



# The Piano Teacher

## Enrichment Guide

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Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree and Dakota people, and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. We are thankful for the benefits sharing this land has afforded us, acknowledge the responsibilities of the Treaties, and embrace the opportunity to partner with Indigenous communities in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

## The Role of the Audience

Theatre needs its audience! We are happy to have you here. Every staff person, actor, and crew member backstage plays an important part in your experience, and you also have a role in the experience of cast, crew and the people around you.

**Arrive Early:** Please make sure you give yourself enough time to find your seat before the performance starts. Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. We ask schools and other groups to arrive at least 20-30 minutes before the show.

**Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices:** Please **turn off** your cell phone/mp3 player /gaming system/camera/smart watch. Texting, surfing, and gaming during performances is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. Using cameras and recording devices during a performance is **never** allowed.

**Talking During the Performance:** Even when you whisper, you can be heard by performers and people around you. Unless it is a relaxed performance, disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait until after the performance to share your words with others.

**Food/Drinks:** Food and outside drinks are not allowed in the theatre. When there is an intermission, snacks and drinks may be available for purchase. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

**Dress:** There is no dress code at the Royal MTC, but we respectfully ask you not to wear hats in the theatre. We strive to be a scent-free environment and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

**Leaving During the Performance:** If you leave the theatre during a performance, you will be readmitted at the discretion of Front of House staff. If readmitted, you may be placed in an empty seat at the back of the auditorium instead of your original seat.

**Being Asked to Leave:** The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave if that person is being inappropriate or disruptive including (but not limited to): talking, using devices that produce light or sound, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

**Talkbacks:** A short question and answer period with the actors takes place after student matinees, first Tuesday evening shows, and some public matinees. While watching the show, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors about the production or life in the theatre. Our artists deserve to be treated with respect! It's okay to have a negative opinion, but this is your chance to ask questions and understand the performance or process, not to criticize. If you have a concern, see the house manager after the show and they will make sure your feedback gets to the appropriate Royal MTC staff.

**Enjoy the show:** Laugh, cry, gasp – responding to the performance is part of the nature of theatre! As you get involved in the story, try to balance your reactions with respecting the people around you. The curtain call is part of the performance too – it gives you a chance to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause, and for them to thank you for your attention. We all appreciate when you stay at your seat and join in the applause!

## Playwright Biography

**Dorothy Dittrich** is a Canadian playwright who lives in British Columbia. Dittrich is a member of the Playwrights Guild of Canada. Amongst other awards, Dittrich won the Governor General’s award for drama in English in 2022 for her play “The Piano Teacher: A Healing Key.” Her other award winning works include *When We Were Singing*. In 2006, Dittrich released her first play that did not use music, *The Dissociates*, which allowed her, as a member of the gay community, to explore queerness throughout history. In addition to writing, she has a background in music as a composer, musical director, sound designer, and musician.



## Characters

**Elaine:** A warm, devoted, and classically trained piano teacher. Arthritis has forced her to give up her career as a performer.

**Erin:** A successful pianist with a promising future. She has recently been unable to play the piano due to her grieving.

**Tom:** A builder. He works outside the arts sector and never had the opportunity to attend lessons but has a deep love of music.

## Content Overview

**This section may contain spoilers.**

No strong language. Grief is a central theme – a past loss.

## Plot Summary

After a devastating loss, Erin, a concert pianist, is no longer able to play. Inspired by a chance encounter, she approaches Elaine, a gifted piano teacher, to help her find music again. The weekly sessions start tentatively but soon find a rhythm that enriches the lives of both women. The lessons, along with an unexpected new friendship, draw Erin out of herself. And teacher becomes student when Elaine discovers she must confront her own loss once and for all.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

### Act 1

Erin, a famous pianist, contacts a piano teacher named Elaine after attending her student's recital. During their first meeting, we learn that Elaine has arthritic hands and that Erin has suffered a great loss. Erin is turning to Elaine for lessons as she has not been able to play since experiencing this loss. Elaine gets Erin to sit on the bench as a first step and Erin's assignment for the week is to touch her piano everyday. Due to her arthritis, Elaine realizes that she and Erin share knowing how to play, but not being able to.

