song, she exclaimed, “falling in love is a beast!” (April 8, 2013)

To make it easier for the visual learners, I used the following drawing to help them remember what a half rest is (given that HALF sounds like HAT):

![Figure 17. Drawing of half-rest used for theory review.](image)

When I reviewed this drawing to the class on April 29, Patty exclaimed, “He’s wearing the same hat he had on last week!” Given how much she enjoyed making her classmates laugh, it is apparent how the social aspect of learning in a group setting made the classes more enjoyable for Patty.

4.4.4 The Social Butterfly

P: [Private lessons] were lonely... that’s why I didn’t keep it up. (April 1, 2013)
Patty regularly demonstrated her enjoyment of learning music in a group setting and her fondness for her peers. She often asked about her absent classmates and occasionally brought us treats to share during and after class. On March 15, presumably because she felt guilty for showing up late, Patty brought treats for the class and told us, “girls, I brought some sweets so if you feel like it, help yourself!” On April 22, she noticed Martha’s absence and asked, “where’s our other friend [Martha] today? She doesn’t like to miss it!”

Patty was the first to arrive to class on May 3. When I told her that Barbara had a medical appointment and had left a note to say that she wouldn’t be able to make it to class, she glanced at Martha’s keyboard and asked, “OK, and who else isn’t coming? She usually comes!” Several minutes later, Martha arrived and when I asked her if she was feeling better since she had just undergone eye surgery, she shook her head. Patty immediately spoke up, “we don’t take that for an answer! Say yes for wonderful!” which put a smile on Martha’s face.

When I asked the class about their feelings towards music learning in a group setting, Patty’s response was, “I think it’s great because everybody makes mistakes!” (April 1, 2013) Several classes later, she added, “I think just between the four of us is fun! Sometimes you’re not up to par and you make mistakes and then you’re embarrassed.” (April 15, 2013)

Patty’s humorous side brought out the best in her classmates and encouraged them to also be more youthful. In the last class that she attended, Patty arrived a few minutes late together with Martha and said, “Hi, here we are! The kids used to sing a little song like that!” Then,
Martha joined Patty in singing, “here we are together, together, together. Oh here we are together, the happier we are. For your friend is my friend, and my friend is your friend...” (May 24, 2013) While we were in the middle of laughter, Patty added, “you didn’t know you had a bunch of old ladies in here, did you!” Later that class, she asked what day it was, and when Barbara replied that it was the 24th of May, Patty started singing, “the 24th of May is the Queen’s birthday. If we don’t get a holiday, we’ll all run away!” This of course brought us all to laughter and Patty finished by adding in, “you’re all from my era!” with a smile on her face.

4.4.5 The Humble Improviser

As a social butterfly, Patty thoroughly enjoyed the group aspect of the classes. Upon reflecting back on the videotapes, I observed that it was most likely her peers who inspired Patty to eventually join in on the improvisation activities. Towards the beginning of the program, she exclaimed, “If you learn to improvise, you’ve got it made!” (March 15, 2013)

When we first met, Patty indicated that she would not be very comfortable with improvising, and her hesitations continued throughout the program: “I never could improvise… everything had to be by note – I wasn’t good at that, I wasn’t good at chords…” (April 1, 2013)

Even after the program had ended, Patty was critical about her improvising abilities: “I’m not good at it… it’s difficult for me. I like to learn from a note and then play it that way, because I’m not good at improvising, I don’t think.” (June 4, 2013)
When I first introduced the improvisation pieces to the class, Patty was reluctant to join in and sat in silence at her keyboard for the first few improvisation sessions. On March 15, there was an unplanned event that may have triggered Patty’s confidence to join in and improvise with the rest of us. That day, a host from the new AM 740 Zoomer Radio station came to interview my students and me. When the host asked what songs we were working on, Patty replied, “Now we’re into the swing stuff!” referring to the Blues on Black improvising piece we had worked on earlier that day. She added: “…Even if you don’t know the notes, you can improvise!” (March 15, 2013)

4.5 Cross-Case Analysis

Despite their unique personalities, there were many similarities in the qualitative data gathered from the four participants during their experiences with the keyboard-learning program. The themes that emerged comprised of both rewarding and challenging aspects of enrolling in a music program as a healthy older adult. The most common similarities among the participants included a genuine desire for making music and improvising, and an appreciation for the social aspect of learning in a group setting. The challenges that all participants had in common included: (a) being self-critical; (b) decline in the ability to retain new concepts; and (c) physical limitations with regards to vision, hand dexterity, or general mobility.

4.5.1 Commonalities

In addition to their genuine love for making music, the participants all valued the social aspect of learning in a group setting. The fact that they were all relatively close in age and of the
same gender may have been a factor which strengthened their social bond (even if this was not directly discussed amongst the participants). Whenever there were any absences, the group dynamic was immediately affected. This was especially noticeable during the in-class recital performances as there were fewer people to provide verbal support and encouragement. Besides the frequency of absences, there were several common challenges that the older adults faced in my study. Regardless of how often they were reminded of their progress, my participants persistently struggled with their self-defined goals. They all became easily annoyed with themselves, whenever they played wrong notes, or answered questions incorrectly. Although I spent a considerable amount of time reviewing theory concepts introduced in class, the older adults were often unable to remember what they had been taught and this likely added to their frustrations. Together with the decline in the ability to retain new concepts, the physical limitations with regards to vision, hand dexterity, and general mobility were the two most common challenges shared among the participants in this study.

4.5.2 Similarities to Literature Review

The benefits of learning music in a group setting, which I noted during this study, coincide with findings from several studies discussed in the literature review chapter. The Music Making and Wellness Project conducted by Tims and his colleagues between 1996 and 1998 was one of the first large scale studies involving music learning with healthy older adults. The results from my study are similar to those found by Tims and his colleagues in that “the promise of social interaction in many cases was what initially may have brought the students to the classes” (Koga & Tims, 2001). This was especially true for the case of Patty and Martha. While my quantitative data results did not indicate any changes in levels of mood (based on the short mood
questionnaire\textsuperscript{19}, the findings in Tim’s study revealed decreased levels of depression. Additionally, “other students also noted that the balance between a supportive, stress-free environment and one that was educationally challenging and stimulating was very important” (Koga & Tims, 2001). These findings correspond to my study in that most of my participants enjoyed taking on challenging tasks on their own accord.

In 2005, Hays and Minichiello conducted in-depth interviews with 38 older adults between 60 and 98 years of age examining the contribution of music to quality of life. The findings indicated that music has meaning and importance in the participants’ lives. The responses were categorized into themes including: wellbeing, connection, spirituality, and the benefits of music. In particular, “the social aspect of sharing music with others was a recurrent theme” (Hays & Minichiello, 2005). More specifically, several of their participants expressed how much they miss social gatherings from their childhood that largely involved musical activities, such as singing around the piano. This is similar to Patty, who recalled music in her childhood as being “sort of a way of life… my father’s family were all very musical, so everyone was interested and everybody did a little bit.” She often enjoyed sharing her childhood memories of being raised in a home with a family that was always immersed in music.

Alongside Hays and Minichiello’s study, in the Music for Life project, which investigated the benefits of music making amongst older adults, Creech et al. (2013) also found common

\textsuperscript{19} See Appendix I
themes, including the importance of social interaction. One of the highest-rated benefits of musical group activities was that it provides a means for interaction with others. In my study, it was evident that the group dynamic was meaningful for my participants as they provided moral support for one another. For instance, although Barbara’s skills were more advanced compared to her peers, she encouraged and also inspired her classmates.

The common themes from my research study correspond with the results found in 2014 by Perkins and Williamon who examined the individual experiences of older adult participants and how their experience of learning music is linked with their wellbeing. Their findings were categorized into themes, including those found in my study. In the first theme, subjective experiences of pleasure, participants focused on their enjoyment in playing a musical instrument. In my study, it was Eleanor and Martha who were the most outspoken about their levels of enjoyment. After the program had ended, it was Eleanor who said, “I can tell you we all enjoyed it! . . . It’s just sort of a thing that I had never thought of until I came here . . . I really enjoyed it!” This statement is also a testament of one of the other common themes found with my study: self-satisfaction through musical progress. All four of my participants demonstrated improvement in their musical abilities including Barbara, who described the difference in her ability before and after the program as being “like night and day”.

4.5.3 Short Mood Survey

For this research study, quantitative data was gathered with the intention of observing trends among the participants. The results showed no significant improvement in the pre-study to post-study scores for both the Quality of Life Index and the Primary Measures of Music Audiation tests. The short mood survey revealed individual differences among the participants, presumably based on their unique personalities.

In the short mood survey that was distributed at the end of each session, it is noteworthy to examine how the personality of each participant may have affected changes in mood as the program progressed. Barbara was consistently cheerful, good natured, relaxed, and confident:

Figure 18. Barbara’s mean scores from the short mood questionnaire.

There is a clear progression in all of Martha’s moods between March (when she first began) and the end of May. When she first started, she lacked confidence in her musical skills and this affected her overall mood. As she became more comfortable with the structure of the
class and her musical abilities, her confidence increased, and she became more cheerful, energetic, and good natured:

In the results from Eleanor’s mood surveys, there was a gradual increase in her relaxed mood level from the beginning to the end of the program. It is evident that her levels of anxiety decreased as her musical skills progressed:
Patty, the oldest participant who also had the most number of absences, did not show any improvement in her mood levels as the program progressed. Her absences were due to low energy levels and family visits. Patty also frequently mentioned that she did not have the energy to come downstairs to practice between each session. In her daily mood survey, most of her levels gradually decreased towards the end of May. This is perhaps an indication that she was displeased with her musical progress:

![Figure 21. Patty’s mean scores from the short mood questionnaire.](image)

4.5.4 Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life Index & Gordon’s Primary Measures of Music Audiation Analysis

While there were considerable differences in mood among the four participants, there was almost no difference in the Quality of Life (QoL) index scores calculated before and after the research study. The pre-study (11.2) and post-study (11.6) scores are indicated by figure 22:
The reason for the insignificant change indicated in the QoL index may be because the participants had difficulty filling out the lengthy questionnaire (despite the fact that it had already been shortened). Each response took a long time for the participants, and they appeared visibly frustrated by the number of questions they had to read.

