

Comparisons Between RCM and CCOM Piano Examinations

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Abstract. This comparative study delves into the piano examination systems of the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) and the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM), highlighting the prevalent inaccuracies in piano education. By juxtaposing these two institutions, each emblematic of distinct educational philosophies and cultural contexts, this research aims to uncover biases and imbalances that shape students' learning attitudes and musical trajectories. Drawing on qualitative analysis of curriculum content, student experiences, and pedagogical approaches, the study examines the positive and negative aspects of both systems. The findings illuminate the cultural and technical disparities between RCM's globally oriented approach and CCOM's focus on preserving Chinese musical heritage. Finally, this research proposes several potential remedies for the discussed issues. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how educational paradigms can inadvertently cultivate certain learning attitudes, offering insights into fostering a more balanced and holistic musical education in the evolving context of Chinese piano instruction.

Keywords: Piano, education, CCOM, RCM, examination system.

1. Introduction

Piano education serves as a conduit for artistic expression, cultural heritage preservation, and skill development, yet the contours of this musical journey are often influenced by the unique philosophies and methodologies of educational institutions. This comparative study delves into two distinct piano examination systems – the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) and the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) – to reveal the complexities of Chinese piano education. The juxtaposition of these institutions not only unveils the diverse educational approaches adopted globally but also uncovers underlying imbalances that might exist within the Chinese piano education. As piano pedagogy undergoes transformations in the context of a rapidly evolving musical world, understanding these distortions becomes pivotal in shaping a more holistic approach to piano education.

By analyzing curriculum content, pedagogical methods, and student experiences, this study seeks to answer crucial questions: What biases and distortions emerge from these distinct systems? How do these biases manifest in students' learning attitudes, technical proficiency, and artistic expression? What are the positive and negative outcomes of these distortions, in terms of musical development? By investigating these questions, this research endeavors to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the evolution of Chinese piano education.

As the educational landscapes of RCM and CCOM offer unique insights into artistic exploration and skill development, a comprehensive examination of these systems can illuminate potential pathways to cultivate a balanced approach to piano education. Ultimately, this study seeks to foster an environment where the beauty of tradition and the dynamism of modern musical education can harmoniously coexist, nurturing well-rounded pianists equipped to navigate the intricacies of a globalized musical world.

2. Introducing CCOM Piano Examination System

2.1. The Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM)

The Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM), located in Beijing, China, is one of the most prestigious music schools in China. The piano examination system provides a standardized evaluation of students' technical skill, musicality, and understanding of music theory from Level 1 to Level 9.

The first section of the examination is Theory and Technique. This section includes “scales, arpeggios and chords”, which is the evaluation of basic building blocks of music, “sight-reading” can test students' ability of reading a new piece of music, and “ear training”, which Evaluate students' ability to understand intervals, chords, and rhythms by ear. From level 1 to level 9, there are specific technical and tempo requirements as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. CCOM Theory and Technique Requirement [1]

	Key	Form	Tempo
Level 1	C Major & A Harmonic Minor, G Major & E Harmonic Minor	-Scale -Broken chords	-No slower than 54 per quarter note -No slower than 42 per quarter note
Level 2	G major & E Harmonic Minor, F major & D Harmonic Minor, and D Major	-Scale -Broken chords	-No slower than 63 per quarter note -No slower than 66 per quarter note
Level 3	F major & D Harmonic Minor, D major & B Harmonic Minor, A Major	-Scales & Semitones -Arpeggios -Broken chords	-No slower than 72 per dotted quarter note -No slower than 72 per quarter note -No slower than 60 per quarter note
Level 4	G major & E Harmonic Minor, D major & B Harmonic Minor, E flat Major & C Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios - Semitones	-No slower than 66 per dotted quarter note -No slower than 58 per quarter note -No slower than 69 per quarter note
Level 5	F major & D Harmonic Minor, A major & C sharp Harmonic Minor, A flat Major & F Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios (Seventh chords, diminished seventh chords and normal Major chords)	-No slower than 72 per quarter note -No slower than 60 per quarter note
Level 6	D major & B Harmonic Minor, E flat major & C Harmonic Minor, B Major & G sharp Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios (Seventh chords, diminished seventh chords and normal Major chords)	-No slower than 72 per quarter note -No slower than 60 per quarter note

