

An Overview of the Current Higher Piano Education in Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC) Through the Lens of the Repertoire in the Graduation Recitals

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Abstract

This study explores the current state of undergraduate piano education at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC), focusing on the repertoire performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals, since the institution conceives music as a multidimensional phenomenon and promotes a comprehensive educational approach. The study analyses printed programs from fifteen undergraduate piano graduation recitals. Through inductive content analysis, patterns in composer profiles, musical periods, genres, and Spanish-themed elements were identified, including explicit and inferred data like nationality and stylistic era. Findings reveal that a total of thirty composers were represented across the recitals, with Maurice Ravel and Robert Schumann being the most frequently performed the programs, followed by Russian, French, and Catalan figures. Only one Spanish composer was included, but Spanish-themed works by non-Spanish composers featured. It was also concluded that the concert program was dominated by male composers (93%). Romantic repertoire was most prevalent (59%), followed by 20th-century, with fewer Baroque and Classical works. Character pieces were the most performed genre (52%). The findings suggest that curriculum structure coexists with student-driven repertoire choices reflecting Romantic and early 20th century styles, expressive performance, and cultural diversity. This study brings light on how repertoire choices in final recitals can reflect not only institutional pedagogical values but also the evolving aesthetic priorities of a new generation of pianists.

Key words: Professional piano education, piano pedagogy, graduation recital, repertoire

Introduction

Piano education at the undergraduate level plays a critical role in shaping the artistic identity and technical proficiency of future professional musicians. In conservatoires and higher music institutions across Europe, graduation recitals serve not only as an assessment tool but also as a culminating artistic statement that reflects years of musical development, pedagogical influence, and personal aesthetic choices.

Within this context, the repertoire selected for such recitals becomes a meaningful object of study—not only as a mirror of the student's interpretive interests, but also as an indicator of broader pedagogical, stylistic, and cultural trends in higher music education. While existing research has explored aspects of piano curriculum design and performance training, relatively little attention has been paid to the actual repertoire choices of graduating students and the implications these hold for contemporary piano pedagogy and musicological inquiry.

The Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC), a leading institution in Spain and the broader Mediterranean region, offers a unique model of piano education that balances curricular structure with artistic flexibility. Students are encouraged to engage with diverse musical languages and stylistic traditions, while being guided by a competency-based curriculum that emphasizes both technical mastery and expressive communication.

This article investigates the graduation recital repertoires of ESMUC's 2025 undergraduate piano class. By analysing the programs of fifteen recitals, the study aims to identify patterns of stylistic preference, national representation among composers, and genre distribution. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how repertoire choices in final recitals can reflect not only institutional pedagogical values but also the evolving aesthetic priorities of a new generation of pianists.

The present study is grounded in the intersection of music pedagogy, performance studies, and repertoire analysis. Piano education at the higher level is combined with technical, artistic, stylistic, personal interpretation and aesthetic expression components. In this context, the selection and preparation of repertoire plays a central role in shaping a student's expressive voice and professionalism.

Piano Education in Higher Education

Piano education at the higher education level is a complex and evolving field, extending beyond mere technical proficiency to encompass a rich interplay of artistic, aesthetic, and pedagogical dimensions. This academic pursuit aims to cultivate not only skilled performers but also well-rounded musicians capable of profound musical interpretation and creative expression. Understanding the current trends and foundational principles of piano education in post-secondary settings is crucial for appreciating its role in shaping future generations of pianists (Choi, 2013).

Central to higher piano education is the development of artistic expression, which is considered a critical aspect demanding more than just technical skill (Mishinova, 2025). Pedagogical strategies are designed to foster emotional engagement, imaginative thinking, and interpretative depth, ensuring that students can convey profound artistic meaning

through their performances (Mishinova, 2025). This involves a dynamic process where students, often starting in specialized areas, progressively deepen their expertise over their degree, leading to increasingly specific career goals (Choi, 2013). The academic culture of a future pianist is viewed as a socially conditioned, dynamic personal formation within the higher education environment, manifesting in value orientations towards musical art, pedagogical activities, and the pursuit of creative self-realization (Chuanjie, 2024). It integrates general knowledge in music education with specialized knowledge in methods of specific activities, including musical, performing, and pedagogical aspects, alongside skills in art cognition, perception, performance, and communication with artistic samples (Chuanjie, 2024).