Within the QoL index, five subscale scores were calculated. Among the participants, the most noticeable improvement was in Eleanor’s pre-study and post-study results for the Social and Economic subscale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eleanor</th>
<th>Pre-Study</th>
<th>Post-Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Eleanor’s pre-study and post-study scores for the social and economic subscale from the Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life index.
These results could indicate that the social aspect of learning in a group setting had made a direct positive impact on Eleanor’s experience within the program, and thus her quality of life.

In the rhythm component of Gordon’s Primary Measures of Music Audiation test, there was moderate increase in the mean scores from pre-study (31.3) to post-study (36). In the tonal component, the pre-study scores (33.3) decreased in the post-study (30.5):

![Primary Measures of Music Audiation Tests](image)

*Figure 23. Mean scores for participants in Gordon's Primary Measures of Music Audiation Tests.*

The reason for this decrease is likely due to the fact that Eleanor seemed to become confused with the symbols during her test (*same vs. different*) and marked the incorrect answer for every question (as seen below in Eleanor’s post-study tonal audiation test). Figure 24 is the second page of the tonal audiation test revealing that Eleanor circled the incorrect answer for 18 of the 20 final questions of the test. Eleanor scored much higher on her pre-study (28) compared to her post-study (16) tonal audiation test:
In spite of the small sample size, there were many shared characteristics among the four participants of this research study. While the results cannot be generalized to the older adult population, this data from their experiences contributed to my understanding of both their journey and mine. Their participation in my research study provided me with the opportunity to grow and develop as a teacher, researcher, and musician.

Figure 24. Eleanor’s post-study results from the tonal component of Gordon’s Primary Measures of Music Audiation Test.
Chapter 5

5 My Story

5.1 How Did I End Up Here?

I first started taking official piano lessons when I was six and a half years old. Until then, my mother (who had some childhood training of her own) taught me several Japanese folk tunes by ear. I always enjoyed playing piano and liked taking lessons, but never thought that I would pursue teaching as a career – if I were to go into a career for music, I could only foresee myself performing, through solo and chamber music. For this reason, and perhaps due to a lack of self-confidence, I did not start teaching regularly as my other pianist friends were doing in their mid-teens to make money on the side.

When I began my undergraduate studies at the University of Victoria (UVic) with Dr. Robin Wood, I focused on performing. There were no piano pedagogy classes offered at UVic, and although by that point I had determined that my dream was to someday be a professor of music at a university, I figured that I would gain the necessary experience after I had ‘made it’ as a concert pianist. After attending the Banff Centre for a residency in the Fall of 2007, I began to contemplate my long-term plans on a realistic level. It was then that I started looking into graduate programs across the country. I came across the University of Toronto’s Masters Performance and Pedagogy program, and my pedagogical curiosity was piqued. During my entrance interview, I was reluctant to do a mock teaching session and instead, expressed my sincere passion for, but lack of any serious teaching experience.
Through the graduate piano pedagogy seminars that I took at the University of Toronto with Dr. Midori Koga, I realized that teaching could be both incredibly rewarding and enjoyable. My classmates and I were given first-hand experience teaching both an advanced adult student and a young beginner student through the two-year practicum. In the seven years since I moved to Toronto, I have also built up my teaching experience outside of the University of Toronto. While most of my private students are young children, I also have several adult students, but none over the age of 70.

Since my elementary school days, I have always been envious of my peers who were able to see their grandparents more than once every few years. Before moving to Toronto, I had spent some time volunteering and playing at retirement homes, and have always felt attached to the elderly, curious to know what kind of lives they have led and what family ties they may have locally or abroad. This was part of the reason why I was interested in conducting a study with older adults. I am also passionate about being able to make a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the increasing older adult population. It is exciting to think about all the opportunities that could be created for the older adult population as greater attention is placed on their needs.

During the process of preparing for and teaching the classes for this study, there were many challenges that I faced along the way including factors beyond my control, the participants’ limited physical and mental dexterity, and the difficulty of learning new concepts as an older adult. Despite the obstacles, there were many rewarding moments throughout the
program, including the noticeable progress in my participants’ piano playing abilities and levels of enjoyment. I developed a close relationship with my students and was fascinated when they shared stories about their lives and families. My participants also frequently mentioned how appreciative they were of me for providing them with the opportunity to bring piano back into their lives.

In the remainder of this chapter, I have included many quotes from both my self-report journal that was compiled in an informal and quick manner after each session, and my reflective report that was written while observing the videotapes. All quotes have been included directly without correcting any grammatical issues to preserve authenticity.

5.2 Teaching a Group Class as a Research Study

As a new teacher instructing a group class for older adults, I faced several pedagogical and logistical issues including the challenges of the classroom size, pacing within the lesson plans, and making wrongful assumptions about students’ retention rate.

While I was grateful that the Dunfield Retirement Residency provided me with a room that I could use for the duration of my research study, it was difficult to work in the rectangular-shaped room. “It is challenging to conduct this class (especially the stretching exercises) in such close quarters.” (February 18, 2013 self-report journal) The length and width of the room were limited, which meant that the keyboards were placed against the walls. Consequently, this left
little space for me to walk freely in the middle of the room. “It is hard to demonstrate the stretching exercises because I feel that the room is too small. I need to figure out a way to modify the exercises so that the participants can do them comfortably.” (March 8, 2013 self-report journal)

The classroom size was also an issue when participants showed up late, in the middle of the stretching exercises, as it was difficult to come into the room quietly with a walker without disrupting the calming experience for the others.

Gradually, my ability to conduct the stretching exercises within limited quarters improved:

In my stretching exercises, I’ve noticed that I’m starting to get much more comfortable and confident with this portion of class compared to when I first started teaching these classes. In terms of pacing, I still could’ve used a bit more time between each exercise, but it is a vast improvement from how I conducted these sessions two months prior! (April 29, 2013 reflective report)

Despite carefully constructing my lesson plans with approximate durations for each activity, it was a struggle to make sure that equal time was given to the core curriculum and the individual or improvisation segments:

I was nervous going into this session because it was my first full session since session 1 ended up being mainly the quality of life and audiation tests. I wanted to make sure that I
had enough time for all the concepts to be introduced and that the time was allocated properly between ‘core curriculum’ and ‘individual work time’. It is challenging now because the ‘individual work time’ feels long when I am going around. This could be because my students are all already at such different levels. (February 18, 2013 self-report journal)

In the beginning of the program, “my goal with each session [was] to have as much variety as possible” (February 18, 2013). This was because I thought that older adults were uninterested in spending any more than 4 to 5 minutes at a time on each activity, based on observations from my pilot study. Unfortunately, this method was not effective for my participants:

After spending only three minutes reviewing rests, I went right into the rhythm clapback exercises. I think that there should be an adequate amount of space between each activity for older adults so that they can comfortably switch their mental processes and feel ready to move on to the next task.

Overall, I feel that there are way too many activities that I try to fit into each class – for instance, reviewing chords in the last 2 minutes of class!! If I spent less time jumping around trying to add as much variety to each class, and focused on just 2 or 3 activities per class, it would probably be much easier for the participants to retain the information. (March 1, 2013 reflective report)

Besides the aspect of trying to include as many activities and concepts as possible into each class, the reflection that I wrote after observing the video-recording from March 8 was eye-opening: “I did not realize this in the class, but whenever I move to the next task I really don’t give them a lot of breathing room.”
After struggling with the pacing in the first few weeks of sessions, I discovered that the four older adults in my class preferred to spend more time on each activity, to help them review the new concepts introduced in class. The following transcript is from the focus group session on April 1:

L: How would you rate your ability to remember the concepts we talk about in class? . . . Does it feel like you’re starting from a clean slate every time you come to class or would you say you’re totally overwhelmed?

B: No, I wouldn’t say that I’m totally overwhelmed. I mean for the most part, it’s nice that you review things with us – that just nudges us along I think – it helps to nudge us along.

E: mhm! (Nodding with a smile on her face)

5.3 Working with Older Adults

5.3.1 Challenges

5.3.1.1 Factors Beyond Control

Despite having a lesson plan structure for each class, there were factors beyond my control that I could not anticipate, such as absences and the general state of mind of the participants, which had a direct impact on the outcome of each class.

Since there were only four participants in the program, any class where there was more than one absence meant that the group aspect for activities was affected. On April 15, Patty and Martha were both absent, and Eleanor was the only participant who was there at the beginning of
class. At that point, I debated whether to continue with the original lesson plan, or to treat this as a private session for Eleanor:

At 2pm, Eleanor was the only person who had arrived. I thought it was going to be a one-on-one class, so I started working privately with Eleanor but then at around 2:10pm, Barbara showed up. I proceeded to shorten the stretching exercises and then went about my lesson plan. It was difficult because as I was doing all of the review, Barbara was getting most of the answers all correct in terms of guide notes, but Eleanor struggled a bit. (April 15, 2013 self-report journal)

Out of the 25 sessions, there were three classes with only two participants, and ten classes with only three participants. While I had initially planned to do many activities involving the participants paired up in twos, I eventually gave up because of the frequency of absences.

