

## Skills Development as a Professional Pianist in Thailand

Prasert Khunthongchan<sup>1\*</sup>, Supunee Leuaboonsho<sup>1</sup> & Anak Charanyananda<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province 44150, Thailand

<sup>2</sup> College of Music, Mahidol University Salaya Campus, 25/25 Phutthamonthon Sai 4 Road Salaya, Phutthamonthon Nakhonpathom, 73170 Thailand  
*pkhunthongchan168@gmail.com*

*Date Received: July 3, 2015 Date Revised: August 19, 2015*

**Abstract** – *This qualitative investigation studies the career of professional pianists and piano teachers. Data were collected from in-depth interview and participant observation of ten professional pianists in Thailand. The investigation is aimed at analyzing the study patterns, learning methods and playing techniques of professional pianists. The results show that piano study patterns of pianists are divided into three types: 1) Formal learning, 2) Informal learning and (3) Non-formal learning or self-instruction. Pianists use a variety of textbooks and other media to supplement their knowledge-bases and some learn by music-related career experiences. There are three ways to develop as a professional pianist in Thailand. Firstly, pianists who begin their musical education at an early age follow the correct procedures and piano-playing principles. Secondly, continuous self-development allows pianists to build upon the knowledge initially transmitted by instructors, imitating their styles and forging an independent identity. Thirdly, a musical routine and repeated practice enables pianists to hone their skills. Their routine must have seven essential compositions. This study also divides pianist playing techniques into three genres: classical piano, contemporary piano and jazz piano.*

**Keywords** – *Success, Professional, Pianist, Piano, Techniques.*

### INTRODUCTION

The piano (an abbreviation from pianoforte) is a musical instrument played using a keyboard, which was designed to respond to composer needs of rhythmic sound and dynamic shading. The sound of the piano can be immediately stopped by removing the fingers from the keyboard [1]. When it was first designed, the internal mechanics of the piano were improved many times until it began to flourish in the music world. The first grand piano performance was the Brandenburg

Concerto No.5 in the late 18th century [2]. Other than its independent historical significance, the piano has affected the musicality and charisma of countless musicians and singers [3]. In the twentieth century western world, especially in the United States of America, pianos were considered the main household instrument and music lessons were established as a compulsory subject according to national education standards [4]. However, musical practice in Thailand concerned only traditional Thai musical instruments. The piano was not a part of education or lifestyle. In recent years, though, pianists have become well-regarded professionals, who can command high levels of income and prestige. Their occupation has also become more reliable due to the increasing role of the piano in Thai music culture and the growing popularity of Western musical styles [5].

When the piano was first introduced to the Thai music scene, it was incorporated into bands and used to play new-style Thai songs and established Western melodies. As Western music styles grew more popular, the role of the piano increased. This led to the creation of an entirely new job sector in the Thai economy, including positions for composers, pianists, teachers, repairmen, tuners and piano shop owners. Currently professional pianists work in entertainment and education. Some famous pianists in Thailand are Dr. Reimondo Amato de Sequeira, a Thai-Portuguese pianist in the royal music band Lay Kram, Nat Yontarak, a Thai pianist, composer and music teacher who was given the Silpathorn Contemporary Artist Award in 2006, Sarayout Supanyo, the founder and head of the first jazz music band in Thailand, Infinity, and holder of the 2011 Thailand International Jazz Conference Lifetime Achievement Award, and Dr. Den Euprasert, pianist, composer, conductor and dean of The Conservatory of Music, Rangsit University. At present, many educational institutes have established music study courses and many students have graduated

as professional musicians. However, access to contemporary professional pianists is not wide enough in Thailand to generate the required public interest to ensure all graduates have a successful career path. The research team thus conducted this investigation in order to discover the learning processes, practice guidelines and playing techniques from pianists with successful professional careers in the hope that the results could be used by higher education institutions in Thailand to strengthen instruction and support for piano students. The following paper is a descriptive account of the research methodology, research results and conclusion. The results section is divided into two parts, documenting pianist study patterns and learning methods and pianist playing techniques, respectively.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to analyse the study patterns, learning methods and playing techniques of professional pianists in order to examine their path to success as a professional pianist.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a qualitative study carried out between 2011 and 2013. The research area was purposely selected as Bangkok, Phuket and Songkhla provinces because these are three provinces with a traditionally strong history as piano playing regions.

