

Anime Piano Tales: Imaginative Storytelling Through Music

A Paper Submitted by

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Table of Contents

Statement on the use of AI.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Literature Review.....	7
Related Research.....	11
Methodology.....	14
Lesson Plan Summary Chart.....	16
Results.....	17
Conclusion.....	22
Bibliography.....	23
Appendix.....	26
Questions for Students.....	26
Information Sheet for Teachers.....	28
In-Class Activities.....	29
Lesson Plans.....	32
Journal Entries.....	44
Questions for Teachers/Answers.....	58
Group Discussion with Class/Answers.....	62
Students' Scripts.....	64
Consent Form.....	75

Statement on the use of AI

This paper contains the limited use of AI to double-check grammar and sentence structures. I mainly rely on my own intuition and a thesaurus to edit the paper, but I used an AI when I needed a second opinion. Usually, the way I write is that I would type everything out first, and then go back and edit it at a later date. The program that was used is ChatGPT, and the main prompt I used is “Is this good?:” followed by the sentence. It should be noted that at times, I reject the suggestions offered by ChatGPT. Everything else is my own thoughts and work, as I have prepared for this project over the summer break to ensure a smooth experience. In fact, the earliest conception for this project was back in December of 2024, when I discussed the possibility of applying for the Ontario Graduate Scholarship and needed to come up with a project for my second year of study with my supervisor.

Introduction

Anime is an animation style that originates in Japan. This style of animation is known for its colourful graphics and expressive character designs (Hellerman 2024). Many anime series are often adapted from comic books called “manga” (Clements et al. 2015). There is no singular dominant artistic style, but they all have a similar style that makes them recognizable (Hellerman 2024). Within anime itself, there are many different genres of films, such as comedy, fantasy, romance, etc. One anime series could be a comedy set during the Cold War, while another could be a romance set in a fantasy world.

Anime is becoming increasingly popular as demand for it has increased in recent years (Fischer and Flynn 2022). Part of the reason is that the storytelling is so diverse, meaning that there is something for everyone (Diffey 2025). For example, readers may be familiar with *Pokémon*, which is catered towards children. Anime shows such as *Attack on Titan* are aimed at adults, while *Your Lie in April* is made with musicians in mind. While anecdotal, many netizens and friends said that during the COVID-19 lockdown, they had a chance to explore new genres, and that’s how they got into anime. At the same time, anime music has also seen a surge in popularity due to its association with anime shows (Spotify 2018). When most people think of anime music, they typically think of the anime opening theme. The anime opening is meant to be iconic to grab viewers’ attention (Nazaré 2023). With this also came the rise of anime piano music as fans wanted to play their favourite anime songs on the piano (Zhai 2024). In my previous research, I defined anime piano music as: “any piano music that has an anime origin” (Zhai 2024, 46).

When I was younger, I discovered anime piano music through a friend, and ever since, I have been a huge fan of it. I would listen to the genre on a daily basis, and I was particularly fond of Animenz, an arranger who often blends anime and classical music aesthetics. In the second year of my undergraduate studies, I took *HMU323 Popular Music Issues and Exchanges* and wrote my final paper on anime music. I am still grateful to Allison Sokhil, the course instructor, because her decision to let us write whatever we wanted for our final project set off a chain reaction that continues to this day. This project inspired me to pursue TMU499 independent study during my fourth year, supervised by Professor Norbert Palej. I was able to produce a 186-page paper that was published on TSpace, a research poster, a 1-hour public presentation and a website. Notable highlights included a survey involving the piano faculty at the University of Toronto and an interview with Animenz. This project won the Patricia and Peter Shanon Wilson Undergraduate Research Prize and inspired me to continue researching this topic during my graduate studies. This led me to my second research project, which was how potential performance practices and considerations associated with Animenz may influence the musical engagement of a young adult pianist. I established a set of performance practices for Animenz's arrangements, similar to how there are rules to performing Chopin or Baroque music. I presented my research at the Faculty of Music research showcase through a research poster, a lecture recital at Walter Hall, and at the CFMTA Conference in Montreal. This last one was particularly memorable because I was showing my research to a much broader and international crowd.

It would seem natural for me to go from working with an adult student to working with children. Usually, anime shows are associated with a much older and more mature audience. However, some anime shows are aimed towards children, such as Pokémon. Other examples include *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, animated by Studio Ghibli, which is known for its work on classic children's anime films. The studio was founded by Miyazaki Hayao, Takahata Isao and Suzuki Toshio in 1985 (Bauer 2019). Personally, I have always been a fan of the soundtrack and songs featured in their films. At the same time, I have been collecting anime piano books, and one of them features elementary-level piano arrangements of songs from Studio Ghibli films. One key area I want to focus on is storytelling because in my previous research, I found that many connections can be made between the anime film and the piano arrangement itself. My current project will investigate how elementary piano students engage with storytelling through their performance of piano arrangements from Studio Ghibli films. I also hope to explore how this experience differs from learning classical pieces, whether the teachers are able to utilize their students' imaginations, and the students' level of engagement when learning these arrangements. By researching this topic, I hope to demonstrate the pedagogical value of anime piano music repertoire and illustrate how imaginative performances can be an enriching experience for young elementary pianists. It is also part of my broader goal of advocating for anime piano music and demonstrating its immense musical potential.

Literature Review

Current research on anime piano music is limited. My original undergraduate paper from 2024 explores the topic from a foundational perspective since, at the time, there was no research on anime piano music. My paper from 2025 looks into possible performance practices and how my practicum student engages with them. The only other known person who has researched this topic is Heather Gillis, who explored the topic from a piano pedagogy and historical perspective. In both of our research, Gillis and I imply the use of storytelling in anime piano music. Gillis discusses how an anime fan often wants to reexperience an anime film again through the music and their imagination. She uses the term *sekai* (世界), which means world in Japanese, to describe how anime fans want to reexperience their favourite anime film. At the same time, tapping into a piano student's imagination can be hard, but an anime fan's interest is sustained through their imagination. This means that we could tap into a piano student's imagination through anime piano music, essentially asking them to create the world of their favourite anime through their performance (Gillis 2021, 2022).

In my previous research from my undergraduate studies, I argued that pianists should take into account the story of an anime series and incorporate various aspects of it into their playing (Zhai 2024). For example, a pianist's performance could represent a certain character, a specific moment, or even the overall story from the anime series (Zhai, 2025). When I learned Hikaru Nara last year for my lecture recital, I tried to invoke the main character's emotional journey and the transition from a monotone to a more colourful life. At the same time, during my interview with Animenz, he mentioned how he would incorporate the story of the anime show into his transcription and

arrangement whenever possible (Zhai, 2024). Fast forward to my graduate research project, one of the possible performance practices I came up with was storytelling (Zhai 2025).

“Anime arrangers/transcribers may take into account the story of the anime and incorporate it into the music (Zhai 2024). For example, when Animenz was arranging *Gurenge* from Demon Slayer, he composed certain passages to mimic the flow of water because the main character used water-based attacks (Animenz 2022a). Another example is Animenz’s arrangement of *Hikaru Nara*, where the transitions are supposed to represent the main protagonist’s friends helping him see new colours in life (Animenz 2022b).

Based on these examples, pianists need to take into account the anime’s story and have their performance reflect it. Classical pianists often aim to tell a story through their playing, but this can be challenging when most pieces lack a predefined narrative. However, with anime piano music, there is the potential for effective and in-depth storytelling since most arrangements are associated with an anime. Being expressive, playing with emotions, tone production, mood, colour, and setting the atmosphere is even more important within this context (Zhai 2025, 23-24).”