5.3.1.2 Varying Levels

Whenever I ask the group for answers, [Barbara] answers right away – this may become a problem because she is advancing quickly whereas the others are struggling because they hardly get a chance to answer the questions. I need to make a point to call upon individual students more. (March 8, 2013 self-report journal)

As an instructor, one of the most difficult aspects was teaching a class with four students of varying levels. Due to the small class size, I wanted to maintain a degree of unity. However, after only a few sessions, it was clear that there was a substantial gap in the retention and progress rate for each student. This was particularly evident when there were absences: “It is
difficult to keep the same pace in the group when students are on clearly different levels. This is especially the case when there are only two people in the class.” (April 15, 2013 self-report journal)

While I tried to teach in ways that would keep it interesting for those who understood the concepts right away, I felt as though I could not keep a pace that would satisfy all the students. Unfortunately, the obvious difference in abilities affected how Eleanor, the only genuine beginner, felt about the group dynamic. She felt badly for me as the instructor, and expressed her concerns at her post-program interview:

E: *Just tell me, do you think it’s better to teach one person or... I mean I know it’s an awful lot to teach because if you have to teach everyone the same thing.*
L: *Well that was one of the aspects of the study. In a group setting, I believe that it’s much more enjoyable because it can get very lonely when it’s just you and the teacher and when we have in-class recitals, you can support one another... so the social aspect was one of the main elements of this program.*
E: *It must’ve been hard on you!*

5.3.1.3 Limited Manual Dexterity

In addition to the difficulty of dealing with absences and teaching students of varying levels, there were unexpected challenges with regards to manual dexterity. In the beginning of the program, it was expected that there would be restrictions based on limited mobility and vision. However, it did not occur to me that a curriculum for older adults should not include any activities involving writing:
L: Just remember line 2 in both the treble staff and the bass staff, keeping in mind that we count from the middle. So line 2 in both staves is the important line to remember.

P: My glasses aren’t functioning the last few days.. So I just want to know.. Line 2, is it on the line? Or here. (Points to the correct line with her pencil that is shaking in her unsteady hand)

L: That’s it. So the note goes right through it like that. (Draws on Patty’s sheet)

OK, so now just to the right of your guide notes on your piece of paper, let’s review seconds and thirds. So draw another treble G – somewhere over here (to Patty and Barbara). Treble G…. that’s it. Now, can I get you to draw an interval of a third, which is a skip above that G?

P: I’m sorry I don’t understand. Middle G?

L (while looking over at Patty’s music): OK so let me go over this one.. It’s a close guess, now a skip or a third, is the… Next line note above.

(Barbara mumbles something and fixes her paper) So the note in between is a step then?

Upon watching the video recording from this class, I came across several realizations:

I spent 7 minutes doing a writing exercise... for this age group, I think that I should not have been doing any written exercises at all – even magnets would have worked better as I know that writing skills greatly deteriorate at that age and it could have been quite frustrating for both Barbara and Patty. At the time, I did not realize how complex the task of writing was for my participants. (February 25, 2013 reflective report)

The deterioration of dexterity combined with the challenges of learning new concepts in this age group posed some problems:
I had no idea that writing things into their books that I drew on the white board would be challenging for my students (excluding Barbara). For instance, as I was explaining the chord structures, I went one-by-one and said, ‘OK this is tonic, so this is the first degree of the scale, and in music, we use roman numerals, so let’s all write a roman numeral 1. Even a task like that seemed to take a long time, although I’m not sure if it was just the physical aspect of writing that is difficult for someone like Patty who is 91 years old. The task of putting a thought through the hand onto paper may be too difficult for someone at that age that is not used to doing so. (May 13, 2013 self-report journal)

5.3.1.4 Challenges of Learning New Concepts

Using Faber’s Adult Piano Adventures in my curriculum involved a substantial amount of theory, which was new, even for those who had prior musical training. There were many issues involving the aspect of learning new concepts among my participants:

I spent a lot of time reviewing theory at the beginning of class – I wanted to make sure that [my participants] were all solid on note values and rests. It seems that while Barbara is fairly sharp on all the theory, the others are a little foggy, often guessing completely wrong answers. Although Martha started later in the group, I’m surprised that Patty and Eleanor are still having problems with answering the questions correctly. (April 5, 2013 self-report journal)

For the remainder of the program, I struggled to understand the retention rate for my participants and their ability to absorb new material:

When I finished, I put the C Major scale on the white board to review the scale degrees. It was all right in the beginning while I was going over tonic, dominant and the leading tone (or so I thought), but it turned out later that Eleanor and Patty were completely lost.
I think that I was even going over Barbara’s head, and looking back, I shouldn’t have introduced so many new theory terms. The concept of scale degrees proved to be too much for my students. After I reviewed the C major scale notes, and asked them to tell me the scale degrees for D Major, the participants had difficulty transferring the concept. (May 13, 2013 self-report journal)

On the second to last day of class, I introduced the first piece that involved a key signature, *Minuet in G Major*:

![Minuet in G Major](image)

Figure 25. Minuet in G from Adult Piano Adventures by Faber, 2009, pp. 150-151.

As an exercise, I asked the participants to go through the music, and circle all the F’s that would be played as F sharp based on the key signature. To my surprise, it was not an easy task for any of them, including Barbara:
When I had them all start Minuet in G, it was even difficult for Barbara to find all the F’s. This again reiterated the fact that I should have been spending a minute or two reviewing the guide notes at EVERY single class. I figured in the past 7 or 8 classes that I had done enough review of the treble G and Bass F guide notes that I didn’t need to, but this was not the case! ... Barbara had circled all the treble G notes thinking they were F’s, and when I corrected her, she seemed frustrated that she had not known that... (May 27, 2013 self-report journal)

A contributing factor to the challenge of learning new concepts was likely declining memory among my participants.

I think I have gone about wrongly assuming that it is easy to remember the musical alphabet. Since memory is a bit of an issue, I shouldn’t assume that it is easy to remember the musical alphabet, even for those who have taken piano lessons before! (May 20, 2013 self-report journal)

Although none of my participants had any diagnosed cognitive impairments, the decline in memory was apparent. This affected their ability to retain new concepts introduced in class and to remember which pieces to practice. As an instructor, I struggled to find different ways of explaining the same concepts: “I find that I often have to explain or repeat myself a number of times and in many roundabout different ways, or even the same way for Eleanor and Martha because they forget things.” (May 27, 2013 self-report journal)
5.3.1.5 Limited Practice Time

When I gave them some individual time to practice for the in-class recital, I thought I had given them enough, but it was clear that Patty had not done any practicing since the last class and that since Eleanor was not there on Friday, she did not even know there was going to be a recital. (April 1, 2013 self-report journal)

Midway through the program, I realized that with the exception of Barbara, it was going to be almost impossible for the other participants to remember what to practice for the next class. I started writing down their in-class recital pieces on the classroom white board with the hopes that it would help remind them when they came to practice between the sessions.

I know that [Eleanor] struggles with her left hand still, but it is difficult when students can’t remember which pieces to practice. I know that Barbara had likely been practicing the past week. Once we did each line one by one, then I performed it all as a group – needless to say, Eleanor still got pretty lost. I couldn’t really hear Barbara because her keyboard was situated behind me. (April 15, 2013 self-report journal)

Finding the time and energy to practice was a struggle for Patty, given that she used a walker, and required her helper to be with her at all times:

For the in-class recital, Barbara played wonderfully but it was a bit of a challenge for Patty first because she did not remember what she was supposed to play and also explained that she did not feel well so did not practice.

(April 29, 2013 self-report journal)
In the last few weeks of the program, I encouraged my participants to not feel guilty about not practicing between sessions, and to simply enjoy making music during the two hours that we had together each week.

5.3.1.6 Performance Anxiety

In addition to the struggles with having limited practice time during and between each class, the anxieties associated with performing in public were prevalent among my participants, particularly in the first half of the study:

*For the group performance, it was a challenge for my students to keep up with me, even at a slower tempo. I think that the issue may have to do with the psychology of playing as a group because I was counting and even singing the solfège while playing the duet part. I should do this each week with the pieces from the Faber book because I think it also makes the experience more enjoyable and also enhances the learning experience (as I’ve found with my younger students in duet performances).*

(March 1, 2013 self-report journal)

It was exceptionally challenging to perform pieces as an ensemble, but this may have also been a result of the keyboards facing away from one another:

*When I did the group duet run through of 500 year old melody with Barbara and Eleanor, even though I kept calling out the bar numbers, line numbers and was singing the solfège, Eleanor had a hard time following along... the melody might have been a bit too difficult for her, especially if she was having trouble seeing the notes.*

(April 15, 2013 reflective report)
Aside from the anxieties of performing, the participants were incredibly hard on themselves and became easily frustrated. The aspect of playing together in a group was difficult for the participants in the beginning of the program, especially for Barbara who became visibly flustered and stressed:

For the in-class recital, I gave my students time to practice their selections. It was interesting to see how the other classmates responded to one another. Barbara is still very hard on herself whenever she makes mistakes or has to stop during her performance. Martha genuinely seems to enjoy herself when she is performing, and Patty and Eleanor also stumbled along but seemed to genuinely enjoy the process. In general, they are all still really hard on themselves. (April 5, 2013 self-report journal)

5.3.2 Rewards

Despite the challenges, there were numerous rewarding and memorable moments from the time that I shared with the older adults in my study. There was noticeable improvement in their levels of enjoyment, and their playing and performing abilities. It was also fulfilling to hear how appreciative my participants were for the opportunity to learn and re-learn piano, and to see how supportive they were of one another, especially during the in-class recitals.

5.3.2.1 The Value and Enjoyment of Group Learning

Early on in the program, I discovered how valuable it was for my students to play along with me in a group ensemble. It was challenging due to their performing anxieties, but I tried to teach my students how to appreciate the value of learning in a group setting so that they could reap more enjoyment from each class:
For the group performance, it was a challenge for my students to keep up with me, even at a slower tempo. I think that the issue may have to do with the psychology of playing as a group, because I was counting and even singing the solfège while playing the duet part. I should do this each week with the pieces from the Faber book, because I think it also makes the experience more enjoyable and also enhances the learning experience (as I’ve found with my younger students in duet performances).

At the end of this session, Barbara performed her own-choice piece for the class and it was an excellent performance – I would like to try to do this at the end of every session – to have at least one resident perform. The other two students were extremely supportive, and we all clapped. It was a great moment! (March 1, 2013 self-report journal)

On March 15, Joe, host of the Zoomer AM Radio Sunday Showcase, came in to do an interview on the piano program. In the middle of the interview, he observed the four students seated at their keyboards and commented on the group setting:

J: It looks great! Everyone’s got their headsets on playing the same songs, and I guess it’s great in a group like this: you’ve got four people, and nobody gets lost in the shuffle. If you need some extra work on something, you’re there to help them out!

