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Piano Proficiency Among Choral Directors

Heather A. Robertson

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Music

Music Education

September 2012

## **Acknowledgments**

The completion of this study was dependent upon the encouragement and support of many people. I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Maynard for being my advisor and providing encouragement and invaluable assistance in the completion of this project. I wish to thank Dr. Gary Ritcher for his continuing support and patience with me during the course of my work at James Madison University.

To my dearest friends and colleagues, Dawn Bradley and Amy Shortt, and my sister Natalie Johnson and brother Brian Anderson, I wish to express my sincerest gratitude for the positive influence, kind words, love and support I have received these past few years; I could not have completed this process without them. Finally, to my parents, Wayne and Susan Anderson, I express my appreciation for their encouragement and I dedicate this research project in their name.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the practice of using piano in the secondary choral rehearsal setting by examining the functional piano skills used and advocated for by current choral educators with the goal of determining if the level and type of preparation provided by university and college music education teacher preparation programs is adequate in terms of meeting choral directors' "real world" needs. An electronic survey was disseminated to 514 middle school and high school choral directors currently serving in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Research was conducted based on usable responses ( $N=190$ ) from two groups, those who had completed their undergraduate studies as keyboard majors, and those who had majored in voice or another instrument or related music field.

The results of this study point to a number of key points that question how piano proficiency is developed in undergraduate music education programs. For example, when asked if participants were required to take a proficiency exam, 9% reported not having been given any such requirements. Such a response suggests that there is still no general curriculum alignment in higher education with regard to functional piano skills for pre-service choral educators. Also, one-third of the group which reported majoring in voice or another instrument were not given the opportunity to practice accompanying skills, and three-fourths were not given specific instruction in the functional keyboard skill of accompanying. Additionally, 23 % of the tested population reported having no ability to accompany an ensemble - a higher number than expected by the researcher.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

The practice of utilizing the piano as a teaching aid in choral music education settings – while it is not one that is advocated by all proponents in the field - is one that was established over a century ago. In 1827, when Lowell Mason became president and conductor of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, he obtained a room with a piano so he would have the ability utilize it as an aid in teaching the singers and soloists of the Society who were in need of vocal instruction. While Mason was an accomplished organist, his work in the field of music education in public schools during his lifetime helped to provide the educational environment young people enjoy today in music classrooms across the United States. As music educators today continue Mason's endeavors to provide quality training in the field of music education, it is also important to consider the impact his practice of using piano in choral settings has had on the preparation of future teachers of choral music in university and college settings.

Are accompanying skills necessary for today's secondary choral educators? If so, are all pre-service teachers provided the means to develop accompanying skills in the institutions of higher education they attend? If not, they may face additional challenges in the working environment. "From year to year many music directors are harassed with the problem of providing a good accompanist for the large performing choral groups (Lambson, p. 70)." Research in the area of functional keyboard skills and specifically accompanying skills has been conducted in the past, with the most recent related research

conducted by Jamila McWhirter in 2005. The current study replicated McWhirter's research with the goal of determining if the level and type of preparation provided by university and college music education teacher preparation programs has continued to be adequate in terms of meeting choral directors' "real world" needs since the completion of McWhirter's research.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the practice of using piano in the secondary choral rehearsal setting by examining the functional piano skills used and advocated for by current choral educators with the goal of determining if the level and type of preparation provided by university and college music education teacher preparation programs is adequate in terms of meeting choral directors' "real world" needs. An electronic survey was disseminated to 514 middle school and high school choral directors currently serving in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Research was conducted based on usable responses ( $N=190$ ) from two groups, those who had completed their undergraduate studies as keyboard majors, and those who had majored in voice or another instrument or related music field.



## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Related Literature**

Research studies examining the use of keyboard skills in the classroom have been conducted since the 1950s. Freeburne (1952) completed a survey of 202 public school music teachers and college music faculty members in nineteen north central states. The study examined the usefulness of the piano in a teaching environment. Participants were asked to list the keyboard skills they used or perceived as being most relevant in order of importance. College music teachers listed knowledge of effective practice technique as being most important, followed by skill at open score reading, sight reading skills, the ability to harmonize at the keyboard, transposition, improvisation, and accompanying skills as being less important. Public school music teachers listed the same skills, with the exception of not including open score reading among those skills listed. Both groups indicated a desire to have had more college instruction in all areas.

Webber (1958) researched the minimum piano requirements for music education majors at 395 teacher training institutions in the United States. The results of her study concluded that many of the institutions failed to meet the functional pianistic needs of future educators. Webber recommended that college music departments align curricula between institutions and incorporate piano proficiency requirements into state certification standards. Webber also compiled a list of minimum piano requirements for music educators from the institutions who participated in the study. The skills were as follows:

- 1) Sight-read simple instrumental accompaniments.
- 2) Harmonize melodies at sight using simple chords and accompaniment styles.
- 3) Sight-read hymns.
- 4) Transpose simple songs and accompaniments.
- 5) Sight-read vocal accompaniments or pieces similar to those found in school music books.
- 6) Perform from memory patriotic songs such as “Star-Spangled Banner”, “America”, or “America the Beautiful.”
- 7) Perform from memory pieces representative of various styles.
- 8) Play by ear.
- 9) Improvise music suitable for rhythmic activity.
- 10) Sight-read three and four-part choral scores.
- 11) Demonstrate technical proficiency in scales and/or arpeggios.