Historically, university and conservatory piano curricula include performance training rooted in the classical tradition, alongside aural skills, music theory, and primarily focusing on European music from 1600-1950 (Choi, 2013). Studies of renowned conservatories in classical music, such as Paris Conservatoire and the Moscow Conservatory, demonstrate that piano education in these institutions is conceived not merely as the cultivation of technical mastery and artistic expression, but as a holistic formation requiring proficiency in accompaniment, chamber music, sight-reading, transposition, theoretical understanding, and analysis (Kızılay, 2025; Kızılay & Atılğan, 2024). The ongoing assessment of the current state of undergraduate piano education, including what students are learning and what instructors are teaching, remains a pertinent area of inquiry (Choi, 2013). Furthermore, the development of future piano performers' creative potential within pedagogical institutions of higher education is a significant problem explored in modern scientific works (Kaikova, 2020).

In essence, higher piano education is dedicated to nurturing comprehensive musical abilities, bridging the gap between technical mastery and profound artistic interpretation, while continually adapting its curriculum to meet contemporary demands and foster the creative potential of its students.

The Case of *Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya* (ESMUC) and the Piano Studies

Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC) is a relatively young institution within the European landscape of higher music education. It was established in 2001 by the Department of Education of Generalitat de Catalunya [Regional government]¹ (Government of Catalonia, 2001), and is currently managed as a public foundation affiliated with the *Departament d'Educació i Formació Professional*. ESMUC is the only publicly funded higher education institution in music in Catalonia (Sempere-Comas & Gisbert-Cervera, 2023).

ESMUC offers the Bachelor's Degree in Higher Artistic Education in Music across all its specializations, as well as twelve specialized Master's program in Artistic Education, two University Master's program in collaboration with Catalan universities, one postgraduate program in partnership with the *Institut del Teatre*, and an extension courses and continuing education courses (ESMUC, 2025).

¹ The Generalitat of Catalonia holds devolved competences in education, as part of its autonomous powers within the Spanish state.

Its educational model is characterized by the cross-disciplinarity of musical fields, the non-hierarchical treatment of musical styles, and a strong commitment to both artistic excellence and social responsibility. The institution conceives music as a multidimensional phenomenon and promotes a comprehensive educational approach. It plays a dynamic role in the Catalan musical and cultural sector and aspires to become an international benchmark for educational excellence (ESMUC, 2024).

Its institutional vision is to be a leading institution in the field of music education and research, internationally connected, integrated into European educational networks, responsive to the social context, and open to all dimensions of music. It also aspires to become a pioneering space for innovation and knowledge transfer, in collaboration with the artistic and university education system of Catalonia (ESMUC, 2024). This mission and vision are grounded in values such as quality, internationalization, equity, diversity and inclusion, foresight, and institutional consolidation, in alignment with the country's educational and cultural objectives.

At the international level, ESMUC maintains ongoing relationships with leading European higher conservatories, music schools, and universities. It is a member of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), the International Benchmarking Group (IBG), actively participates in the Erasmus+ program, and is part of ELIA, the European League of Institutes of the Arts. ESMUC also plays a central role in *In.Tune*, the first European University Alliance dedicated to music and the arts, which brings together eight leading institutions within the European Higher Education Area (IN.TUNE, 2025).

Over the past quarter-century, ESMUC has trained generations of professionals with a high level of artistic competence. The diversity of academic pathways and the cross-disciplinary nature of its educational model have enabled many graduates to pursue outstanding careers in a wide range of fields — from performance, with regular appearances in orchestras, festivals, and international projects— to contemporary creation, musicological research, music education, and cultural management.

ESMUC has a teaching staff of approximately 250 professors. The school's academic organization is structured into departments that reflect the various areas of knowledge encompassed by its educational project, both in terms of teaching and research. The current eight departments — Classical and Modern Music; Jazz, *Flamenco*, Pop and Traditional Music; Early Music; Musical Creation and Theory; Music Education and Artistic Mediation; Music Management; Music Technology; and Cultural and Musical Studies — form the backbone of the institution's academic activity. Each department fosters curricular coordination and develops its own lines of research, artistic creation, and knowledge transfer within their respective fields (ESMUC, 2025).