L: Yes and of course everyone moves at their own pace . . . we also have own-choice pieces. Some of them have picked various classical or jazz standards.

J: So you do take requests! Does it make it easy in this kind of setting?

P: I’m learning all over again!

Several minutes later, Joe added, “well I think the bottom line is the fun and enjoyment you get out of it, and the satisfaction whether you’re . . . refining your talents or picking up a new talent!” and Patty responded, “it’s always good to review – brings back a lot of memories!”
The reward of teaching students in a group setting was most evident during the in-class recitals. My students were all incredibly encouraging and inspired each other to set higher goals and to feel more confident in their abilities:

Patty exclaimed a few times that she was feeling under the weather, and couldn’t remember what to play, so I told her that it’s all the more reason to choose a tune that she could just basically play by ear, and we played Edelweiss together. It was really nice since Martha was humming and singing along.

Barbara was the only one who played with both hands, and although she had a few stumbles, it was an excellent performance. She played Home on the Range – a piece that is challenging and long from the Faber book, and one that I had not even gone over with the group, but that I said she could take on as a bonus challenge if she wished. It was a great joy for me to see her perform and then to see the reaction from her classmates after she finished! (May 24, 2013 self-report journal)

5.3.2.2 Increase in Students’ Musical Abilities

From the beginning to the end of the program, there was an obvious improvement in the musical abilities of all four participants. Besides Eleanor, who had never had a piano lesson before in her life, the three other participants with prior musical experience were unable to play through a single piece of music when we first met. By May 31, the last day of the program, all participants including Eleanor, had at least three pieces in their repertoire and they had all performed over ten times during an in-class recital.
Once I realized how valuable it was for my participants to perform as often as possible, the in-class recitals became a motivational tool especially for the students who took the time to practice their pieces for class:

> When we had our recital, it was amazing to see that they had all improved their performing abilities – it was especially noticeable in Barbara, who had played [her piece] for me individually, and also played it much better than on Friday. She said, “oh, that’s because it’s just for you and there’s no pressure, but I just lock up when I’m playing it for everyone”, but sure enough, she was able to play it so much better than on Friday! Even her legato playing was wonderful – I was happy and she seemed genuinely proud of her progress.

> Also, Eleanor played ‘Over the Rainbow’ again, and this was also better than on Friday. It was also a pleasure to see how genuinely supportive they were of one another: Eleanor cried out ‘maaarvelous’ after Barbara finished playing!

(April 22, 2013 self-report journal)

### 5.3.2.3 Sharing a Sense of Accomplishment

Shortly after changing my lesson plans to include an in-class recital at each session, I realized how important these performing opportunities were for older adults to feel a sense of accomplishment:

> At the end of class, everyone seemed really pleased with themselves, and when I had them choose their in-class recital pieces for next class, they all seemed more eager. Barbara is really on a whirl – she is choosing really difficult pieces and challenging herself. It is really great to see her progress! (May 24, 2013 self-report journal)
These experiences also allowed the participants to pursue their goals at their own pace, while building the confidence to play in front of their peers. In the last few sessions, I performed together with some of the participants as a duo during the in-class recitals, and it was shocking to see the difference that it made:

Class went so much better today than on Monday! The only thing that I did differently was to play duets with my students for the in-class recital. Martha was thrilled, and even wrote on her questionnaire, ‘all I need is you!’ and had scored a 7/7 on her class satisfaction score compared to the low mark she gave at the last class together with her ‘frustrated’ comment. Also, all I did was to play the left hand for Patty, Martha, and Eleanor in their in-class recital pieces – it turned out that it made a huge difference, especially for Eleanor and Martha because they were much more comfortable just playing with one hand. It was a joy to see how much enjoyment and pleasure they got out of the experience today! (May 24, 2013 self-report journal)

5.3.2.4 Appreciative Students

Besides having the opportunity to experience the sense of accomplishment felt by the older adults felt for their musical achievements, it was rewarding to have students who were so appreciative for me as a teacher. During the Zoomer AM Radio interview, Joe asked my students to discuss why they decided to pursue this opportunity and what they enjoy about making music. Martha’s response was, “[Lisa] is great!” and Eleanor enthusiastically exclaimed, “She is marvelous!”
Shortly after, Joe asked the class what made them want to pick up the piano again after all this time (referring to Martha, Patty, and Barbara who mentioned their prior musical experience). Patty replied:

*Well anything that you learn here is of great value – not necessarily financially, but it certainly is a pleasure and we’re enjoying it and we have a great teacher and she’s always available so we’re really having fun with this!*

For those students with prior musical experience, Joe asked how they felt towards the opportunity to bring piano lessons back into their lives:

J: *I’m surrounded by keyboards, and it looks like some very apt students learning a song specifically and this is a great class even if you’re starting from scratch.*

B: *As a child I learned how to play piano.*

J: *So Lisa the instructor helps you to learn new things?*

B: *refreshing new things – because I’d completely forgotten everything that I first learned.*

J: *How long have you been playing? Is this new to you? (to Martha)*

M: *a long time ago... and this is more fun than I remember then.*

J: *is that right?*

M: *... new careers!* (Everyone laughs)

On April 19, Eleanor asked if I had any suggestions to help her overcome her difficulties with coordination between her hands. I told her that she could try several methods, including spending more time practicing slowly and hands separately. During the focus group session on
May 3, when I asked the class whether they could discuss any changes in self-confidence levels or their musical ability:

E: Yes I have come along in the right but my left hand is hopeless.

L: Compared to a few weeks ago, your left hand has really come a long way! The key is to break it down into steps.

E: Yes I wrote down that I was supposed to do this in sort of small steps at a time.

L: Persistence is key!

E: Well I thank you for all these little hints because it’s just really great!

At the end of the last class on May 31, while the participants were packing up their books and belongings, Martha came up to me with a smile on her face and said, “The preparation you made for these lessons is superb! . . . How come we’re so lucky?” It was moments like these that made me feel fortunate to have had such wonderful and appreciative students to teach as part of my research study.

5.4 Teaching Older Adults Using Improvisation

5.4.1 Challenges

Although I have been using the Pattern Play method book with my private students for the past few years, I faced several challenges at the beginning of the program when I attempted to incorporate improvisation into teaching the older adult participants in my study.
5.4.1.1 Challenges of Learning How To Improvise

Only one of the older adults was comfortable playing without a music score in front of them: “While doing the improvising activity, Martha was very concerned about playing the right notes – she kept pointing to the book… I should have recognized this right away and closed the book so that she didn’t have to worry!” (March 18, 2013 reflective report)

Furthermore, I had wrongly assumed that the instructions (i.e., play anything as long as it is a black key), would be easy to follow:

*Having some of my students follow a task such as “play any key as long as it is a black key” seemed to be too much for them to handle in the sense that I believe older adults are not comfortable with the idea of not having any rules to go by. Now that I think about it, I should have tried to use more effective/different vocabulary to make the improvising segment more manageable. Using words like ‘exploring different sounds’ might have worked better for Eleanor and Patty. Also, I should have emphasized that it is much more effective to start exploring by using single notes.*

*I was frustrated and exhausted after the end of class today – I need to find a better way of explaining how to join in on improvising. At this point, Barbara is the only one of the four who really gets how to improvise together and play with good rhythmic syntax and meter. Martha joins in but is not very confident and ends up playing chords or sometimes strikes the wrong notes (for instance, a white key when we are doing an ‘all black key’ pattern) and then she pauses and takes 5-10 seconds to join back in. Eleanor struggles as I think she feels completely lost in improvisation. Even when I play the pattern with her on the bottom and demonstrate how she can join in, she has an extremely difficult time.*

(March 22, 2013 self-report journal)
Teaching my students how to improvise was also challenging because it came so naturally for Barbara, but not for the others in the class:

*Since Barbara understands and knows how to improvise well with the pattern, I tend to treat her as the class standard, which unfortunately does not work to the others’ advantage. I need to remember that Barbara is the exception and not the rule!*  
(March 25, 2013 self-report journal)

Towards the end of the program, I decided to try and teach my students how they could improvise on their own using the ‘Solo’ instructions from the *Pattern Play* book. Unfortunately, the task was too demanding for everyone excluding Barbara:

*I spent a considerable amount of time trying to teach my students how to improvise on their own with the ‘solo’ version, but I do not think it was very effective. I think that it was a bit too complex for except for Barbara. It was too challenging for my students, and also not a good use of class time to try and teach them how to improvise on their own - It would’ve been much more enjoyable and less frustrating to just continue improvising as a group ensemble.*  
(May 20, 2013 reflective report)

5.4.1.2 Classroom and Keyboard Issues

Beyond the challenges of trying to teach older adults how to improvise and feel comfortable with the process of spontaneously creating music without a score, there were some issues related to the room and the keyboards. The size of the room (roughly 15 feet long and 10 feet wide) did not allow for the keyboards to be placed so that the participants could all face one another while improvising in ensembles. This may have hindered the enjoyment of playing in a group: “With improvising, it would have been much better if the keyboards were all facing one
another and we could either look at each other’s hands or make eye contact. This would make it feel much more like an ensemble!” (March 11, 2013 reflective report) I also found that “when improvising, I struggled to find easy ways of introducing the new patterns and again, there was not a lot of connection in the group because everyone was facing away from one another.” (March 25, 2013 reflective report)

While I improvise on the keyboard, I can only look over at two of my students. It is hard to tell if the resident behind me is actually playing or not. I think that I should do the duet part together with one of my students each time so it’s more like an ensemble. (May 20, 2013 self-report journal)

The Yamaha digital keyboards used for the purpose of this study included detachable pedals that made the slower and more lyrical pieces (such as World Piece) from the Pattern Play book challenging:
In the first improvisation segment, we started with World Piece. I felt flustered because I had to plug in the sustain pedals for the keyboards to make them sound better, but then there were technological issues. Also, I started with the pattern as a duet with Barbara while Martha and Patty just listened, and it went well with Barbara, but did not go very well when I had Martha and Patty join in as a group.