Buchanan (1962) conducted a survey to examine the basic piano skills needed by teachers of all levels and types of music instruction. Participants ( $N=312$ ) from the fields of K-6 music, choir, band, orchestra and college level music participated in Buchanan’s survey. The results were divided into four areas: (i) the degree to which the ability to play the piano was regarded as essential; (ii) the average number of years of piano study music educators who indicated their preparation was adequate or inadequate had received; (iii) the percentage of music educators who had been required to pass a piano proficiency test, and (iv) the basic piano skills that were considered necessary by music educators in three different teaching areas. Choral and elementary educators responses reflected the highest percentages of importance with regards to the degree to which ability is regarded as essential at 76% and 83% respectively. 64% of band and orchestra

educators reported the opinion that their college training did not adequately prepare them for their area of teaching.

Choral directors who indicated an average number of years of pre-college study between 1.1 and 2.7 years expressed the opinion that their college training was inadequate. A high percentage of vocal majors, as well as band and orchestra majors, indicated a year or less of study prior to college. Buchanan's study also revealed that not all music educators were required to pass a piano proficiency test. Approximately one quarter of the survey participants were not required to pass a piano proficiency examination.

Another aspect of Buchanan's survey scrutinized the pianistic needs of music educators. The highest percentage of responses from all three classifications of educators was in the area of playing accompaniments, ranging from 82% to 100%. Choral, band/orchestra and elementary educators also expressed the need to be able to transpose a melody or simple accompaniment, with responses ranging between 54% and 76%. Buchanan argues that mastery of any piano technique is a study in itself, and recommends colleges and universities provide a separate class entitled "Functional Piano." She further recommends that the course should be at least two semesters in length. "By using music literature applicable to school music teaching, the student not only learns to perform at the piano, but he also becomes familiar with school music materials." (Buchanan, 1964).

Buchanan's study sampled 61 colleges and universities to examine requirements in piano for music education majors and found that 75% of the respondents required a piano proficiency examination (Buchanan, 1964). The study also determined that 48% of the schools had juries consisting of piano faculty alone, and 37% included the piano and music education departments jointly. Of the respondents, 8% reported the piano teacher

giving the examination and 5% used the chairman of the piano department, the head of the music education department, and/or the entire music education faculty to comprise the jury.

Finally, the piano proficiency examination itself was explored. Fifty-two percent (52%) of the schools reported using the same piano proficiency examination regardless of area of study. With regard to the nature of the examination, thirty percent (30%) of the respondents reported basing the exam primarily on functional piano skills, while twenty-one percent (21%) reported their exams consisting of functional piano, solos, and technique. Only ten percent (10%) reported basing the exam primarily on solos and demonstration of technique. Buchanan determined that colleges and universities should consider the needs of the music education majors and teach them accordingly. “Unless a person has had experience in improvising, playing by ear, harmonizing, playing accompaniments, reading scores, and sight reading, he is not sufficiently educated in piano performance to be a music educator.” (Buchanan,1964).

Taebel (1964) developed a list of music teaching competencies and asked study participants (music teachers) to rank them according to their individual preferences. From the participants’ responses, he developed a list of competencies. Classified as either musical or teaching competencies, 51 musical competencies were grouped into the following categories: aural skills; conducting skills; vocal skills; analytic and composition skills; knowledge of history, literature and teaching materials; skills in dance and movement; primary performance medium skills; and accompanying skills. The 59 teaching competencies were grouped as follows: planning, methods and techniques;

instructional materials and equipment; classroom climate; communication skills; pupil evaluation and feedback; program and teacher evaluation; professional responsibilities; and control and management skills (Taebel, 1964).

Results of the study suggested that all of the teachers surveyed considered aural skills to be the most important competency that they used in their own teaching. Vocal skills also rated very highly among all teachers, although instrumental teachers rated skills on their major instrument as being more important. Accompanying skills were ranked eighth. Taebel (1964) recommended that music education majors have strong preparation in the area of aural skills, and that more emphasis should be placed on sight-reading and improvisation. A further recommendation was that students' programs of study should be differentiated in terms of the skills they are asked to develop and should be based on the known needs of the student's intended teaching area.

Nicklett (1966) studied and evaluated the undergraduate piano program in music education at Ithaca College. The focus of the study was to address the future professional needs in the area of music teaching. He reviewed the related literature, conducted interviews, examined various college syllabi, and collected responses from a questionnaire. Nicklett determined that the program was lacking in course offerings and made the following proposals (p.84):

- 1) The addition of a one-semester course in piano literature in addition to piano instruction and pedagogy.

- 2) The addition of a two-year course for piano majors in functional piano skills and accompanying.
- 3) A change in the conduct of instruction to make the piano instruction more efficient and compatible. (The change recommended adding group instruction to allow for more time with the major instructor).
- 4) The addition of a two-semester piano pedagogy course, including lectures, observations, and practice teaching.

Case (1977) conducted research into whether performance standards imposed on music education majors were comparable to the standards actually demonstrated in their teaching. He disseminated a questionnaire to 278 music teachers in the fields of general music, band, orchestra, choral, and elementary classroom music in North Carolina. Fifty-eight (58) individuals were evaluated by a panel of music specialists using a rating sheet. An audio tape was also made to assist the music specialists in evaluating the teaching session. Note accuracy, fingering, technique, rhythm and scales were the skills most emphasized. The least emphasized piano skills were sight-reading, open score reading, improvisation, score reduction, and transposition. Case found that the piano skills most emphasized in teaching were accompanying, note accuracy, chords, rhythm, and sight reading. The least emphasized skills were pedaling, open score reading, piano compositions, ensemble playing, and score reduction. Using the results of his research, Case made the following conclusions:

- 1) Public school music teachers who participated in the study were trained to teach in more than one area of music, but certain skills obtained through study had a small effect on the actual teaching situation.
- 2) The surveyed teachers indicated that the literature they performed in college had little relationship to their teaching situations.
- 3) There was a relationship between what the music teachers reported and what the music specialists heard in the use of piano skills.
- 4) There was a significant relationship between the skills most frequently used by the sampled music teachers in the classroom and what the music specialists heard from the tape recordings (pp.87-88).

