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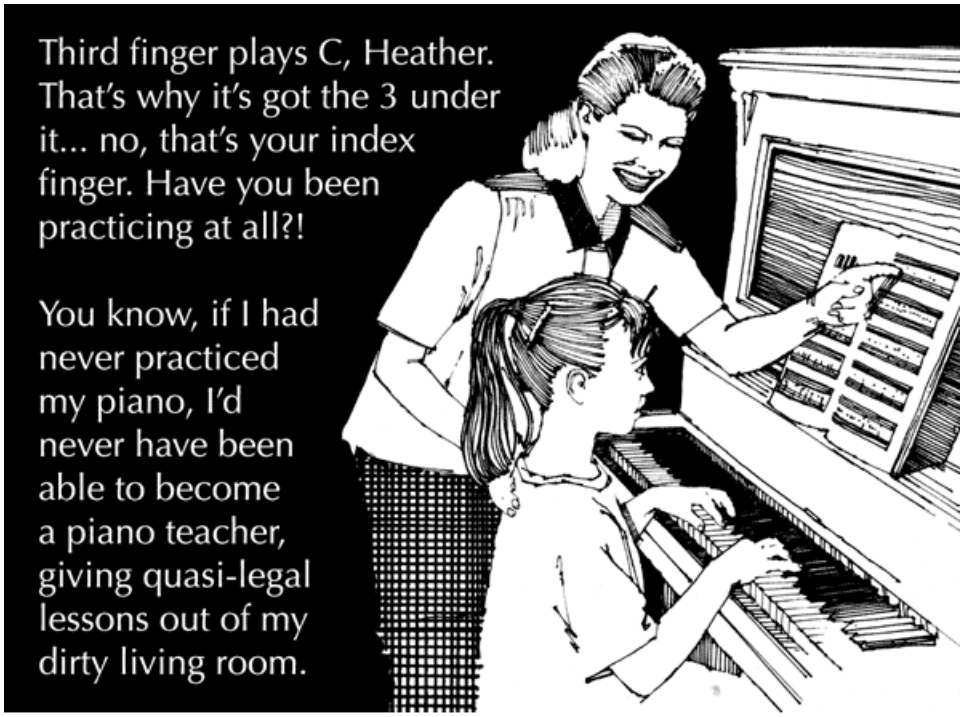
Images of Piano Teachers in Popular Culture



The career piano teacher has often been met with the disapproving sense that piano teaching is not, in fact, a career. Questions from onlookers include ‘but what do you actually do?’ or ‘it must be so nice to stay home all the time’. A common mental image of a piano teacher among adult non-musicians is of the elderly spinster in her heavily decorated home, wearing frilly tops buttoned to the neck, and teaching beginner students on an out-of-tune upright. They are generally thought of to be strict, unimaginative instructors who have been teaching the same pieces of Classical music for the past fifty years (see Photo 1). There is an element of frustration in their lessons, and a serious lack of new ideas or ability to connect with their students on a personal level. While this is a negative and unfair representation of the average piano teacher, it is important to recognise that this impression still exists. This stereotype likely has its roots with nuns as piano teachers in the early 20th century and falls in line with common stereotypes of early school teachers “as drab, asocial and asexual creatures whose sole mission is to make children learn, whether they want to or not” (Weber & Mitchell, 2002, p. 4). We all have an image of what a piano teacher might look like and these images, “while created by experience in early life, are fueled as much by myth as by truth” (Doloff, 1999, p. 192). Although this is no longer the image that popular media portrays, nor the real culture of piano teaching, it is one of the prevailing images which have remained in the public mind. Other images include stay-at-home moms giving quasi-legal lessons from their living rooms, or teachers as failed performers who need to make a living. Again, while these stereotypes are not often based in truth, they are damaging to the profession and often reflect that private studio teaching is poorly represented.