Storytelling is an essential part of performing anime piano music. However, these papers focused on advanced repertoire rather than elementary level arrangements. Due to this, I explored other studies that looked into the use of storytelling in other genres. Interestingly, the results remained limited despite the broadening of my search, which suggests that storytelling in general might be an area lacking substantial scholarship. However, I did find three sources that shared several overlapping themes.

The first theme is that the use of storytelling in music lessons encourages creativity and the use of the student’s imagination. Storytelling forces students to think more deeply about the music and practice more intentionally. It allows students to move beyond technical proficiency and encourages them to engage with the more creative and spontaneous side of music (Ho 2024). From Koike’s perspective:

“By associating each musical notation with linguistic sounds, performers can infuse life into each written note of the music and imagine every note has a meaning to express to others (Koike 2025, 377).

This creative approach also makes instructions more accessible and approachable since they are explained in simpler terms. One student in Koike’s (2025) study said that the use of storytelling brought the music to life as they came up with a story for their piece. In fact, they were able to come up with a conversation based on a section they were working on (Koike 2025). Wu’s study echoes this sentiment, finding that the use of storytelling allowed the student to use their imagination. It also immerses students in the music and reinforces what they learned, creating a stronger connection to it. One student in Wu’s study said that this learning approach is fun and made a deeper impression on them, allowing the music to be played more easily. A parent also noted a significant improvement in their two daughters’ musical creativity (Wu et al. 2025).

Another prominent theme is that storytelling promotes expressiveness and confidence among students. In Ho’s study, they found that the use of storytelling elevated expressiveness in students’ playing. For example, examining the accidentals and articulations helped students play with greater nuance. They were able to link creativity to expressiveness, increasing their students’ confidence and self-expression. Ho recommends that instead of treating expressiveness as a final step, it should be part of the learning process. This is because many students focus on technique first and then work on storytelling after, which makes expressiveness a secondary focus (Ho 2024). In another study, Koike found that students were able to utilize storytelling in their music lessons, which helped improve their musicality and performance. Storytelling contextualizes musical phrases and, in the words of Koike (2025), storifies the music,

allowing for a better understanding of the structure and development of the music.

Finally, in Wu's study, storytelling was incorporated as one of several exercises used to help students learn *Peter and the Wolf*. One student, who was initially scared of dotted notes, was able to play them correctly by portraying the role of the grandfather in the piece. Another student was able to play staccato properly after portraying one of the characters' joyful expressions. In fact, by linking slurs, accents and arpeggios to the portrayal of emotional expression associated with characters in *Peter and the Wolf*, students were more likely to play them correctly (Wu et al. 2025).

The final theme is that storytelling deepens a student's understanding of a piece and helps them become more aware of details. Ho states that transitioning from listening to the music to engaging with it through storytelling moves the student toward deeper musical understanding and expression. It enhances their technique, deepens their connection to the music, and provides a comprehensive and enriching musical experience. There is also a deeper understanding of tonality, form, articulation and dynamics (Ho 2024). This finding is also echoed by Koike (2025), who states that the use of storytelling forces students to contextualize each phrase and see how they interact with each other. It forces students to be more aware of the transitions, the organization, and the development of the musical phrases (Ho 2024). Finally, in Wu's study, one student found that the multiple exercises they used, including storytelling, helped them develop a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of musical concepts, techniques and form. It also strengthened their analytical skills and fostered a greater appreciation of different perspectives. One parent also noted their child's increased attention to musical details after the lessons (Wu et al. 2025).

Related Research

In terms of related research, my research project from the previous year can provide some useful insights. During the 2024-2025 school year, I taught an adult student for my piano pedagogy practicum who was interested in learning *Unravel*. I developed various performance practices so the experience can feel authentic for my student. These include storytelling, text interpretation and connecting musical gestures to visual scenes from the anime show. My student said that the experience was very creative and imaginative. He also felt that he could relate more to the music and better understand the overall emotional tone of the arrangement because of the additional musical material. In addition, he was more engaged with his anime arrangement than with his classical pieces, and many of the skills and concepts he learned carried over (Zhai 2025). For my current project, I plan to continue this approach, but focus mainly on storytelling, since some of the other concepts are too abstract for elementary piano students. However, my previous study provides a good reference for what I should do and expect. I hope to engage the students' imagination and make the process enjoyable for them.

Another research study I found informative was by Wei Chen Wu and her colleagues. They explored interdisciplinary approaches by combining music and other art forms to create an immersive learning experience. They refer to this process as “*Cross-art*,” and they implement it using Prokofieff and Haacken’s “*Peter and the Wolf*”. Storytelling was one of the activities they used, along with others such as dance-like movement and listening, creating a fusion of different activities. Each student was given a character from the piece, and the activities were based on them. They were asked to

embody the character and apply it to their performance. This holistic approach provided many benefits such as improved finger dexterity, better music literacy, deeper understanding of musical concepts such as form, more accurate articulation, and greater confidence (Wu et al. 2025). The main takeaway is that storytelling, combined with other activities, may better reinforce student learning. For my project, I will conduct other activities with my students that will support their imagination and storytelling goals.

Finally, there is Weatherly Ho's research, which uses storytelling to help with expressiveness in string players. They used storytelling as a "decoding" method to understand articulations, dynamics, form, and tonality. It forces students to engage with the music on a more expressive level. One student came up with a story about a young boy with an injured leg attending a new school. Another student came up with a story about an adventure and a quest for treasure. The storytelling exercises helped build confidence, increase self-expression and utilize the students' imagination (Ho 2025). For my project, students are free to determine how detailed they want to be. I also hope that this project can help them in other ways, such as building confidence in their playing.

While not research-related, I do feel the need to mention a recent conversation I had with Heather Gillis. She notes that a common problem in elementary anime piano repertoire is that it is often significantly more difficult than its level suggests. She suggests that teachers should arrange the music themselves. Some tips she provided were to use simple meters, limit key changes to once per arrangement, and transpose the music to avoid complex key signatures. She did mention that the Zen-On Studio Ghibli books, the one I will be using for this project, is a fantastic resource (Heather

Gillis, pers. comm., November 2, 2025). At the same time, she also provided me with copies of her own anime piano arrangements, which are slightly easier than the Zen-On Studio Ghibli Books I will be using. Based on this information, I will allow the students' private teacher to determine the best course of action for teaching their anime piano arrangements.

Methodology

I worked with 6 elementary piano students for 12 weeks from September 11 to December 11, 2025. Their ages range from 10 to 12 years old, and many of them have spent several years in the University of Toronto piano pedagogy program. However, we did have a new student this year, and she is a little more advanced than the rest of the group. These students make up the Piano Pedagogy Elementary E Class. I joined the program back in my 4th year of undergraduate studies, when they were known as the Elementary C class. This is my third year with them, so most of them are quite acquainted with me. For transparency purposes, I am getting paid, but this is unrelated to the study. This pay is related to my work as a teaching assistant and private instructor for the piano pedagogy program.

As for how this class was chosen for this project, I asked my teaching partner if I could conduct a research study with the class, and she agreed. We felt that the storytelling project would be a beneficial experience for the students. Each student chose a Studio Ghibli arrangement to perform from the Zen-On Studio Ghibli Recital Repertoire Books 1 and 2. They were tasked with telling the anime film's story through their playing. I demonstrated through my own playing how this can be achieved through various activities throughout the semester.