Lyke (1968) examined the functional piano courses for music education majors at the six state universities in Illinois, focusing on the piano minor programs. Group piano faculty were interviewed and information about their syllabi, class observations, and piano proficiency examinations was also collected. Faculty members from the six universities were also asked to rank the importance of functional piano skills, as part of the interview. The music educators and group piano teachers ranked the following skills in order of importance (from most important to less important): chord progressions, transposition, analysis, improvisation, sight reading, harmonization, playing by ear, accompanying, critical listening, and technical development. Using the results of his research, Lyke designed a two-year piano program for music education majors, with functional piano skills being the primary focus. He also recommended a curriculum

alignment throughout the state, and that curricula be organized around piano keyboard skills that future educators would actually utilize.

Similarly, Hunter (1973) conducted a study to determine the needs of undergraduate music education majors. He sampled information from twenty-five public and private colleges and universities in California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. A series of on-campus interviews with functional piano teachers were conducted, and a survey was distributed with the intention of gathering information about instructional procedures and materials used in functional piano classes. As in Lyke's study, ten functional piano skills were included: sight reading, playing by "ear", analysis, harmonization, critical listening, technical development, transposition, improvisation, chord progressions, and accompanying.

The results of Hunter's study (1973) suggested that the music education majors' needs were being met in five areas: chord progressions, technical development, critical listening, analysis, and sight-reading. Four skills (accompanying, playing by "ear", improvisation, and transposition) were not being taught at all by 35 of the educators participating in the study. Also, the educators participating in the study questioned whether current instruction and student experiences were sufficient to enable students to adequately apply harmonization skills in an actual teaching environment. They also questioned whether student levels of piano proficiency were adequate for the real teaching environment. Hunter also determined that four of the five functional piano skills ranked most important by the participants were not being taught as effectively as four of the five skills ranked lower in importance.



Richards (1977) disseminated a survey to graduates from a large university who had become music educators with the intent of determining whether the current piano proficiency examination use by the institution was educationally valid. Another purpose of survey was to determine whether the current procedure of student examination was appropriate, and whether the course content was meaningful to music educators. Following the results of the survey, California State University changed the content of its piano proficiency examination. These changes included the elimination of all memorization requirements in favor of the skills of sight-reading, score reading, and accompanying. Less emphasis was also placed on piano literature, patriotic songs, and scales.

Exline (1977) conducted a study with the goal of developing original keyboard materials for a two-semester functional piano program. A survey was conducted using non-music majors enrolled in functional piano classes during the spring semester in 1973 at the State University in Oswego, New York. An identical survey was disseminated to the piano faculty at Oswego and faculties at selected colleges and universities in the United States. The survey examined eight keyboard skills generally administered to all students enrolled in functional piano courses.

Research findings continued to show mixed results in the 1980's with regard to the importance of functional piano skills. Sonntag (1980) conducted a survey of college faculties in Ohio to determine which skills music education students needed most for the work place. The respondents gave only moderate ratings to accompanying as an important skill for music education students. According to the faculty members, the

following skills were needed for individuals to become competent music educators: reading, transposition, modulation, harmonization at sight, and improvisation. Other skills that were also listed included: reading single lines of music; the ability to perform score reductions and simple accompaniments; and reading three- and four-part choral scores. Sonntag concluded that the basic competencies needed were functional in nature and not those to be gained from study of repertoire (p.73). He also found a lack of uniformity in the minimum number of piano credits required for music education majors, and suggested that some institutions affiliated with NASM were preparing students as performers rather than educators.

Lowder (1983) obtained the perceptions of faculty members, teaching assistants and recent graduates from The Ohio State University on the relevance of keyboard skills taught to undergraduate music majors. The participants in this study were asked to rank seventeen keyboard skills from one to six, with one being least important and six representing the most important skill. The skills listed in the survey included: accompanying; analysis; arpeggios; cadences; chord progressions; harmonization; improvisation; memorization; modulation; patriotic songs and hymns; piano solos; playing by “ear”; scales; score reading; sight reading; technical exercises; and transposition.

Both groups of respondents ranked the ability to perform cadences, sight-reading, score reading, harmonization, and accompanying as being most important, although both groups differed on their exact rankings. The college graduates ranked harmonization as being most important, followed by accompanying, cadences, sight-reading, and score

reading. However, the college faculty ranked the ability to play cadences as being most important followed by the ability to sight-read score read, harmonize, and accompany. Lowder (1983) recommended that accompanying, harmonization, cadences, and sight reading of scores and accompaniments be emphasized in the curriculum. He also recommended a de-emphasis on memorized solos and further suggested striking from the curriculum the skills of technical exercises, patriotic songs, arpeggios, and improvisation.

Redfern (1983) conducted a survey of 375 vocal, instrumental, and general music educators in Connecticut, Indiana, and Arizona. The purpose of the study was to identify useful piano proficiency skills, to establish the relationship between the skills required for music education majors and the skills used in teaching, and to determine what effect eight variables might have on music educators' use of the piano. The eight variables were: teaching experience; geographic location of the school; academic degree; performance area; teaching area; amount of piano training; type of piano training; and type of college piano requirements (p.94).

The results of Redfern's (1983) study suggested that the keyboard skills most often used by teachers were: chords and chord progressions; accompanying; improvising; sight-reading; and harmonizing melodies. The skills used less often were: reading open scores; reading alto and tenor clefs; playing piano solos; pedaling technique; and principles of fingering. Of the eight variables listed above, four were highly related to the use of piano skills by educators. These were the amount of piano training, school location, performance area, and teaching area. Redfern concluded that "college

requirements for piano proficiency examinations are unrelated to the piano skills music teachers use regularly in the real world of music teaching (p.102).”

