

CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTS OF ART EDUCATION

Original article

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Two Concepts of the Electronic Keyboard and Ways to Develop Musical Art and Education

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Abstract. Since the 1980s, electronic keyboards have become widespread in everyday music-making worldwide. This has created a demand for instruction, resulting in numerous teaching methods, training courses, and graded skill requirements for beginners.

Many music colleges and universities in Western countries offer electronic keyboard programmes. Both amateur and professional training emphasise jazz, pop, and rock styles, along with interactive features (auto-accompaniment, arpeggiators, etc.) that rely on the rhythmic ostinato typical of popular music. Professional artists also use these interactive modes, which limits the instrument's presence on the philharmonic stage. The dominant Western concept of the electronic keyboard can be described as applied – it aims to involve young people in the music industry, where mass musical culture prevails. Russia, however, has developed a different academic concept, focused on developing music in its highest artistic forms.

Its key features are:

- priority of original sound material of electronic music;
- reliance on three-part communication (composer → performer → listener);
- pedagogical interpretation of interactive modes;
- emphasis on the musician's technical mastery;
- use of classical and original repertoire.

While the first concept has made electronic keyboards widely accessible in amateur music-making and popular genres, the second can turn these instruments into worthy successors of their mechanical predecessors, thereby giving new impetus to the development of musical art.

Keywords: electronic keyboard, music education, philharmonic concert, mass culture, academic music.

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Две концепции клавишного синтезатора и пути развития музыкального искусства и образования

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Резюме. Клавишные синтезаторы, начиная с 80-х гг. прошлого века, получили широкое распространение в музыкальном быту по всему миру. Возникла потребность в обучении игре на них, что вызвало появление множества учебных пособий, курсов обучения и уровневых требований к формированию творческих навыков начинающих учеников.

Многие музыкальные колледжи и ВУЗы стран Запада также ведут обучение студентов по клавишным синтезаторам. При этом при обучении как любителей, так и профессионалов акцент делается на стилистике джазовой, поп- и рок-музыки, использовании интерактивных режимов, позволяющих опираться на свойственную этой музыке ритмическую оstinatность. Профессиональные артисты также используют интерактивные режимы игры на клавишных синтезаторах, что ограничивает возможности их применения на филармонической сцене.

В целом, доминирующую в странах Запада концепцию клавишного синтезатора можно обозначить как *прикладную*, нацеленную на вовлечение молодых людей в «музыкальную индустрию» с характерным для нее доминированием массовой музыкальной культуры. Между тем, в России сложилась иная концепция этого инструмента, которую можно охарактеризовать как *академическую*, нацеленную на развитие музыки в ее высших художественных проявлениях.

Ее особенности: приоритет оригинального звукового материала электронной музыки; опора на трехзвенную коммуникацию: композитор – исполнитель – слушатель; педагогическая трактовка интерактивных режимов игры и значимость технического мастерства музыканта-исполнителя; опора на классический и оригинальный репертуар.

И если первая концепция послужила основой для широкого распространения клавишных синтезаторов в любительском музицировании и массовых жанрах, то вторая способна сделать эти инструменты достойными преемниками их механических предшественников и тем самым дать новый импульс развитию музыкального искусства.

Ключевые слова: клавишный синтезатор, музыкальное образование, филармонический концерт, массовая культура, академическая музыка

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1. Introducing Musicians to Playing the Electronic Keyboard

The electronic keyboard (EKB) has firmly established itself in everyday musical practice. This is illustrated by export data from China, the world's largest musical instrument manufacturer. In 2024, China exported 6,944,350 EKBs versus 21,475 upright pianos (Upright pianos, 2024) and 3,856 grand pianos (Grand pianos, 2024) (total 25,331 acoustic instruments). Thus, for every acoustic keyboard exported from China, approximately 274 electronic ones were shipped. Globally, the electronic keyboard has significantly displaced the acoustic piano, which had dominated household music-making for over two centuries.

Since the 1980s, when digital keyboards began being mass-produced, numerous teaching courses, methods, and manuals have appeared. This is natural: mass music education is directly linked to everyday practice.

One of the earliest and most influential courses was the Yamaha Keyboard Course (Japan). It aims to introduce the widest possible audience to electronic music-making, typically in groups. Two age categories are targeted: 6–7 years (Junior Play For Keeps) and 9–99 years (Play For Keeps) (Yamaha Music Foundation, n.d.). The course focuses on appealing popular repertoire, allowing students to immediately hear a musically satisfying result. Technical elements (hand position, positional playing, coordination, sight-reading, singing, listening, ensemble playing, arranging and improvisation) are also covered.

The course introduces two special terms: **Keyboard-Style** – technique using interactive modes (auto-accompaniment, arpeggiator, etc.), which facilitates playing and produces a pop-music sound;

Piano-Style – traditional piano technique for those who value continuity with acoustic instruments. A hybrid (approx. 70% piano-style / 30% keyboard-style) is also common.