In order to help them, I conducted several activities to help foster their imaginations. One of them is piano charades, where students pick a random prompt, such as a volcano erupting, and they try to imitate it on the piano. Another activity involves me reading a children's book while the students create sounds on the piano that correspond to the events in the book. For the first 8 weeks, we did these activities

to help foster their imagination and storytelling. At the same time, I played their arrangements for them in class so they could hear what they sounded like. Students were also tasked with watching the anime film their arrangement is from, so they could have a better understanding of the context. After that, we spent some time analyzing their arrangements and how they could incorporate the story of their anime film into their performance. We also conducted several dress rehearsals for their upcoming December recital. They were asked to fill out a sheet of paper with questions about their anime film, and they shared their answers during the recital. The student's private teachers were provided with copies of the lesson plans, activities, and an information sheet about the project. They also had complete control over their approach to teaching their students' arrangements. For a more detailed look and the schedule, I have included my lesson plans, a journal, and teaching activities in the appendix section of this paper.

For data collection, I took brief notes on my iPad and later compiled them into short journal entries. I interviewed the private lesson teachers and conducted a short group discussion with the class in January to gather both of their perspectives on this project. The students' final recital was recorded, and copies of each student's script were saved for me to review at a later date.

Lesson Plan Summary Chart

Weeks	Main Activities
Week 1	● Introduce the Anime Piano Tales Project ● Try making sounds based on the scenes from the anime film.
Week 2	● Play Spirited Away and talk about how I incorporated the story of the anime into my playing.
Week 3	● Play two of their arrangements and talk about them.
Week 4	● Play two of their arrangements and talk about them. ● Play piano charades.
Week 5	● Play two of their arrangements and talk about them. ● Play piano charades.
Week 6	● Read a children's book and have them come up with sounds on the piano.
Week 7	● Halloween bingo.
Break	Break
Week 8	● Music Jeopardy. ● Writing out their scripts.
Week 9	● Run through their arrangements.
Week 10	● Run through their arrangements and practice introducing them.
Week 11	● Run through their arrangements and practice introducing them.
Week 12	● Run through their arrangements and practice introducing them.
Recital	Recital

Results

Theme 1: Motivation and Engagement

Both teachers reported that their students were engaged and very motivated to learn their Studio Ghibli arrangement compared to their other pieces. This was also evident from my personal observations during the group lessons, as many students expressed interest in learning their Studio Ghibli arrangement. After the December recital, both teachers said that some of their students would continue working on their Studio Ghibli arrangement because they enjoy playing them.

From the students' perspective, the project was very engaging and enjoyable. One student was particularly excited when they found out we were working on Studio Ghibli arrangements. Many of them loved that one of their homework assignments involved watching the movie associated with their arrangement. All of them stated that they enjoyed playing their Studio Ghibli arrangement much more than the other piece they were working on. This is consistent with what the teachers said. In terms of the in-class activities, the students said they were fun but did not see how they connected to their performance of Studio Ghibli arrangements. After reflecting, I realized that I did not make the connection between the in-class activity and the goal of the project clear enough. Despite this, it is very clear that learning a Studio Ghibli arrangement was very engaging and motivating for the students.

Theme 2: Utilization of Imagination

Both teachers also reported that their students were able to utilize their imagination and creativity much more, despite some initial hesitation from some. The

students were able to better understand the music because there were visual elements and an actual story to follow. In fact, their conversations and the students' understanding of the music were much deeper and unique compared to other pieces they had worked with. This sentiment is also shared by Wu's study, which found that storytelling immerses students in the music and reinforces what they have learned, creating a closer connection to the music. (Wu et al. 2025). Koike's (2025) study also found that the use of storytelling brought the music to life for the students. From both teachers' perspectives, their students were able to incorporate the story of the film into their playing. In fact, one teacher noted that after discussing the story of the film with two of their students, they were able to learn it more quickly despite the difficulty of their arrangements.

Theme 3: Beneficial Learning

Both teachers stated that this project was beneficial to their students' piano education. One student was pushed to play more complex left-hand accompaniments, while others used the piece as reinforcement for techniques they already know. For example, one student was learning *A Town With an Ocean View* and *The Somersault King*. Both pieces contain a variety of different articulations and complement each other, helping develop the student's articulation skills. One teacher was also able to teach their student about thematic transformation, but they did not use that term when teaching it.

The use of storytelling, with gentle pushing from their teachers, also helped the students understand their arrangements better. It helped with their expressiveness and confidence. It also encouraged them to think about mood, atmosphere, and details,

rather than simply focusing on playing the correct notes. This is consistent with Ho's (2024) finding, as storytelling allows students to move beyond technical proficiency and encourages them to engage with the more creative and spontaneous side of music. At the same time, many other sources in the literature review discuss how storytelling encourages students to pay closer attention to the details in the music.

Theme 4: Contradictory Results

What's interesting is that from the students' perspective, they felt that they were unable to tell a story through their playing and found the task too complicated. Yet, they all said that they understood the task they were given for this project. However, they did feel that they were able to musically express themselves. This stands in contrast to the teachers' view that their students were able to tell a story through their playing. Especially when reviewing their scripts and all the evidence, all of the students were able to connect extra-musical material with different aspects of their playing. In addition to this, some students felt that they did not improve as pianists, while the teachers felt they did. These differences may be due to two reasons:

1. The students may simply be evaluating their work more critically than we realize.
We are often our own harshest critics, which may explain why they felt they could not tell a story through their playing despite the evidence saying otherwise.
2. It is also possible that they could be evaluating themselves with a different criteria than the one I am using.

When students were asked if they were able to use their imagination, the responses were mixed, with answers ranging from yes, no, and maybe. This stands in

contrast to their teachers, who felt that their students were able to use their imagination, albeit with some gentle pushing. The same responses were given when students were asked whether they felt they had improved as pianists. For those who said yes, it was because their arrangement is at the right level. For those who said no, it was because their arrangement was too easy. Finally, for those who said maybe, it was because their arrangement was too hard. This stands in contrast to their teachers, who felt that all their students had improved as pianists and that the Studio Ghibli arrangement was beneficial to their music education.

Theme 5: Storytelling

When students were given the task of storytelling, they either focused on a specific scene or a general theme. Students often think about the scene in which their arrangement appears in the film and what was happening during it when it played. For example, the student who played *My Neighbour Totoro* stated that their playing was bouncy like Totoro's belly and that the song appears when the main characters meet Totoro for the first time. When listening to the recital recording and reflecting back on our mock recitals, this student was able to consistently imitate this bounciness. In another example, two students were assigned two different arrangements from *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and they took into consideration the way Kiki flies in order to set their tempo and style. The student who played *A Town With an Ocean View* said that they played the opening of their arrangement gracefully and beautifully because that is how the film looked to them. In addition, the student who played *Path of The Wind* talked about how different sections of their arrangement align with parts of the film's story.

Altogether, this shows that elementary-level piano students are able to engage in storytelling in their performance. Many sources from the literature review discussed how storytelling helps increase a student's expressiveness in their playing. The fact that students were able to incorporate elements from the film into their playing is consistent with the literature review.

Theme 6: Definition of Storytelling

For me, this project raises an interesting question: "What is storytelling?" Initially, I came into this project thinking that storytelling meant telling a story from beginning to end. In fact, when I demonstrated my own example to the group class, I explained how I fully incorporated the story from *Spirited Away* into the arrangement *One Summer Day*. Yet for the students, only one of them came close to what I was doing, while the rest were thinking about a specific scene or a general theme. However, after analyzing the results, I realized that storytelling does not have to unfold in the traditional sense and can take on different forms. Each student was able to utilize their imagination and incorporate various aspects of the film into their performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project shows that elementary-level piano students are able to tell a story through their playing. Students often focus on a specific scene or a general theme to incorporate into their performance. Despite several students stating that they could not tell a story through their playing, the evidence suggests otherwise. At the same time, the Studio Ghibli arrangements were beneficial to the students' piano education, as some of them learned new concepts, were pushed to play harder accompaniment patterns, and consolidated their articulation skills. The arrangements were also engaging for them, and with some gentle pushing, the students were able to use their imagination and focus on the musical details. Most of the findings align with what the current literature says about the topic. This project demonstrates the pedagogical value of anime piano music repertoire and illustrates how imaginative performances can be an enriching experience for young elementary pianists.