Photo 1 – *Historical image of piano teacher.*

Images matter for how the world understands groups of people: it is the visual representation of the values, actions, and characteristics of a person or group. Images are able to communicate deep impressions in only a few seconds. Without saying a word, they present a large amount of information about a person's identity, what their interests are, and how they might conduct themselves in the world. Images also matter for how those people in the group are expected to behave: if new members of the profession observe that longstanding members always wear cardigans and behave seriously, then it is implied that they should also follow suit. Images represent a portrayal of how someone is expected conduct themselves in the world, which becomes part of forming their identity, and it becomes increasingly difficult to break away from widely held notions of what is predictable or acceptable. Since most people desire belonging and aim to 'fit in', group members often behave similarly to form a collective identity. A collective identity involves common perceptions or feelings and the "shared 'sense of we' motivates people to act

together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interests of the collectivity" (Snow & Corrigall-Brown, 2015, p. 175). In other words, a piano teacher's image is a message to them from society of what they are 'expected to do'.

Image-making is an essential characteristic of human sense-making, and gives answers on how to approach one another, predict behaviour, or guide conversation. Connelly and Clandinin (1985) say that images become embodied in us, and are expressed in our language and our actions. It is a cyclical structure: images inform piano teachers of how they are supposed to conduct themselves, and images capture piano teachers conducting themselves in these ways, which further perpetuates the cycle. In other words, "we not only create images, but are also shaped by them" (Weber & Mitchell, 2002, p. 21). Then, images become a mutually constructed phenomenon, not only by how a piano teacher acts in the world but by how it is taken up and interpreted by observers. Those viewing images interpret and re-interpret in attempts to make sense of human experience and to communicate that sense to others. Therefore, how people think about piano teaching may be shaped in many ways by the images that they encounter in their daily lives, based on how they are historically situated, but may not actually be a true representation. Popular culture representations of piano teachers may be creating a spiraled problem of public image affecting self-image. Our identity as piano teachers is partially formed by the power images contain, and the messages they communicate. In his book, *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg (1989) suggests that we have a relationship with images based on preconceived notions, and those relationships are often emotional ones. It has since been well established in the field of cultural studies "that pictures 'speak to' viewers, that they have their own 'power'" (Wolff, 2012, p. 5). If a picture speaks a thousand words, then it is worth exploring how piano teachers are portrayed in images to gather a better understanding of the profession.

This brief article will examine 10 more images of piano teachers using visual content analysis (Bell, 2004) and offer a critical analysis. Content analysis is the most widely used method when discussing media. It has proven to be "the most basic way of finding out something about the media's meaning and allows for apparently general statements to be made" (Bell, 2004, p. 13). The term *meaning* often turns us towards the study of hermeneutics, in which the hermeneutic circle plays an important role: it is the study of the whole and its parts. The hermeneutic circle has sometimes been described as a 'zooming in and zooming out' to understand a subject more completely, from the micro to the macro, which will be a useful concept in describing details within images. Content analysis is based on objective observation in order to quantify images using reliable, explicitly defined categories, and often begins with a hypothesis or expectation of what is forthcoming. My categories seek to examine gender, ethnicity, surrounding environment, and interaction between participants in the photos. For the purposes of this analysis, I expect to find that white, middle-class, middle-aged women will be shown working with young children, that both people of colour and men will be severely underrepresented, and that historical notions of serious, Classical instrumental study still persist today. While there are thousands of images available online, I have selected the ten photos which I feel best represent the topic and make for a compelling argument.

When I introduce myself at parties as a piano teacher, I am often met with the comment that I do not look like a piano teacher. In fact, the reality is likely the opposite. Tim Topham (2019) did a recent, informal online survey of 500 piano teachers to find that 91.5% of respondents were female, the largest group between the ages of 25 – 40 years old, who worked with students between ages 6 – 17 years old, and had between 11 – 20 years' experience teaching, primarily in home studios. This seems to say that the mental image of piano teachers often runs against the reality,