The Yamaha course became a model for many "from scratch" methods. In the USA, popular manuals by M. Manus, W.A. Palmer, and others appeared:

- Alfred's Basic Electronic Keyboard Course (Palmer et al., 1986) – basic notation, technique, multitimbrality, auto-accompaniment.
- Alfred's Basic Chord Approach to Electronic Keyboards (Palmer et al., 1989) – accompanying songs using letter-coded chords, without full notation.
- Alfred's Teach Yourself to Play Electronic Keyboard (Manus et al., 1987) – self-directed learning from zero to simple pieces and songs.

In Western Europe, similar manuals emerged:

- K. Baker (UK): The Complete Keyboard Player (Baker, 1984) – playing popular songs with auto-accompaniment (pop, rock, ballads).
- S. Walker (UK): Electronic Keyboard Basics 1 (Walker, 1998) – right-hand melody, left-hand chords with auto-accompaniment.
- U. Bye (Germany): Keyboard spielen – mein schönstes Hobby (Bye, 2021).

- D. Roux (France): Coup de Pouce – Méthode débutant Clavier arrangeur (Roux, 2009).

In Asia, following the Yamaha course, local textbooks appeared:

- China: Mai Ziyang & Wang Leijia (Mai & Wang, 2011), Zhang Yao (Zhang, 2020).
- South Korea: Dara Editorial Department (Dara Editorial Department, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

The rapidly expanding global market for keyboard instruction led to the need for standardised skill levels. This task was taken up by **Trinity College London** (a non-governmental examination body). Since 2003, Trinity has offered graded exams in electronic keyboard. Teaching is not provided; candidates may study at institutions, with private teachers, or independently.

Assessment criteria include:

- Fluency & accuracy – rhythmic precision, correct realisation of notation.
- Technical facility – ability to operate digital features.
- Communication & interpretation – convincing artistic interpretation and audience engagement (Trinity College London, 2023).

There are nine levels (Initial to Grade 8). Grades 1–3 cover basic notation and simple playing skills. Grades 4–5 add reading harmonic notation and selecting appropriate auto-accompaniment patterns. Grades 6–8 require confident stage performance, sight-reading, and improvisation. The highest level (Grade 8) is roughly comparable to a graduate of a Russian children's music school.

Trinity also issues diplomas:

- **ATCL** (Associate) – approximately first-year bachelor level.
- **LTCL** (Licentiate) – final-year bachelor level.
- **FTCL** (Fellowship) – master's level (Trinity College London, n.d.).

These diplomas do not confer academic degrees, as Trinity is not a state educational institution. The exams emphasise popular genres (jazz, pop, rock, funk) and the ability to read chord symbols and use auto-accompaniment. In January 2026, Trinity launched a Rock & Pop diplomas track (Trinity College London, 2026).

China introduced a similar grading system (10 grades) developed by professors of the Central Conservatory of Music (Zhang, 2016). These materials emphasise classical and national repertoire, student motivation, and stylistic diversity.

Thus, the Western "applied" concept focuses on mass amateur music-making, group learning, auto-accompaniment, and popular styles. Some modification has been introduced by Chinese educators, who give more attention to classical and national repertoire.

2. Specifics of Professional Training on Electronic Keyboards

In China and other Asian countries (following Japan), the **Yamaha Electone** – a two-manual electronic organ with pedalboard – has gained a place in music education. The Electone is a stage instrument, not a home instrument. International competitions have been held since 1964 (Yamaha, 2025). It serves as a

bridge between mass and professional education in electronic music.

In Japan, China, and South Korea, the Electone is taught as a separate specialisation (Electronic Organ) (Senzoku Gakuen College of Music, n.d.), whereas single-manual EKBs are included in programmes such as Contemporary Instruments, Applied Music, Jazz/Pop/Rock, Composition, Arranging, Music Technology, Sound Engineering, etc.

In the USA, EKB instruction occurs within courses like Synth/Programming Lab, Commercial Music Keyboard, Music Technology (Berklee College of Music, n.d.). Keyboard skills are typically divided into five levels: Foundation, Core (I-II), Intermediate, Advanced, Capstone. The final goal is a specialist who can perform, arrange, improvise, set up equipment, record, and mix.

In Western Europe, as in the USA, EKB teaching combines performance, sound design, and music technology. It is usually integrated into one of three tracks:

- Jazz / Pop / "Contemporary Performance" (keyboardist in an ensemble);
- Composition / Electronic Composition / Sound Arts (live electronics, multimedia);
- Music Technology / Producing / DAW-based studio work (Bern University of the Arts, n.d.).

R. Cremata notes: "Student-centred popular music education demands teacher relinquishment of power. It also challenges facilitators to foster sonic spaces while support[ing] notions of democracy, plurality and diversity" (Cremata, 2017,

75). The profession of electronic keyboardist is predominantly linked to jazz and pop music (R&B, funk, fusion, etc.), with emphasis on interactive modes, rhythmic grooves, chord charts, improvisation, and ensemble playing. Graduates face no employment problems due to the large popular music market.