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Appendix

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?
- What movie is your piece from?
- Why did you choose this piece?
- What is the story of the anime?

- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

Info Sheet for teachers.

Hello, my name is Steven Zhai. If you're receiving this sheet, it is because you're teaching a student in the UTPPP elementary E group class. This semester, we're doing an anime-themed class project, which is part of my 2nd-year piano pedagogy research. This project explores the use of anime piano repertoire, specifically Studio Ghibli arrangements for elementary-level students. I encourage you to incorporate some of the related performance practices in your lessons. There is a lot of room for interpretative freedom, so feel free to be creative. The two main focuses are how the visuals and story influences one's playing.

Visuals: How might the visuals of the film influence one's playing? Something as simple as colourful visuals could mean playing out more. If the song is associated with an energetic character, then your playing could reflect that. What is happening in the film when that song appears?

Story: There is the potential for effective in-depth storytelling in your students' playing since these songs are associated with a visual film. If there is a lot of drama going on in the film, your playing could be more dramatic. Could your student's playing reflect the development of the film's story? Or more simply, could something like birds chirping be reflected in more articulated notes?

This will likely be a learning experience for you, and I appreciate your participation. Feel free to take a lot of creative liberty in supporting your student's interpretation, as this is meant to be an imaginative experience.

Other things:

- Each student will give a brief talk before performing. They will receive a sheet with several questions, three of which ask about how the visuals, story, or other elements shaped their interpretation. They can respond to one, two, or all three and should be ready to demonstrate. Some may need help completing the questions.
- In class, we are doing activities to foster their imagination. For example, one of the games we are playing is piano charades, where the students are asked to create a sound on the piano based on a prompt. They will also be asked to narrate a story using a piano to imitate what is going on.

Piano Charades

A buzzing bee	An Elephant Stomp
A hopping bunny	A singing bird
A roaring lion	A slow turtle
A sneaky snake	A galloping horse
Rain falling	Thunderstorm
A tornado	Leaves falling
A car zooming by	An airplane taking off
A helicopter	Someone laughing
A dog barking	Fish swimming
Waves crashing	Waves crashing
A volcano erupting	A fairy flying

A robot walking	A rollercoaster ride
Fireworks	Snoring
Rocks falling down a hill	Hail falling
A breeze turning into strong wind	A police car's siren
Stars twinkling	A log floating down a river
A horse neighing	A cow mooing
A meteor streaking across the sky	Shivering from the cold

Thursday, September 18th, 6:30-7:15 PM

Song: *One Summer Day* from *Spirited Away*.

Story: The film *Spirited Away* follows a 10-year-old girl named Chihiro Ogino. She and her parents are moving to a new town when they stumble upon an abandoned amusement park. They went inside, but her parents accidentally ate food that was meant for spirits and were transformed into pigs. Subsequently, Chihiro discovered that she had entered the world of spirits, gods and strange creatures.

She meets Haku, a mysterious boy who helps her survive by telling her to go work at a bathhouse run by the witch Yubaba. Unfortunately, Yubaba steals people's names to keep control over them, so she took Chihiro's name and renamed her as Sen. Chihiro had to do hard labour and encounter strange spirits, but she learns courage and resilience while also searching for a way to save her parents.

Along the way, she discovered that Haku, the boy who saved her, is actually a river spirit who once saved her when she was younger. Chihiro breaks Yubaba's spell, restores Haku's real identity and passes Yubaba's final test. She manages to rescue her parents, who return to human form, and they leave the spirit world.

Connecting the Anime and Music:

1. The song appears 4 times in the anime, and some theorized that the song is supposed to represent the real world.¹ When I play this song, I try to give a homesick feeling. Chihiro is stuck in the spirit world, and she misses reality.
2. The introduction of the song is very distinct. I try to see it as Chihiro entering the spirit world.
 - a. FBE Chord = seeing the spirit world for the first time.
3. Ending of the piece: Leaving the spirit world.
 - a. Compare the beginning and the ending of the piece. Chord quality/harmonies.

¹ Source:

https://www.reddit.com/r/SpiritedAway/comments/tct47r/why_does_one_summer_day_play_4_times_in_the_movie/

Lesson Plans

Class: #1 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, September 11th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Worked with Sonatinas the previous year. • Somewhat aware of Anime. • Good elementary piano foundation.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Studio Ghibli Elementary Piano Recital Repertoire #1 & 2 • Studio Ghibli intermediate Piano Recital Repertoire #1 & 2 • iPad
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Goals

- Introduce students to anime, the class project, and the project itself.
- Have students explore the connection between visuals/story and sound.
- Have students choose their repertoire.

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- Ask the student if they know what an anime is.
- Ask if they have heard of Studio Ghibli and if they have a favourite one.
 - Ask the student to explain the story of one.
- Talk about the Anime Piano Tales Project (Research and UTPPP Class Project).

Main Activity (15 Minutes)

- Play a short scene from a Studio Ghibli Film (Or a favourite scene from a student's viewing)
- Demonstrates potential sounds on the piano to reflect the animations and what is happening in the scene.
 - (GOAL: Demonstrates connection between animations & sounds as well as story X sounds).
 - First [Link](#)
 - Second [Link](#)
- Have the student try it out.
 - (GOAL: Have students try out the above concept ^)

Wrapping Up (10 Minutes)

- Connect the activity to the project and the repertoire they will be playing.
- Have students choose one piece from the Studio Ghibli recital repertoire books.

Considerations

- Students will likely be shy or excited. Encourage the shy ones, but don't push them too hard.
- Let their piano teachers know what is happening and encourage them to explore the connection between visuals/story and sound.

Class: #2 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, September 18th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Studio Ghibli Elementary Piano Recital Repertoire #1 & 2 • Printed Sheet Music for students to follow along + Info Sheet. • iPad
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Goals

- Perform a Studio Ghibli piece and talk about how the story or visual animation informs my playing.

Introduction (2 Minutes)

- Reveal which pieces the students will be playing

Second Half (25 Minutes)

- Perform a Studio Ghibli Piece (will prepare myself)
 - Play *One Summer Day* from *Spirited Away*.
- Talk about how the story or visual animation influences my playing (Briefly).
 - Show trailer.
 - Ask students questions about the piece.

Wrapping Up (3 Minutes)

- Tell students their homework
- Sometimes, within the next few weeks, either watch the Studio Ghibli film associated with your piece, watch scenes from YouTube, or research the story.
 - Doing something similar to the Sonatina Introduction.
 - What is the story about?
 - How did you take into consideration the story of the film?
 - Be ready to play examples

Considerations

- Some students might be shy when playing piano charades.
- Share the activity with their piano teachers so they can try it in a private setting.

Class: #3 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, September 25th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Studio Ghibli Elementary Piano Recital Repertoire #1 & 2 • Printed Sheet Music for students to follow along + Info Sheet. • iPad
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Goals

- Perform a Studio Ghibli piece and briefly talk about it.
- One of the students is assigned this piece, so talk briefly to avoid spoiling it.
- Play the music so they know what it sounds like.

Main Activity (10 Minutes)

- Perform another Studio Ghibli Piece (will prepare myself)
 - *A Town with an Ocean View* from *Kiki's delivery service*
- Talk about how the story or visual animation influences my playing (Briefly).
 - Show Video
- Play My Neighbor Totoro for other students to hear.