March (1988) collected information from public school music teachers to determine what proficiencies they considered important for successful music teaching. The population of the study consisted of sixty public school music teachers in the state of Oregon. Included in March’s dissertation were separate statistics for instrumental, choral, and general music teachers. As in previous studies, there was a significant difference in the rating of skills, depending on the individuals’ teaching area. Instrumental teachers ranked score reading as most important, whereas general music and choral educators ranked accompanying as the most important skill.

The ability to play piano repertoire was ranked as being least important by all educators participating in the study. The study conducted by March (1988) also made comparisons between the opinions of the Oregon public school educators and those of Oregon college piano faculty. There were disagreements between the public school teachers and the college piano faculty on the rankings of the various skills, with the exception of the playing of piano repertoire. March determined that “it became apparent that the college instructors may not understand the functional piano needs of the school music teacher.”(p.118)

Wells (1986) directly addressed the concerns of the aforementioned study with her dissertation research, as well as concurring with March’s previous research. Wells’ study investigated which keyboard skills were considered most important by public

school music teachers, and which were most often used in public school music teaching. Wells surveyed public school music teachers and college or university music faculty members. Wells also collected information from piano proficiency examinations from 29 North Carolina colleges or universities and compiled a list of skills. The skills list along with a questionnaire was disseminated to North Carolina university faculty and public school music teachers engaged in the education of grades K-6.

Wells (1986) sought to determine which keyboard skills were most often used by public school music educators, and which keyboard skills were considered most important by them. Specifically, he sought to determine which keyboard skills:

- 1) Public school music teachers rated as important in their daily instruction.
- 2) College or university music teachers rated as being important for public school music teachers.
- 3) Public school music teachers reported using most often in their daily instruction.
- 4) College or university music teachers reported were most often used by public school music teachers.

The ability to successfully perform the following skills were ranked (in order of importance) by the participants: accompanying (most important); arpeggios; blocked chords; chord progressions; harmonization; hymns; improvisation; open score reading; patriotic songs; piano literature; scales; sight reading; and transposition. Also included in

the questionnaire were questions specific to the following areas of interest: highest degree obtained; major area of concentration; piano proficiency examination requirement; and type of college or university piano study.

Wells (1986) determined that the public school music teachers and the college or university faculty were in agreement on the most useful keyboard skills in public school music teaching. Both groups ranked the following skills as being most valuable: accompanying, harmonization and sight-reading. Public school music teachers ranked the skills in the following order: accompanying, sight-reading, and harmonization. College or university faculty members differed from the public school music teachers, in ranking the skills as follows: sight-reading, harmonization, and accompanying. Both groups were nearly identical in ranking lowest the skills of being able to play arpeggios, hymns and piano literature. Public school music teachers' ratings were slightly different from the faculty members in that they seemed to value open score reading skills more than the ability to play arpeggios. Wells recommended further study be conducted, and suggested her investigation be replicated in other states. She also recommended investigations be made in areas other than in the public schools or within college or university music settings, as well as the including undergraduate secondary piano students and college or university music faculty members.

McDonald (1989) conducted a survey of 449 NASM institutions, seeking information about the functional keyboard curricula. The respondents emphasized the teaching of harmonization, chord progressions, transposition, ear training, sight reading, and accompanying. A moderate amount of emphasis was placed on the skills of score

reading, modulation, improvisation, and ensemble repertoire. The skills ranked as the least important were the ability to realize figured bass, to play informal idioms, and to play by “ear.” Results suggested that technique development, critical listening, performance analysis, memorization, and solo repertoire were mostly taught in private lesson settings. McDonald’s study reflects a high emphasis on harmonization and accompanying for the first time. Before his 1989 research, few changes in the debate over these skills were evident.

Interest in the subject of the piano proficiency pre-service teachers was renewed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In her dissertation, Christensen (2000) attempted to determine which functional piano skills public school teachers considered most important for their work. Christensen obtained data from 472 high school, middle/junior high school, and elementary music teachers in the areas of band, choral, orchestra, and general music nationwide. She determined that the most important functional piano skills for pre-service teachers were accompanying and score reading.

The sampled population also indicated that they would “use functional piano skills more frequently if they were more proficient, particularly accompanying skills (2000).” One hundred and two (102) respondents to the questionnaire were employed in the choral field. All of the choral respondents indicated that they used a keyboard instrument in the process of their teaching. The results of Christensen’s study also suggested that the respondents felt that they would use keyboard skills more often if they felt more proficient at all functional keyboard skills, with the exceptions of being able to

transpose instrumental parts to concert pitch, composing a new vocal or instrumental piece, and sight reading alto or tenor clef parts.

Chin (2002) examined instructional practices in group teaching techniques and functional piano skills in the United States in 2002. Chin sampled 600 college instructors in the United States and received 304 responses. Results of his research indicated significant differences in the importance placed on sight-reading and accompanying skills among the various institutions represented by the respondents. His research also indicated a trend towards placing more emphasis on repertoire, compared to similar research conducted ten years before. Chin's results seem to suggest that despite past research's emphasis on the need for accompanying skills, colleges and universities were reverting to the practice of emphasizing solo repertoire, sight reading and harmonization skills.

McWhirter's (2005) research concurred with Linda Christensen's findings. The purpose of McWhirter's study was to determine which functional piano skills were used in the classroom and what secondary choral music teachers expected from college interns, with a focus on which skills were used most often and considered to be most important. McWhirter received 219 responses to her survey and found that secondary choral teachers indicated they used keyboard skills frequently and considered such skills important for college interns to possess. In concurrence with Christensen's study, McWhirter also reported that the respondents felt they would use functional piano skills more frequently if they were proficient, particularly in the area of accompanying.