Within the Classical and Contemporary Music Department —the largest, with a total of 90 faculty members—, the piano area holds a prominent place and is made up of ten professors (nine men and one woman). This team consists of active musicians with distinguished careers and diverse profiles, both in terms of background and pedagogical approach. Such diversity enables students to choose the teacher whose artistic and educational perspective best aligns with their own interests and goals (ESMUC, 2025).

ESMUC offers a total of 150 undergraduate places each academic year, distributed across different specializations (ESMUC, 2025). Within the Performance specialization, these places are further divided by instrumental areas and modalities. According to the guidelines of the Foundation's Board of Trustees, approximately 43% of the places are allocated to the Classical and Contemporary Music area, amounting to around 65 places per academic year (ESMUC, 2019). Of these, around 10 are assigned to the piano modality. This means that, considering the undergraduate program spans four years and 240 ECTS credits, there are approximately 40 active piano students enrolled in this specialization.

This program is based on a specific curriculum² that was officially validated by the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU) in 2014 and reaccredited in 2024 (AQU, 2025). Since then, no substantial modifications have been made. It is worth noting, however, that the Principal Instrument course follows a common syllabus for all instruments (ESMUC, 2025), which is then tailored into an individualized study plan for each student, based on their specific needs and artistic interests, as identified by the teaching staff and agreed upon by the academic team.

The desired entry profile for the undergraduate program in Classical and Contemporary Piano Performance includes a solid previous musical education, strong technical skills, artistic sensitivity, and an open attitude towards a diversity of styles and repertoires. In addition, autonomy, commitment to both individual and collective work, and a genuine interest in developing within a highly demanding artistic and intellectual environment are highly valued (ESMUC, 2025).

Admission to this specialization is subject to an entrance examination designed to assess the candidates' technical, musical, and academic competencies (Government of Catalonia, 2024). The examination is divided into two parts. Part A evaluates general knowledge in music theory, transcription, aural analysis, score reading, as well as musical culture and sight-reading skills. Part B, which is specific to each specialization, consists of the performance of a significant and varied solo repertoire to assess the applicant's technical level, artistic maturity, and stylistic understanding. It also includes a sight-reading task and a working session with the examination panel (ESMUC, 2025).

Repertoire as an Artistic, Pedagogical, and Cultural Construct

The repertoire of a piano student constitutes a complex construct that significantly impacts artistic expression, pedagogical methodologies, musicological comprehension, and cultural identity. This dynamic interaction not only cultivates the technical proficiencies of the students but also enhances their creative and interpretative faculties, thereby mirroring overarching cultural narratives.

The repertoire cultivates artistic awareness, enabling piano students to engage with a multitude of musical styles and expressions, thereby augmenting their interpretative

² <https://www.esmuc.cat/estudis/grau/interpretacio-musica-classica-i-contemporania/interpretacio-classica-i-contemporania-piano/>

capabilities (Tolmacheva, 2021). Exposure to a variety of genres, inclusive of contemporary compositions, stimulates creativity and individual expression, transcending conventional European-centric repertoires (Almeida, 2014).

A judiciously selected repertoire is imperative for the cultivation of technical proficiency; pedagogically sound etudes are vital for establishing foundational skills within students (Chernyavska, 2020). Proficiency in piano technique encompasses the capacity to convey through physical movement any and all musical concepts. Technique ought to be intricately associated with interpretative expression throughout each practice session. An effective practice period provides an opportunity to delve into the interpretative content of the repertoire more profoundly while simultaneously enhancing motor dexterity (Smith, 2021). Educational methodologies must evolve to incorporate both interpretation and creation, thereby fostering a comprehensive approach to learning (Almeida, 2014). In piano interpretation, aesthetic meaning, symbolic meaning, and pragmatic meaning play a significant role in discovering the basic building blocks for the transfer of meaning from the educator to the student and the listener. In piano interpretation, the notation of a piece lays the groundwork for the aesthetic meaning attributable to that piece (Yahşi, 2023).