perhaps based on portrayals in the media (see photo 2). We can see in this television movie poster a white, middle aged female wearing a sensible cardigan and surrounded by students. Given the bright lighting, this seems to suggest a stage spotlight rather than a classroom or studio. Returning to the introductory party questions, acquaintances usually inquire about if I have played with the symphony, if I am on YouTube, or if I have CDs available. This implies that performance is a far more valuable skill. It seems that most people have a glorified image of the pianist on stage playing with a symphony, or shredding the keyboard at a jazz club, but forget that behind every great performer is a great teacher. Could it be that images in the media perpetuate this misconception? Most piano teachers are shown in performance attire, which speaks towards the performance training that most teachers receive (see photo 3). Whether at a university or a conservatory, musician-as-performer is the primary role that students are encouraged to absorb. In this image, we see a professional woman in a sleek black dress standing in front of a valuable nine-foot Steinway concert grand piano. The sound panels on the wall behind, the high ceilings, and bright lighting suggest that this is a recording studio or concert hall. While this image speaks to the teacher's high level of training, it does little to communicate what occurs during lessons. Both of these photos in question seem to communicate a sense of performance rather than a sense of pedagogy. On the opposite side of the spectrum, photos which show piano teaching as a 'home hobby' without any musical aptitude are even more damaging to this highly complex and personally influential profession.

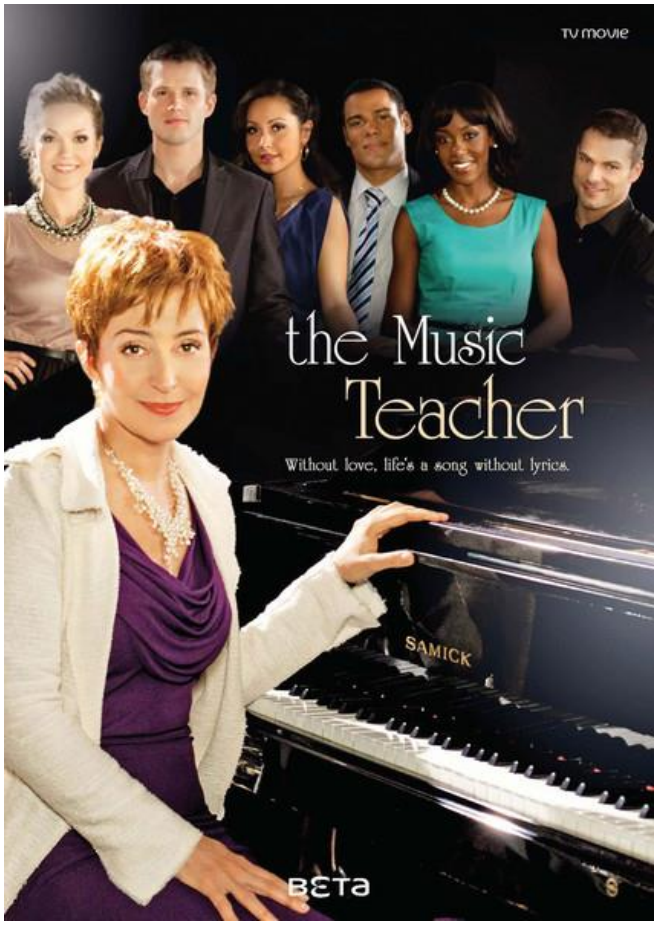


Photo 2 – *The Music Teacher TV Movie Poster* (Axelrod & Oliver, 2012).

Photo 3 – *Fiona Teo Sinyee* (Teo, 2019).