McWhirter further went on to make recommendations for changes in piano proficiency exams given to choral music education majors, with the intent to assist pre-service teachers in gaining the knowledge of what skills they would need in their teaching careers.

### **Summary**

The related literature supports the need for a replication of research to determine if collegiate requirements and practices have changed in the area of music teacher preparation with regard to keyboard proficiency, and also to determine if the needs of future music educators are being met. Previous research suggests mixed opinion about the need for functional piano skills. Previous research also indicates continued discord amongst institutions of higher education on the subject of the skills necessary for pre-service teachers to be successful, as well as inconsistencies in the content of piano proficiency examinations between institutions of higher learning. It is hoped that the results of the current study may help college educators to come to greater consensus and develop a curriculum that will be more efficient in preparing future choral directors and educators.

## **Chapter III**

### **Procedure**

The district representative for the Virginia Choral Directors' Association in the geographical region in which the researcher resides was contacted to determine how to obtain contact membership email information for the entire state membership. The state president of the Virginia chapter of the Choral Directors' Association was then contacted to provide permission for the requested information to be shared. The names and email addresses of 514 middle and high school choral directors were then obtained with the purpose of electronically disseminating a survey instrument. The survey was created using Qualtrics software and consisted of twenty questions specific to the issues of keyboard skills use by and proficiency of choral directors, their undergraduate experiences with keyboard skills preparation, and their related perceptions of the usefulness of the training in keyboard skills that they had received. The questions asked in the survey are as follows:

- 1) What is the length of your teaching experience?
- 2) What was your major instrument of study in college? (If piano or organ, please skip to question #8 after recording your answer. If more than one major, please select all that apply.)
- 3) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, were you required to pass a piano proficiency exam?

- 4) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, did you have any previous piano experience (piano lessons) before college?
- 5) If you answered yes to question #4, answer the following question. Otherwise, go on to question #8. Approximately how many years of previous piano experience did you have prior to college?
- 6) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, were you ever given the opportunity to accompany a person or group?
- 7) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, were you provided specific instruction on the art of accompanying? (After recording your answer, you may skip to question #12.)
- 8) If you were a piano/organ major, did you have any previous piano experience (piano lessons) before college?
- 9) If you were a piano/organ major and had private lessons before college, approximately how many years of study did you acquire?
- 10) If you were a piano/organ major, did your instructor provide specific instruction on the art of accompanying?
- 11) If you were a piano/organ major, were you ever given the opportunity to accompany a person or group?
- 12) How would you rate your general keyboard skills?

- 13) Are you able to conduct while accompanying groups, if it is necessary?
- 14) If necessary, are you comfortable with conducting from the keyboard?
- 15) Have you had any experiences of conducting from the keyboard?
- 16) If necessary to accompany your ensemble, approximately how long would it take for you to prepare and practice accompaniments?
- 17) Do you feel your college experience adequately prepared you for your current teaching position?
- 18) Does your school budget provide funding for accompanists?
- 19) Are you able to pay accompanists from your program's general budget?
- 20) By what means are your ensembles accompanied? Select all that apply. (1 – I accompany and direct. 2 – I have a paid accompanist. 3 – I choose volunteers from the student population or the community when I need an accompanist. 4 – I use electronic/recorded accompaniment. 5 – My ensemble is an a cappella group.)

A link to the secure survey was copied and pasted into the email sent to all participants in which it was stated that all participants responses to the survey would remain anonymous. In the invitational email, participants were also invited to relay any additional information they wanted to share via email with the researcher. In addition to answering specific queries about their individual personal experiences with functional keyboard skills and their undergraduate training, the participants were also asked to: rate

their keyboard abilities; to provide information about whether they had received keyboard instruction prior to college; share what their major instrument was in college; share how their respective ensembles were accompanied; share their experiences conducting from the keyboard; and whether they were required to pass a piano proficiency exam. All information was collected and analyzed using Qualtrics software and is located in the appendix for perusal.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Data and Analysis**

The purpose of this chapter is to report the data gathered in this investigation. Information gathered from this study will be presented in the form of appropriate descriptive graphs and written narrative. The original hypotheses will be restated, followed by a description of the statistical methods used and a presentation of the analyses.

An electronic survey was sent to 514 middle and high school choral directors associated with the Virginia Choral Directors' Association. Usable responses were received from 190 individuals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The 190 responses were examined according to the following variables: major area of concentration (piano principal/non-piano principal); piano proficiency examination requirement (tested/not tested); and individuals' rating of skill level and keyboard experience (prior to college/no experience prior to college). Participants were asked to respond to questions based on their major course of pedagogy. Certain questions were asked of non-piano majors that differed from or were not applicable to piano majors. The following information was gathered from each question.

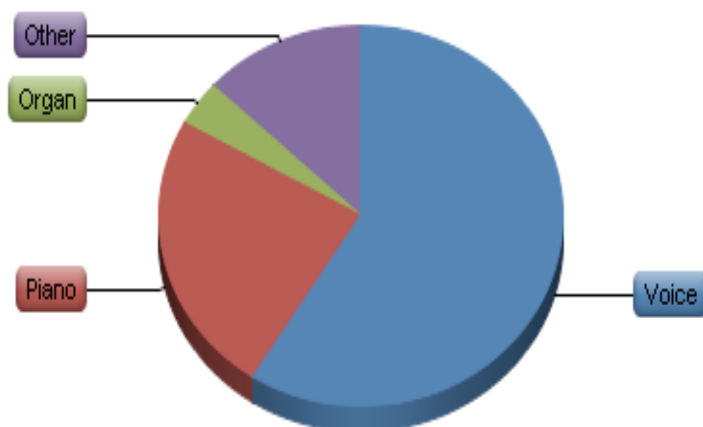
Participants were asked to report the length of their teaching experience. Of 188 responses, 61% indicated they were veteran teachers with ten or more years in a working environment. Sixteen percent or 30 respondents reported having been teaching in the field of music education for three years or less. Twenty-four (24) of the participants (13%) reported having taught for seven to ten years and 11 % (20 participants) listed their educational experience at four to seven years. Out of 187 total responses, 65% indicated their major course of study in college was voice, while 50

subjects (27%) indicated they were piano majors. Four percent (4%) of the tested subjects were organ majors and fourteen percent (14%) or 27 participants indicated other instruments as their major course of study in college, including flute, french horn, tuba, clarinet, euphonium, saxophone and oboe.