At her next lesson, Erin tells Elaine that she enjoys teaching a music history class at the university and acknowledges that she wants to play again. This is difficult as Erin feels consumed by grief. She describes the torment which is both emotional and physical.

The following lesson, Elaine tells Erin that her performance career was cut short due to her arthritis. Erin is critical of herself and Elaine implores her to be kinder to herself. Elaine also suggests that Erin make a change to her house.

Shortly thereafter, Erin meets with Tom to discuss adding a window to her landing. During their discussion, she tells him that her husband is dead. Erin decides to move forward with the construction project. This impresses Elaine, who decides it is time for Erin to face the keyboard of the piano, which she does.

After Tom has installed the window, Erin invites him to stay for tea.

Elaine tells Erin she is arranging a duet for two of her young students, but thinks the piece needs improvement and asks Erin to work on it with her. Without realizing it, Erin begins to play the piano with Elaine. When Erin realizes that she played, she leaves abruptly.

### Act 2

Erin and Tom are playing *Scrabble* and they discuss her perfectionism and inability to separate her personal and professional life. Tom decides to stay after they are done playing. She tells Tom she teaches adults a music history course and they point out the irony of her teaching, but not playing. They discuss the unfairness that opportunities present themselves to some folks and not others.

Erin returns to Elaine's for her weekly lesson after storming out the week before. She tells Elaine that she feels Elaine tricked her into playing. She then moves on to talk

about the time she has been spending with Tom and says that she feels able to breathe and a normalcy returning to her life. Tom has asked her out and Erin likes being with someone who did not know her before the accident. Erin reveals that she has not been able to enter her son's room since his death. She sits at the piano and plays a duet with Elaine. When she returns home, she enters her son's room

Erin is excited to play a duet with Elaine, but Elaine is unable to complete the song due to the condition of her hands. Even though Erin is becoming more herself playing at lessons, she still has not played at home. Tom is over one day, and offers to teach her "The Knuckle Song." They play together and when they finish, Tom kisses her, but she pulls away.

Erin discusses her relationship with Tom during one of her lessons. Elaine talks about her hands and her difficulty in coping with her diagnosis. When she found out she had arthritis, she went back to school to learn more about the theoretical side of music.

Erin wakes up from a nap with Tom and tells him she needs to leave for one of her piano lessons, which he did not know she was taking. When Erin arrives late to Elaine's, we learn that Elaine has had a frustrating day. She points out to Erin that while Erin makes a choice not to play, she is physically unable. Elaine seems disappointed in herself that she gave up playing after learning about her arthritis. Before leaving, they play a song together, which Elaine has arranged for them.

When Erin arrives home, Tom is playing a CD that features her. This causes an argument and Tom is frustrated by how little Erin shares about her personal life, even though they have been together for five months. He asks about her husband and son, then leaves shortly after.

Erin recounts the day Kevin and Terrence were killed in a car accident by a drunk driver to Elaine and Tom.

The play closes as Tom and Elaine are both about to attend one of Erin's concerts.

## Context and Related Resources

### Becoming a Concert Pianist

To become a concert pianist, one needs to be willing to make sacrifices throughout their life. The industry is competitive and requires time, excellent teachers, talent, and practice, amongst other factors. Generally, a pianist will need at least fifteen years to refine their skills and practice between 3-5 hours a day. The “ten thousand hour rule” is a concept coined by Malcom Gladwell that states the ten thousand hours is the required amount of time to become an expert in a skill. Even this is not a guarantee of success.

### Musical Works in the Play

During the play, Erin, the protagonist, tells us that she is partial to Béla Bartók as a composer. Bartók’s works are known to be complex and technically challenging. The rhythms are difficult and are often foreign to many classically trained musicians.

Several of Aaron Copland’s musical pieces are mentioned throughout the play. Classical musicians typically regard Copland’s compositions as challenging. The piano parts are intensive and the rhythms as well as the timing of his compositions are difficult. His music is considered as often neglected masterpieces.

Later in the play, Erin’s teacher chooses to play Debussy, opting out of playing Schubert’s “Fantasia in F Minor.” This is a difficult piece that can be challenging for pianists that requires advanced technical skills.