I think that despite the small size of the room, it is hard for the others, especially Patty, to hear the pattern that I am playing. I also think that my explanation may have been challenging because I had assumed that ‘just play anything as long as it is on a black key’ would be easy enough to understand, but this was clearly not the case. (March 11, 2013 self-report journal)
5.4.2 Rewards

Incorporating improvisation into a teaching curriculum for older adults had its’ own challenges, but the rewarding moments were plentiful. March 11 was the first class where I introduced improvisation:

When I started my first improvising segment, I had Barbara be my first guinea pig since she was the most advanced student in my group. As soon as she and I finished improvising our first pattern (and she played brilliantly with the mood of World Piece!), Martha started applauding and smiling. It was a great moment for both Barbara and me! (March 11, 2013 reflective-report)

5.4.2.1 Learning Through Improvisation

Some of the patterns (i.e. Canon in C & Persia) were more challenging for the older adults, however, these pieces encouraged me to come up with alternative methods to make the act of spontaneously creating music more comfortable and enjoyable for my students:

I introduced Persia, which I described as one of the most challenging improvising patterns from the Pattern Play book. I was proud of the way that I introduced the Persian scale – I had half of the class only play four notes, and the other half play the other four notes. This way, they didn’t have to remember more than four notes at a time. Otherwise, the Persian scale would have been too difficult for any of my students! (May 24, 2013 self-report journal)
When the class improvised with the Persian scale, it was remarkably effective since all participants were playing along. Furthermore, I discovered how to integrate theory concepts into the process of improvisation in the piece, *Canon in C* (Faber, 2009, p. 32):

*Watching Eleanor, Barbara, and Patty improvise the Canon in C with me successfully and musically in this session (for the first time) was incredibly rewarding! I could almost feel the positive atmosphere in the air and I recall how rewarding it was at the time. Watching it on the video brought back great memories, especially after the struggles I faced when working with this pattern over the last few classes prior to this one. It helped a lot that I simplified the instructions for them, and it was great to see them incorporating the rhythms that I had assigned them! This was a true indication that improvising could not only be a fun activity but also a learning activity where they work on musical concepts such as rhythm. It was also great to hear and see Patty’s face as she talked about how improvising was a new and enjoyable experience!* (April 1, 2013 reflective report)
5.4.2.2  Gaining Musical Confidence Through Improvisation

Beyond making the process of learning more enjoyable, it was gratifying to see how improvisation helped to build the participants’ musical confidence, particularly in the last few classes:

_In order to not have to deal with my students’ confusion over which notes to be reading, instead of starting the class with review of theory, I had them start by creating and exploring different sounds at the piano. It was fairly successful, and all three of my students (excluding Barbara who couldn’t be there for a medical appointment) were joining in, even Eleanor!_

_At one point, I even overheard Eleanor only playing staccato notes so I used that to my advantage to point out what kind of notes she was playing, and I had us all play staccato note improvisations on white keys. Then, I asked them to switch and play all legato notes. It was interesting to see the process of creativity and improvisation when no books are used._  (May 17, 2013 self-report journal)

Upon watching the video recording of this class, I observed that:

_It was neat to see how Martha, Patty, and Eleanor participated together in the ‘exploration’ activity that I did at the beginning of class. This was where I asked them to feel free to play anything and be creative without any rhythmic or stylistic rules. All of them participated and were not shy about playing along. Patty stayed within the middle range, Eleanor played a few scales in the middle and then upper then lower part of the keyboard, and Martha also experimented with longer tones (perhaps to contrast what she was hearing Eleanor play?)_  (May 17, 2013 reflective report)
When I introduced *Blues on Black* from *Pattern Play*, it immediately became the class favourite. In the beginning, Barbara’s classmates simply watched as she improvised melodies with the catchy Blues beat, but they soon discovered how simple the E-flat blues pattern was and began joining in:

*Eleanor was having a blast improvising on the ‘Blues on Black’ pattern, and Martha was also playing along the whole time, which was fantastic! Looking back on when I first tried to have them improvise in class, when both Martha and Eleanor had no confidence to join Barbara in improvising, they’ve come a long way!* (May 24, 2013 reflective report)

In the second to last session, I realized that the anxieties about joining in during the improvisation segments had disappeared for all participants, including Eleanor who was reluctant in the beginning:

*It is so great now that everyone joins in, even Eleanor. I remember when I first started improvising with the class and especially with this pattern, Eleanor said that she couldn’t join in because she didn’t understand what to do or she couldn’t hear herself amongst all the rest of the ‘noise’. (May 27, 2013 self-report journal)*

In the last class, I spent more time on the improvising pieces from *Pattern Play* since it was clear that the participants were enjoying themselves:

*I noticed in the improvising segment that Martha was much more comfortable joining in with the improvising pattern when I played along with her (on the bottom part of her keyboard). While improvising with ‘Persia’, I didn’t clap or review the rhythm cards for the participants at all and as it turned out, during this segment, none of them (including*
Barbara) played with the rhythm that was on the card in front of them. After I paused to go over each participant’s rhythm card, it was much more successful the second time.

During the ‘Reflecting’ improvising pattern, I noticed that Barbara figured out and played the same rhythmic pattern as my left hand. Martha was a bit apprehensive at first, but then joined in as I kept encouraging her since I was playing on the bottom half of her keyboard. Gradually, she played more and more notes in her improvisation.

Reflecting

Imagine a mirror that reflects feelings we can hear rather than images we can see. That is what music is. Music reflects feelings rather than appearances—interiors rather than exteriors—and sounds out what is hidden deep within us.

As your partner’s melodies float through the sky, let this PATTERN be a calm lake reflecting them.

**PATTERN**

[Musical notation image]

**Vacation**

[Musical notation image]

Figure 28. Reflecting Duet (Bass) from Pattern Play Book 1 by Kinney, 2010, p. 24. Copyright 2010 by The Frederick Harris Co., Limited.
For Blues on Black, I improvised on Eleanor’s keyboard and I noticed that she got really into it and was laughing and smiling – she even started improvising with her left hand as well and also alternated her hands!!!

There was a really cute moment at the end when I did my ‘jazz hands’ imitation tremolo to signify that it was the end of our improvisation piece, and Eleanor copied me by doing a mini tremolo between her hands! (May 31, 2013 self-report journal)

5.5 What I Discovered About Teaching Older Adults

At the end of class, Patty said in a very cheerful tone, “that was a good class today!” I think that introducing and playing the ‘500-Year-Old Melody’ (the Israeli anthem), really made a big difference for Patty. She was singing the words to the song the whole time while we played, and while she practiced on her own. (April 5, 2013 reflective report)

Although there were only four participants in this study, I made many discoveries about teaching older adults including: (a) the importance of peer support and learning in a group setting; (b) the value of in-class recital performances and playing repertoire that is familiar and popular; (c) how to accommodate physical and mental limitations; and (d) how crucial it is to spend additional time reviewing core concepts.

When I introduced When the Saints Go Marching In from the Adult Piano Adventures method book (Faber, 2009, p.85), I made an important discovery. Given that my participants had limited dexterity and problems with coordination, it was evident that playing with both hands was going to be overly challenging and frustrating for my older adults. Performing in a group
ensemble with the students each playing a different hand made the experience much more enjoyable and rewarding for everyone:

*It was much more effective when I split up the class. First of all, it was easier for my students when I demonstrated one hand at a time, and then we played one line at a time as a group. Then, when I tried playing the piece as a group, I had Barbara play the left hand and the other two play the right hand – it was a lot more cohesive...except for the fact that Eleanor kept playing in different rhythms or tempi. When we finished playing, she exclaimed that it is hard to hear what she is doing when everyone is playing so loudly.* (April 22, 2013 self-report journal)

In a larger room where the keyboards could have been facing each other, the volume may not have been an issue. Also, I believe that if the participants were able to see one another while performing in the group ensemble, it would have been more effective.

Once I began spending more time on review, there was a noticeable difference in the participants’ moods since they felt proud of themselves for answering the questions correctly:

*While doing the note-value review with Patty, Martha, and Eleanor, all three of them answered the questions immediately and correctly, which was a significant change even from just two weeks prior when they were mixing up their half notes and their whole notes. It was so nice to see the progress among the participants’ in the review section!* (May 3, 2013 reflective report)

One of the most significant discoveries that I made while working with the older adults in my study was that particularly towards the end of the program, the in-class recitals became the
highlight of each class and most of the participants looked forward to sharing their music with their peers:

Barbara went first in the in-class recital “to get it out of the way”, and she played well despite the challenging piece that she chose. She played The Entertainer. The other two were amazed, and Eleanor exclaimed how wonderfully Barbara could play without even looking at her hands.

Martha and I played ‘When I Fall in Love’ – I played the bass part for her, and she played the treble. There were a couple of stumbles, but she has such a good ear that she fixes her mistakes right away and since she counts while playing (and practicing), she has a very steady beat. When she finished, Eleanor (who had stood up to watch Martha (and Barbara)) was saying how marvelous it was, which was a joy to see! Martha seemed so happy playing with me as a duet.