Level 7	B flat major & G Harmonic Minor, E major & C sharp Harmonic Minor, D flat Major & B flat Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios (Seventh chords, diminished seventh chords and normal Major chords)	-No slower than 88 per quarter note -No slower than 76 per quarter note
Level 8	A major & F sharp Harmonic Minor, A flat major & F Harmonic Minor, G flat Major & E flat Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios (Seventh chords, diminished seventh chords and normal Major chords)	-No slower than 100 per quarter note -No slower than 92 per quarter note
Level 9	E major & C sharp Harmonic Minor, B major & G sharp Harmonic Minor, B flat Major & G Harmonic Minor, G flat Major & E flat Harmonic Minor	-Scales -Arpeggios (Seventh chords, diminished seventh chords and normal Major chords)	-No slower than 100 per quarter note -No slower than 92 per quarter note

The second section for the examination is: Repertoires from different eras. From Level 1 to Level 3, students are required to choose 1 etude, 1 Fugue, and 1 repertoire from the repertoire list. From Level 4 to Level 9, students are required to choose 1 etude, 1 Fugue, 1 short repertoire and 1 normal repertoire from the repertoire list.

The third section for the examination is: Academic Understanding. Students must take the Music Theory Exam if their age is between 7-40 years old in order to test their understanding of music theory concepts like harmony, form, melody, etc.

2.2. The Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM)

The Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) is a well-respected music education institution that was organized in 1886. The RCM Piano Examination System is designed to provide a standardized evaluation of piano students' technical skills, musicality, and theoretical understanding. The system is recognized internationally and offers a progressive set of examinations that students can take as they develop their skills. This examination starts from Preparation Level, Level 1 to 10, and ARCT Level (Associate Diploma (ARCT) in Piano, Performer) [2].

The examination can be divided into three sections: Musicianship, Technical Requirements and Complete Repertoire.

2.2.1 Musicianship: Musicianship includes Ear Test and Sight Reading

In Preparation A: For Ear Test, students need to command how to clapback rhythms after the examiner played it twice. Students also need to identify the quality of the chord (Major or Minor) the examiner played. Last but not least, students need to playback what melody (in C Major & G Major) the examiner played on the piano. For Sight Reading, students need to clap out a given rhythm and play back a four-note melody (only right hand).

In Preparation B: For Ear Test, Students need to command how to clapback rhythms after the examiner played it twice. Students also need to identify the quality of the chord (Major or Minor) the examiner played. Last but not least, students need to playback what melody the examiner played on the piano in given keys. For Sight Reading, students need to clap out a given rhythm and play back a short melody.

From Level 1 to Level 10, sight reading has different expectations for that specific level, which usually gets more complex as the level increases. Ear training, including aural tests, which might

include rhythm tests, melody playback and chord/interval recognition. The difficulty will progress as well.

For ARCT Level, the only thing they got examined on is their performance, which is listed on the syllabus as “Performer Requirements” [3].

2.2.2 Completed Repertoire

In Preparation A: Students are required to prepare three contrasting selections from the syllabus list. They also need to memorize their repertoire if the syllabus told them to do so.

In Preparation B: Students are also required to prepare three contrasting selections from the syllabus list.

From Level 1 to Level 10, students are expected to prepare three to four repertoires from different periods (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th/21st Century), students are required to choose one repertoire from each period. Based on the Syllabus, Level 1 to Level 7 require three contrasting periods of repertoire, Level 8 to Level 9 requires four contrasting repertoires, and Level 10 requires 5 contrasting repertoires.

For ARCT Level, students will be tested on five different periods, one work by J. S. Bach; one Classical Sonata; one Romantic Repertoire; one repertoire from Post-Romantic, Impressionist, and Early 20th-century Repertoire”; and a repertoire from 20th- and 21st-century [3].

2.2.3 Technical Requirement

From Preparation A to Level 10: Students are required to play the given scales and chords (broken and solid) in a given tempo written on the syllabus.

As for ARCT Level, students are required to perform one repertoire from the Concert Etude list by different composers [3].

3. Comparison between CCOM and RCM

CCOM (Central Conservatory of Music) and RCM (Royal Conservatory of Music) are both well-known institutions in China and Canada which offer piano examinations to assess the skills and abilities of piano students. These examinations help to examine a student’s learning progress and provide a structured framework for piano learning. CCOM and RCM are all structured in a strict and complicated system for each grade. There are similarities, but there still appear differences in various aspects.

