

# THE APPLICATION OF THAI THI LIEN'S PIANO LEARNING METHOD AT THE PIANISSIMO MUSIC CENTER, HANOI, VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** In the context of globalized arts education, piano pedagogy for preadolescent learners represents a crucial field that shapes aesthetic development, intellectual growth, and emotional intelligence. This study examines the application of The Piano Learning Method by People's Artist Thai Thi Lien at the Pianissimo Music Center in Hanoi, a private educational institution. The research explores the pedagogical philosophy underlying Lien's method, the current teaching practices at the Center, and proposes instructional strategies designed to balance technical training and artistic expression for students aged 11–12. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher–student interviews, and pedagogical analysis. The findings indicate that Lien's approach—integrating national identity, pentatonic modes, and progressive skill development—offers a culturally responsive and musically comprehensive framework for Vietnamese learners. However, inconsistencies in teacher training and assessment limit its full effectiveness. The paper proposes a set of pedagogical solutions emphasizing systematic lesson design, expressive interpretation, and experiential learning. A 15-week controlled teaching experiment confirmed that these strategies improve both technical proficiency and musical expressivity. This study reaffirms Thai Thi Lien's enduring contribution to Vietnamese piano pedagogy and highlights the relevance of her humanistic philosophy—“Music to educate the human being”—in contemporary music education.

**Keywords:** Thai Thi Lien, piano pedagogy, Vietnamese music education, expressive performance, teaching methods, adolescent learners.

# ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ МЕТОДА ОБУЧЕНИЯ ИГРЕ НА ФОРТЕПИАНО ТАЙ ТХИ ЛЬЕН В МУЗЫКАЛЬНОМ ЦЕНТРЕ «ПИАНИССИМО», ХАНОЙ, ВЬЕТНАМ

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**Аннотация:** в контексте глобализованного художественного образования преподавание игры на фортепиано для детей дошкольного возраста представляет собой важнейшую область, формирующую эстетическое развитие, интеллектуальный рост и эмоциональный интеллект. В данном исследовании рассматривается применение метода обучения игре на фортепиано народной артистки Тхай Тхи Лиен в музыкальном центре «Пианиссимо» в Ханое, частном учебном заведении. В исследовании рассматривается педагогическая философия, лежащая в основе метода Лиен, современная практика преподавания в Центре и предлагаются образовательные стратегии, направленные на обеспечение баланса между технической подготовкой и художественным самовыражением учащихся 11–12 лет. Данные были собраны посредством наблюдений за занятиями в классе, интервью с учениками и педагогического анализа. Результаты показывают, что подход Лиен, объединяющий национальную идентичность, пентатонические лады и прогрессивное развитие навыков, предлагает культурно-чувствительную и музыкально всеобъемлющую структуру обучения для вьетнамских учащихся. Однако непоследовательность в подготовке учителей и оценке их работы ограничивает его полную эффективность. В статье предлагается набор педагогических решений, делающих акцент на систематическом построении уроков, выразительной интерпретации и экспериментальном обучении. 15-недельный контролируемый педагогический эксперимент подтвердил, что эти стратегии улучшают как техническое мастерство, так и музыкальную выразительность. Данное исследование подтверждает непреходящий вклад Тхай Тхи Лиен в вьетнамскую фортепианную педагогику и подчёркивает актуальность её гуманистической философии — «Музыка для воспитания человека» — в современном музыкальном образовании.

**Ключевые слова:** *Тхай Тхи Лиен, фортепианная педагогика, вьетнамское музыкальное образование, выразительное исполнение, методы обучения, учащиеся-подростки.*

## 1. Introduction

In the era of educational globalization, piano instruction for young learners has gained increasing significance for its impact on aesthetic formation and personal development. Piano training is not merely an artistic pursuit but also a means of cultivating discipline, creativity, and cognitive flexibility. Over the past two decades, Vietnam has witnessed a surge in private music institutions, creating accessible learning environments for children of various ages. Among them, students aged 11–12 occupy a transitional stage between elementary skill acquisition and expressive artistic growth. This stage presents distinct pedagogical challenges: how to balance technical rigor with emotional cultivation, international standards with national identity, and structured curricula with individual creativity.

Within this educational landscape, *The Piano Learning Method* by People’s Artist Thai Thi Lien remains a cornerstone of Vietnamese piano pedagogy. As the first piano textbook specifically written for Vietnamese students, Lien’s work synthesizes Western musical pedagogy with national and humanistic values. Her guiding philosophy—“*Music to educate the human being*”—emphasizes student-centered learning, emotional engagement, and the moral dimension of art education. Investigating the contemporary adaptation of this pedagogical tradition within a modern private music center thus holds both academic and practical value.