The examination of repertoire elucidates historical and cultural contexts, underscoring the evolution of piano pedagogy from mechanistic to holistic paradigms (Laor, 2016). Analyzing the repertoire's significance in shaping musical education can inform contemporary practices and curricula, thereby ensuring relevance within today's diverse musical milieu (Chuanjie, 2024).

The repertoire embodies cultural values and identities, affecting how students engage with music and their own cultural heritage (Almeida, 2014). Engaging with an array of musical traditions cultivates a more expansive cultural appreciation and understanding among students (Tolmacheva, 2021). Distinct national traditions, such as the Russian, French, and German piano schools, establish unique interpretative methodologies that influence a pianist's identity. Pianists frequently align their artistic identities with these traditions, which in turn shape their performance styles and aesthetic inclinations. The repertoire associated with these schools not only mirrors cultural heritage but also impacts the emotional and technical dimensions of performance, thereby nurturing a singular artistic identity (Lourenço, 2020). These schools provide a framework for comprehending how cultural and historical contexts inform performance styles and repertoire selections.

The Graduation Recital as a Subject of Inquiry and Aesthetic Expression

The graduation recital is of paramount significance within the academic framework of piano students, effectively serving as the apex of their technical and artistic evolution. This performance not only exemplifies their cultivated competencies but also augments their aesthetic expression, thereby fostering a more profound connection with the realm of music.

The graduation recital necessitates an elevated degree of technical prowess, thereby motivating students to meticulously hone their skills through systematic and rigorous practice (Chen, 2017). Piano students are tasked with the challenge of balancing technical execution with musical interpretation, thereby circumventing mechanical performance and nurturing a

more emotive presentation. The graduation recital offers a vital platform for students to articulate their artistic identity, permitting individual interpretation of musical pieces, while concurrently promoting reflective practices wherein students critically assess their performances and artistic decisions, thereby enhancing their self-awareness and development as musicians (Sushchenko, 2024). Aesthetic insights acquired during the preparation and execution of the performance contribute to a deeper appreciation of musical compositions, facilitating a comprehensive musical experience. The performance context enables students to engage with the audience, thereby enhancing their capacity to convey emotions and narratives through the medium of music (Hastings, 2014).

This study aims to present an overview of the current state of undergraduate piano education at ESMUC, with a specific focus on identifying the repertoire performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals. Accordingly, the present study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the repertoire in terms of composer profile, period, and genre?
- Are any works with *national themes* performed in these recitals?

By “profile”, we mean knowing composers’ surname and name, birth and death years, gender, and nationality. And we refer to “national themes” to catalogue those music pieces or themes inspired on any Spanish folklore elements or Spanish melodic music elements.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative research enables the examination of the meanings of situations and conditions, the processes of activities, and the ability to provide explanations related to them (Güler, Halicioğlu, & Taşgın, 2015). In this study, it was deemed appropriate to explain the current state of undergraduate piano education at ESMUC using repertoire selections as a lens through which to interpret educational and artistic practices.

Data source and collection

The primary data source for this study consisted of printed concert programs from piano graduation recitals at ESMUC. The fieldwork was conducted in-person at ESMUC between May 30 and June 19, 2025, during which all fifteen recitals took place. All performances occurred in Sala 4 Alicia de Larrocha, one of ESMUC’s main performance venues, and were open to the public and free of charge. Printed concert programs were distributed at the entrance of the hall immediately prior to each performance. Each student was responsible for preparing their own program.

Each recital lasted approximately one hour, and all performances were delivered on Steinway & Sons grand pianos, and the first author attended all concerts personally and confirmed that the repertoire listed in the printed programs matched the works performed during the recitals.

Data analysis

To examine the repertoire characteristics, the study employed qualitative content analysis. This analytical method involves interpreting textual data through inductive coding, allowing

categories and themes to emerge organically from the material (Güler, Halicioğlu, & Taşğın, 2015). Given that the printed programs contained only explicit data—namely, the names of composers and works—the researcher analysed implicit content such as: Composer profile (full name, birth and death years, gender, nationality), period (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th century, Contemporary), genre (sonata, étude, prelude, etc.), and presence of Spanish-themed works, defined as pieces influenced by Spanish folk elements or melodic idioms. Using an inductive approach, the researchers created categorical codes based on a close reading of the collected documents. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, allowing for a systematic interpretation of the repertoire as both an artistic and pedagogical expression. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, data were analysed manually and systematically, following the principles of inductive qualitative content analysis to ensure methodological rigor.