3.1. Bias between CCOM and RCM’s Learning Methods

RCM (Royal Conservatory of Music) and CCOM (the Central Conservatory of Music) are two representative music educational institutions. They are both trying to reach the same goal which is letting students succeed in musical (piano) performance and their overall musicality. But, looking through their guidelines of exams, they each foster their students in different ways, for instance, teaching methodology, culture, focus point etc.

RCM’s piano grading system, students may demonstrate a tendency to pursue holistic musical development, given the emphasis on comprehensive assessments that include performance skills, music theory, aural abilities, listening skills, sight reading, and interpretive skills. For instance, level 6, according to the RCM piano syllabus 2022, they include 3 different genres of repertoires (Baroque, Classical and Romantic/20th&21st century), and each of them have at least 30 different repertoires for students to explore and try out.

Because of the rigorous and comprehensive exam guideline, excellence is the learning attitude of RCM piano exam students. The pursuit of higher grades and recognition on a standardized platform fosters a benevolent competitive mindset to students. The desire to succeed in the RCM exams motivates students to go above and beyond their previous accomplishments. This drive for excellence transcends the exam and instills a lifelong pursuit of musical growth. However, there needs to be assistance. This holistic system includes numerous knowledge that students need to take time and

patience to command. The whole process not only needs strong personal motivation from students, but also support from families and teachers. In a case study conducted for this research, one participant Leo, a 21-year-old Asian male, who passed his ARCT level (Associate Diploma, Performer) in 2021, he said the whole process of doing from level 1-ARCT is very gradual and comprehensive, he liked that they have a wide variety of repertoires in each era to let students to choose, and during each lesson, students can cultivate good artistic talent and temperament; but, he also complained about how tiring it was to go through the whole process himself. The RCM tries to get students to excel in piano playing, but at the same time, they go and grade us when we perform and will judge us, and while I understand that this is an essential step evaluating a student, it makes me nervous to play out the musicality and my understanding of the music [4].

Similar but more serious situation happened with CCOM as well. CCOM piano examination is also designed in a way to provide students a comprehensive piano education, and combined with some focus on Chinese music heritage. Music theory, basic technical proficiency, performance skills, music theory, and aural skills are all included in the CCOM piano examination syllabus, but the amount of repertoires that students can choose are limited, each genre only includes average 5-6 pieces. And when they finalized on their repertoires, piano teachers will only focus on the assigned pieces, teaching students how to play by rote, or in another word, “spoon-feeding” teaching. Students only get educated on the techniques on the specific repertoire they are going to test on. And after they finish the examination, they do not know how to play the piano. Students do not know how to sight read, because they were learning their repertoires by rote; they also do not know how to relate all the dynamic markings to their own musical expressions; once they stop playing piano for a little while, and later decide to return, they would found it very difficult to start over, This is largely because they never learned the fundamentals and relied solely on quick, "instant" methods of learning. According to the interviewee Lillian, she said after completing Level 9 in CCOM piano examination, she stopped playing piano for a while to prepare for middle school entrance exams, and after a few months, when she tried to continue her piano journey, she found herself very difficult to learn a new repertoire which is much easier than the one that she played in the exam, she even could not do the sight reading part. This learning method is utilitarian and pathological for piano learners to lay their foundations for piano learning.

3.2. CCOM Piano Examination: Distortions in Chinese Piano Education

The reform and development of music education in China made remarkable progress in the second half of the 20th century. Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM), as one of the most important music schools in China, plays an important role in cultivating musical talents and promoting the reform of music education. The examination system, which was first established in 1993 and was widely known to the Chinese public in the early 21st century, as a part of music education, helps to standardize the quality of teaching, improve the standard of students, and promote the inheritance of music culture [5].

3.2.1 Emphasis on Technical Proficiency over Artistic Expression

In spite of the fact that this growth in music education has undoubtedly raised the level of technical proficiency among young musicians, it has also led to an educational model that overemphasizes technical proficiency at the expense of artistic expression. This focus has far-reaching implications for the development of musicians and the broader cultural implications of music education in China.