Eleanor did not really seem to want to play, but Martha and Barbara encouraged her to just go for it, and she did – she played ‘Camptown Races’ and something neat happened: she played both hands with the chords and lead sheet, but at the end when she went to a different note, she didn’t fuss at all or make a face or anything. Instead, she calmly improvised her way down some other wrong notes but finished on the correct note, and it was so great! I exclaimed that it was a really valuable performing lesson: that it’s not about the mistakes, but how we deal with them. She seemed to be pretty proud of herself! (May 27, 2013 self-report journal)

I was able to learn a lot more about myself through the experiences that I shared with the participants in my study. The challenges that I faced along the way helped me to understand more about teaching older adults, particularly in a group setting. It was exciting to give my students the chance to try improvisation, a skill that they had thought was reserved for jazz musicians. I discovered that there are many possible ways of providing the older adult population
with the opportunity to bring music back into their lives, regardless of their prior musical experience. It was evident that the process of teaching for this study had enabled me to grow not only as a pedagogue, but also as a researcher and musician.
Chapter 6

6 Concluding Thoughts

6.1 Summary

Our goal as music teachers is to prepare students to understand music and to skilfully play an instrument so they can enjoy music for the rest of their lives . . . therefore, how we teach the music becomes more important than the music or technology we use . . . the focus should be on the process of learning music, not on the product of music performance. (Coats, 2006)

This research study involved teaching four older adults. They participated in a three-month long music-learning program involving keyboard skills and improvisation. The lesson plan included traditional reading-based instruction as well as improvisation-based instruction. The core curriculum used Faber’s Adult Piano Adventures to teach theory concepts and pieces in a traditional reading-based method. The improvisation segments used Pattern Play, a method book created by Forrest & Akiko Kinney. Qualitative data was gathered in the form of audio-visual materials, observation and interviews as well as field notes and journal reports. Quantitative data was also collected, but not intended for the purpose of making generalized conclusions about the older adult population (due to the small sample size). Instead, the qualitative and quantitative results were merged to form a more complete analysis of each individual.
The older adults’ experiences in the program were analyzed using a case study approach. Common themes emerged among all four participants. The similarities included a general love for learning how to play music and an appreciation for the social atmosphere of the group environment. The participants were also inspired and motivated by one another through the experience of working as an ensemble. Moreover, there were shared challenges, including their self-critical nature, the decline in their ability to learn and retain new concepts, and certain physical limitations (including vision and dexterity). However, in spite of the participants’ initial hesitations towards joining in, the improvisation-based instruction was a success. By the end of the program, all four of the participants were responding well to the guided improvisation activities using different rhythm and scale patterns. A longer-term research study would have allowed for a greater variety of improvisation patterns and, as a result, participants would have the opportunity to develop more confidence to improve their creative improvisational abilities.

My pedagogical journey was narrated with a reflective voice through my personal journal and class reports. The data was organized into central themes, which included working with older adults, and teaching using improvisation. Within these themes, challenges and rewards were discussed and analyzed.

6.2 Revisiting the Research Question

6.2.1 The Socio-Emotional Climate

The main research question of this dissertation paper addressed an investigation of the perceived and observed effects of music instruction with improvisation on older adults. Upon
revisiting this question, I realize that the socio-emotional climate of the group setting affected the participants’ learning experience in a number of positive ways.

For Eleanor, the only one who had no prior musical experience, her classmates were a motivational factor: “I felt that the others all knew so much more than I. Maybe this is my problem . . . I always feel that they know so much more and can do so much more than I can, but you know, I try and that’s why I keep coming a few times a week to come up here to do something hard for me.” Eleanor looked up to her peers and constantly strived to improve her musical abilities. During the in-class recital performances, she was inspired by her classmates and often asked them how they managed to play so well. In one instance, she turned to Barbara and said, “[your performance] was marvelous! . . . You knew exactly where to go! . . . How do you do that?!” Her classmates noticed Eleanor’s struggles as a genuine beginner and they provided support in return: “Be brave!” Martha said kindly to Eleanor when she appeared hesitant to perform during an in-class recital.

The following conversation between Barbara and Patty is a key example of how the socio-emotional climate of the group affected the learning environment. Patty struggled to accept that her aural abilities were more advanced than her note-reading abilities. She constantly criticized herself, but her classmate Barbara provided her with kind words of encouragement:

P: I don’t think I’ll ever put it together.

B: Oh you will Patty, you just have to persist.

P: I know that but see I play half by ear and half by note, that’s bad.
B: No, it isn’t, it’s good. It’s great!

P: It’s interesting, but I have difficulty.

B: I know, but you’ll be OK Patty, don’t worry!

The older adults in my study seemed to genuinely enjoy one another’s company. Patty, the oldest participant in the group, often brought treats for the class. It was also Patty who offered the most entertaining words of support for her classmates. When Martha showed up for class after having just undergone eye surgery, I asked if she was feeling better, and she shook her head. Patty immediately said, “we don’t take that for an answer! Say yes for wonderful!” which put a smile on Martha’s face.

Through the process of this research study, it was enlightening to see how the group dynamics made a significant impact for my participants. As a result, I believe that the socio-emotional climate of the group setting is an important factor in enhancing the music learning experience for the older adult population.

6.2.2 Effects of Instruction on Musical Ability

Through observations of my participants’ learning experiences, it was apparent that music instruction with improvisation had a positive effect on musical abilities. Patty, Eleanor, and Martha were modest about describing the difference in their piano playing skills before and after the program. As an example, Patty indicated at her post-program interview, “well, I think I’ve improved a bit! Not a lot, but a little bit.” As a recently turned 91 year old, she appeared to
have forgotten that before the music program, she had not touched a piano in over half a century. Further, she had learned to play and perform almost ten brand new pieces. Martha’s journey in the music program was similar to Patty’s in that she was particularly critical of herself and unable to see the significant progress that she had made in her musical abilities since the start of the program.

The progression of my participants’ musical abilities was evident through the in-class recital performances, particularly for Eleanor, Martha, and Barbara. The clearest illustration of this occurred towards the end of the program. Eleanor played the first half of *My Favourite Things* from *The Sound of Music* with one hand. Two weeks later, she performed both pages with both hands for the class with confidence.

Barbara was the one participant who openly expressed her view of the difference in her musical abilities before and after the program:

B: *That’s what amazed me more than anything else, that at my age, I was able to get all that back... over the years I’ve thought, ‘I wonder if I sat down at the piano if I could do anything’ and I mean I put it now to you, your program. Definitely. It inspired me to get to the point where I really felt comfortable. This has been an absolute education to me because I’d never sat down and actually gone through all those processes with the notes.*

For Barbara, who had also not played a piano in over half a century, the music program enabled her to re-discover the musical abilities that she had once learned as a child. Through the
process of preparing for each session, her musical skills and confidence increased: “I definitely [feel] like it’s coming to me much more easily now than when I first came. It’s such a long time since I sat at the piano!”

Although there was some apprehension among three of the four participants in the beginning of the program, it was evident that the inclusion of improvisation into the curriculum provided multiple benefits. Barbara was the first to demonstrate the effectiveness of reviewing musical concepts through improvisation: “I was trying to create a different way of those few keys that we had, not just doing the same things but trying to dart around.” For Martha, the act of improvising increased her musical confidence, something that she struggled with at the beginning of the program. She exclaimed, “all I need is you!” in one of the last sessions while she successfully improvised with the Blues on Black pattern. When asked about her musical experiences, Patty stated, “even if you don’t know the notes, you can improvise!” Evidently, improvisation enabled my participants to not only improve their musical abilities, but also to increase their confidence and levels of enjoyment.

6.2.3 Reading-Based versus Improvisation-Based Instruction

Reflecting upon the difference between traditional reading-based instruction and improvisation-based instruction revealed several insights. One of the biggest challenges that my participants faced was their limited vision. Although the Adult Piano Adventures method book used in this study was chosen for its’ clear design, there were difficulties associated with the size of the notes. The own-choice arrangements were printed with much larger note-heads. However,
my participants continued to struggle with the note-reading aspect. This led to feelings of frustration, particularly for Patty, who often brought two pairs of glasses to class. “I haven’t got the right glasses for this! My glasses are due to be changed and I’m having trouble…” Patty exclaimed as she leaned in and squinted at the notes in her book. In a different class, Patty declared, “I feel frustrated… I can’t tell a B from a G!” Barbara also had difficulty with her vision, and this affected the rate of her progress.

Eleanor’s circumstance was unrelated to vision. Her self-defined goal in the program was to learn how to read music and play the piano without having to look at her hands. For the duration of the program, she agonized over her inability to read notes, despite the obvious improvement that she was making. She asked, “How do you read the music and know what you’re playing down there? Can you just tell me how you can actually read it and play it at the same time?”

The reading-based instruction was especially challenging for Martha and Patty, as they experienced feelings of frustration for not being able to recall the music reading abilities they had learned decades earlier. Martha frequently expressed her concern with the theory portion of class that involved the instruction of note reading: “If it’s the music, I’m as happy as I can be. If it’s the theory, trying to figure out the other thing…”

In view of the difficulties with limited vision and note reading, improvisation-based instruction provided many benefits for the older adults in my research study. Learning how to
improvise had opened up a new world of creative possibilities for Barbara and her classmates. Barbara’s statement below supports the argument for breaking free from traditional reading-based instruction:

B: *It’s just very interesting because [improvising] is a concept that I’ve heard played, but I never really understood. I just always thought, ‘isn’t it wonderful that these people can do that?’ But I mean, it’s sort of opened up a new experience for me . . . knowing that it’s actually not that difficult, really . . . it’s very interesting!*

6.2.4 Challenges and Rewards of Teaching Older Adults

This research study provided me with valuable insight into the many challenges and rewards of teaching older adults. The challenges that I faced along the way included the participants’ limited physical and mental dexterity and the decline in the ability to learn and retain new concepts as an older adult. Among the four participants, mobility was limited as one used a walker, and one used a cane. More importantly, all four older adults struggled with finger dexterity, which caused severe difficulties with coordination. These issues led to feelings of frustration and annoyance, shared among the participants. Looking back, I wonder if it may have been effective to have more repertoire that only involved playing one hand at a time. Although the participants were never forced to learn anything that they did not want to, they were generally self-motivated to take on challenging tasks that would push their limits. Sadly, this usually meant that they were left feeling disappointed and frustrated with themselves. Besides the physical limitations, the participants’ slower retention rate was a limiting factor in the research design. Despite my efforts to review concepts in a variety of ways, the participants continued to struggle with retaining new information. In turn, this led to added feelings of frustration by the participants when they were unable to answer questions correctly.
In spite of the obstacles, the rewards of working with this group of older adults left a lasting impression on my journey. Teaching students who have a genuine desire for making music was one of the most rewarding aspects of this study. My participants constantly indicated their appreciation for the opportunity to re-learn (or in Eleanor’s case, to learn) how to play the piano. Their shared life experiences allowed them to develop a strong bond. Through this bond, there was a feeling of trust and community. I developed a close relationship with my students and, in return, they shared interesting stories of their lives. It was also enlightening to observe the remarkable improvement in my participants’ musical abilities as the program progressed. Another rewarding aspect of this study was the undeniable increase in my participants’ levels of enjoyment and confidence. With *Pattern Play*, I was able to provide the older adults in my study with the chance to try something that they had never done before. Although it took a bit of time, I had all four participants improvising with me (both creatively and spontaneously) by the end of the program.