3. The Electronic Keyboard on the Philharmonic Stage

How are these instruments faring on the philharmonic stage – the traditional arena for high-level musical art?

Western philharmonics (Paris, Berlin, Szczecin) have hosted such electronic keyboard stars as Jean-Michel Jarre (space music, memorable melodies, ostinato rhythms), Klaus Schulze (meditative ambient), Kraftwerk ("machine music"), and Tangerine Dream (rhythmic ostinato for inner contemplation). Contemporary successors include Nils Frahm, Max Richter, Hania Rani, Ryuichi Sakamoto. Common features: blending electronic and acoustic sounds, extended durations, minimalistic ostinato, often supplemented by light, video, and graphics – turning the hall into a "sound theatre".

However, this music is not academic. Improvisation often dominates, with no written scores. Many of these artists are not composers or performers in the classical sense, but improvisers – modern troubadours. The question arises: can such art compete with academic music, which rests on three-part communication (composer → performer → listener)? Since the historical shift from two-part (improviser → listener) to three-part communication, improvisers have been

moved away from the forefront of musical art.

Nevertheless, Western philharmonics also host "Contemporary", "New Music", "Late Night", and "Crossover" concerts, where the public is willing to listen to improvisations built with loopers, arpeggiators, multipads, and sequencers. The musical quality of such products is significantly lower than that of academic concerts, and this does not enhance the reputation of electronic keyboards.

4. Ways to Raise the Status of Electronic Keyboards in Musical Art and Education

It sounds paradoxical: electronic keyboards, with a century-old history and sound potential far exceeding that of mechanical instruments, have not yet achieved equal status. What must be done to raise that status and bring them onto the philharmonic stage as full participants in high-level academic music?

1. *Focus on virtual space and original sound generation* – the true specificity of electronic music, unattainable with mechanical instruments.
2. *Adhere to three-part communication* (composer → performer → listener) – possibly also including a sound engineer and a sound creator (timbral designer), roles that the performer may assume. This is why the computer, which reduces communication to two-part (musician → listener), cannot compete with a keyboard on the concert stage.
3. *Minimise or abandon interactive modes* (looper, arpeggiator, multipad, sequencer, etc.) in professional

concerts. These should be seen as pedagogically valuable (motivating beginners), not as defining the instrument's identity. Their use on stage lowers artistic quality and shifts the style towards mass culture – both contrary to academic tradition. Virtuosity matters: "Liszt or Rachmaninoff-level" keyboardists will always outperform those who merely press buttons.

4. *Rely on classical repertoire*, maintaining continuity with academic traditions. "The principle of focusing on the values of musical art emphasises the organic connection of music with philosophy, emphasises the spiritual, moral and aesthetic, ideological, cognitive significance of musical works" (Smyrnova et al., 2019, 2082).
5. *Build an original repertoire* for the electronic keyboard – works that can be interpreted by different performers. This is a key sign of a concert instrument's high status.

These principles are elaborated in the author's monograph (Krasilnikov, 2008) and teaching method (Krasilnikov, 2011), which have been implemented in many Russian general and supplementary music education institutions (children's music schools, children's art schools). No reduction in artistic quality is observed. From the first lessons, students are immersed in electronic sound through virtual acoustics and original timbres. The student is positioned primarily as a performer, in line with academic tradition. Interactive modes are treated as pedagogical tools to motivate children. Auto-accompaniment patterns are

custom-made to match original recordings. Repertoire includes folk, classical, and the best examples of modern academic and mass genres – low-quality pop/rock are excluded. Russian composers collaborate with teachers to create original works for the electronic keyboard.

Thus, in Russia, teaching the electronic keyboard is based on academic traditions. Extending this approach to higher education levels will naturally produce concert performers capable of appearing solo or in ensembles on the philharmonic stage.

5. Conclusion

Thus, alongside the Western **applied** concept of the electronic keyboard (aimed at involving young people in the music industry with its dominance of mass culture), Russia has developed an **academic** concept (aimed at developing music in its highest artistic manifestations).

The first concept starts from preset sounds and interactive modes. The second treats the electronic instrument primarily as a source of new sound material that

complements the traditional component of musical art.

If the first concept has made electronic keyboards widespread in everyday music-making and popular genres, the second can make these instruments worthy successors of their mechanical predecessors, open the doors of philharmonic halls to them, and thereby give new impetus to the development of musical art.

The classic of electronic music **Eduard Artemyev (1937–2022)**, who highly appreciated the artistic potential of the electronic keyboard, supported the development of electronic music pedagogy in Russia. His words sound as a call to action:

"The enormous sound resources built into the synthesizer remain untapped <...> Especially in popular music. For me, one important rule applies: the instrument must be overcome. What the manufacturer offers is only a DEMO – the tip of an iceberg of huge possibilities that are revealed only through constant work" (Artemyev, 2020, 99–100).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Authors' Contributions

Krasilnikov I. M.: conceptualization; methodology; writing – review & editing, data curation; methodology; investigation; validation; writing – original draft preparation.

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