The image of a piano teacher necessarily includes their physical location, and being shown in the home studio setting has certain implications. The geographical space where piano teachers conduct their business gives rise to a discussion of place-based identity. Place-based identity stems from the interaction between the self and the physical world: an individual not only integrates elements of the environment into their identity, but also ends up identifying himself to those places (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983). Previous research defines that "personal identity is built in relation to his or her physical environment" (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011, p. 345). Every interaction with places leads to a creation of mental pictures, meanings, ideas, and ways of thinking about the world (Lengen & Kistemann, 2012). In other words, the more time we spend in a place, the more we become like that place. The perceived image of home-based piano lessons incorporates 'homey' notions of nurture, comfort, coziness, and a relentless state of happiness (see photo 4). In turn, the people in that 'homey' setting are perceived to reflect the same characteristics. In this image, we see a teacher smiling, pointing attentively, and trying to coax the student along the procession of the music. Instead of presenting pedagogy as challenging, inspiring, or filled with important learning moments, the teacher here is shown to be a nurturing, supportive mother-like figures who operates as the centre of a home. We can see that the studio is located in an affluent urban home, with gilded photo frames, French doors, and long draperies. The orderliness of the space reflects a calm nature to the lesson, and the focused child seems to respond accordingly. This image speaks to the idea that teachers are expected to be peaceful and attentive but seriously lacking a sense of imagination or spontaneity. The image seems to say that piano lessons are joyful and comforting, but glosses over any challenging moments in which students might experience the struggle necessary for learning. Piano teachers often get asked if they 'just teach from home', which implies the expectation of a relaxed and non-serious atmosphere. The

reputation, identity, and even income is decided according to this standard. In turn, some teachers who live and work from home expect themselves to be cozy and nurturing, similar to their teaching environment, and as a consequence are not taken seriously as professionals.

Photo 4 – *Their First Lessons* (Johnston, 2016).

The fact that most piano lessons geographically take place in teachers' homes presents a particular challenge for identifying as a professional. Professionals are typically viewed as working outside the home in occupations governed by an overseeing regulatory board. For example, teachers within the public school system seem to be viewed differently, in part because of their accountability to the school board, government, and taxpayers. However, the unregulated nature of private studio teaching and the variation in curriculum and lesson setup can make it difficult for music lessons to gather the respect it deserves. It is notable that conservatories have recently published a number of images which support piano teachers as professional educators (see photo 5). Conservatories' existence is predicated on the existence of teachers who teach their curriculum

and it is from a position of power that they can shape the way teachers are observed by the general public. Here, we can see that a sharply-dressed, male teacher reaches towards the music. He is surrounded by gleaming tiles, which suggests that he is not at home, and a beautifully shiny grand piano. The intermediate student is slightly out of focus, which tells the viewer that it is the teacher is the more important subject in this image. His glasses provide an air of studiousness but unbuttoned collar suggests approachability. We can see that the image speaks towards how the teacher would like to be treated. In every career, "a professional image enhances credibility, which develops from many attributes, including your appearance" (Pullen & Alley, 2016, p. 55) Unfortunately, most piano teachers do not present themselves in such a thoughtful, professional way and have difficultly gaining the credibility they desire.

Photo 5 – *Teaching Intermediate Piano* (The Royal Conservatory, 2019).

Teaching piano is something many people stumble into accidentally, often as a secondary source of income or a way to stay home while children are young. One teacher writes that, "while working on a degree in Sociology with plans to become a Social Worker, I fell into teaching piano lessons as a way to pay my bills" (Payne, 2012). Another teacher writes that "Early in our marriage, I needed a way to supplement our income. Teaching piano lessons just seemed like a good fit. I would be able to set my own schedule, do something I love, and be my own boss" (Knerl & Rudy, 2013). It seems that many teachers fall into teaching because they own a piano, took lessons at some point in their life, and need a source of income. Many teachers operate a tax-free business on an old upright from their basement, without significant prior lesson planning, and little professional development (see photo 6). In this photo, we see a teacher and her student clearly enjoying making music together, singing with a smile. However, the informal nature of her t-shirt and jeans, with colourful things scattered in the background, implies that more fun than actual learning happens in this studio. The shape of the photo itself also signals that it was taken on a cell phone camera, without any serious intention of presenting a professional image to the community. This image of the 'accidental piano teacher' damages the reputation of an already fragile career and leaves the impression of being unprincipled and amateur. In a highly unregulated field, there are no specific qualifications needed to call oneself a piano teacher. This means that a music historian, bus driver, or church secretary can also call themselves a piano teacher, but potentially without a great respect for the complex nature of the practice and deep understanding of pedagogy.

Photo 6 – *Teacher and student* (Litzky, 2019).