### 6.3 Limitations

#### 6.3.1 Researcher’s Experience

Prior to conducting this research study, my experience with teaching older adults was limited to the pilot study and one-on-one private lessons. I had never taught a group class to older adults, and had difficulty with factors beyond my control, such as absences and mental limitations. The challenges that I faced during the pilot study may have led to my apprehensions at the beginning of the actual research study. While I was aware of the physical and mental limitations of the older adult population, I was concerned that my inexperience would hinder my ability to provide an engaging and enjoyable environment for my participants. As the program
progressed, I developed a close relationship with the older adults in my study. Through this process, I gained confidence in my teaching, as I was better able to respond to the individual and collective needs of the participants. I believe that my teaching improved as I gained experience in this setting, because I no longer felt nervous when there were unexpected developments, such as absences or students who had not adequately prepared for class. In the beginning of the program, I often felt flustered whenever my original lesson plan had to be modified. By the end of the program, my participants and I had established a mutually rewarding and trusting bond, which made me feel comfortable as a teacher and researcher.

6.3.2 Recruitment Process

In the recruitment process, it was difficult to find participants who were willing to commit to the one-hour bi-weekly sessions. Those who joined the research study had taken part in at least one session from the pilot program. Since the participants were recruited through flyers that were posted around the Dunfield Residency, and by word-of-mouth, the challenge was to find enough participants to meet the needs of the original research design (a control group and an experimental group). Further, a number of residents at the Dunfield were confused between the pilot study (recruited in October 2012) and the research study (recruited in January 2013). There were several residents who told the activities manager of the Dunfield that it was unclear whether they had to have been in the 2012 music pilot program, to be a part of the program commencing in February 2013. Although the activities manager and I made our best efforts to explain that this was not the case, it may have been too late. Only three participants responded (with the fourth student who joined several sessions after the program had started). In a future research endeavour, I would not necessarily need to run a pilot study.
6.3.3 Classroom Size

One of the main limitations of the research study was the classroom size.

During the pilot study, I had access to a much larger room that allowed me to set up the keyboards in a semi-circle with the large instructional white board at the front and center of the room. This allowed the participants to look at one another and also look at the board without having to turn around on their benches. When the actual study began, this room was no longer available.
The smaller room used for the actual study may have had a negative impact on the music sessions. To begin, the stretching exercises conducted at the beginning of each class were challenging, as there was limited space to move around. Further, the placement of the keyboards against the walls may have altered the findings of this study because the participants had their backs to one another and could not make any eye contact during the improvisation ensemble pieces. The lack of eye contact may have impacted the performances, as it did not feel as though we were all part of the same group when improvising as an ensemble. Additionally, the placement of the white board that was used to introduce and review concepts may have been a challenge for the participants. For example, Patty frequently remained facing her keyboard, because it was difficult for her to turn around and face the board at the head of the classroom. This may have also affected her ability to hear my instructions clearly.
6.3.4 Research Design

Due to the small sample size of this research study, the quantitative results obtained could not be generalized for the older adult population. Further, there were often absences of at least one participant per session (due to medical purposes or extended family visits). This meant that the lesson plans had to be flexible. With a larger class size, absences would not have had as large of an affect on the group dynamic.

Another limiting factor may have been the choice of repertoire and the books that were used for the curriculum (including Faber’s Adult Piano Adventures and Kinney’s Pattern Play). Within the Faber method book, there were many pieces that were too difficult for the participants in my study. Furthermore, the introduction of theoretical concepts in the book involved a moderate amount of reading, and the font size may not have been conducive for those with limited vision. In the Pattern Play book, the participants in my study enjoyed improvising with Blues on Black. They did not respond as enthusiastically to the other patterns in the book. Perhaps an improvising method book with a variety of blues or ragtime patterns would be most beneficial for the older adult population.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Study

In this research study, the experiences of four older adults were examined in the context of a music-learning program involving improvisation. Similar studies conducted in the future could consider: (a) modifying characteristics of the research design, such as the length of the study, number of participants, and choice of curriculum materials; (b) examining the difference
between private and group piano study; and (c) exploring the advantages of using different types of improvisation in the curriculum.

A longer-term study would have the potential to yield more conclusive results with regards to the difference between traditional reading-based and improvisation-based instruction. It may also help participants feel more comfortable about their rate of learning and their progress as they would have more time to fulfill their musical goals. Further, participants would have more time to develop closer social bonds with their classmates, thus enhancing their musical experience.

In addition, a study with a larger number of participants would provide more research possibilities. Firstly, the older adult population, as defined in this research paper, includes anyone over the age of 65. Unfortunately, this comprises a group of individuals with a wide variety in levels of physical and mental limitations. With a larger number of participants, individuals could be grouped according to age brackets in order to substantiate the research findings. Secondly, the research design could include a control group in addition to an experimental group, which would further verify the usefulness of improvisation within the curriculum. Choosing appropriate curriculum materials in a research study for older adults can be challenging. It is crucial for the researcher to have flexibility in their research design. A study that involved a curriculum without the use of a method book may be beneficial. In my program, I found that my students became eager to see the results of their progress and wished to quickly
move through the pieces in the *Adult Piano Adventures* book even if they were not ready to do so. The use of tailored curriculum materials may be more effective for this learning environment.

In my research study, three of my four participants had taken piano lessons as young children. The one participant with no prior musical experience often mentioned her concern for being the only genuine beginner in the class. At our post-program interview, she asked if it might have been more effective for her to have private sessions. In a future study, it would be interesting to examine the difference between participants who are taught the same improvisation-based music curriculum in a private setting versus a group setting. Researchers could also explore several noteworthy factors including: (a) how comfort levels (i.e., lack of musical confidence) may have an impact on the learning experience in both a private and group setting; (b) the social benefits of learning in a group setting; and (c) older adults’ preferences for learning.

While *Pattern Play* was the method book used for the improvisation curriculum, a future study could explore the advantages and differences of other approaches to teaching improvisation, including *free improvisation*. As described by Pressing (1988), *free improvisation* is based on concepts of creativity and expressive individuality. Researchers could also examine older adults’ preferences for keyboard improvisation-based activities. This would help determine the most suitable approach to teaching older adults with improvisation.
6.5 Final Reflections

We need to listen closely to teachers and other learners and to the stories of their lives in and out of classrooms. We also need to tell our own stories as we live our own collaborative researcher/teacher lives. Our own work then becomes one of learning to tell and live a new mutually constructed account of inquiry in teaching and learning. What emerges from this mutual relationship are new stories of teachers and learners as curriculum makers, stories that hold new possibilities for both researchers and teachers and for those who read their stories. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)

As I reflect on my experiences, I realize the value that storytelling had in shaping my research study. By telling the stories of the participants’ lives, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of these four individuals. There were many instances in the program where I was able to engage in lengthy conversations with my students and, through this process, learn more about how their life experiences shaped their approach to learning. Accordingly, I feel that I was able to develop the type of mutually rewarding relationship with my students that Connelly & Clandinin describe.

I also recognize the significance of improvisation-based instruction for the older adult population. In the process of introducing improvisation, I provided the older adults in my study with the opportunity to learn a skill they thought was reserved for professional jazz musicians. In addition to learning how to improvise, my participants gained musical confidence through the act of creating music spontaneously.
This pedagogical journey in my DMA program granted me with the opportunity to learn a lot about myself as an educator, musician, and person. As the older adult population increases on a global scale, more emphasis must be placed on their wellbeing and interests. It is my hope that more teachers will recognize the numerous benefits of teaching music using improvisation to older adults, and realize the positive implications that this has for the growing field of pedagogy.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Brief Screening Questionnaire

1. Name: ____________________________

2. Age: _____________________________

3. Do you have any diagnosed cognitive impairments? (please circle)  YES  NO
Appendix B

General Information/Consent Form

To Whom It May Concern:

You have been invited to participate in a study involving the incorporation of improvisation into a music learning curriculum for healthy older adults.

Your choice to participate in the study is entirely voluntary. You will have the opportunity to join in music making activities in an atmosphere that is both enjoyable and comfortable. The group classes and lessons will have an extremely relaxed pace of learning. Most importantly, you will have the opportunity to progress at your own individual pace and at your own comfort level.

In participating in this program, we would ask that you complete a short questionnaire, and brief assessment surveys, including the Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life Index, and Gordon’s Musical Aptitude Profile prior to the study. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign-up for 20 sessions. Video recordings will be taken at each of the group classes. These recordings will be used for analysis to document the progress of participants, and to assess the efficacy of the curriculum. The 60-minute weekly group classes will involve: (i) a gentle breathing and warm-up activity, (ii) some singing, rhythm and movement activities, and (iii) basics of music theory and note reading.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, we will ask you to choose a code name or number of at least 5 characters. All video recordings associated with your work during the class, and questionnaires that you fill out, will be labeled with this code name. No other personal and
identifiable information will be collected from you.

Video recordings and questionnaires will be kept in a locked faculty office or on a secure computer (with password). In addition, all electronic information outside of a secure server environment will be encrypted, consistent with the University of Toronto’s data security and encryption standards. If at any point you choose to withdraw from the study, you are welcome to do so, and your data will be destroyed or deleted. Data collected from study participants will be kept through the duration of the study and then destroyed/deleted when the study is completed and results have been disseminated.