Of the 27 participants who indicated “other” as their major instrument of study, one response indicated a switch from vocal performance to general choral music education. Two other participants indicated they were general music education/choral music education majors and listed no major instrument of study, while one participant reported being a composition major and another listed himself/herself as an English instrumental major. Finally, one response indicated a major in instrumental pedagogy, with no major instrument specified.

Table 1

*Major Instrument of Study*



Participants who indicated they majored in voice or an instrument not specified were asked if they were required to pass a proficiency exam to obtain an undergraduate degree. Out of 140 usable responses, 92% indicated they were required to pass a proficiency exam, while 12 subjects (8%) reported not having to successfully complete a proficiency piano assessment tool.

In relation to piano experience prior to undergraduate study, 117 individuals responded affirmatively that they had taken private lessons and/or had previous piano experience prior to their undergraduate studies. Twenty-five participants indicated that they had had no prior experience with the piano before attending university. Non-piano majors indicating that they had had previous experience were asked to report the length of said experience. Forty-four (44) participants indicated ten or more years of piano study prior to college, 37 participants reported their experience to be between six to nine years, three to five years experience was listed by nineteen subjects, and seventeen subjects answered having experience of two years or less.

The ability to accompany an ensemble is a useful tool. Assessment in this area and available coursework in this area of study is widely varied among higher institutions of higher education. The survey instrument used in this study included questions about accompanying. Participants were asked the following questions:

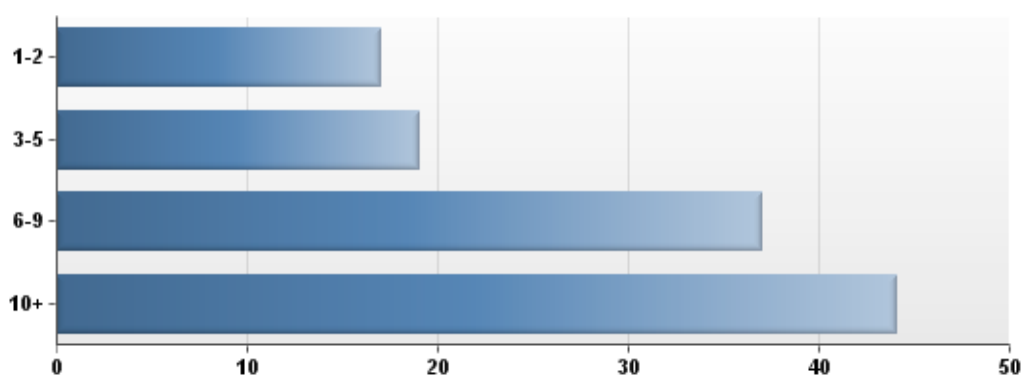
- 1) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, were you ever given the opportunity to accompany a person or group?
- 2) If you majored in an instrument not specified or were a voice major, were you provided specific instruction on the art of accompanying?



In response to the first question, 66% of 122 responses indicated the participants were given the opportunity to accompany an individual or ensemble, while 34% reported never having been given or assigned the opportunity for functional piano skills such as accompanying. The majority of participants (77% of the responses to question #2) replied that they were not given instruction on the specific functional piano skill of accompanying while 23% of participants reported that they had had the opportunity to study the functional piano skill of accompanying during their undergraduate studies.

The participants who indicated the piano and/or organ as their major instrument of study were asked to respond separately to the same questions previously discussed. When asked if they had piano experience prior to college, 95% of the 58 recorded responses indicated an affirmative. Three individuals responded that they had received no private instruction prior to college. It is unknown if these respondents were organ majors or if they had studied functional piano skills during the completion of their secondary education. Of those who had studied piano privately prior to college, 69 % or 35 subjects indicated ten or more years of study, fifteen subjects (29%) recorded experience of six to nine years, and one person indicated less than five years of study but more than three years of private piano instruction.

Table 2

*Length of Piano/Organ Study*

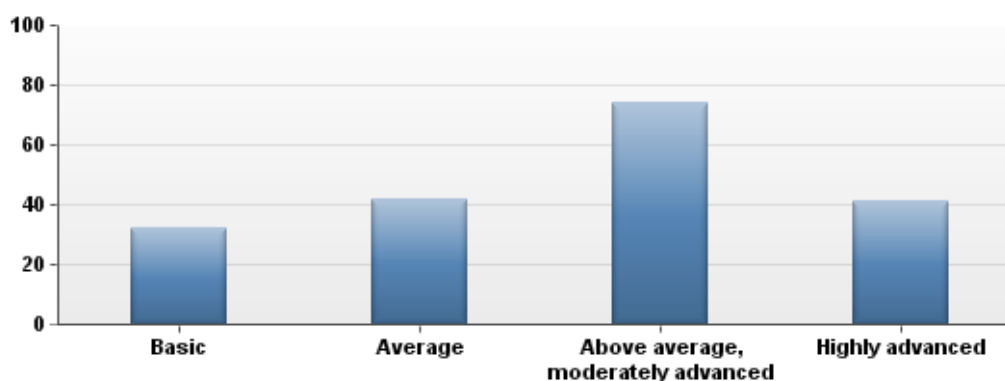
Piano/organ majors were also asked if they had received specific instruction on the art of accompanying and their answers were recorded separately from the non-keyboard majors to develop a comparison. Forty-eight percent of the respondents replied that they were provided specific instruction in accompanying ensembles, while fifty-two percent indicated they received no such instruction. However, 95 % of the test subjects reported having had the opportunity to accompany soloists and/or ensembles. Five percent stated they were given no opportunities to accompany in any environment. The majority of both test groups reported not having had instruction in accompaniment. The ability to accompany ensembles is listed as a necessary tool in the NASM handbook. The