An important part of piano teachers' images is made up of who chooses to take piano lessons. Upon surveying hundreds of images of piano teachers, it quickly becomes obvious that teaching piano has traditionally been a white, European profession, usually situated in homes, taught to upper-middle class children. Historically, given that the piano was invented in Italy, refined in Germany, and produced in England, France, and America during the late-19th century, it is unsurprising that images of piano students have included these backgrounds (see photo 7). In this painting, we can see the coiffed piano teacher relaxed, sitting back with one arm draped over the spinet. He seems to have been in the middle of reading a book, but looks up suddenly – perhaps to correct a mistake. The gowned student sits bolt upright and looks to be playing cautiously

through a piece of music. Her wallpapered room, bookshelves, and candles communicate a sense of wealth. However, the predominance of white children in many historical images fail to represent the explosive popularity of the piano in Asian cultures today. There are currently an estimated 40 million children learning to play the piano in China (Montefiore, 2014). When Asian teachers are represented in images, they are largely seen without students, captured in a performance pose. When students are present, Asian teachers are noticeably more intense and take on more masculine features such as less smiling, more involved, or focused on the task at hand (see photo 7). We can see in this photo the intensity of the teacher's facial expressions, the animated mid-air gesture, and the obedience of the similarly Asian-heritage student. A volume of Haydn's compositions sits to the side of the piano which suggests a more serious level of piano study. One Asian participant in a recent qualitative study expressed that "if the teacher asked students to play *Hanon No. 1* one hundred times… then they just did it" (Cho, 2015, p. 23). The main problem with this, compared to the many images of pleasant, white teachers working with privileged white children, are that Asian teachers are sometimes deemed to be more diligent, more qualified, and therefore 'better' teachers. In turn, white teachers are viewed as being soft and having lower standards. Images can perpetuate these misconceptions. As we compare the images throughout this paper, it is noticeable that the white teachers are presented as valuing a relaxed and enjoyable lesson atmosphere whereas the Asian teachers are noticeably more intense. Further, images often fail to represent the ethnic diversity of those who take piano lessons and the mixture of cultures who come together through music. By predominantly representing two ethnic backgrounds, images of piano teachers propagate the homogeneity of the activity.

Photo 7 – *The Piano Lesson* (Leighton, 1896)

Photo 8 – *Piano Teacher Ping Yung Hsu* (Abraham, 2015).

The image of a piano teacher is most importantly made up of who engages in the teaching itself. In a search of "piano teachers" in Google Images, it is noticeable that the vast majority are female. Interestingly, in searching "pianist", the vast majority are male. Female teachers are generally captured as less rigorous, less advanced, and less knowledgeable than their male colleagues. They are primarily shown teaching beginner or elementary students basic music reading skills which implies the teacher's lack of refined understanding on how to play the piano (see photo 9). In this photo, we see a university-aged teacher pointing towards a colourful method book. While the sense of two grand pianos does communicate a significance, the student is sitting somewhat too low and ignoring a somewhat lazy hand position. At this moment, the emphasis is on reading basic notation rather than playing music. In contrast, male teachers are often shown working with advanced students in more professional settings, which seems to suggest a more successful career. Male teachers are more frequently employed as advanced or university-level instructors working with late teenage or adult students on the great pieces of the piano repertoire (see photo 10). In this photo, we see a professor working with a more advanced student, clearly trying to communicate a point of musical expression. His face and arm gestures seem to be rising, implying stronger dynamic levels, and he is absorbed by the moment. It seems that true music-making is happening in this photo.