In the future, short clips of the video recordings may be used for scholarly presentations at conferences, or as part of online publications, but without identifiable personal information including facial features. If you would be willing to have your video recordings be considered for publications or conference presentations please sign your consent in the SEPARATE form marked Appendix D.

**Written summaries will be available for any participants who request a copy during and after the study.** Please contact Lisa Tahara to receive a paper copy.

If you have any questions or concerns that may be raised during the study, please do not hesitate to contact the principal investigator Lisa Tahara, or the University of Toronto faculty advisor, Dr. Midori Koga.
If you are willing and able to participate in this study, please sign both copies of the consent form, and return one to Rosita Chakardan, Activities Manager at the Dunfield Retirement Residency.

For further information regarding the rights of research participants, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (ethics.review@utoronto.ca, 416-946-3273).

Signature:_____________________________________        Date: ___________________
Appendix C

Interview Questionnaire for Participants Selected from Screening Process

Subject Code Number: __________

1. Have you had any prior musical experience? Have you had any piano experience? Please describe…

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

2. What kind of music do you enjoy listening to?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

3. Please list some of your favorite songs or pieces of music. This information will be helpful for us as we determine the pieces that you might like to learn how to play on the keyboard during this program.

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

4. If you have had prior singing experience, please describe scenarios in which you have enjoyed singing. (ie. in a choir, in informal family gatherings etc.) Are you familiar with solfege singing (Do Re Mi)? :
5. Do you currently do (or have done in the past) any regular relaxation or breathing/stretching exercises?

   YES   NO

Please describe your exercises:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

6. How often would you be willing to practice each day?

   5-10 minutes   10-15 minutes   15-20 minutes   20-25 minutes   25-30 minutes   30+ minutes

7. Have you had any previous experience with improvisation or playing/singing melodies by ear?

   Please keep in mind that it is not necessary to have any prior knowledge of improvisation in order to participate in this program.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
We are aware that entering a new learning situation may cause some levels of apprehension or concern. The following questions will ask you to reflect on your comfort level as you approach various aspects of music learning. The answers to these questions will help us to prepare the curriculum pace, and be aware of personal and individual needs and desires.

**For each statement, check the appropriate box as follows:**

1 – Strongly Disagree
2 – Disagree
3 – Somewhat Disagree
4 – Somewhat Agree
5 – Agree
6 – Strongly Agree

8. I am comfortable with improvising in a group setting:

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9. I am comfortable with the thought of performing for my peers in the group class:

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10. I am comfortable singing melodies with my peers in the group class.

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Appendix D

Poster and Letter Distributed to Residents at the Dunfield Retirement Residency

Do you have a passion for music??

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to take keyboard lessons??

It is never too late to bring music back into your life!

For more information, please read the following page!
Lisa Tahara, a doctoral student in piano pedagogy at the University of Toronto, will begin a keyboard-learning and music-making program for the healthy older adult population at the Dunfield next month.

Lisa would like to have a total of eight participants, of any gender, with any level of musical background. All participants must be over the age of 65 and not have any known cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer’s or dementia. These eight participants will take part in a weekly 60-minute group class. Within the group class, participants will also have the opportunity to play in group ensembles in an atmosphere that is both enjoyable and comfortable. The group classes and lessons will have an extremely relaxed pace of learning and in addition to time spent at the keyboard, they will involve: (i) a gentle breathing and warm-up activity, (ii) some singing, rhythm and movement activities, and (iii) basics of theory and note reading. It is important to note that students will have the opportunity to progress at their individual pace and at their own comfort level.

For those who may be interested in taking part in this program, please contact Rosita Chakardan (Activities Manager for the Dunfield Retirement Residency).
Appendix E

CONSENT FORM for data (videos) to be considered for publication in online journals or used as part of future conference research presentations

Dear Participant:

Thank you for voluntarily choosing to participate in this study!

In the future, short clips of the video recordings may be used for scholarly presentations at conferences, or as part of online publications, but without identifiable personal information including facial features. If you would be willing to have your video recordings be considered for publications or conference presentations please sign your consent below.

Even if you have signed this consent form, you may choose to revoke permission for use of your video recordings in research publications or presentation, at any time during the study or afterwards. In this case, please contact the principal investigator as soon as possible.

STATEMENT OF PARTICIPANT: I give permission for video recordings of my group sessions to be used in scholarly publications or conferences, and understand that no identifiable and personal information will be linked to the video recording (please circle one):

YES

NO

If yes, please list code name:

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________________
### Appendix F

Ferrans & Powers Quality of Life Index (revised version distributed to participants)

**Ferrans and Powers**  
**QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX®**  
**GENERIC VERSION - III**

**PART 1.** For each of the following, please choose the answer that best describes how **satisfied** you are with that area of your life. Please mark your answer by circling the number. There are no right or wrong answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH:</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Moderately Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Slightly Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Slightly Satisfied</th>
<th>Moderately Satisfied</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Your health?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>2. Your health care?</td>
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<td>3. The amount of pain that you have?</td>
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<td>4. The amount of energy you have for everyday activities?</td>
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<td>5. Your ability to take care of yourself without help?</td>
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<td>6. The amount of control you have over your life?</td>
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<td>7. Your chances of living as long as you would like?</td>
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<td>8. Your family's health?</td>
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<td>9. Your children?</td>
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<td>10. Your family's happiness?</td>
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<td>11. Your friends?</td>
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<td>12. The emotional support you get from your family?</td>
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<td>13. The emotional support you get from people other than your family?</td>
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<th>HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH:</th>
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<td>16. Your ability to take care of family responsibilities?</td>
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<td>17. How useful you are to others?</td>
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<td>18. The amount of worries in your life?</td>
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<td>19. Your neighborhood?</td>
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<td>20. Your home, apartment, or place where you live?</td>
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<td>22. Not having a job (if unemployed, retired, or disabled)?</td>
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<td>23. Your education?</td>
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<td>24. How well you can take care of your financial needs?</td>
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<td>25. The things you do for fun?</td>
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<td>26. Your chances for a happy future?</td>
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<td>27. Your peace of mind?</td>
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<td>29. Your achievement of personal goals?</td>
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<td>30. Your happiness in general?</td>
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<td>31. Your life in general?</td>
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<td>32. Your personal appearance?</td>
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<td>33. Yourself in general?</td>
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Appendix G

Gordon’s Musical Aptitude Profile Tests

PRIMARY MEASURES OF MUSIC AUDIATION

TONAL TEST

Practice Examples

Test Questions

PRIMARY MEASURES OF MUSIC AUDIATION

19 20
PRIMARY MEASURES OF MUSIC AUDIATION

RHYTHM TEST

Practice Examples

Test Questions

PRIMARY MEASURES OF MUSIC AUDIATION
Appendix H

Popular Repertoire Selection List distributed to participants at the beginning of the study

Dear residents,

Here is a list of works that fall under three categories:

1. Classical Works
2. Broadway Hits
3. Jazz & Classical Standards

Please look through each repertoire list, and choose **FOUR (4)** or **FIVE (5)** works that you would like to learn how to play during the piano program over the next 2 months.

Thank you,

Lisa Tahara

Code number: _______________________
Repertoire List - Classical

Beethoven  □  Fur Elise (First Theme)
□  Turkish March (from *The Ruins of Athens*)

Brahms  □  Lullaby

Grieg  □  Morning (from *Peer Gynt Suite*)

Haydn  □  Surprise Symphony

Mozart  □  Eine Klein Nachtmusik
□  Romance (from *A Little Night Music*)

Offenbach  □  Barcarolle (from *Tales of Hoffman*)

Rachmaninoff  □  Rhapsody on a theme from Paganini Variation 18

Schubert  □  The Trout (*Die Forelle*)

Tchaikovsky  □  Sleeping Beauty Waltz
□  Swan Lake
□  Symphony No.5 (second movement)
### Repertoire List - By Musical

- [ ] Ain't Misbehavin'  
  (Ain't Misbehavin')
- [ ] Memory  
  (Cats)
- [ ] The Best Things in Life Are Free  
  (Good News!)
- [ ] I Dreamed a Dream  
  (Les Miserables)
- [ ] Where is Love?  
  (Oliver!)
- [ ] All I Ask of You  
  (The Phantom of the Opera)
- [ ] Some Enchanted Evening  
  (South Pacific)
- [ ] Do Re Mi  
  (The Sound of Music)
- [ ] Edelweiss  
  (The Sound of Music)
- [ ] My Favorite Things  
  (The Sound of Music)
- [ ] The Sound of Music  
  (The Sound of Music)
- [ ] Over the Rainbow  
  (The Wizard of Oz)

### Repertoire List - Jazz and Classical Standards

- [ ] As Time Goes By
- [ ] I Got Rhythm
- [ ] I'll Take Romance
- [ ] It Had To Be You
- [ ] Love is a Many-Splendored Thing
- [ ] Misty
- [ ] Theme from New York, New York
- [ ] Route 66
- [ ] Someone to Watch Over Me
- [ ] When I Fall in Love
Appendix I

Short Questionnaire to be completed by each participant after every session

Subject Code Number: ____________
Date: __________________________

Please describe how you feel RIGHT NOW by checking which mood is closer:

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<th>Mood</th>
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Please rate your overall satisfaction with the group session today on a scale of 1 (extremely unsatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied):

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Appendix J
Focus Group Questions

Lead Questions for the Lesson Plan A Sessions (not involving improvisation):

1. Can you discuss your thoughts or feelings about music learning in a group setting?
2. How has your participation in the music program affected your quality of life?
3. Can you discuss any changes in self-confidence levels or your musical ability?
4. Can you describe your familiarity or retention rate of the tonal and rhythm concepts introduced?

Lead Questions for the Lesson Plan B Sessions (involving improvisation):

1. Can you discuss your thoughts or feelings about music learning in a group setting?
2. How has your participation in the music program affected your quality of life?
3. Can you discuss any changes in self-confidence levels or your musical ability?
4. Can you describe your familiarity or retention rate of the tonal and rhythm concepts introduced?
5. Can you discuss your experience with improvisation-oriented instruction compared to traditional note-oriented instruction?