Findings

According to our aim of getting a deep insight on the repertoire performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals, we analysed the characteristics of the repertoire in terms of composer profile, period, and genre, as well as focusing to any *national theme* performed. The first overview is offered by Table 1 that presents the composers whose works were performed, along with the frequency of these performances. Composer names are listed in alphabetical order by surname followed by given name, starting with the most frequently performed and proceeding to the least:

Table 1.

Characteristics of the repertoire in terms of composer profile

Composers' Surname and Name, Birth and Death Years	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Ravel, Maurice (1875-1937)	4	8
Schumann, Robert (1810-1856)	4	8
Chopin, Frédéric (1810-1849)	3	5
Debussy, Claude (1862-1918)	3	5
Haydn, Joseph (1732-1809)	3	5
Liszt, Franz (1811-1886)	3	5
Mompou, Frederic (1893-1987)	3	5
Scriabin, Alexander (1872-1915)	3	5
Albéniz, Isaac (1860-1909)	2	4
Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770-1827)	2	4
Brahms, Johannes (1833-1897)	2	4
Rachmaninoff, Sergei (1873-1943)	2	4
Szymanowski, Karol (1882-1937)	2	4

Bach, Johann Sebastian (1685-1750)	1	2
Blumenfeld, Felix (1863-1931)	1	2
Chaminade, Cécile (1857-1944)	1	2
Falla, Manuel de (1876-1946)	1	2
Franck, César (1822-1890)	1	2
Gershwin, George (1898-1937)	1	2
Glass, Philip (1937-)	1	2
Granados, Enric (1867-1916)	1	2
Mendelssohn, Fanny (1805-1847)	1	2
Messiaen, Olivier (1908-1992)	1	2
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus (1756 -1791)	1	2
Mussorgsky, Modest (1839-1881)	1	2
Poulenc, Francis (1899-1963)	1	2
Taneyev, Sergei (1856-1915)	1	2
Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich (1840-1893)	1	2
Wagner, Richard (1813-1883)	1	2
Weber, Carl Maria von (1786-1826)	1	2
	Total	100

Accordingly, it is observed (Table 1) that works by a total of 30 composers were included, and that compositions by Maurice Ravel, Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin, Claude Debussy, Joseph Haydn, Franz Liszt, Frederic Mompou, Alexander Scriabin, Isaac Albéniz, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Karol Szymanowski appeared in more than one concert program, while the works of the remaining composers were performed in only one concert.

When looking at content analysis in terms of composers' gender, we see Table 2:

Table 2.

Composer profile: Gender

Gender of Composers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	28	93
Female	2	7
	Total	100

As shown in Table 2, the proportion of male composers whose works were performed is significantly higher. The only two female composers represented in the performances are Fanny Mendelssohn and Cécile Chaminade.

When looking at content analysis in terms of composers' nationality, we see Table 3:

Table 3.

Composer profile: Nationality

Nationality of Composers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
German	7	23
Russian	6	20
French	6	20
Catalan	3	10
Polish	2	7
American	2	7
Austrian	2	7
Hungarian	1	3
Spanish	1	3
Total		100

Table 3 displays the distribution of composers whose works were performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals according to their nationalities. It was found that composers from a total of nine different nationalities were represented in the concerts. Among these, German composers were performed most frequently. The German composers featured in the concert programs were Carl Maria von Weber, Robert Schumann, Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, Fanny Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms, and Johann Sebastian Bach. They were followed by Russian and French composers. Additionally, works by three Catalan composers³ (Isaac Albéniz, Frederic Mompou, and Enric Granados) and one Spanish composer (Manuel de Falla) were also included in the performances.

Giving answer to the second research question, there's the following Table 4:

Table 4.