information gathered from the questions about accompaniment instruction suggests the need for greater general curriculum alignment among music education programs in institutions of higher education.

Both test groups (the non-keyboard majors and the piano/organ majors) were then asked a series of questions specific to their accompanying and/or general functional piano skills. The survey participants were asked to rate their general keyboard skills according to the following parameters: basic, average, above average/moderately advanced or highly advanced. Seventy-four subjects (40%) labeled themselves above average and/or moderately advanced. Twenty-two percent indicated they felt they were average, while 32 individuals considered their keyboard skills to be basic. Forty-one respondents indicated having highly advanced keyboard skills.

Table 3

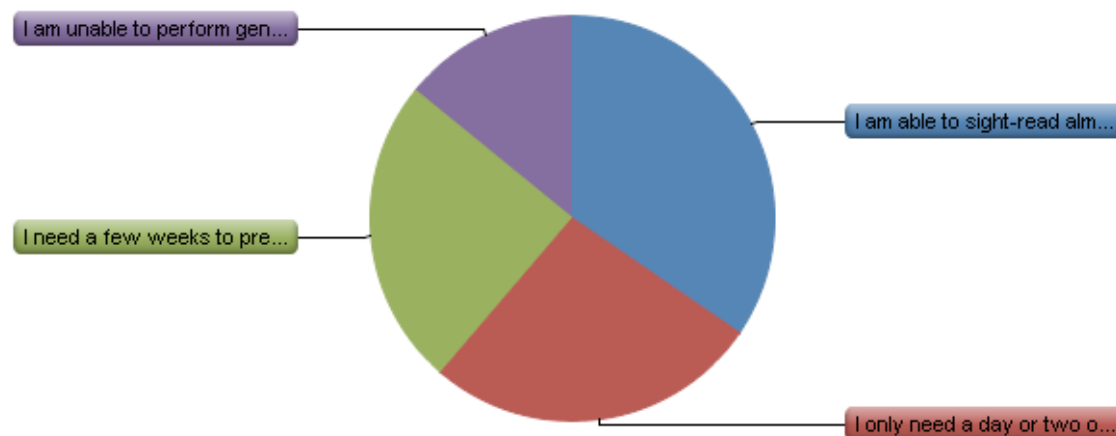
*Participants' rating of functional keyboard skills*



The two test subjects, the piano/organ majors and the non-keyboard majors were also asked questions concerning their ability to accompany their various ensembles and how their ensembles were accompanied on a daily basis. When asked if he/she had the ability to conduct while accompanying an ensemble (if necessary), 50% indicated that they were able to do so if necessary. Additionally, 28 % indicated they could do so if they had enough preparation time. Twenty-three percent (23%) reported that they were unable to accompany their ensembles. Also, subjects were asked approximately how long it would take for them to prepare to accompany an ensemble. Thirty-five percent of the participants claimed advanced sight reading skills and expressed the opinion that they needed little or no preparation time for accompanying an ensemble. “I only need a day or two of preparation time” was the response given by 27 % of the assessed subjects. Twenty-five percent indicated they needed a few weeks of preparation time and fourteen percent said they were unable to perform general accompaniments.

Table 4

*Participant self assessment of accompanying skills*



In relation to the ability to conduct from the piano/organ, participants were asked if they felt comfortable with doing so. One hundred and thirty-eight responses indicated “yes” and forty-nine responses indicated “no.” Additionally, participants were asked if they had had any experiences conducting from the keyboard. There were 159 affirmative responses and 27 negative responses. In relation, the opinion of the participants was obtained as to whether or not they felt their undergraduate studies prepared them for their current teaching position. Sixty percent (60%) said they felt that they were adequately prepared for their current teaching position, while thirty percent (30%) felt they were not adequately prepared and ten percent (10%) were undecided.

Finally, survey participants were asked how their ensembles were accompanied and if they had paid accompanists to indicate by what means and if funding was available. Sixty-six percent (66%) reported not having a separate budget line item for accompanist pay, while thirty-four percent (34%) said they did have separate funding for accompanists. Individuals were also asked if they were able to pay for accompanists from their general departmental budget: there was a nearly even split in responses, with 49 % responding that they were able to pay for accompanists from their budget and 51 % indicating that they were unable to do so. Participants were asked to list how their ensembles were accompanied (they were asked to check all responses that applied). Fifty individuals (50) directed a cappella groups and required no accompanist. Seventy participants (70) indicated that they used recorded/electronic accompaniments. Seventy-five participants (75) gleaned volunteer accompanists from the school and/or community populations. One hundred and twenty-five participants (125) indicated that they had a

paid accompanist, while eighty-seven participants (87) reported that they conducted from the piano or organ.

Table 5

*Methods used for ensemble accompaniment*



In addition to the participants' responses, five individuals chose to share their thoughts via email. The following quotes are taken directly from those emails:

Participant A: "I just finished your survey, but I wanted to elaborate on a couple of things. When I was at X, we had to take 4 semesters of keyboard skills (I

tested out of 1 and 2 and finished 3 all in one semester), level 4 came later and involved more improvisation than straight piano skills. In my career so far, I have had 2 student teachers. One came with pretty good piano skills, the other had absolutely NONE. Both were wonderful with the students (middle school) but the second was really hampered by her lack of any keyboard skills at all.

I played before I went to college (church stuff mainly), but always play for my kids in class and at most of their concerts (District Festival being the notable exception). My comment about college not adequately preparing me to teach was mainly about this: I felt I got a great education in music, but not such a good education in how to actually teach music.”

Participant B: “I just took the survey but feel I need to qualify some responses. Our general school budget does not pay for our accompanist. However, we have over 600 students in middle school choir and our one fund-raiser brings in an average of \$13,000 per year from which we pay for our accompanist. She comes in 3 times a week for our 8th grade classes and also a week or so before our 6th and 7th grade concerts.

My colleague and I are both fairly good pianists and are very comfortable leading rehearsal from the keyboard but would never do so in concert. I can sight-read just about anything written for "middle school" with no need of preparation. Sadly, I never learned how to really prepare a challenging piece but that has never hindered my ability to teach pieces with challenging accompaniments. College

piano courses (two of them) did nothing to improve my skills. I honestly have no idea how any voice major who didn't have piano experience prior to college makes it through those courses. Make sense?"

Participant C: "I am happy to help you. This has been a bone of contention for me. I have had 4 student teachers in a row with minimal keyboarding skills. One should be proficient in a secondary instrument or have an incredible ear to succeed in the secondary setting. Not only that, but students need to hear that you are proficient and not just go on blind trust."

Participant D: "I think you might want to look into a few other areas... My ensembles perform grade 5 and 6 literature. There is no way even though I've played a while that I could do accompaniments of that difficulty and still really conduct. Also you might want to address the rehearsal playing some people do... most college education majors can't read open score but want to use the piano as a rehearsal technique. Many of us use the piano not just for performance but for rehearsal as well."

Participant E: "I did your survey. I am a X graduate of 2008 in Choral Music Ed with Voice primary and Piano secondary. However, I had been playing piano since I was six. I am in my second year of teaching and I thank myself every day for having done piano since I was little. Not having an accompanist in my classroom or students who can play, I have to do everything myself. It helps \*so much\* to be able to do things myself."



At X, you get three semesters of class piano, and two credits of PMI. I don't think that is enough if you are not a pianist. We also did not have room or were not eligible to take the accompaniment class. It would have been really useful to learn to read choral parts, and how to "fake" accompaniments well enough to support singers. I learned all of that during student teaching. Once again, I relied heavily on my ability to play from private lessons I took in high school. I am by no means a concert pianist, but I can play Mozart and Haydn Sonatas.

Maybe I am biased since I use piano a lot, but I think they needed more of it for choral directors at X. I'm sure more vocally oriented people find other ways to work around this in rehearsal.”

Participant F: “The need for functional skills appears to still be beneficial to modern choral educators. Pre-service teachers entering college without previous experience in piano are at the greatest disadvantage, even considering today’s technological endeavours. The burnout rate amongst new teachers in every subject is still currently high and occurs within the first five years of teaching. As departmental budgets become further reduced due to cuts in education, the duties and obligations imposed on our music educators are increased. It is recommended by this researcher that piano proficiency programs be examined again and the list of functional keyboard skills be evaluated for utmost effectiveness in today’s working environment.”



## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the functional piano skills of choral directors currently serving in secondary education. The study was conducted to examine the differences experienced in the working environment for secondary educators who were piano majors at the undergraduate level, versus the experiences of “non-keyboard” educators who were required to pass a piano proficiency exam. Choral directors responding to the electronic survey were asked a series of questions relating to their training at the undergraduate level and their current ability or lack thereof to accompany their various ensembles. One hundred and ninety individuals (190) responded to the survey of twenty questions but since the number of responses varied from one survey item to another, it was difficult to ascertain if all responses were complete. Participants were asked to answer certain questions based on their major instrument of study in college.

Two groups were formed as a result: piano/organ majors, and non-keyboard majors. One hundred and twenty-two respondents (122) indicated they were voice majors while eighty-five responded (85) they were either keyboard majors, majored in other instruments, or gave another area as their degree concentration. The total overall tested population consisted of 190 individuals, which suggests there may have been some overlapping of answers with regards to major instrument or field of study. Upon analysis of the participants’ responses, there appears to be no observable relationship between major field of study and the functional keyboard skills of the tested subjects.

However, the results do point to a particular number of key points that may be

addressed. For example, when asked if participants were required to take a proficiency exam, 9% reported not being given any such requirements to obtain their individual degrees. Such a response alludes to the probability that there is still no general curriculum alignment among institutions of higher education in regard to functional piano skills for pre-service choral educators. Also, one-third of the group which reported majoring in voice or another instrument were not given the opportunity to practice accompanying skills, and three-fourths of said group were also not given specific instruction in the functional keyboard skill of accompanying. Additionally, 23 % of the tested population reported having no ability to accompany an ensemble; a higher number than expected by the researcher. Due to cuts in education and the realistic public school teaching environment, obtaining an accompanist or purchasing recordings may be difficult for pre-service teachers entering the workforce.

Due to the nature of the testing instrument and human error, there is potential for the results of this research to be skewed. However, a key element to support the research of Jamila McWhirter(2005) and Anna W. Wells (1986) is present: there appears to be no curriculum alignment in institutions of higher education for functional piano skills, specifically the functional piano skill of accompaniment. The programs in which piano minors and/or non-keyboard majors enter vary widely from institution to institution. As our pre-service teachers enter the work environment, they need to be provided every tool necessary to be successful.

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