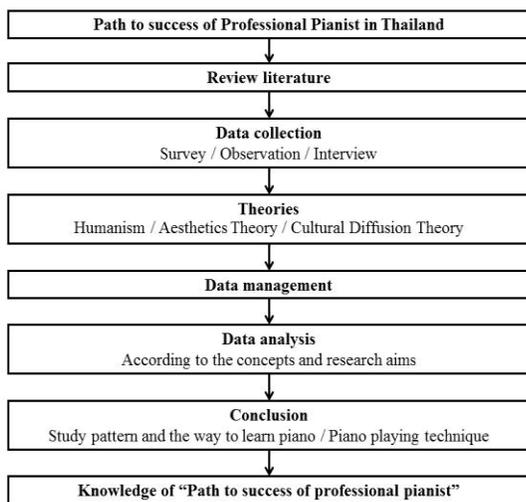


Figure 1: Research Framework

The research sample was identified using snowball or chain sampling and was composed of 25 individuals. This sample group was divided into three groups: key informants (n=10), casual informants (n=10) and general informants (n=5). The ten key informants interviewed for this study are

professional pianists in entertainment and education: Nat Yontarak, Den Euprasert, Nu Wuttichai, Manluk Thummakanon, Saksit Vejsupaporn, Kasem Pichaisongkram, Winai Sotthipan, Jakkawal Saothongyuttitum, Sarayout Supanyo and Poonsuk Taweechuai. Each of the respondents for this research have given informed consent to the publication of their data related to this investigation. The tools used for data collection were survey, participant and non-participant observation, structured and non-structured interview and focus group discussion. Data was validated using methodological triangulation. The steps for the research are illustrated in Figure 1.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three of the ten professional pianists attended piano class from an early age in both government and private music institutions (Table 1). All three pianists studied further piano skills, for which they won scholarships and graduated from both Thai and international universities. One of the ten professional pianists had never formally studied piano classes but usually played piano for religious ceremonies in church from an early age. Some of the pianists started playing piano due to family environment and others developed independent interested and learnt by themselves. According to the interviews, piano study patterns of pianists are divided into three types: 1) Formal learning, 2) Informal learning and (3) Non-formal learning or self-instruction (Table 2). Saksit Vejsupaporn (personal communication, 2013) believed that he became a famous professional pianist in Thailand because his father Nakhon Vejsupaporn (the leader of *Grand Ex*, a popular Thai music band) supported him. Besides, he also participated in Christian ceremonies, making him familiar with the music since he was a child. Sarayout Supanyo (personal communication, 2012) said he started to listen to Western songs when he was studying in Rachasima Wittayalai School. Thus his role-models were famous musicians, such as Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Buddy Morrow and Edmundo Ros. In the case of Jakkawal Saothongyuttitum (personal communication, 2012), he has never been taught but he studied by himself using various instructional media. Kasem Pichaisongkram (personal communication, 2011) started his career later due to an accumulated love of music. He said he played piano by a trial and error method and when he moved to Khon Kaen province he studied piano theory in Bangkok every week with Dr. Manluk Thummakanon and Prasit Payomyong.

Table 1. Formal piano learning patterns and experience of Professional pianists in Thailand (Information obtained from personal communication between 2012 and 2013)

<b>Professional pianist</b>	<b>Piano learning experience</b>	<b>Piano study patterns</b>
Nat Yontarak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studied piano since he was nine years old as a student of Panthipa Treepoonpol.</li> <li>• Studied in Siam Kolkarn musical school, Yamaha music academy.</li> <li>• Graduated with a bachelor's degree from the faculty of architecture, Chulalongkorn University.</li> <li>• Attended Goldsmiths' College in England and won a scholarship for further study in Piano Performance at the University of Reading.</li> </ul>	Formal learning
Den Euprasert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Started to study piano at Siam Kolkarn musical school, Yamaha music academy.</li> <li>• Earned a Doctorate degree in Music Theory and Composition with a secondary emphasis in Jazz Pedagogy from University of Northern Colorado.</li> <li>• Graduated from a Master of Music degree in Jazz Studies from the University of North Texas, USA.</li> </ul>	Formal learning
Nu Wuttichai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended piano class at the age of seven at Siam Kolkarn musical school, Yamaha music academy.</li> <li>• Graduated from Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle.</li> </ul>	Formal learning
Manluk Thummakanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initially learned Basic Curriculum (Electronic organ) at Siam Kolkarn musical school, Yamaha music academy at the age of six.</li> <li>• Joined the school band as a percussionist and still plays piano occasionally in Montfort College, Chiang Mai.</li> <li>• Attended The College of Music, Payap University.</li> </ul>	Formal learning
Saksit Vejsupaporn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began taking piano class when he was three years old.</li> <li>• Attended primary school in Bangkok Christian College and secondary school in Ekamai international school and graduated from The International Business Management College, Assumption University.</li> <li>• Did not take formal piano classes but his piano skill was accumulated by playing at religious ceremonies in church from the age of nine.</li> </ul>	Informal learning
Kasem Pichaisongkram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interested in and started to play electronic organ in Roman Catholic church when he was a child.</li> <li>• Learned independently and performed at various entertainment venues in Southern Thailand for 40 years.</li> </ul>	Non-formal learning
Winai Sotthipan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Became a musician when he was a teenager. Previously he played Thai musical instruments and later he turned to the piano.</li> </ul>	Non-formal learning
Jakkawal Saothongyuttitum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Played electronic organ since he was a child. Later learned piano and electronic keyboard by remembering the tone of Thai country songs and applying it to the melody, notes and chords of the piano.</li> <li>• Studied additional skills using instructional media.</li> </ul>	Non-formal learning
Sarayout Supanyo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initially his brother Montri Supanyo taught him. Later he learned and practiced playing piano with tutors and independently.</li> <li>• Joined a musical band for procession in Rachasima Wittayalai School and practiced more music skills at Rachasima Child Centre.</li> </ul>	Non-formal learning
Poonsuk Taweechuai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Played many types of musical instruments with his family, who established their own band in Songkla province.</li> <li>• Initially he used numbering instead of music notes to play piano before independently learning musical notation.</li> </ul>	Non-formal learning