Characteristics of the repertoire in terms of Spanish-themes

Spanish-themed Works	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
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³ In this study, we distinguish between Catalan and Spanish composers for cultural, historical, and linguistic reasons relevant to musical analysis. Catalonia, as a nation with its own identity, language, and distinct musical tradition, has produced works with unique characteristics shaped by its cultural context. This approach aligns with studies on plurinational contexts such as Wales, Scotland, or the Basque Country, and reflects an academic perspective that values cultural identities within Europe.

Other composers' Spanish-themed works (“Sérénade de Don Juan” from <i>Masques</i> , Op. 34, “La soirée dans Grenade” from <i>Estampes</i> , “Alborada del gracioso” from <i>Miroirs</i> , M. 43)	3	50
Catalan composers' Spanish-themed works (“Goyescas”, “Suite Iberia”)	2	33
Spanish composer's Spanish-themed works (“Suite del Amor Brujo”)	1	17
Total		100

Spanish-themed works are present in the concert programs. As shown in Table 4, there is one Spanish-themed work by a Spanish composer (Manuel de Falla's *Suite del Amor Brujo*), two Spanish-themed works by Catalan composers (Enric Granados's *Goyescas* and Isaac Albéniz's *Suite Iberia*), as well as three Spanish-themed works composed by non-Catalan and non-Spanish composers. These works include the “Sérénade de Don Juan” from *Masques*, Op. 34 by the Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, which is based on the Spanish literary character Don Juan; the “La soirée dans Grenade” movement from *Estampes* by the French composer Claude Debussy, which reflects influences from Spanish music; and the “Alborada del gracioso” movement from *Miroirs*, M. 43 by the French composer Maurice Ravel, which carries distinct Spanish melodic elements.

Discovering the periods is also valuable for this study, and we saw the following proportions (Table 5):

Table 5.

Periods

Musical Periods	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Romantic	39	59
20 th century	20	30
Classical	6	9
Baroque	1	2
Total		100

In constructing Table 5, the year of composition of each work was taken into consideration. It is observed that the majority of the works performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals belong to the Romantic period, followed respectively by works from the 20th century, the Classical period, and the Baroque period. The performance of only a single Baroque work emerges as a noteworthy observation within the overall repertoire. Since the Romantic period in music is typically divided into sub-periods, the distribution has been determined as follows: 10 works from the Early Romantic period (1810–1840), 7 works from the High Romantic period (1840–1870), and 22 works from the Late Romantic period (1870–1910) were performed. The

20th century, marked by diverse stylistic movements in music, is represented in these concerts by works reflecting neoclassical, impressionist, nationalist, spiritual, and jazz influences.

Finally, looking at content analysis in terms of music genres, we see them in Table 6:

Table 6.

Music genres

Genres	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Character piece	34	52
Suite	10	15
Sonata	9	14
Rhapsody	4	6
Theme and Variations	3	5
Toccata	2	3
Prelude-Fugue	2	3
Concerto	1	2
Total		100

Table 6 presents the distribution of the works performed in the concerts according to their genres. The data indicate that character pieces were performed most frequently, followed by suites, sonatas, rhapsodies, theme and variations, toccatas, preludes and fugues, and a concerto. While only one concert featured a concerto performed with orchestral accompaniment, all other concerts took the form of solo piano recitals.

Table 6.1.

Character pieces

Character pieces	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Prelude	8	29
Intermezzo	5	18
Étude	3	11
Waltz	2	7
Ballade	2	7
Novelette	1	3,5
Serenade	1	3,5

Polka	1	3,5
Mazurka	1	3,5
Barcarolle	1	3,5
Lied	1	3,5
Scherzo	1	3,5
Romance	1	3,5
Total		100

Table 6.1 presents the distribution of the character pieces performed in the concerts. The distribution of character pieces is as follows: 5 intermezzos, 2 waltzes, 2 ballades, 1 novelette, 8 preludes, 1 serenade, 3 études, 1 polka, 1 mazurka, 1 barcarolle, 1 lied, 1 scherzo, and 1 romance. These findings suggest that students demonstrated openness to a diverse range of styles and genres when selecting repertoire to showcase their performance abilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore the current state of undergraduate piano education at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC), focusing on the repertoire performed at ESMUC 2025 graduation recitals. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how higher piano education -far from being limited to technical training- actively engages with artistic, aesthetic, and pedagogical dimensions. Repertoire selection emerges as a critical lens through which to examine evolving educational priorities and the artistic formation of students.