Considerations

- Some students might be shy when playing piano charades.
- Share the activity with their piano teachers so they can try it in a private setting.

Class: #4 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, October 2nd, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Piano Charades
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Goals

- Perform two Studio Ghibli pieces so the students know what they sound like.
- Have students connect sounds on the piano with extra musical material and vice versa.

Main Activity (10 Minutes)

- Perform another two Studio Ghibli pieces.
 - Merry Go Round of Life and On a Clear Day

Piano Charades (20 Minutes)

- Do piano charades
- Do single prompts
- Depending on how it goes, you can either do mixing and matching or save it for another time.

Considerations

- Some students might be shy when playing piano charades.
- Share the activity with their piano teachers so they can try it in a private setting.

Class: #5 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, October 9th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Piano Charades
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Goals

- Perform two Studio Ghibli pieces so the students know what they sound like.
- Have students connect sounds on the piano with extra musical material and vice versa.

Main Activity (10 Minutes)

- Perform another two Studio Ghibli pieces.
 - The Path of the Wind and The Legend of Ashitaka

Piano Charades (20 Minutes)

- Do piano charades
- Do single prompts
- Depending on how it goes, you can either do mixing and matching or save it for another time.

Considerations

- Some students might be shy when playing piano charades.
- Share the activity with their piano teachers so they can try it in a private setting.

Class: #6

Time: 30 minutes

Date: Thursday, October 17th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Pianos • 2 children book
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Goals

- Get students to come up with a musical narration.

Main Activity (15 Minutes)

- Read a short children's book (Steven), and have the students come up with sounds.

Considerations

- Some students might be shy when doing this activity.
- Share the activity with their piano teachers so they can try it in a private setting.

Class: #7 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, October 23rd, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u>	<u>Resources</u>
• Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	• Pianos • 2 children book

HAWLOWEEN BINGO

Class: #8

Time: 30 minutes

Date: Thursday, November 6th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Paper with their questions • An iPad and a computer for them to search for information.
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Goal

- Have students fill out the paper with questions.

Main Activity (30 Minutes)

- Have students fill out questions on the paper.
- Let students use computers and iPads to answer questions.

Considerations

- Make sure their piano teachers are aware of the paper.
- If needed, their teachers can help them fill out the paper.
- One of the questions might require their input/help.

Class: #9 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, November 13th, 6:30-7:15 PM

- **Break from anime activity.**
- **Focus on music jeopardy and Theory**

Class: #10 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, November 20th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Paper with their answers
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Goals

- Rehearse Recital

Main Activity (20 Minutes)

- Have students rehearse their script and practice playing their piece in order.
 - (Similar to their sonatina from last semester)

If there is extra time

- Piano Charades

Class: #11 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, November 27th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Paper with their answers
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Goals

- Rehearse Recital

Main Activity (20 Minutes)

- Have students rehearse their script and practice playing their piece in order.
 - (Similar to their sonatina from last semester)

If there is extra time

- Piano Charades

Class: #12 **Time:** 30 minutes **Date:** Thursday, December 4th, 6:30-7:15 PM

<u>Prior knowledge of Students</u> • Aware of Anime • Working on their Studio Ghibli Piece.	<u>Resources</u> • Piano • Paper with their answers
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Goals

- Rehearse Recital

Main Activity (30 Minutes)

- Full rehearsal run through including their classical pieces.
- Have students rehearse their script and practice playing their piece in order.
 - (Similar to their sonatina from last semester)

If there is extra time

- Piano Charades

Journal Entry

September 11

This was the first day of class for the University of Toronto Piano Pedagogy Program E cohort. Once the students were settled, we reviewed scales and relative minors, as that was the last topic we had covered before the summer break. After that, I introduced the class to the Anime Piano Tales project. We went over what an anime is, what Studio Ghibli films are, and then a student who was familiar with one explained the story to the class. I told them that they were going to tell a story of a Studio Ghibli film through their performance. That's when I pulled out two elementary-level Studio Ghibli piano arrangement books. The students went through them and chose their top 3 pieces in case two of them had picked the same one. My teaching partner will make the final decision on their repertoire choice before revealing what they'll be playing next week.

In order to introduce them to the project, I played cooking scenes from two Studio Ghibli films and demonstrated how the piano could mimic the sounds in the scenes. I thought this would be relatable since they have likely seen their parents cook before. The students were able to mimic fire, water pouring, eating noise, bacon sizzling, talking, and clay pots banging. However, I noticed it was the same 3 students who were doing it, while the others were engaged but shy. I had a feeling this would happen, so I shared the lesson plan and teaching materials with their private teachers. This is because I want them to be aware of what we are doing in class, and they can try the activities during their private lessons. This way, shy students can participate from the privacy of their private lessons with their teachers.

September 18

During this class, we started with music theory review before we revealed which student was playing which Studio Ghibli piece. Next, I demonstrated what they would be doing with their assigned pieces by playing *One Summer Day* from *Spirited Away*. I gave them an information sheet that includes the film's story, the sheet music and an explanation of how I incorporated the story into my performance. I then explained the film's story and showed them the trailer so they have a visual reference. One thing that stood out was the presence of spiritual creatures, so I try to evoke a more spiritual sound in my playing. I proceeded to perform the piece for them.

After I finished playing, I asked them to describe the atmosphere, and they used words such as anticipation, dancing, sad, blissful, nature, chill and lofi. I started explaining the story of the anime again and how it informed my performance. For example, some have theorized that the piece is supposed to represent the real world, since it is played whenever the main character thinks about it. When I played the piece, during the more passionate parts, I tried to create a homesick feeling. At the same time, I pointed out that the chords in the beginning sound very distinct, but the harmonies aren't clear. This represents the main character entering the spirit world. The ending of this piece features wave-like chords going back and forth. Most importantly, the harmony is much clearer and brighter. This represents the main character leaving the spirit world. I played the chords from the introduction and ending side by side so they could hear the difference.

I also pointed out how there were two identical passages in the piece, but one of them ended with a dissonant chord, and the other ended with a major chord. The former

represents the main character's name being taken, hence the dissonant chord, and at the same time, the melody actually stalls and sits in place. Then there's this passage right after, which in my view represents the main character having the courage to carry on. It then leads to the second identical passage, where it ends on a major chord, which represents the main character remembering her name and saving her parents. I played the song again with my teaching partner narrating the story.

Once I finished, I asked the students whether my explanation made sense and if they had any questions. Surprisingly, they understood everything, which made me happy because it felt like I got through to them. At the end of the lesson, my teaching partner mentioned that she appreciated the analytical approach I took to explaining how I integrated the anime's story into my performance. She said that usually, they just focus on the notes and maybe two things from the movie, but she was impressed by how much I was able to integrate and how I was able to tell a story through my playing.

September 25

For this class, the Studio Ghibli-related lesson was short. I asked all the students to gather around the piano because I was going to play two of their pieces. Originally, I was supposed to do a full run-through with the piece *A Town with an Ocean View*. However, one of the students ended up choosing that piece, so I decided to do a condensed version of what I had planned because I wanted them to have their own ideas. I first showed them a live orchestral version of the piece, which featured a large projector screen at the back showing clips from the film. As the orchestra played, I asked the students to pay attention to what was being shown on the projector screen.

After we finished watching the video, I pointed out that on the projector screen, it showed the main character flying on their broom. Due to this, I try to imagine the main character flying as I play the piece. After I finished performing, I asked the students for their opinions, and one of them said it actually sounded like there was a town with an ocean view, and they could hear how some passages sounded like a person flying. I pointed out some ascending and descending passages where it sounded like a person was flying, and they agreed. Interestingly, the student who chose “*A Town with an Ocean View*” asked if he could have the same interpretation as me because he really liked it. I told him that if he still remembered it when they had to write about their arrangements, he could use it. I also played *My Neighbour Totoro* because another student was working on that piece, and I wanted them to hear what it sounded like. After this, we moved on to other activities such as theory and music jeopardy.