The contrast between these images points towards previous work demonstrating the relationship between feminization and the loss of occupational prestige (Reskin & Roos, 1990). Research has demonstrated that "occupational prestige and desirability may be directly related to the proportion of men that are expected to enter an occupation" (Touhey, 1974, p. 334). Further, losses in occupational prestige and desirability were accompanied by the attribution of stereotypically 'feminine' traits of being passive, insecure, less effective, or unsuccessful. but

presents the illustration of teaching as a feminized and inferior source of income rather than a true vocation. While this is certainly changing in our current world, there is still an important undercurrent which connects prestige with typically male-dominated professions like law and medicine. Teaching has been viewed in the past as a feminine occupation which requires little training or critical thought. Men entering into feminized professions, such as piano teaching, are often deterred by these labels and the loss of prestige discourages them from seriously considering those professions as viable options. In contrast, women working in traditionally male professions have achieved an unprecedented acceptance on popular television shows as doctors (Grey's Anatomy), lawyers (Law & Order), detectives (CSI: Miami). But media rarely portrays men in non-traditional work roles such as nurses, teachers and secretaries, and when it does, that anomaly is made the central focus, if not joke, of the program (Weber & Mitchell, 2002). As we viewed in the historical painting earlier, teaching piano was traditionally a male job. This career, which was based on an apprenticeship model, was generally known for its wages, independence, stability, working conditions, and upper-class desirability. But when these rewards declined or other careers provided these benefits in greater supply, the gap was typically filled by women. In a similar way, women took over school teaching in the late-19th century because "salaries and autonomy dropped, relative to other occupations open to qualified men" (Reskin & Roos, 1990, p. 42). The problem of viewing piano teaching as a feminized, hobbyist profession is that it brings a lack of prestige, lower salaries, and a lack of appeal as a bona fide career. In contrast, male pianists with performance careers do gain a higher prestige, income, and career appeal, and this image of piano performer is perpetuated by schools of music throughout the world.

Photo 9 – *Piano Pedagogy Bachelor of Music* (Bob Jones University, 2016).

Photo 10 – *Chow Lesson* (Bienen School of Music, 2016).

Current images of piano teachers may be based in students graduating from piano performance programs unprepared to become piano pedagogues and without a clear sense of the difference. Research has shown that high performance levels are the utmost goal of undergraduate music education, but most graduates "will have to integrate teaching responsibilities into their portfolio careers" (Pike, 2015). Many images present teaching as a side-line source of income rather than a dignified profession; an afterthought perhaps based on an intermittent performance career. This has been portrayed in the movie *Madame Sousatzka* (Schlesinger, 1988) where Shirley MacLaine stars as a strict but loving piano teacher who, having failed in an international performing career, is attempting to redress her own shortcomings through her student, Manek (see photo 11). Here we can see Madame Sousatzka hovering over Manek, stopping his playing mid-phrase, to make a dramatic point. Her studio appears to be in a heavily decorated and overcrowded living room, full of framed photos with a traditional feel. He turns towards her respectfully, as their eyes meet in an intense stare. This image is significant because the teacher seems to be living vicariously through her student.

In most post-secondary institutions, there is a strong emphasis on being a performing musician or theorist first and a teacher second. The self-identity of undergraduate music students, and hence their concept of success, is primarily rooted in performance – either in their own artistic performances or having their compositions performed. Surprisingly, despite the long history of piano teaching in Canada, the Universities of Toronto and Ottawa are the only two programs in the country to offer graduate level studies specifically in piano pedagogy, rather than piano performance or more generalized music education. This may be reflective of a perceived hierarchy of career, with performing at the top and teaching further down. The lack of dedicated piano pedagogy programs implies that this field not taken seriously and not worth studying, which is

surprising based on the rate at which performance graduates teach. Bennett (2009) found that 97% of the students completing a performance degree expected to have a portfolio career in which teaching played a part, and that those who were already working as performers spent 87% of their time teaching. This is in comparison to just 1.1% of core course time devoted to teaching during their degree. In addition, Roberts (1991) demonstrates that music *education* students view themselves primarily as musicians rather than teachers, which leads to a conflict in the development of their teacher role identity. These discrepancies suggest that there is a significant barrier to teachers developing their own self-identity, particularly "if being a teacher is part of their concept of having failed as a performer" (Garnett, 2014, p. 131). One answer towards establishing a pedagogy as a legitimate field of study is that "in order for musicians to see themselves as successful teachers, it is necessary for them to expand their sense of self-identity so that they are capable of defining success in relation to their students' development as well as in relation to artistic values" (Garnett, 2014, p. 140). It also calls into question the definition of a 'musician' and if music teachers fall within that scope. The results from previous studies and practical knowledge signifies a tension between being a musician and a teacher of music, and this is further perpetuated by the active 'rock star' imagery of performing musicians in comparison to the passive images of studio teachers.