“As the piano grading tests had been rapidly popularized all over the nation, people’s recognition of the piano grading system somehow became tilted.”, said Guo in her article [6]. As the CCOM Piano Examination became widely popular in China, many merchants/musicians started to run piano institutions, it is a good thing that people in China started to grow their musical mindset and having a greater understanding and aesthetics in music, but institutions are trying to produce high volume of successful exam candidates might result in piano instructors giving out instructions and feedback without the exploration and the feeling of music, which left over only with utilitarian, the prioritize of rote learning and “spoon-feeding” teaching for exam preparation disturbed the holistic musical

(piano) education. These existing pedagogical methods and approaches tend to reinforce these biases; with limited space for exploration, creative interpretation or intercultural engagement.

In another case study conducted for this research, one participant Mary, a 22-year-old Asian female, who started learning piano when she was 5, and started to take the CCOM piano examination at 7 years old. She took level 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9 at CCOM, and the process was hard and mechanical. When she was practicing my level 9, The teachers in the piano institution let her to learn 3 repertoires that is completely not at her current piano level, and she has to put numerous hours on these songs, first learning the song by teacher telling what's the note and what happens next, then after learning the notes, she practiced mechanically over and over again just to make it fast and accurate, then the teacher would teach her the dynamic markings (either to play loud or soft), in this whole learning process, she did not feel any engagement in my repertoires, she only felt like she is a piano playing machine who learn to play the music over and over. It brought a lot of stress to her. After she completed the level 9 examination, she felt tired. She does not know what is the point of doing all the work for that single examination, and at the same time, she lost all interest in playing piano and quit piano since then.

Piano training beyond the student's ability is not only stressful for the student, but students also fail to realize the true meaning of music in the process of learning the repertoire. Students only get narrow focus on what they get examined on, for instance, accuracy, techniques, and ignore the exploration part of music. The focus on technical skill and repertoire mastery in exams (only a 30-minute exam), such as those administered by CCOM and RCM, could inadvertently contribute to the problems described. Students may feel pressured to excel in specific areas that are measured in exams—like accuracy and technique—at the expense of broader musical understanding and emotional connection to the pieces they play. This narrow focus can indeed create stress and potentially rob students of a more holistic and enriching experience of music.

While CCOM and RCM have comprehensive examination systems designed to offer a balanced musical education, the emphasis in practice—especially as students and instructors prepare for exams—can tilt toward performance metrics. As a result, students may be less inclined to explore improvisation, emotional expression, or the historical and theoretical contexts of the pieces they're learning.

So, while these conservatory programs aim to provide a thorough education in music, the way these programs are sometimes implemented can limit students' broader engagement with music. This could make it particularly difficult for individuals to re-engage with the piano after a hiatus, as their training might have lacked crucial foundational elements that make for a well-rounded musician [7].

3.2.2 Parental Pressure in Piano Education: A Double-Edged Sword

Parents are always the essential part of children's growth, education and the formation of personality. During a child's piano learning, they are also a crucial character. While students (Younger students) are learning piano, they provide the necessary logistical and mental support. They pay for piano lessons, regulate students' normal practice routine, and also give out encouragement and some constructive feedback during practices. However, as the piano world becomes highly competitive, especially in CCOM's examinations, the excessive support might metamorphose into excessive pressure.

China is a country that prioritizes achievement in any field, including academic and extracurricular. This phenomenon leads to parents compelling their children to excel in piano as another component of a 'comprehensive education' or 'holistic development'. They want their children to excel in front of their peers and they also wish to present themselves as accomplished in front of other parents. It is understandable that parents hope their children to become an outstanding personage, but when the "hope" turns into vanity, it would hurt their passion of learning piano and their path to find musicality.

"Parents often promise their children that once they passed Level 10, they will not have to learn to play the piano anymore.", said Guo in her article. High letter grades or markings in piano exams not only bolster self-esteem but also serve as impressive additions to school applications and resumes.

Parents, understandably, want to see a return on their investment and the sacrifices they've made for their children's education.

3.2.3 Pressure from Mechanism Practice

When playing piano became repetitive and logical, the magic of music disappeared. When students practice repeatedly to drive for excellence, the pressure arises. This kind of pressure manifests in: lengthy hours of practice, setting unrealistically high expectations, and sometimes even connecting love or approval to success in piano exams.

In the context of Chinese parenting culture, where educational excellence is often highly valued, the concept of "love and approval tied to success in piano exams" takes on additional layers of meaning. Chinese parents may view musical achievement not just as an individual accomplishment, but as a reflection of family honor and success. Consequently, the child may perceive their worth, and their ability to receive love and approval from their parents, as intrinsically tied to their performance in piano exams.