The analysis of fifteen recital programs revealed a strong orientation toward Romantic and early 20th century repertoire, mostly by male composers, with character pieces and expressive works predominating. German, French, and Russian composers were most frequently represented, while Spanish-themed works—often composed by non-Spanish composers—further enriched the stylistic landscape. These choices suggest that students are not only absorbing curriculum expectations but also expressing individual artistic identities shaped by broader cultural and historical narratives. In addition, despite the presence of important female composers in the Romantic period, the fact that only two female composers from this period were included in recital repertoires can be explained by the fact that female composers did not come to the fore due to problems such as gender roles during Romanticism, limited access to education for women, restrictions in concert life, and the male-dominated structure of music institutions (Çetin & Küpana, 2025).

Within the theoretical framework of higher music education, the graduation recital serves as a culmination of artistic, technical, and interpretive development (Choi, 2013; Mishinova, 2025; Chuanjie, 2024). The repertoire a student performs is more than a set of works; it functions as an academic and aesthetic statement, revealing how institutional values and pedagogical models translate into personal musical expression. ESMUC's curriculum -structured yet flexible-supports this process by encouraging students to shape their programs in ways that reflect their individual competencies, career goals, and artistic inclinations.

The repertoire itself constitutes a multifaceted construct with implications for artistic expression, musicological understanding, and cultural identity. As Tolmacheva (2021) and Almeida (2014) suggest, repertoire diversity fosters interpretive richness and critical engagement with a broad range of musical traditions, including contemporary and non-Western styles. The deliberate inclusion of varied genres cultivates artistic awareness, enabling students to internalize both technical and symbolic dimensions of performance. These educational experiences, in turn, reinforce the pianist's identity through aesthetic, cultural, and emotional resonance.

Technically demanding works also serve a dual function: they strengthen foundational motor skills while providing the context for expressive refinement. According to Chernyavska (2020) and Smith (2021), effective pedagogy must bridge technique and interpretation, with each practice session seen as a space for both physical training and artistic exploration. In this view, repertoire becomes a vehicle not only for skill acquisition but for creative self-realization.

The graduation recital, as noted by Chen (2017) and Sushchenko (2024), holds central importance as a performative and reflective moment. It requires students to balance execution and expressivity while publicly articulating their musical voice. As a site of aesthetic positioning and self-evaluation, it enables students to engage deeply with their repertoire and to communicate meaningfully with audiences. Hastings (2014) further emphasizes the relational dimension of performance —how it enhances a student's communicative and narrative capabilities through music.

Cultural heritage also plays a significant role. As Lourenço (2020) points out, national schools of piano -Russian, French, German- inform both the stylistic approaches and artistic identities of pianists. The repertoire associated with these traditions shapes emotional expression and interpretive perspective, linking individual artistry to broader cultural frameworks.

In sum, this study highlights the graduation recital as both an academic milestone and an artistic mirror. Repertoire selection, shaped by institutional pedagogy, student agency, and cultural context, reflects the complex goals of higher piano education: to produce not only technically proficient performers but also expressive, critically engaged, and culturally literate musicians prepared for the evolving demands of the contemporary musical landscape.

Limitation and future research

This study is limited to the analysis of the piano graduation repertoire presented during the 2024–2025 academic term at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya (ESMUC), offering a snapshot of the current state of undergraduate piano education at this institution. As such, the findings should be interpreted within this specific temporal and institutional context. Future research is encouraged to build on this foundation by examining the evolution of repertoire choices and pedagogical trends over time. Additionally, comparative studies involving other reputable music schools and conservatories would provide broader insights into the state of higher piano education. It is also worth noting that valuable, though non-academic, information is available from initiatives such as the “ESMUC Piano Fórum” held in 2025, which showcases student-performed repertoires and formative recital practices. This resource may prove useful in future analyses aiming to capture a more comprehensive picture of piano education at ESMUC and beyond.

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