### Songs used in the Production

Haydn’s “Piano Trio No. 45 in E-flat major, Hob. XV:29”

Bartók’s “Romanian Folk Dances”

Bach’s “Trio Sonata in E-Flat Major”

Copland’s “Appalachian Spring”

Haydn’s “Piano Sonata No. 59”

Mozart’s “Piano Sonata No. 16”

Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”

Chet Baker’s “My Buddy”

Margaret Whiting’s “Till We Meet Again”

Bach’s “Flute Sonata”

Gene Austin’s “My Blue Heaven”

Copland’s “Old American Songs”

Schubert’s “Fantasia in F Minor”

Debussy’s “Petite Suite”

Oscar Peterson’s “Stardust”

Copland’s “Four Dance Episodes”

## **Oscar Peterson**

Oscar Peterson is mentioned by a character throughout the play. He was a prolific award-winning Canadian jazz pianist born in 1925 who was known for playing with great speed and dexterity, using meticulous and ornate technique and having a distinct style. During his teen years, he was diagnosed with arthritis. This condition can cause pain, stiffness, swelling, or numbness in the wrists and fingers. This can make bending the fingers difficult. Despite this, he is regarded as one of the greatest jazz pianists of all time and “the master of swing.” He released many recordings during his lifetime and appeared on more than 200 albums of other artists, including many jazz greats. Peterson also toured internationally into the 1980s. Once his arthritis became too severe by the end of the 80s, he began to tour for only a few weeks each year.

## **Monologues**

Elaine delivers several monologues throughout the play. The role of a monologue within a dramatic work can be used to focus the audience and move the plot forward or even accelerate it by providing key information or advancing a character. It is a way to identify the stakes which are at play. The monologue can be used to expose another character’s traits while pointing out the similarities with the speaker. When “used wisely as a vehicle, the monologue can achieve beguiling, tortuous, revelatory, enlightening or hilarious plot twists, character arcs, and story developments.”

## **The Healing Power of Music**

The Healing Power of Music -

Music therapy is a professional practice used by practitioners “who use music experiences and the relationships that develop through them to restore, maintain, and promote health and well being.” This form of therapy has become a tool used by therapists in bereavement work. Advantages of music therapy versus more traditional forms of counselling include:

- Facilitating expression for those not comfortable speaking
- The use of symbolism and metaphor in song lyrics can allow a safe distance from the feelings someone is experiencing
- Singing and playing instruments can allow for a physical release of emotion
- Music can go beyond cognitive processing, thus creating a pathway to access and experience feelings
- Many people find music enjoyable therefore they are more motivated to attend this type of therapy
- When used in a group setting, feelings of connection, support, belonging, and community are fostered
- Making music can be the catalyst for positive changes in mood

Participants in music therapy as part of their grieving process have reported the following:

- Feeling safe, supported, and understood when releasing feelings in front of others
- Increased body relaxation and confidence
- Attributing personal meaning to songs and having feelings validated by songs
- Feeling connection to others
- Feeling freedom to enjoy oneself
- Feeling motivated to make changes and explore other opportunities in daily life, including the ability to move forward

### **Potential spoilers in this section!**

#### **Grief**

Grief is defined as the experience of loss. This can be caused by the passing of a loved one, a loss that has a significant impact on one's life, or after a health related diagnosis. It is a complex process that can cause mental, physical, social, and emotional responses. Common feelings of grief include sadness, shock, anger, fear, numbness, and anxiety. Others might feel relief or a sense of peace. Typically, these feelings change in intensity over time and they can often be at odds with one another. Time is key in this process. Grief is experienced differently by everyone, but there are common strategies people can use to navigate their grief, including:

- Reaching out to loved ones
- Journal writing on the feelings one is experiencing
- Creating new traditions around holidays
- Talking to a doctor
- Seeking counselling and therapy
- Becoming involved in activities that were previously enjoyed or becoming involved in new activities
- Learning self-soothing strategies
- Holding off on making any major life decisions
- Contacting a community organization that supports people who are grieving

There are also strategies to help others through their grieving process, including:

- Asking the person what they need
- Discussing the loss experienced



- Involving the person in activities
- Connecting the person with resources

For more information, visit: <https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/documents/grieving/>

### **Drinking and Driving in Canada**

Information published by Statistics Canada in 2021 reported an increase in impaired driving in 2019. This was the first increase since 2011. It is one of the leading criminal causes of death in Canada. In 2019, 255 people were killed as a result of impaired driving, including 67 road users who were not the drivers. Because of this, preventing impaired driving has been made an organizational priority for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Fortunately, deaths caused by impaired driving are at their lowest level, and this is considered to be a better indicator of the incidence of impaired driving. It is possible that the increase in cases in 2019 was due to increased enforcement. Since driving while intoxicated was made a criminal offence in 1921, Canada has continued to enact tougher laws around this crime in an effort to increase public safety. This is reflected in the progress that has been made in impaired driving cases; since 1986, there has been a 60% decrease in impaired driving and a 77% decrease in the rate of impaired driving causing death. For more information on impaired driving in Canada, visit <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00012-eng.htm>

MADD Canada offers supports to the victims and survivors of impaired driving, including for those directly involved in the crash and friends or family coping with loss or injury of loved ones. You can find more information here:

<https://madd.ca/pages/programs/victim-survivor-services/>

## Explore More: Recommended Library Reading List

### **Meditations on Grief and Loss**

*The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion: An intensely personal exploration of grief and mourning based on the author's experience with her daughter's illness and losing her husband within the same few days. B DIDION 2021

*Out of Grief, Singing: A Memoir of Motherhood and Loss*, Charlene Diehl

With a poet's ear for language, Charlene Diehl shares her discovery of joy amidst a devastating loss, putting into words what so many parents find themselves unable to express. 155.937 DIE 2010

*Crying in H Mart*, Michelle Zauner: Complete with family photos this memoir is Zauner's story of family, food and the grief of losing a parent who holds the traditions of her Korean culture. B ZAUNER 2021

*Notes on Grief*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : An extended essay dealing with the author's loss of her father who died suddenly. This book is both a tribute to him and a mediation on loss, grief and remembrance. 155.937 ADICHIE 2021

### **Stories of friendship**

*Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, Ann Patchett: A testament to best friendships – Patchett writes about the times she shared with her friend who was also an accomplished author. 362.1969 PATCHETT 2005

*Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, Gail Honeyman: A funny and uplifting story of Eleanor, a woman who struggles with social skills, whose life changes when she meets a bumbling IT guy from her office and the two of them save an elderly man who had fallen on the sidewalk. The story explores the power of human connection. FICTION HONEYMAN

### **Power of music**

*Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall*, Kazuo Ishiguro: A collection of interconnected short stories delving into musicians' lives exploring themes of music, love and time. FICTION ISHIGURO

*An Equal Music*, Vikram Seth: A romantic story exploring a violinist's past love affair with another musician who unexpectedly reenters his life. FICTION SETH



There are 1.4 million books, movies, audiobooks, eBooks and more at the Winnipeg Public Library, and all you need to borrow them is your library card. There are 20 locations throughout the city and there's an online catalogue for requesting items for pick-up at your library of convenience. An e-Library has thousands of eBooks, eAudiobooks and more! All free with your card. Visit us at [Winnipeg.ca/library](http://Winnipeg.ca/library)

## Glossary and Mentions

**Alberti Bass** – a specific broken chord pattern, whereby the notes in the triad are played in the order lowest-highest-middle-highest.

**Altered Sevenths** – The 5th or 9th of a chord are raised or lowered.

**Augmented Fifths** – The 5th of a chord is raised by a semitone (an augmented fifth on a “C” would be a “C#”).

**Cadence** – the ending of a musical phrase.

**Chord Progression** – the order in which chords are played in a piece of music.

**Dissonance** – related to the harmony of notes, this is a combination of notes that is unstable.

**Interplay** – a reciprocal exchange in music in which each player influences the other.

**Mercurial** – sudden or unpredictable changes of mood or mind.

**Modulations** – related to tonality, this refers to moving from one key area to another key.

**Root Movements** – the movement in a piece of music that is from one chord’s root to another chord’s root (the root of a chord is the note that the chord is built upon).

**Tempo** – from the Italian word for “time,” this indicates the speed or pacing of a piece of music.

**Tin Pan Alley** – a genre of popular American music born in an area of New York in the late 19th century.

**Tonic** – Usually the first note in a musical scale that is the focus for the melody and harmony.

## Discussion Prompts

### Pre-Show

1. What do references to composers like Beethoven, Schumann, Bach, and Mendelssohn call to mind?
2. Discuss what makes a good teacher.
3. Discuss the role of vulnerability in interpersonal relationships.
4. Can art heal psychological wounds?
5. In what ways can we experience loss?

## Post-Show:

1. What do references to composers like Beethoven, Schumann, Bach, and Mendelssohn call to mind? What does it mean that Elaine's students do not revert to these songs?
2. Elaine starts by talking to her students before getting them to play the piano. What function does this serve?
3. What does the music used in the play communicate? Can music better communicate than words?
4. Discuss the different ways we see the characters experience grief in the play.
5. Discuss how Erin's inability to separate her professional and personal life has affected her career and grief process.
6. Discuss the use of monologues and the metaphors by Elaine. What purpose does her use of metaphors serve? Examples of these include:

"Music is a world, and in that world, there are rules and systems and relationships."  
"The broken chord sustains with such power... isn't it remarkable how something that's broken can be so strong, compelling, beautiful, and so much more interesting?"  
"When I think about our lessons, I think of us weaving a tapestry of sorts, creating a new fabric and patterns for us both"  
"Each little piece is a story... It's a little adventure. And mainly the adventure is about leaving home and coming back. You begin and you venture forth into all kinds of situations... - you explore and you experience - and in the end, you return home."  
"Playing music is a relationship like any other. Sometimes it gets too intense and needs some time to breathe"  
"I thought of my life and the rooms I would have filled with music, all those empty rooms I don't go into either."  
"You cannot perform until you've completed the messy process of practising, making mistakes, misunderstandings, assumptions, and all."
7. Discuss which characters were teachers in the play.
8. Erin says that, "Holding on to Kevin and Terrence has been breaking my heart, taking my life. Letting them go has given me my life back." How is this seen?
9. The second part of the play's title is "A Healing Key." What was the "healing key" in the play? What are the indicators that the characters have experienced healing? Discuss how you think music, friendship, and love played a role in process.
10. Towards the end of the play Erin brings Elaine tulips in the spring. She tells Elaine, "I haven't noticed flowers till now. I think you have something to do with that." Discuss the symbolism of the passing seasons.
11. Discuss the relevance of this quotation: "My younger students always want to play the parts of the music they already know. They avoid the hard passages. But you don't become a better player by avoiding the difficult passages." Then, the characters discuss that to work through a difficult passage, you need to do it "one note at a time." What personal experiences you can connect to these passages?

## Grief Resources

Anderson Cooper hosts the podcast *All There Is*. This podcast is about “the people we lose, the people left behind, and how we can live on - with loss and with love.” Cooper interviews guests who have experienced loss and together they explore their feelings of grief. “Do we ever move on from grief, or do we just learn to live with it?”

### Books

*It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* by Megan Devine

*On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler

*The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss* by Mary-Frances O'Connor

*Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief* by Joanne Cacciatore

*Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* by David Kessler

### Bereavement Programs

Many organizations in Winnipeg offer bereavement support programs. For a full list, visit: <https://palliativemanitoba.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Community-Based-Grief-Resources-2015-2016.pdf>

Hospice Huronia in Ontario offers a free virtual art and grief group facilitated by a registered art therapist on the second Thursday of each month.

<https://hospicehuronia.ca/events/event.php?id=532>

The Loveland Group hosts Grief and Remembrance Storytelling Sessions online monthly. Tickets are by donation. Find them on Eventbrite to register:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/o/the-loveland-group-llc-31142233271>

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## **Enrichment Guide Contributor Biography**

Desirée Pappel began teaching English Language Arts in Manitoba high schools in 2008. During that time, she also taught the occasional dramatic arts class and was involved with improvisation, both inside and outside of school. In 2010, she began her involvement with Royal MTC's Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival and started working as a volunteer team leader at venues soon after. Creating study guides for Royal MTC fuses her love of education and theatre. She has written multiple enrichment guides for Royal MTC.

After listening to the soundtrack and watching the production on Disney+ countless times, Pappel finally saw Hamilton on a recent trip to the United States. It goes without saying that experiencing the “booms” of a war cannon on stage is far more engaging than hearing them from home speakers while sitting on a couch, so she is glad to be back to the theatre in person.

**Thank you to Canada Life for generously supporting student tickets!**