The Pianissimo Music Center in Hanoi exemplifies a modern yet tradition-conscious institution. Equipped with professional facilities and staffed by young, formally trained teachers, it provides individualized and small-group piano instruction. The Center’s student population includes a large cohort of 11–12-year-olds, a pivotal age for consolidating technique and developing interpretative awareness. This research focuses on that group to analyze the interaction between Thai Thi Lien’s pedagogical principles and contemporary teaching practice in Vietnam’s private music sector.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

- (1) to examine the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Lien’s piano pedagogy;
- (2) to analyze current teaching practices at the Pianissimo Music Center; and
- (3) to propose pedagogical solutions that enhance technical, expressive, and personal development.

Methodologically, the research integrates field observations, interviews, and pedagogical experimentation, combining qualitative insight with practical evaluation.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation and Pedagogical Philosophy

Teaching piano to students aged 11–12 plays a vital role in shaping aesthetic perception, discipline, and artistic personality. At this developmental stage, learners exhibit strong memory, quick comprehension, and an emerging capacity for independent practice, yet still require clear guidance to form healthy habits and emotional sensitivity. The piano, as an integrative instrument demanding auditory, visual, and motor coordination, provides an ideal medium for cultivating both cognitive and expressive abilities.

From a pedagogical standpoint, teaching is understood as an organized, goal-oriented process where teachers guide students toward knowledge and skill acquisition. In piano instruction, this process combines theoretical learning with motor training, uniting cognition, perception, and emotion. Teachers must not only teach notation, rhythm, harmony, and dynamics but also stimulate artistic imagination and interpretative intent. Piano learning thus becomes a holistic journey—disciplining mind and body while nurturing creativity and empathy.

Thai Thi Lien (1918–2023), founder of the Piano Department at the Vietnam National Academy of Music, established a pedagogical system grounded in both European classical methods and Vietnamese cultural identity. Her two-volume *Piano Learning Method* introduces essential theory, technique, and repertoire through a structured, progressive design. Volume I focuses on note reading, finger exercises, and simple folk-inspired pieces; Volume II expands to sonatinas, polyphonic textures, and scale studies—including major, minor, and pentatonic modes. Approximately two-thirds of the repertoire consists of Vietnamese folk and children’s songs such as *Co La*, *Dan ca Ha Bac*, and *Em la co gai det*, reflecting her philosophy of “Vietnamizing” piano education.

Lien’s approach embodies several key pedagogical principles:

- **Cultural contextualization:** using national materials and pentatonic modes to enhance cultural resonance.
- **Gradual progression:** designing tasks that move systematically from simple to complex.
- **Emotional education:** emphasizing expressivity and imagination as central to musical learning.

- **Humanistic focus:** treating music as a means of personal development, not merely technical mastery.

Her legacy extends through successive generations of Vietnamese piano educators, whose contributions—modernization (Tran Thu Ha) and international recognition (Dang Thai Son)—demonstrate the adaptability and vitality of her foundational philosophy.

### **3. Current Teaching Practices at the Pianissimo Music Center**

The Pianissimo Music Center operates as a private institution in Hanoi specializing in piano education for children and adolescents. The Center features soundproof studios equipped with acoustic and digital pianos, a small performance space for internal recitals, and a structured academic framework. Instruction is mainly delivered through individual and paired lessons (45–60 minutes each), supplemented by mini-recitals and ensemble activities to enhance performance experience.

#### **Faculty and Pedagogical Context.**

Most instructors are graduates of leading Vietnamese music institutions such as the Vietnam National Academy of Music and the Central University of Art Education. While professionally competent and enthusiastic, a high proportion are early-career teachers with limited pedagogical experience, resulting in inconsistent instructional quality. Some rely heavily on personal learning experiences rather than an articulated teaching philosophy. As a result, applications of *The Piano Learning Method* vary across classes, disrupting the continuity of skill development.

#### **Learners and Curriculum.**

Students aged 11–12 typically fall between Elementary and Lower-Intermediate levels (AMEB Grades 2–4). They possess basic literacy and coordination but vary in discipline and emotional maturity. The Center combines international methods (*John Thompson*, *Alfred's Basic Piano Library*, *Faber & Faber*) with Lien's *Piano Learning Method*. Among these, Lien's text aligns more closely with Vietnamese students' psychology and cultural familiarity through folk-based repertoire and gradual task sequencing.

#### **Observational Findings.**

A typical lesson includes: (1) warm-up and technical exercises; (2) repertoire study; and (3) review, listening, or mini-performance. Visual demonstration, guided repetition, and gamified tasks are frequently used to sustain engagement. Some teachers successfully connect technical goals to musical imagery—encouraging students to listen to original folk versions, analyze pentatonic scales, or imagine narrative scenes to inform phrasing and tone. These integrated lessons yielded noticeable improvements in tone color and musical breathing.

However, several systemic limitations persist:

1. **Lack of methodological coherence:** teachers interpret and apply the same curriculum differently.
2. **Limited artistic depth:** younger teachers often prioritize note accuracy over expressive phrasing and pedal control.
3. **Insufficient assessment framework:** progress is measured qualitatively rather than by standardized criteria for tone, balance, and expression.
4. **Unstructured home practice:** absence of weekly goal-setting weakens self-discipline and long-term retention.

Despite these issues, Pianissimo's favorable infrastructure, teacher dedication, and supportive community provide a strong foundation for pedagogical enhancement. The integration of Thai Thi Lien's method represents a crucial opportunity to unify technical, musical, and cultural learning within a coherent educational framework.

### **4. Pedagogical Solutions**

Building upon theoretical foundations and field observations, this study proposes a system of pedagogical solutions designed to optimize piano instruction for students aged 11–12. The aim is to achieve equilibrium between technique and expression, fostering comprehensive musical growth.

#### **1. Structured Lesson Design.**

Lessons should integrate technical drills and repertoire in a unified sequence. Scale and arpeggio exercises must directly support the interpretative goals of current pieces. This approach reinforces the meaningful connection between mechanical training and expressive outcome, maintaining student motivation and focus.

#### **2. Technical Foundation and Healthy Habits.**

Teachers should emphasize correct posture, hand shape, and finger independence, embedding dynamic and tonal control within technical work. Scales and finger exercises are practiced with attention to tone, balance, and articulation rather than rote repetition, transforming technique into an expressive tool.

### **3. Development of Musical Expression.**

Students are encouraged to explore musical imagery and narrative contexts before playing. This “musical storytelling” approach—central to Lien’s pedagogy—helps learners perceive music as communication rather than mechanical reproduction. Through imaginative engagement, they learn to “speak through sound” and internalize expressive phrasing naturally.

### **4. Experiential Learning Environment.**

Frequent recitals, peer performances, and project-based activities create an experiential context where students build stage confidence, self-expression, and motivation. These experiences foster a sense of artistic community and make learning emotionally rewarding.

### **5. Teacher Professional Development.**

Regular workshops, peer observations, and methodological seminars are necessary to ensure consistent pedagogical standards. Teachers are encouraged to align their practice with Lien’s principles—student-centered guidance, expressive intention, and cultural awareness—while incorporating contemporary educational psychology.

### **Experimental Verification.**

To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, a controlled 15-week teaching experiment was conducted with six students (ages 11–12) instructed by two teachers. The experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in technical accuracy, dynamic control, and interpretative confidence compared to the control group following traditional instruction. Students also exhibited greater enthusiasm and self-regulation, indicating that the proposed model effectively integrates skill, emotion, and motivation.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study confirms the academic and practical significance of Thai Thi Lien’s *Piano Learning Method* in contemporary Vietnamese music education. By combining technical rigor, expressive training, and performance experience, the model proved effective in enhancing both musical competence and personal growth among preadolescent learners. The findings also underscore the evolving role of the piano teacher—not merely as a transmitter of technique, but as a facilitator of artistic discovery and human development.

The results further suggest that a rich learning environment, frequent performance opportunities, and age-specific assessment criteria are essential for optimizing piano instruction at this developmental stage. Although the experimental scope was limited in duration and sample size, the outcomes demonstrate the high potential for broader application. Future studies could expand the participant base and integrate international evaluation frameworks (such as AMEB or ABRSM) to strengthen generalizability and cross-cultural comparability.

Ultimately, this research reaffirms the enduring relevance of Thai Thi Lien’s pedagogical philosophy—*music as a path to human education*. Her method, grounded in Vietnamese identity yet open to global integration, offers a sustainable model for modern piano pedagogy: one that harmonizes discipline with creativity, intellect with emotion, and national culture with international standards.

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