The pressure to excel can thus become a psychological burden, leading to excessive stress and potentially diminishing the intrinsic joy and 'magic' that should accompany the experience of learning and making music. Over time, the instrument becomes merely a tool for validation rather than an avenue for artistic expression or personal fulfillment.

In extreme circumstances, parents may resort to emotional manipulation tactics, attaching familial pride or even the child's worth to their performance. And once the manipulation adds up to a maximum amount, the immediate impact of such pressure is emotional burnout. Students will lose the intrinsic motivation for music and playing piano, because when they play the piano, what's in their mind is always parent's excessive expectations and the exaggerated emotional manipulation [7].

3.2.4 The Real Problem

So, the problem is not the piano examination system itself. Rather, the problem is the mentality of parents and teachers, and also the purpose of the test. CCOM's Piano Examination syllabus has a systematic and almost holistic process (although the repertoire list is a little bit limited) on testing a students' ability on both musicality and technically. If some parents, teachers, or even students are intent on using the piano exams as a platform to prove themselves, compete with others, and derive personal satisfaction and benefits, the issue should not be attributed to flaws in the Piano Examination system itself. The exam is not harmful to the students, but to the inexperienced parents and teachers, you can regard the exam as the final exam of the school, a kind of test on the students' learning results [8].

4. Enhancing Piano Education in China: Strategies and Recommendations

As discussed in the previous section, piano education in China has achieved remarkable development in recent decades, but there are still some problems, such as the balance between technique and art, the shaping of students' learning attitudes, and the innovation of the education model.

4.1. Diversified Teaching Approach

4.1.1 Pedagogical Training

Encourage piano teachers to undergo specific pedagogical training which focus not only on how to improve technical skills, but also to teach artistic expression, musical interpretation and emotional flow. Specific pedagogical training can equip teachers with the tools needed to inspire their students to connect emotionally with the music they are playing. This includes lessons on how to convey the nuances of different musical genres, the historical and cultural contexts of specific pieces, and techniques for evoking emotional depth within performances. Such training would also ideally cover methods for adapting teaching styles to suit individual student needs and learning preferences.

Additionally, this type of specialized training could offer guidelines on how to manage the psychological aspects of musical education. This is particularly important in high-pressure environments, like preparation for exams, where the risk of students associating their self-worth or parental approval with musical success is heightened.

Classroom Dynamics: Teachers should adopt an interactive environment where students can open up their minds to communicate about their ideas, and also their confusions during learning their repertoires/techniques. This can help students to absorb what they learn in class with teachers, also to gain different perspectives on musicality [9].

4.1.2 Master Classes

Not only professional pianists in universities and beyond can have master classes, all piano students should have some opportunities to attend master classes. Teachers/Piano Institution Owners can organize master classes once in a while, inviting renowned pianists and music educators to impart the intricacies of emotional and artistic expression in piano performance, or in music generally.

Individualized Approach: Piano teachers should recognize that only letting students practice mechanically to “pass” the exam is not helpful in their piano journey. Each student is unique, their strengths and weaknesses in music are all different. Tailoring teaching methodologies to individual needs can be more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach.

4.2. Combat Parental Pressure

Organize parent-ideology seminars regularly to help and guide parents to understand the whole process of CCOM Piano Examination and the value of giving students a balanced musical education.

Create opportunities for parents to interact with instructors, allowing for a discourse that can alter expectations and remove unnecessary stress on students.

4.3. Support from Government and Institution

Advocate for governmental policies that provide subsidies or incentives for institutions to adopt a more balanced approach to piano education [10].

5. Summary

This comparative study critically examines the differences between the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) and the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM)’s piano examination systems. While both systems aim to set high standards for piano education, they diverge significantly in their approach. COM places a considerable emphasis on technical proficiency, often sidelining artistic expression and emotional nuance. RCM, in contrast, offers a more balanced approach, including artistic interpretation and a broader musical education that encompasses theory and history. The piece argues that the intense focus on technical skills in CCOM's assessment model, often fueled by parental pressure, leads to a narrow, performance-centric view of music education. This overlooks the holistic development of the student as an artist, contrasting sharply with RCM’s more balanced approach. The article calls for a re-evaluation of the CCOM system to integrate a more holistic understanding of musical education, much like its RCM counterpart.

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