October 2nd

For this class, we started with rhythmic clapping before moving on to our Studio Ghibli-related activity. I performed two more pieces for them, and they were *Merry Go Round of Life* and *On a Clear Day*, so they know what it sounds like. Next, we moved on to music charades. One student picks a prompt from a bag and tries to imitate it on the piano. The rest tries to figure it out based on what was being played. I chose this activity because I wanted them to connect extra musical ideas with creating a sound on the piano. I believe this could spark their imagination and help their storytelling abilities. Initially, I was worried they might not like it because during the first class, some students were shy. This time, all of them were engaged, enthusiastic and having fun, which made me happy. I think this is because the first class activity was too abstract, whereas this one is more specific about the sounds you need to create.

Some of the sounds they were able to create included a meteor streaking across the sky, a volcano erupting, a galloping horse, a log floating down a river, a roaring lion, stars twinkling, and a car zooming by. The volcano prompt stood out to me because of the creativity behind it. The student started playing in the lower register and created a rumbling sound before sliding his hands up to mimic a volcano erupting. It was amazing to see their creativity in action. However, we ran out of time, but because they loved it so much, we will be doing the activity again for the next class. One student told me that he wanted to do the activity again because it was so fun. I am happy with how this class went, and I hope that it will help with their storytelling abilities when they are performing their Studio Ghibli arrangements.

October 9

During this lesson, we spent a considerable amount of time teaching 16th note rhythms and dotted eighth notes before moving on to the Studio Ghibli-related activity. The students asked if we were doing music charades again today, and I said yes, but we had to do something else first. I played two more pieces, which were *The Path of the Wind* and *The Legend of Ashitaka*. The students who were playing these pieces were particularly excited and said they had been waiting for a long time to hear me play them. Perhaps their excitement rubbed off on everyone else because the whole class was very attentive when I played. Their eyes were laser-focused on my hands, and they sat really still.

After this, we played music charades again. This time, students were able to mimic a meteor streaking across the sky, leaves falling, hail falling, a galloping horse, a volcano erupting and a fairy flying on the piano. The student who got the galloping horse prompt stood out to me because they used a galloping rhythm to imitate the horse's movement. At the same time, the student who got the fairy flying prompt said something interesting. Initially, he played lightly in the upper register to give a whimsical feel. Another student asked, "Is that a dragon?" and he immediately responded, "Does this sound like a dragon?". Although small, he is urging his classmate to use their ears and reconsider their answer. The students really enjoyed this activity, and despite them saying their prompts were difficult, they were all able to imitate the sound on the piano.

October 16

For this class, we were running out of time due to our lengthy lesson on 16th note rhythms. Originally, I planned to split them into two groups. One would narrate the book while the other would create sounds on the piano. However, due to limited time, I decided to read from the book myself, while the students would volunteer to come up and try to imitate what was happening in the book. The books I chose were from the *Little Critter* series.

The first book we worked with was titled "*Just Helping My Dad*". In the book, the main character tries to help his father with chores but ends up being less helpful than expected. Below is a list of notable sounds the students created:

- A loud noise to imitate the main character waking up his father early in the morning.
- A low rumbling and an ascending line to imitate a lawnmower losing control and mowing into a bush.
- Constant movement of notes to represent water from a hose and a loud sound to represent water splashing inside the dad's car.
- A trill to represent spray painting and a soft brush-like sound to represent a brush.
- A loud sound to represent the main character hitting a bee's nest with a bat.
Then, rapid notes were played to represent the main character running away.
- A student held down a piano string and played the corresponding note to imitate someone hammering in a nail.
- A low sound in the bass of the piano to represent snoring.

The next book we worked on was titled "*Just Grandma and Me*." Below are a list of notable sounds the students created:

- A repeating ascending line to imitate the main character getting blown away by the wind.
- A looping line to represent the main character flying a kite. Then a loud sound to represent it hitting someone and coming to a stop.
- The student played a loud sound in the bass to represent a crab and then an ascending line to represent the main character running away. This was done at the same time.
- A repeating block sound to represent someone blowing air into an inflatable sea horse.
- Playing a variety of single notes to represent the bubbles from snorkelling.
- Rapid brushing notes to represent tickling.
- An ascending line to represent a wave and then a loud sound to represent it crashing into a sandcastle.

Throughout this activity, four out of the six students were very active in creating sound, while the last two were shy. However, they were watching their classmates and were laughing along with everyone. One of the students, after class, asked if we could do it again, and we said yes. This warmed my heart, and I was very happy that my activities were fun for them. We moved on to our mini recital, where one student was excited to play her Studio Ghibli arrangement.

October 23, 30, and November 6

On the 23rd, we played rhythm bingo because Halloween was approaching. We did not do any storytelling or Studio Ghibli-related activities. The week of the 30th was a break for them. On November 6th, we began filling out a piece of paper filled with questions regarding their Studio Ghibli arrangement. Questions included:

- What is the name of your piece?
- What movie is your piece from?
- Why did you choose this piece?
- What is the story of the anime?
- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.
- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

The students understood the first 4 questions, while the last two required additional explanations. However, they did understand it in the end. I also told them to bring this sheet to their private piano lessons so their teachers can help them fill it out. Finally, I mentioned that they did not have to be very detailed, as this experience is new for them, and I wanted them to have fun. At the same time, it would probably take them a long time to get through everything when they talk about their arrangement at the recital.

Unfortunately, I had to leave after 10 minutes because I was performing in Walter Hall for Instrumentalis. Ironically, I am playing my anime arrangement, and it went very well. For the next class, I will go over the sheet again in case there are any questions.

November 13

For this class, we took a break from the anime activities, and we focused on music theory and played music jeopardy. I had a chance to talk to the students before class to see how last week went. They said they understood everything, and they filled out the paper. I also asked how learning the Studio Ghibli arrangement is going and they are in various stages at this point. Previously, Heather Gillis mentioned that some anime arrangements are labelled as easy but contain passages that are much harder than that label suggests. The student who chose *The Legend of Ashitaka* only learned one page due to its difficulty. However, I assured them that I do not mind if they cannot get the entire arrangement ready. I am more interested in them having fun and exploring storytelling. Ironically, the student later realized that he could have played the whole arrangement if he had practiced instead of panicking.

We did have a mini mock recital where students played whatever they wanted, and several of them played their anime arrangements. Again, they are in various stages of readiness, but they do seem like they are having fun, which is what I hope. The student who chose *My Neighbour Totoro* was in good shape. The student playing *A Town With an Ocean View* can play with his right hand. Finally, the student playing *Path of the Wind* can play 2/3 of the piece.

November 20th

During this class, we spent most of it doing ear-training, unrelated to their Studio Ghibli arrangements. However, we spent the last 20 minutes doing a recital run-through where each student played both their anime arrangement and another piece they have been working on. They are in various stages of readiness.

1. **The Legend of Ashitaka:** This student can play the first page comfortably. It is a difficult piece despite being labelled elementary.
2. **Path of the Wind:** This student was able to play 2/3 of the song, but it was a little bit shaky. However, she does seem to understand the flow of the arrangement.
3. **My Neighbour Totoro:** This student was able to play the entire thing but had some trouble in the middle section.
4. **Merry Go Round of Life:** This student was able to play the entire thing but had some difficulty in certain parts.
5. **On a Clear Day:** This student was able to play the introduction.
6. **A Town with an Ocean View:** This student was not present.

