

DISCOVERING THE PIANO THROUGH OTHER INSTRUMENTS

BY MICHAEL SMOLENS

Ever wonder what private music instruction is like? If you were a fly on the wall at Michael Smolens' class, this is what you'd hear. Michael Smolens, composer, performer, and music columnist, offers lessons in Keyboard Creativity and Musical Creativity.

When Ron came into my studio for his first lesson, he seemed to be alternating between excitement and resignation. He had studied some classical music as a youngster and some jazz at a local community college five years ago.

Ron: "I feel like something has been missing. I thought I was studying the music that turned me on."

Michael: "When you played classical music as a youngster, did the melodies and harmonies speak to you?"

Ron: "Yes, but I don't seem to be able to *speak them* very convincingly."

Michael: "And what about your jazz playing?"

Ron: "I found myself getting tripped-up trying to play complicated ideas. You know, trying to sound like the CD."

Michael: "I have an idea. Let's start on a completely different instrument that can help you feel more connected to your melodies."

Michael and Ron walk over to a set of vibes.

Michael: "Have you played a set of vibes before?"

Ron: "No, but it looks like fun. Do I use these sticks?"

Michael: "Yeah, let me show you a couple things about holding the mallets so that it stays comfortable in your hands. If you play a note with your foot holding this bar down, the tone lasts a long time."

Ron: "Wow! Not only does it last a long time, but it rings like a big bell."

Michael: "Right. When you play a melody on this instrument, every note really speaks out in a way that grabs you. Now if you were to sing along as you play, your melody would sound like an announcement to the whole neighborhood. To make this really clear, I'll accompany you on my balaphone, an African marimba that has a sweet sound but very little sustain."

The two improvise together for a few minutes, with Ron singing and playing.

Ron: "I feel a lot more invested in my melody making now."

Michael: "Great. Let's go over to the piano and see if you can appreciate how a piano speaks its melody."

Ron: Yeah, I'm beginning to hear the subtlety of my old friend."

Michael: "Spending some time with the piano imagining that it can sound like different instruments can actually get you deeper into the piano as a melody instrument, because, remember, the piano is a percussion instrument. A lot of learning how to play a melody well on the piano invokes tricking your ear into believing that the piano can actually sing. Now, let's deal with your rhythm. I'd like you to choose from any of the percussion instruments that you see here."

Ron: "Uh... yeah. Can you tell me what some of them are?"

Then Michael takes Ron on a quick tour of his percussion instruments, demonstrating their unique sound qualities which includes a drum kit, a set

of steel pans, an African log drum and jun juns, an Egyptian dumbek, and lots of other percussion instruments.

Ron: "I've always fantasized about playing the drum set."

Michael: "Great! You choose a good instrument for experiencing the power of solid rhythm. The kind of independence that you need for good piano playing can be explored on the drum set."



Michael first sets up Ron to play one simple part in each hand on the drum set. After those parts settled he encouraged Ron to add one part in his feet.

Ron: "Boy, I was trying to play these complicated rhythms when I never really felt the groove. No wonder it was frustrating!"

Michael: "Right! When you play piano rhythmically it has to be on a foundation of a pulse that you feel in your body. When we move over to the piano I'd like to go for the same feeling."

Michael then moves over to the drum set and accompanies Ron on drums while vocalizing a walking bass line.

Ron: "This is really exciting playing with drums and bass, but the piano feels harder to control than the drums. Am I imagining this?"

Michael: "Well, the motions you make at the piano are more refined in a certain way. I bet you can retain that sense you had on the drums if you focus on your feet, your belly, and your breath."

Ron: "Why the breath?"

Michael: "The breath allows any kind of new activity to gel more quickly because it relaxes the body and focuses the mind."

Ron: "Sounds good. Do you see anything else worth mentioning?"

Michael: "One of the most important things that I hear in your music has to do with how you are playing your chords. Actually, it has more to do with how you are *hearing* your chords. Once this gets opened up, it'll be easier to fine tune how you're *playing* chords."

Michael shows Ron both of his synthesizers next to the grand piano.

Ron: "Don't tell me. I'm going to pick a sound on one of your keyboards, start playing some chords, and then play the same chords on the piano. And then you'll get to watch my eyes light up, right?"

Michael: "You got it! And I bet your energy around composing will loosen up as you hear more harmonic subtlety. What's more, different sounds on synthesizers can create very different moods. And that means more options for your composing and songwriting."

Postscript: Each instrument has its own special challenges and rewards. And working with a teacher who can help a student navigate through these special idiosyncrasies will ensure rapid progress. Yet breakthroughs often occur when a student appreciates new facets of the piano through other instruments in a supportive, playground-like environment.