Photo 11 – *Madame Sousatzka* (Schlesinger, 1988).

Images presented in our daily lives are not only shaped by what we do, but shape how we do it. The images offered in this brief discussion show notable contrasts: a performer versus a teacher identity, a professional versus a hobbyist image, a nurturing versus intense lesson environment, or females teaching elementary lessons versus males teaching advanced students. These visual representations of piano teachers suggest that becoming a piano teacher is not necessarily desirable, that it may be viewed as a fallback plan, and that teaching is not usually included in the definition of being a musician. Given the narrow definition of who qualifies as a 'musician', the infrequency at which pedagogy is studied relative to performance, and the lack of programs to set music teaching apart as a distinguished profession, it is unsurprising that piano teachers are often poorly represented in images. More specifically, capturing the glamorous concert artist is simply much more inviting that photographing a teacher 'in the trenches': concert

artists take centre stage in flowing gowns and tuxedos under the spotlight while teachers work primarily alone behind closed doors on Sonatinas and weak hand positions. It seems that the initial hypothesis was correct and women are more strongly represented than men, that a narrow range of ethnicities are represented, and that individual reading-based lessons in the classical tradition still persist. One additional, overall observation is that images only seemed to capture the teacher and student, and parents were never seen in any part of the piano lessons.

There are a number of questions which arise after viewing these images. If one's training is as a performing musician, are the qualifications really in place to become an effective teacher? Why do women typically take on teaching roles while men dominate performance roles? How can images communicate a high standard of learning without perpetuating the historically elitist nature of private music instruction? What are the implications of such a narrow representation of ethnicities? If teaching is captured in images as a 'back up plan', does this normalize the problem? If teaching is viewed as an unregulated profession, how can it establish itself as a dignified place of scholarship within the academy? If one is faced with images which determine that teaching is at maximum a home hobby for failed performers, then teachers, scholars, and society may never realize the importance of this work.

Images capture a part of someone's identity. They also construct others' identities. One final, important idea from Judith Butler (1999) is that identity is performative: identity is "an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 1999, p. 177). For example, the piano teacher wearing a jean jacket, with music scattered around their studio, holding a cold cup of coffee performs to others who they are and what they believe is important. Since images represent someone in the action of performing their identity, they become powerful points of

communication. What is of crucial importance is the cyclical nature of identity construction – the push and pull between the self and society – and the extent to which "media ideals become such a central aspect of personal identity" (Dittmar, 2009, p. 5). The problem of feminine hobbyist pedagogy may be perpetuated if teachers incorporate that sociocultural norm, as seen through images, into their identity. However, studying representations of piano teachers in the media with a critical eye can provide "a stimulus for self-interrogation that can sharpen our professional identities as teachers by providing the contextual, historical, and political background that makes self-interpretations more meaningful and identity more complete" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 130 – 131). Developing a strong but reflexive self-identity as a piano teacher is important because who we think we are influences what we do, and how we perform ourselves in the daily world is a reflection of who we believe we *are*.

This short discussion is only the beginning of an exploration on media portrayal of piano teacher identity, but important to illuminate the tensions within the discourse. Although this paper opened with a description of a highly rigid, elderly teacher who had used the same piano books her entire career, the photos suggest somewhat the opposite. Piano teachers are sometimes portrayed in images as smiling, gentle females who are attentive and perhaps uncritical to a fault. Other times, they are represented as stern concert artists rather than teachers. The common thread amongst the majority of the photos presented here is that teachers are shown actively engaging with their students in a dynamic, student-centred environment rather than a passive or even abusive engagement sometimes found in previous centuries. Nevertheless, this discussion has highlighted some important inconsistencies behind the commonly held images in peoples' minds, and urges institutions to create a truer representation of piano teaching in the 21st century.

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