We will continue to do these practice run-throughs in the lead-up to their December recital. Next week, they will have a chance to practice introducing their piece to each other.

November 27th

During this class, we spent half the time on ear training while we reserved the second half for our recital run-through. Unlike last week, this week, they will practice running through their script, introducing the anime and the arrangement to the audience. On the second page of the script, students were asked to demonstrate how they incorporated the anime's story into their performance. My teaching partner and I decided not to do that anymore and asked them to just play the main theme.

1. **The Legend of Ashitaka:** The student can play the first page, but since it is short, we asked him to play the main theme twice and create an ending so it sounds complete. Again, this piece is much more difficult than its elementary label suggests.
2. **Path of the Wind:** This is much better than last week, and the student was able to play 80% of it.
3. **My Neighbour Totoro:** Again, an improvement from last week, and the student is getting comfortable.
4. **Merry Go Round of Life:** An improvement from last week as well.
5. **On a Clear Day:** This student was able to play the first half of the piece.
6. **A Town with an Ocean View:** This student is working on the piece with both hands separately, but will put it together very soon.

When introducing the piece, I found that most of the students were able to incorporate one or two elements of the story or another aspect into their playing. For example, some of them talked about when their song appeared in the film and what was happening at the time. Others talked about how they try to play gracefully, like the way

Kiki flies or how they have a bouncy touch like Tortoro's belly. This seems to suggest that, at least within this time frame or framework, students can only incorporate a limited amount of details from the anime into their playing.

December 4th

This was the last class before their recital next week, and we did one more run-through. Overall, they're at various stages of readiness, but one thing that was certain was that they seemed to understand and were able to incorporate the anime's story and other elements into their playing. When they talk about their arrangement, they talk about the context in which it appears in the film and how various elements or the story influenced their playing. Then, when they do play, I can hear it come through. However, one thing I kept thinking about is what Gillis previously said about how many elementary-level anime arrangements are actually more difficult than what their label suggests. They would have spent around 11 weeks on their anime pieces, and I think if they had another month, it would be in better shape.

Questions for the Teachers

1. How engaged were your student(s) when learning their Studio Ghibli arrangement in comparison to their other piece?
2. Did you feel your student(s)' were able to utilize their creativity and imagination? How does it compare to before this project?
3. Did the use of storytelling help your student(s) understand their arrangement better and look at the finer details?
4. Did the use of storytelling improve your student(s)' expressiveness and confidence?
5. Did you feel that learning a Studio Ghibli arrangement was beneficial to your Student's piano development?
6. Did you feel that your student(s) were able to incorporate the story and/or the various elements from the film into their playing?
7. Did working on the Studio Ghibli arrangement help your student(s) with their other piece? (Ex: learning a technique from that arrangement and applying it to their other piece).
8. Did your student(s) learn any new concepts when learning their Studio Ghibli piece, other than storytelling?
9. Were there any interesting/notable moments with your student(s) when learning the Studio Ghibli Arrangement?
10. Any final thoughts or comments?

Questions for the Teachers

1. How engaged were your student(s) when learning their Studio Ghibli arrangement in comparison to their other piece?

- The students were slightly more engaged with their Studio Ghibli arrangement compared to other pieces. Since they watched the movie, I could tell that it was helpful that they recognized the music.

2. Did you feel your student(s)' were able to utilize their creativity and imagination? How does it compare to before this project?

- I found that at first, the students were a bit hesitant in terms of creativity/imagination, since they were first learning the notes. After being more familiar, they were able to portray the storyline more. It helped when they explained the storyline and where in the movie that they heard the music, so they could connect these together.

3. Did the use of storytelling help your student(s) understand their arrangement better and

look at the finer details?

- The use of storytelling helped my students understand the atmosphere and the mood of their pieces. Especially for XXXXXXX, it helped him to talk through the storyline and where the music was played in the movie. By using storytelling, he was able to set the mood in the beginning of the piece (The Legend of Ashitaka). This helped him think about the mood and details, rather than just the notes.

4. Did the use of storytelling improve your student(s)' expressiveness and confidence?

- It was difficult at first because the pieces were slightly more challenging (to learn in a short time), but I noticed improvement after we talked through the storyline and how it connects with the music.

5. Did you feel that learning a Studio Ghibli arrangement was beneficial to your Student's

piano development?

- For sure, the Studio Ghibli project was a good challenge. Overall, my students were able to connect the music with the story more, since they had watched the movies and were familiar with it.

6. Did you feel that your student(s) were able to incorporate the story and/or the various elements from the film into their playing?

- Yes, although sometimes they were focused on the notes, and they would need reminders to think about the meaning of the piece/what moods to portray.

7. Did working on the Studio Ghibli arrangement help your student(s) with their other piece? (Ex: learning a technique from that arrangement and applying it to their other piece).

- There weren't necessarily new techniques that my students learned from the Studio Ghibli arrangement, but it helped reinforce techniques they had learned in other pieces. For example, XXXXXXXX (A Town with an Ocean View) was able to work on having different articulations in each hand in the main theme, which also occurred in his solo recital piece (The Somersault King).

8. Did your student(s) learn any new concepts when learning their Studio Ghibli piece, other than storytelling?

- We learned about listening to the important parts in the music – for both students, I simplified some sections that were difficult. By listening to the melody and important details, we were able to take out a few notes but have the same effect with the music. We also learned about thematic transformation (although I didn't mention this term) – in both pieces, there were slight variations when the theme came back.

9. Were there any interesting/notable moments with your student(s) when learning the Studio Ghibli Arrangement?

- It was interesting to hear the students introduction of the piece before playing – this helped me understand how much they knew about the storyline.

10. Any final thoughts or comments?

- Both XXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXX seemed to enjoy this project, and mentioned that they would be interested in keeping the piece a bit longer to work on more of it (as we took out some sections).

Questions for Teachers

1. Students were initially very excited about their Ghibli pieces, and also had extra motivation from knowing their peers were working on their own Anime pieces. XXXXXXXX learned her piece very quickly and independently. XXXX, XXXX and XXXX progressed at their regular pace.
2. We had some great discussions on the movie, including narrative pacing, characterization and development, film and musical expressions of emotion. Because we had the movies, our descriptions and shared understanding were much more distinct than our usual extra-musical ideas.
3. Independently, no. With nudges from me, yes. Details are not their forte (haha).
4. Yes, story improv is a good way to step outside their comfort zone and do something "wrong" or "silly" or "no wrong answers!"
5. Yes!
6. Yes, having strong visual memories from the movie helped a lot.
5. No, because their other piece for the December recital was very contrasting (purposefully selected this way).
8. For XXXX, it pushed her to play more complex LH chords/ chord progressions.
9. and 10. XXXX watched her movie and said she did not hear her piece "On a Clear Day" at all 😊. I pointed it out subsequently with a Youtube clip. I thought the written reflections/ reflections were essential to the process, for the students to solidify their strongest thoughts and responses on the piece and the movie, so that they could express it in their pieces.

Mini Group Discussion

1. Did you enjoy the special project? Did you have fun?
2. Did you feel that you were able to tell a story with your playing?
3. Did the in-class activity help you in telling a story?
4. Did you like playing your anime piece more or your other piece?
5. Were you able to use your imagination more with your anime piece?
6. Did you feel you improved as a pianist?
7. Was there anything confusing, or something you did not understand?
8. Any final thoughts or comments?