Table 2. Learning methods of professional pianists in Thailand

Professional pianist	Piano-learning method		
	Learning at early age	Continuous self-development	Music routine development
Nat Yontarak	✓		✓
Den Euprasert	✓		✓
Nu Wuttichai	✓		✓
Manluk	✓		✓
Thummakanon			✓
Saksit Vejsupaporn	✓		✓
Kasem		✓	✓
Pichaisongkram		✓	✓
Winai Sotthipan		✓	✓
Jakkawal		✓	✓
Saothongyuttitum		✓	✓
Sarayout Supanyo		✓	✓
Poonsuk		✓	✓
Taweechuai		✓	✓

This study divides pianist playing techniques into three genres: classical piano, contemporary piano and jazz piano (Table 3). Professional pianists mainly playing classical music said the principles of basic technique in classical piano playing are quite similar in each institute of music (Nat Yontarak, personal communication, 2012). Pianists must read and write the score, be good at finger positioning and also understand the meaning and functions of every musical notation on the score sheet, for example the staff, treble clef, bass clef, ledger line and also the tempo and time signature. Playing piano in classical music requires less finger movement than other genres and as little finger pressure as possible. The sitting posture is important, helping the pianist move more actively and saving them energy. The positions of the wrist and fingers are especially important. Constant memory practice gives more performance confidence and reduces dependence on the sheet music. Another technique is melody analysis, considering and analyzing fine detail in every aspect of music, such as beat, rhythm and duration. The player then creates a sense of movement in time, melody and counterpoint based on analysis of the music in an appropriate arrangement and structure.

Generally, the piano training techniques used by contemporary pianists are listening, remembering and transforming the melody by themselves (Kasem Pichaisongkram, personal communication, 2012). Another technique is practicing finger control, using *arpeggio*. Poonsuk Taweechuai (personal

communication, 2012) explained that he ‘played by heart’ to remember the songs and used the principle of *The Circle of Fifths*, a visual representation of the chromatic scale. In the case of Saksit Vejsupaporn (personal communication, 2012), he chose ‘slow and fast control’ to train his agility and procedure accuracy. To play more emotional music, the ‘loud or soft’ technique according to the symbol on the score sheet can help to indicate music dynamics. Music is connected with the tone smoothly by using ties, slurs or *legato*. To understand, ‘chord and scale’ can help pianists combine one song in complete harmony with another song.

Jazz pianists said that, other than the understanding of music interval, chords and Jazz harmony, the most important thing that every jazz musician must develop is an understanding of music form, motives development, chord voicing, melodic/harmonic intervals, substitution chords, music patterns and variations (Den Euprasert, personal communication, 2012). Solo performance and improvisation, the most important parts of jazz music, not only widen the melody but also expand the melodic line from the original harmony, making the music more colourful. Winai Sotthipan (personal communication, 2012) explained that solo jazz music and improvisation with friends help pianists improve their skills. Jazz musicians should play together with other musicians, not only learning how to call and respond but also to improve musical agility and creativity.

Table 3. Main piano playing techniques adopted by key informants in this investigation

Professional pianist	Musical genre		
	Classical	Contemporary	Jazz
Nat Yontarak	✓		
Den Euprasert			✓
Nu Wuttichai			✓
Manluk			✓
Thummakanon			✓
Saksit Vejsupaporn		✓	
Kasem		✓	
Pichaisongkram		✓	
Winai Sotthipan			✓
Jakkawal			✓
Saothongyuttitum			✓
Sarayout Supanyo			✓
Poonsuk Taweechuai		✓	

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Piano study patterns of pianists are divided into three types: 1) Formal learning – Professional pianists with formal piano study backgrounds take piano classes at educational institutes from an early age. They begin their education at a basic systemized level. This provides them with more playing confidence, the right procedural foundations and a high chance to continue their skill in higher education institutions; 2) Informal learning – This study technique differs from formal learning by incorporating family teaching, personal training, extra tutorial classes and study in private music schools; 3) Non-formal learning or self-learning – This type of learner learns the piano through listening and practice without an instructor. This learning type can be begun in both childhood and adulthood. Pianists find information in various textbooks and by using other media, such as compact discs, the Internet and music related career experiences.

There are three ways professional pianists learn the piano in Thailand: 1) Learning at an early age – These pianists are taught by instructors as children and also study with reliable textbooks. This results in them playing piano according to correct procedures and principles; 2) Continuous self-development – initially, basic knowledge of piano is transmitted by non-formal instructors such as family members, relatives and senior musicians. After the pianist is indoctrinated with the love of music and understands the basics of piano playing, they practice to further their skill and continuously train and play piano, either as work experience, by finding and following expert role-models or by self-creation; 3) Music routine development – Some professional pianists are from rural areas and must rely on copying and repeatedly practicing as part of their daily routine. In order to successfully practice this method, they have seven essential compositions: patience and hard work, disciplined practice, knowledge management with other musicians, collaboration with famous musicians, musical research, observation of world-class piano concerts and expertise in English.

Pianist playing techniques are divided by this investigation into three genres: 1) Techniques of classical pianists – performance according to the meanings and functions in every emotional music notation on the score sheet; 2) Techniques of contemporary pianists – practice by arpeggio and memorization of scales, chords and rhythms in each song; 3) Techniques of jazz pianists – solo performance and improvisation. Jazz pianists play with created scales

and chords and additionally harmonize using independently defined principles.

The results of this study correspond to the principles of humanism, which focuses on the value and agency of human beings. If an individual has freedom, they will try to improve themselves towards completion. This concept explains that humans have natural basic needs and they can learn and develop themselves in a relaxed and independent state. Sukanya Techawaro [6] has studied motivational strategies of piano teachers at Mahidol University College of Music and found four learning strategies: 1) The strategy of study motivation by presenting expected achievements and results; 2) External motivational strategy – a perception and appreciation of piano skill in expert pianists; 3) Internal motivational strategy; (4) Learning motivational strategy.

Pianist playing techniques in this study were divided into three categories: classical, contemporary and jazz. Stephen Barth Widenhofer [7] found that the improvisational style of Bill Evans was achieved through selected transcriptions using scale, melodic pattern, motivic development, chord voicing, intervals from substitution chords and variation. These diversities could occur in both contemporary and jazz pianists. They are initially hard to understand but when the artist records all notes by himself, he will later develop his playing style. In the study of the music of Herbie Hancock, Wallmann [8] analyzed songs from seven Hancock albums between 1962 and 1969. Wallmann found that Hancock's improvisation is aesthetically beautiful, concealed and in clear patterns. The cultural identity of jazz music and improvisation usually represents the individual performer and his high level of musical skill.

It is hoped that the results of this investigation and the subsequent discussion may be used by higher education institutions to help student pianists become professional pianists. The results may also be used to prompt further research on the subject of musical playing techniques and learning. From the results of this investigation, the research team suggests that further research should consider the path to success as a professional musician (non-pianist) in Thailand. A more detailed comparative study related to piano-playing in each music genre would be beneficial, such as the rhythmic interaction of jazz. In order to promote piano music in Thailand and widen the target audience group, music bands and live concert performances should be studied, with particular emphasis on the aesthetic

reaction of audiences to jazz, contemporary and classical piano music.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Sokatyanukarak, N. (2007A). *Classical Music: Vocabulary* [in Thai]. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.
- [2] Kerman, J. & Vivian, S. (1980). *Listen*, 3rd Ed. New York: Worth Publishers.
- [3] Sokatyanukarak, N. (2007B). *Classical Music: Key People and Masterpieces* [in Thai]. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.
- [4] Bassin, J. (1994). The Art of Musicianship in Performance There is more to a musical performance than being technically correct and sensitive to dynamics. Joseph Bassin examines the difference between mere craft and art. *Music Educators Journal*, 80(5), 30-48.
- [5] Jaroensuk, S. (2011). *Thai Secondary Education Schooling Development* [in Thai]. Bangkok: College of Music, Mahidol University.
- [6] Techawaro, S. (2004). *Motivational strategies of piano teachers at the music campus for general public*, College of Music, Mahidol University [in Thai]. Bangkok: College of Music, Mahidol University.
- [7] Widenhofer, S.B. (1988). *Bill Evans: An Analytical Study of his Improvisational Style Through Selected Transcriptions*. PhD Thesis, University of Northern Colorado, Colorado.
- [8] Wallmann, J. P. (2010). *The Music of Herbie Hancock: Composition and Improvisation in the Blue Note Years*. New York: New York University.