Mini Group Discussion
(Notes)

1. Did you enjoy the special project? Did you have fun?
 - a. The students liked the special project.
 - b. They liked the homework where they were tasked to watch a movie and talk about their piece.
2. Did you feel that you were able to tell a story with your playing?
 - a. Students feel they were not able to tell a story.
 - b. The task was too complicated, but felt they were able to musically express themselves.
3. Did the in-class activity help you in telling a story?
 - a. Students enjoyed the in-class activity. It was fun.
 - b. However, it was not helpful.
 - c. Likely an issue with seeing the connection.
4. Did you like playing your anime piece more or your other piece?
 - a. They like playing their anime piece more than their other piece.
5. Were you able to use your imagination more with your anime piece?
 - a. Mixed answers here: yes, kinda, and no.
6. Did you feel you improved as a pianist?
 - a. Mixed answers depending on the difficulty of the piece.
 - b. Yes: if it was at a good level.
 - c. No: if it was too easy.
 - d. Kinda: if it was too hard.
7. Was there anything confusing, or something you did not understand?
 - a. No, they seem to understand everything else.
8. Any final thoughts or comments?
 - a. No.

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?

Path of the Wind

- What movie is your piece from?

My Neighbor Totoro

- Why did you choose this piece?

Because I already know
the piece well

- What is the story of the anime?

A family with two girls and the
youngest goes on an adventure and
makes an encounter with a
creature named Totoro

- ♥ ☆ 4
- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

opening = dust balls leaving the house because the father and children are cleaning and they sweep them out



Billie
Eilish

Middle Section = The second time you hear the theme is when they go to the tree where Mei first met Totoro to find Mei, who is missing.

- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

Sad but hopeful that their mother will live in a subtle way. Totoro brings them hope.

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?

Merr-go-round of Life

- What movie is your piece from?

Howl's Moving Castle.

- Why did you choose this piece?

I chose two but, I got my first choose.

- What is the story of the anime?

There is a girl named Sofie. And there is a Moving Castle. (Howl's moving castle). And a Witch makes a curse on Sofie and it makes her really old. So Sofie goes away from her town and finds Howl's Moving Castle. Howl and Sofie fall in love after a long time.

- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

I incorporated the love thats in the
Scenes that the songs plays in.

- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

The flowy feel. And the jumping moments,
the minor moments and the major moments
The Movies also have a lot of
surprising moments and happy ones and a
tiny bit of sad moments.

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?

My Neighbor Totoro

- What movie is your piece from?

My Neighbor
Totoro

- Why did you choose this piece?

I choose this piece
because I liked
how it was happy
then not so happy
then happy
again.

- What is the story of the anime?

This story is about
2 sisters, Satsuki and Mei.
They just moved and
when they went looking
around and found Totoro.
From Mei missing, and
their mom in the hospital or
their dad being late to pick
them up. Totoro is always there
to save the day with his friend Catbus.

- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

This song is bouncy like
Totoro's belt.

The song comes
right when ~~you~~^{me} sees
Totoro in the forest

- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

Name: _____

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?

The Legend of Ashitaka

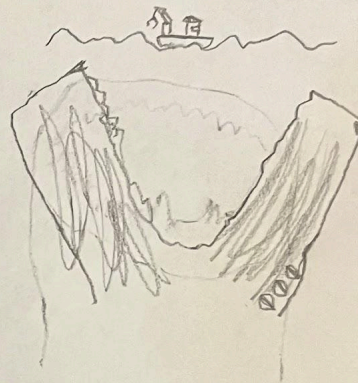
- What movie is your piece from?

Princess Mononoke

- Why did you choose this piece?

I like da movie
but peep is hard

FEAR THE DEEP



- What is the story of the anime?

• Ashitaka goes to the forest
to fight the demon
because he wants to murder

- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?

✕ If possible, play and demonstrate. ^{nah}

he is walking through what think
about genes ide

- Did you take into account any other aspects? ^{but?}
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

chill conflict stopping

List of Questions

- What is the name of your piece?

On A Clear Day

- What movie is your piece from?

Kiki's Delivery Service

- Why did you choose this piece?

I chose this piece because I found it carefree and peacefully.

- What is the story of the anime?

A ^{young} ^{witch} named Kiki leaves her hometown and goes to "A town with an ocean view" and starts a flying delivery service as part of a task when she turns 13. Near the middle Kiki gets caught in the middle of a storm, which causes her to doubt herself and lose her powers for a while.

- How did you incorporate the story of the anime into your playing?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

The first time we hear the song is when she leaves home and finally regains control of her broom so the song feels peaceful and care free. In the scene Kiki is flying through the night as it starts to rain. Kiki is feeling nervous as she has left home and, proud for she is by herself and responsible for herself and the song reflects this.

* Play line 1 & 2.

- Did you take into account any other aspects?
 - If possible, play and demonstrate.

I took the speed and style that she flies in to match the tempo of the song.

The name of my piece is a town with an ocean view. My place is from Kiki delivery service.

I choose this place because I choose a handful of places I knew, and it turns out to be a town with an ocean view. The story of the anime is about a 13 year old witch named Kiki and she is travelling to a town with her pet cat GIGI. She starts a delivery service and starts slow but gets better. She starts losing her power but gains it back and saves the boy from falling down. Here's the main theme (Play)

The start of the song is when Kiki starts ascending up into the sky, then over a beautiful old town. I think the start of the song motivates that. The scenery in the movie is pretty and beautiful, so I think the song should be played very gracefully and beautifully.

Dear Families and Children in piano lessons:

My name is Steven Zhai. I am the assistant teacher for the UTPPP Elementary E Class. Currently, I am conducting a research study, which is an essential course requirement of the Graduate Piano Pedagogy Seminar MUS 4270H at the University of Toronto within the Faculty of Music under the supervision of Dr. Peichen Chen and Dr. Midori Koga.

Below is a brief title and description of the project.

“Anime Piano Tales: My current project is to investigate how elementary piano students engage with storytelling through their performance of piano arrangements from Studio Ghibli films. I also hope to explore how this experience differs from their classical pieces, if their teachers are able to utilize their students’ imaginations, and how engaging it is. By researching this topic, I hope to demonstrate the pedagogical value of anime piano music repertoire and illustrate how imaginative performances can be an enriching experience for young elementary pianists.”

Between September 2025 and December 2025, students in the UTPPP Elementary E class participated in activities related to this project. I want to talk about their experiences related to learning their Studio Ghibli arrangement for this project. Their participation in this study is entirely **voluntary**.

The primary method of data collection will be through:

- i) Personal Observations and Notes.
- ii) A video recording of the final recital.
- iii) A mini group discussion/reflection.
- iv) Their script about their Studio Ghibli Arrangement.
- v) Interview with their piano teachers.

Participant’s information will be collected and stored without the participant’s name or any other identifying information. All data collected will be treated with confidentiality. All videotape materials will be stored and encrypted on private computers and will not be shared with anybody other than the researcher and supervisor. The results of this study will be shared publicly, including but not limited to research conferences, seminars and academic publications. **No** identifying information or videos will be shared in this context. Participants will be anonymous.

University of Toronto Piano Pedagogy Program

Consent Form

MUS4270H

At the completion of the spring term, written summaries of the study will be made available to those of you who request a copy. Please contact the researcher or Dr. Midori Koga at midori.koga@utoronto.ca, to receive a digital copy of the research summary.

If you are willing and comfortable with me talking about your child's experience in learning a Studio Ghibli arrangement, please sign this consent form and send a copy to midori.koga@utoronto.ca and steven.zhai@mail.utoronto.ca

Please keep a copy of the consent form for your own records.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher directly at: steven.zhai@mail.utoronto.ca or the supervising instructor, Dr. Midori Koga at: midori.koga@utoronto.ca

For further information regarding the rights of research participants, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (ethics.review@utoronto.ca, 416-946-3273).

Thank you for considering this request to participate in this study.

Sincerely,



Name and signature of student:

Name and signature of guardian (if student is under the age of 18):

Date:
