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# Influence of Different Periods on Teaching Classical Western Music in Türkiye: Example of Piano Education

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## Abstract

This study employs a descriptive comparative research design to examine and compare the piano curricula and graduation-level performance outcomes of conservatories in Türkiye offering 12-year integrated and 4-year undergraduate piano programs in classical Western music. The study group comprises 31 volunteer students selected from conservatories representing both program models, whose end-of-term examination performances were observed and evaluated. Data were collected through end-of-term and graduation examination observations as well as written curriculum documents and examination programs obtained from participating institutions. Performances were assessed using a rubric-based scoring framework encompassing three criteria: technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire/form mastery. The data were analyzed comparatively to identify proficiency differences attributable to education duration. The findings indicate that students in 12-year programs consistently demonstrated higher performance levels across all three assessment criteria, with graduation-stage performances predominantly clustered within the advanced and professional ranges, whereas students in 4-year programs were primarily concentrated within the basic and intermediate ranges. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed to raise the graduation-level standards of 4-year programs, including the introduction of admission-level performance requirements, part-time preparatory programs, and differentiated diploma classifications.

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## Introduction

The relationship between the duration of conservatory-based music education and graduates' technical and artistic competencies constitutes one of the central topics in music pedagogy. International scholarship offers substantial evidence that total instructional time—and, by extension, the pedagogical cycle and the sequencing of repertoire—has a decisive influence on the automation of motor skills, acquisition of stylistic knowledge, and performance endurance (Ericsson et al., 1993). In this respect, professional music education may be understood as a cumulative educational process aimed at developing the behaviors and competencies of talented individuals who have chosen music, or a specific branch of it, as a profession (Şakar, 2019). The piano, widely regarded as the foundational instrument of polyphonic music, represents one of the professional branches within this field and requires rigorous and systematic preparatory training (Barutcu, 2025). Piano learning has been described as a multidimensional and complex process involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains that must function in coordination throughout professional training (Bakıoğlu & Kurtuldu, 2025; Reybrouck & Schiavio, 2024).

A distinctive feature of the Turkish context is the coexistence of 4-year higher-education-focused programs and integrated programs (primary school–high school–undergraduate) that may extend up to 12 years. While the 4-year model is designed to bring late-starting students to a professional level within a limited timeframe through an intensive and goal-oriented pedagogical structure, the integrated model seeks to introduce discipline at an early age and support students through long-term repertoire development. Early-age piano education is considered important not only for technical development but also for the formation of musical hearing, rhythmic perception, and long-term musical awareness (Kırca & Soykunt, 2024; Mosing et al., 2021). It has been emphasized that planned and progressive technical studies beginning from the elementary level support both the technical and musical development of piano students and play an important role in preparing students for advanced repertoire (Özdamar, 2025).

Beyond this structural diversity, in Türkiye, professional piano education is not confined to state conservatories alone; faculties of Music and Performing Arts, music departments within faculties of education, and private certificate programs also provide piano training. The delivery of education across multiple institutions and levels results in observable differences in graduates' professional skills and individual performance qualities. Long-term, early-starting integrated conservatory education substantially enhances students' artistic and professional competencies as well as their technical proficiency, whereas short-term and late-starting programs lead to disparities in graduate outcomes (Koçkar, 2001). However, current legal regulations recognize diplomas from these programs as providing equivalent professional opportunities upon graduation. As a result, a pianist who has completed only a 4-year undergraduate education may teach under the same conditions as a graduate of a 12-year conservatory program. This situation highlights the need for a clear national quality standard that can reduce the level diversity produced in practice by institutional diploma equivalence and ensure closer alignment with international standards.

This study seeks to contribute to the above-mentioned need for standardization. By comparing qualitative data derived from observations of undergraduate-level piano examinations in 4- and 12-year conservatory programs with the curriculum content of these programs, the study examines differences in graduates' technical, musical, and professional competencies. The ultimate aim is to propose a quality standard model that acknowledges duration-based structural differentiation in piano education while ensuring equal and high-quality learning outcomes. It is anticipated that this model will serve as a reference framework for updating national music education policies and supporting internal institutional accreditation processes.

### Significance of the Study

This study primarily aims to conduct a comparative examination of 12-year integrated conservatory programs providing piano education in classical Western music in Türkiye and 4-year undergraduate-level conservatory programs in terms of curriculum

structure, end-of-term examination requirements, and graduation-level outcomes. The study aims to identify differences in the technical proficiency, stylistic knowledge, repertoire breadth, and professional performance levels fostered by these two education models, which are structured around different durations. Accordingly, the analysis draws not only on written curriculum documents but also on qualitative data obtained through observations of end-of-term examinations, and evaluates the impact of education duration on achieved piano performance levels using concrete criteria.

The significance of the study lies in its capacity to make visible the distinct level differences that emerge in practice despite the official equivalence of graduation diplomas awarded by institutions offering piano education of differing durations in Türkiye. Within the current system, treating the professional competencies of pianists who graduate with the same title as uniform—irrespective of education duration—creates various pedagogical and institutional challenges. By addressing these issues through empirical data, the study emphasizes the need for quality assurance and standardization in piano education and offers applicable recommendations, particularly regarding ways to strengthen the graduation level of 4-year programs. In this regard, the study aims to contribute to the reassessment of higher-education piano training policies and provide an original comparative perspective within the academic literature.

### Problem Statement

In Turkish higher-education institutions that provide piano education, 12-year integrated conservatory training and 4-year undergraduate-level conservatory programs substantially differ in terms of education duration, curriculum intensity, and graduation objectives; nevertheless, they are often treated as equivalent at the point of graduation. This situation contributes to the neglect of important level differences, particularly with respect to technical proficiency, repertoire scope, stylistic knowledge, and professional performance level. In 4-year programs, students typically begin piano education at an older age and with limited prior preparation, which may render the available instructional time insufficient for establishing fundamental technical and musical gains. In contrast, 12-year programs provide a long-term and gradual training trajectory. The fact that these structural differences are not sufficiently interrogated at pedagogical and academic levels creates uncertainty regarding the quality of piano education outcomes and positions the standardization of graduation levels as a clear problem area.

## Literature Review

The study of piano education within the Turkish conservatory system intersects with broader debates in music pedagogy regarding the role of institutional duration, pedagogical sequencing, and the development of technical virtuosity. Professional music education has been conceptualized as a cumulative educational process aimed at developing the behaviors and competencies of talented individuals who have chosen music, or a specific branch of it, as a profession (Şakar, 2019). The piano, widely regarded as the foundational instrument of polyphonic music, occupies a central place within this framework and requires rigorous and systematic preparatory training (Barutcu, 2025). Piano learning has been described as a multidimensional and complex process involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains that must function in coordination throughout professional training (Bakıoğlu & Kurtuldu, 2025; Reybrouck & Schiavio, 2024).

Early-age instruction has received particular attention in the literature on instrumental development. Early-age piano education is considered important not only for technical development but also for the formation of musical hearing, rhythmic perception, and long-term musical awareness (Kırca & Soykunt, 2024; Degé et al., 2019). It has been emphasized that planned and progressive technical studies beginning from the elementary level support both the technical and musical development of piano students and play an important role in preparing students for advanced repertoire (Özdamar, 2025). Long-term, early-starting integrated conservatory education substantially enhances students' artistic and professional competencies as well as their technical proficiency, whereas short-term and late-starting programs lead to disparities in graduate outcomes (Koçkar, 2001; Ericsson et al., 1993).

Research specifically addressing the Turkish context has examined the piano lesson contents of institutions offering professional music education (Karataş & Şengül, 2018) and the proficiency levels of students graduating from different types of secondary-level programs (Avcı, 2013). These studies reveal considerable variability in student preparation, pointing to structural factors within the Turkish music education system as key determinants of graduate outcomes. In piano performance assessment, rubric-based evaluation systems are considered important for reducing subjective inconsistencies between evaluators and for producing reliable comparative data (Turgut & Dalkıran, 2021; Moura et al., 2024). Advanced music performance environments involve continuous evaluation and high artistic expectations, underscoring the importance of systematic and long-term professional training processes (NourAllah, 2026). Memory and memorization strategies also play a significant role in professional piano performance, with particular implications for performance quality at different developmental stages (Çelikten Hepgüler, 2025).

A related line of research concerns comparative analysis across instrument education programs. Aktaş (2022) investigated the knowledge and experiences acquired during the undergraduate education process and professional life for cello, revealing discrepancies between academic preparation and professional demands—a pattern applicable to piano education as well. Collectively, the existing literature points to the need for systematic comparison of conservatory programs of differing durations using objective performance assessment criteria, a gap that the present study seeks to address.

Note: In accordance with the reviewer's recommendation, additional citations from Scopus-indexed journals addressing comparative music education, conservatory curriculum design, and performance assessment will be incorporated in the final revised version to further strengthen the theoretical foundation of the study.

## Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the structural and curricular differences between 12-year integrated conservatory programs and 4-year undergraduate conservatory programs offering piano education in classical Western music in Türkiye?
2. How do the technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire/form mastery levels of students in 12-year and 4-year conservatory piano programs compare at the graduation stage?
3. What recommendations can be proposed to reduce the identified proficiency gap between graduates of 4-year and 12-year conservatory piano programs and enhance standardization in graduation-level outcomes?

## Method

### Research Design

This study was conducted within the framework of a descriptive and comparative research design aimed at examining and comparing the graduation levels of conservatory programs in Türkiye that provide piano education and are structured with different durations. A review of similar studies in the field indicates that curriculum analysis, performance assessment, and data collection techniques based on examination observations are frequently employed in instrument education research. In line with this approach, the present study adopted a performance-based assessment method that enables the collection of quantitative data.

### Study Group

The study participants included students enrolled in 12-year integrated conservatory programs and 4-year undergraduate-level conservatory programs that provide piano education in classical Western music in Türkiye. The study group comprises 31 students who participated in end-of-term examinations at institutions selected to represent both education models. Participants' examination performances were assessed using predetermined criteria—technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire/form mastery—and each criterion was scored based on the established level definitions. These scores were compared quantitatively by considering the education model in which students were enrolled,

their grade level, and their stage of graduation. In addition, documents related to end-of-term and graduation examination programs obtained from certain 12-year conservatories were included in the quantitative evaluation, and statistical trends in level differences associated with education duration were presented.

### Data Collection Instruments

End-of-term and graduation examination performances of students enrolled in 12-year and 4-year conservatory programs constituted the primary data source. Throughout the examination observations, students' performances were evaluated within a structured assessment framework based on the criteria of technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire/form mastery. These criteria were developed by drawing on performance assessment parameters used in previous research (Turgut & Dalkıran, 2021), and each criterion was scored according to predefined proficiency levels corresponding to five developmental stages: Beginner, Basic, Intermediate, Advanced, and Professional (see Table 1). Furthermore, written documents related to end-of-term and graduation examination programs obtained from selected conservatories were incorporated into the dataset, enabling comparisons between curriculum objectives and the repertoire levels required in examinations.

### Data Analysis

The quantitative data derived from performance observations were analyzed comparatively to identify level differences associated with education duration. Examination observations were conducted by the project coordinator and at least one additional researcher to ensure inter-rater consistency in scoring. For all parameters in the assessment table, full attainment of the requirements at each level was necessary. At every level, technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire mastery were required to be present simultaneously; examination performances that did not meet this condition were assessed as one level lower. The resulting scores were analyzed to identify patterns of proficiency distribution across program types and grade levels.

### Limitations

This research was conducted within several limitations. The quantitative data are restricted to the performances of 31 students observed during end-of-term and graduation examinations held at conservatories included within the scope of the study. The limited number of participants constrains the generalizability of the findings to all institutions providing piano education in Türkiye. Moreover, although performance evaluations were scored in accordance with predefined criteria and level classifications, they may involve a degree of interpretive variation because of the inherent nature of musical performance. Since the quantitative data were derived from examination performances within a single academic term, longitudinal data intended to monitor students' long-term developmental trajectories were excluded from the study. Furthermore, variables such as individual practice time, private lesson history, and personal motivation could not be quantitatively controlled and were therefore treated as external factors that may have influenced the findings.

## Findings and Discussion

### Evaluation of Conservatory Piano Curricula

#### *Twelve-Year Conservatory Piano Curricula*

An examination of the curricula of 12-year conservatory piano departments reveals an integrated structure extending from the fifth grade of primary education through the eighth semester of undergraduate study. Maintaining the axis of "Etude, Baroque period, classical period, romantic period, 20th century, Turkish composers" at each level, this structure progressively increases technical complexity and repertoire difficulty, thereby supporting the gradual development of cognitive and psychomotor skills. Moreover, the inclusion of works from diverse historical periods emphasizes stylistic knowledge, which plays a significant role in the formation of musicianship. From the fifth grade of secondary education through undergraduate graduation, the requirement to perform one work from the Baroque, classical, romantic, and modern periods each semester provides students with sustained opportunities for stylistic experience alongside technical development.

This approach contributes to students' development in the following ways:

- enabling them to explore music from an early age and construct personal meaning from it;
- making them familiar with different composers within their respective periods and grasp period-specific stylistic characteristics at an appropriate level;
- supporting them in discovering their own musical identity and recognizing the periods or composers toward which they demonstrate particular affinity, thereby facilitating the attainment of these outcomes.

Upon successful completion of the 12-year program, students gain an understanding of how the music of the repertoire they have studied—progressing from simpler to more complex works by composers from various periods—should be interpreted, and the extended duration of training provides them ample opportunity to consolidate and internalize these competencies through practice. As a result, graduates are able to enter their professional careers in a well-prepared and competitive manner.

From a technical perspective, 12-year conservatory piano curricula aim to establish technical development beginning at an early age and advancing in a consistent and systematic manner. The inclusion of scale–arpeggio and cadence exercises repeated across all grade levels, together with Hanon studies, supports the automation of finger mechanics, whereas the structured progression of repertoire strengthens motor skills in accordance with the principle of gradual load increase. This structure may enable students to engage with a broad repertoire ranging from Carl Czerny to Frédéric Chopin and from Sergei Rachmaninoff to Adnan Saygun. Naturally, the extent of this progression is shaped by individual talent; however, the minimum level prescribed by the curriculum remains essential in establishing a shared standard. The 12-year duration provides students with the opportunity to progress from beginner-level competencies toward advanced and virtuoso-level performance. In parallel with technical development, the stylistic spectrum—extending from Baroque dance forms to contemporary dissonant idioms—supports the early development of polyphonic phrasing skills and contemporary notation literacy. Furthermore, the compulsory inclusion of national composers, such as Saygun, Akses, and Erkin, throughout the undergraduate curriculum contributes to the formation of an awareness of the "Turkish School" within piano literature.

Another prominent component of 12-year conservatory piano curricula is the expectation that students will learn at least one piano concerto by the time of graduation. Concertos, written for various instruments, are generally intended to be performed with orchestral accompaniment and are designed to expand and test the technical and musical capacities of the instrument. Including such a work in a student's graduation repertoire provides a significant advantage, particularly for those pursuing a soloist career.

In summary, the curriculum integrates gradual technical development with a broad stylistic framework, offering a comprehensive progression that can lead students to a level at which they are able to perform works ranging from Baroque suites to compositions by Liszt, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. Additionally, the concerto requirement at the graduation stage may further enhance graduates' international competitiveness.

### *Four-Year Conservatory Piano Curricula*

Undergraduate-level piano education compressed into a 4-year period reflects an intensive pedagogical model that requires students to internalize both motor-skill automation and an awareness of stylistic diversity within a limited timeframe. An examination of this curriculum indicates that it seeks to meet this requirement by maintaining a balanced integration of technical and musical development.

The program includes a two-stage assessment structure for each semester: the midterm examination is intended to measure fundamental and technical competencies, and the final examination focuses on stylistic and repertoire representation. The first year begins with a compulsory repertoire consisting of four-octave major and minor scales and two basic etudes; in the final examination, stylistic awareness is introduced through the inclusion of a polyphonic Baroque work and a free piece. In the

second year, tonal variety is expanded to encompass all 12 keys, and a classical-period sonata or sonatina is incorporated into the repertoire. In the third year, the curriculum introduces the "virtuoso etude" option within the Etude category, preparing students for the technical demands associated with composers such as Liszt, Chopin, and Moszkowski. Additionally, the compulsory inclusion of a free piece from the romantic or contemporary period in the final examination broadens the stylistic scope. In the final year, students are required to perform either a concerto or a complete sonata, a work by a Turkish composer is added to the examination program, and graduates are expected to demonstrate responsibility for representing the national repertoire.

From a general perspective, the program necessarily distributes technical and musical development across a 4-year period and maintains these developmental targets at a minimum level within that timeframe. The frequency with which students perform works from different stylistic periods is spread throughout the program. Notably, students begin performing romantic and modern repertoire in the third year; prior to this stage, performance in these styles is not compulsory, even at an introductory level. Nevertheless, there are no restrictions on students who wish to include works from these styles in their examinations. Furthermore, the inclusion of "etude or virtuoso etude" within the same curriculum item allows accommodation of higher-level repertoire. For instance, within this structure, beginner-level etudes by C. Czerny may be performed as "etudes," whereas technically demanding works such as F. Liszt's etudes may be presented as "virtuoso etudes." This flexibility indicates that technical levels of varying difficulty are accepted under the same category. Such an arrangement appears to be linked to the absence of a standardized proficiency requirement at admission. In other words, students with no prior piano training and those with extensive prior experience may enter through the same examination process and be evaluated within the same framework.

A similar flexibility is also evident in other curriculum components. For example, "sonata or sonatina" is listed among the required end-of-term works; however, these two forms differ considerably in terms of technical and structural difficulty. The sonata form typically involves longer and more complex virtuoso structures, whereas the sonatina represents a simplified version of the sonata and generally poses fewer technical demands. In terms of level differentiation, this again reflects a curriculum that permits significant variability in technical expectations. Overall, this suggests that the program can offer meaningful developmental opportunities for students who begin their studies with an established level of proficiency. Simultaneously, being assessed within the same framework as students with no prior ability to play the piano presents a pedagogical challenge, producing substantial level differences throughout the educational process. At this point, a central question emerges: what graduation-level target does the 4-year conservatory curriculum establish for a student without any prior piano proficiency? While curricular flexibility may support students entering with prior preparation, it does not fully clarify the intended graduation-level outcome for those starting from the beginning.

Another issue that stands out in the 4-year program is the limited number of required performance components. At the minimum level, each term requires four works—two etudes, one polyphonic work, and one free piece. Given that two of these are etudes, only two non-etude works are added to the student's repertoire each term. This structure has a direct impact on the professional readiness of students upon graduation.

From a technical standpoint, it appears unrealistic for a student with no prior piano experience to reach a virtuoso level within four years. The program does not fully assume responsibility for achieving this developmental target and instead places a substantial portion of the burden on the student. Students who enter the program with an existing foundation may set more ambitious goals, whereas those without prior training are directed toward a more horizontal and limited technical progression. Until the final stages of the program, the required repertoire—particularly within the "etude" category—primarily reflects classical-period virtuosity and does not make romantic-period technical studies mandatory. Although scales and technical exercises may be includ-

ed as mandatory elements, the absence of required etudes by major romantic-period composers, such as Chopin and Liszt, suggests that the intended technical development may remain incomplete. This is because the romantic-era conception of the etude is grounded in expanding and redefining the expressive and technical possibilities of the evolving instrument. When the period-based development of musical language is considered, these etudes typically involve more musically integrated and technically demanding structures, which directly shape advanced technical proficiency. The ability to perform a full sonata or concerto with comfort and confidence is closely linked to the technique developed through romantic-period studies and etudes produced within that tradition. When training is limited primarily to classical-period etudes, the technical gains achieved tend to position Mozart and Beethoven sonatas or concertos as the upper limit, thereby reducing the likelihood of confidently performing concertos and related repertoire extending into the modern period. In conclusion, the 4-year program primarily aims to train competent performers; however, this level of competence does not necessarily correspond to virtuosity.

## End-of-Term Examination Observations

End-of-term examination observations were conducted at one 4-year and one 12-year conservatory, involving 31 students across all terms, including graduation-level examinations. From the other 12-year conservatory included in the project, end-of-term examination documents were requested, and examination programs for a total of five students—including graduation—were provided. The available observation and document data were evaluated and scored in accordance with the parameters presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Performance assessment parameters**

| Level | Technical Proficiency | Musical Proficiency | Repertoire/Form Mastery |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beginer | • Basic fluency in eighth notes above 60 BPM metronome<br>• Simple legato, forte–piano difference<br>• Minimal hand independence | • Phrase perception of 4–8 measures<br>• Simple dynamic difference (p/f)<br>• Stylistic difference unclear | • Small song form<br>• 1–2 pages memorized<br>• Single-period repertoire |
| Basic | • Sixteenth notes at 80 BPM metronome in all scales<br>• Basic-level pedal use<br>• Simple accompaniment–melody balance | • Phrase perception of 8–12 measures<br>• mp/mf control<br>• Baroque vs. romantic style distinction begins | • Sonatina form<br>• 3–4 pages memorized<br>• Baroque and classical repertoire |
| Intermediate | • Scales–arpeggios equal at 100 BPM metronome<br>• Balance in polyphonic passages<br>• Half-pedal awareness | • Motif development is clear<br>• Controlled crescendo/decrescendo<br>• Stylistic articulation | • Full sonata form<br>• 10+ pages memorized<br>• Romantic work is added |
| Advanced | • 120 BPM metronome in virtuoso etudes<br>• Clean octaves–trills<br>• Pedal–touch synchronization | • “Question–answer” tension<br>• Micro-nuance management<br>• Rubato flexibility<br>• Interpretation becomes distinct | • Concerto or large romantic works<br>• 15+ pages memorized<br>• Early 20th-century style |
| Professional | • Liszt/Chopin etude tempi<br>• Clarity in multi-layered texture<br>• Colorful pedal use | • Mastery of multiple styles<br>• Orchestra-like color palette<br>• Differentiation in large forms and dramatic interpretation | • Concerto, variation forms<br>• 20+ min memorized<br>• Advanced contemporary repertoire |

For all parameters in Table 1, full attainment of the requirements of each level was necessary. At every level, technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire mastery were required to be present simultaneously; examination performances that did not meet this condition were assessed as one level lower.

### *End-of-Term Examination Observations in the Four-Year Conservatory*

The primary observation drawn from the end-of-term examinations of the 4-year conservatory piano program is the presence of clear level differences among students. As indicated both by the observations conducted within the scope of this study and by the curricula of other institutions in Türkiye offering 4-year piano education, the absence of a required performance level in entrance examinations (Karataş & Şengül, 2018) results in beginners and students with prior piano experience being placed in the same cohort. This creates the opportunity to observe a wide spectrum of proficiency levels, a situation that is particularly evident in the first year. Students who already know how to play are seen preparing for examination repertoire that is somewhat more advanced than that of beginner students. For instance, differences emerge such as performing a sonata instead of a sonatina, or presenting a two-part invention rather than short preludes. In this context, students described as already being able to play are typically those who have completed the educational program of Anatolian Fine Arts and Sports High Schools. Research on these institutions has also shown that proficiency levels may vary even among students within the same program (Avcı, 2013). In contrast, it was observed that training received through other private institutions or in the form of private lessons was not a decisive factor in producing these level differences. In other words, no substantial distinction was identified between beginner students and those who had learned piano through private instruction or as a hobby.

When the examination observations were evaluated from a technical perspective, it was observed that while some students were able to reach the targeted developmental outcomes at a minimum level, others continued to display fundamental technical issues despite progressing to a more advanced repertoire. Therefore, the basic technical level appears to follow a relatively horizontal trajectory, indicating that although repertoire difficulty advances in line with curriculum expectations, technical deficiencies cannot always be fully resolved. Naturally, this outcome cannot be attributed solely to the curriculum or instructional program. Students' practice habits, effort, and individual aptitude are directly related to their development. Nevertheless, a more solid technical foundation could contribute to greater standardization in outcomes.

Notably, in exceptional cases, the repertoire performed by certain students in the second or third year meets the criteria defined above as "advanced" or even "professional." These students demonstrate sufficient confidence to prepare repertoire at this level for examinations. However, their performance does not consistently reflect the same level of attainment. Although aspects of the performance may align with advanced technical and musical expectations, technical and musical disruptions observed during the examination remain closer to the "basic" level. Examples include issues related to concentration and form mastery. The length of the repertoire and the demanding nature of its technical structure directly influence performance stability, often pushing professionalism into the background in terms of musical execution and interpretive quality. As a result, the intended performance standard remains low due to limited concentration and insufficient form mastery. Since the program is designed to promote short-term and intensive development, it may contribute to the emergence of this outcome. The inability to distribute technical foundation-building over time and develop it through sustained experience and consolidation constitutes a key factor shaping this situation.

In light of the data obtained, it is possible to state that although the level of the performed repertoire may meet "advanced" or "professional" criteria, technical control and musical performance quality may remain at a "basic" level. This creates a contradiction in the interpretation of student proficiency: while the repertoire appears high-level in theory, the performance does not consistently

demonstrate the same standard in practice. At these levels, expectations involve stylistic and mastery-based parameters such as pedal control, phrasing, interpretive decision-making, and touch. Deficiencies in these areas ensure that what appears to be a high level in principle may remain considerably low in actual performance. These findings were derived from examination observations of students who entered the 4-year conservatory program with an existing foundation; however, when the program is considered as a whole, such cases represent exceptions rather than the general pattern.

Different findings emerged for students who entered the program as complete beginners and reached graduation solely through training provided within the program. For such students, development appeared to follow a more horizontal trajectory. It was observed that professional growth remained at a minimum level throughout the 4-year period. Although the curriculum-based progression targets were formally met during the education process, some students who started at the most basic level added very little beyond their initial stage. Among those who did demonstrate improvement, progress was generally limited to a single level increase over a 4-year period. Within this timeframe, students were found to move only from the "beginner" level to the "basic" level. Naturally, students' talent and effort play a significant role in shaping this outcome; however, since the curriculum structure also reinforces this limitation, the result becomes largely inevitable. Moreover, it is not realistic for a curriculum to expect rapid advancement within a 4-year period. The restriction of program duration to four years compels the curriculum to prioritize minimum-level outcomes.

When the examination performances of students who started the program as beginners were evaluated from a technical perspective, it was observed that the horizontal progression described above was not confined to finger agility alone but also extended to elements such as phrasing, stylistic awareness, and pedal use. In addition to difficulties related to right–left hand balance, the accompaniment function of the left hand and the cantabile character of the right hand, unequal finger strength and the resulting imbalance in control can also be cited as indicators of this limited progression. A problem that persists at the beginner level may improve only one stage during the education process and continue to manifest at that subsequent level. Difficulties that would normally be expected in the early phases of training may therefore persist until the final stage of the program. This situation may be illustrated through the metaphor of constructing a building without a foundation. Since the program is required to deliver outcomes aligned with international standards at a minimum level within four years, the establishment of a solid technical foundation necessarily proceeds under these constraints.

Another important factor influencing performance is memorization. In the observed 4-year conservatory program, there is no requirement to perform from memory, and this has a direct impact on performance quality. While students attempt to maintain hand–arm coordination, they focus on following the score rather than observing the keyboard and their hands, which makes controlling the intended performance more difficult. Particularly at the "beginner" and "basic" levels, performing without memorization can be more challenging than at more advanced stages. Because students have not yet developed sufficient professional control, they may struggle to perform comfortably without visually monitoring their hands and the keys. Performing from memory functions as a requirement at the beginner level and becomes an automatic reflex at the professional level. As a student's level advances, memorization becomes increasingly natural. In other words, at higher proficiency levels, memorizing repertoire does not require substantial additional effort; rather, it often occurs spontaneously through practice. Therefore, the absence of a memorization requirement in examinations was observed as a factor that lowers performance quality at the early stages. Conversely, students who represented advanced levels were found to perform their examinations from memory, and this was concluded to have a direct positive effect on performance.

Thus, examination observations suggest that within the framework of a 4-year education program, students are generally unable to reach the "advanced"

level parameters outlined in Table 1. Instead, the "intermediate" level appears to represent the highest attainable target within the same program; however, this conclusion may not apply uniformly to every student.

### *End-of-Term Examination Observations in the Twelve-Year Conservatory*

Before presenting the undergraduate examination observations of the 12-year conservatories, it should be noted that both institutions included in the project require a defined level of proficiency in their undergraduate entrance examinations, and this level may be regarded as the minimum virtuosity threshold. The examination requires the performance of at least one complete sonata, at least one virtuoso etude, and works by composers from other stylistic periods (romantic, modern, Baroque). This entrance examination applies not only to candidates from outside the institution but also to students advancing from within the conservatory's own system. As a result, the proficiency levels of internal and external candidates who seek to pursue university-level training are ensured to be equal or at least comparable, which makes the presence of level differences among students more expected and pedagogically manageable.

An examination of the submitted documents indicates that the first-year university level for piano students corresponds to the "advanced" level defined in Table 1. It is evident that highly demanding repertoire—such as Frédéric Chopin's virtuoso etudes and complete sonatas by L. v. Beethoven—is performed within these examinations. It was concluded that this level increases as students progress through the program, and that the extent of progression is shaped in accordance with individual student characteristics within the framework of the curriculum. Although the concerto repertoire performed at graduation in the submitted programs may be considered relatively moderate in difficulty, it can also be inferred that this is not uniformly the case, as students' talent and determination directly influence repertoire selection and performance level.

In the end-of-term examination observations of the 12-year conservatory, level differences were again present, similar to those observed in the 4-year conservatory. Particularly in the first and second years, students entering from outside the institution were observed to remain slightly below the level of students trained within the conservatory's own system. Disruptions were identified in technical control and pulse stability, and deficiencies were noted in touch and stylistic awareness. The repertoire selected for examination performances represented the minimum virtuosity level, yet the performances of externally admitted students did not fully align with those of students who had progressed through the institution's internal training system within the same term. At this stage, it should be emphasized that externally admitted students do meet the program's entry requirements and the level mandated by the curriculum. The observed difference therefore also reflects the particularly high level achieved by students trained within the institution. Nevertheless, this discrepancy does not appear to have a substantial impact on professional-level outcomes. Since externally admitted students entered by demonstrating an established level of proficiency, their performance quality indicates that they possess the technical foundation necessary to reduce these differences throughout their university education.

Here, "external entry" refers to students who have completed Fine Arts High School programs or who have attained proficiency through private institutions. Unlike the situation observed in the 4-year conservatory model, this background does not produce the same effect in the 12-year system. A proficiency level that may be considered high within the 4-year model may be regarded as comparatively low within the 12-year framework, given the detailed structure of 12-year curricula in which even the minimum expected level includes virtuosity.

When the examination performances of students entering the 12-year conservatory from outside were evaluated, it was observed that their proficiency generally corresponded to at least the "intermediate" level in Table 1. In some cases, higher levels were evident in parameters such as finger agility, pulse control, and stylistic awareness. Even when students were assessed as lacking in technical or musical aspects, the errors and deficiencies observed

remained above the "basic" level defined in the table. This outcome appears to result directly from the entry-level proficiency requirement. Based on the observation data, the level differences described above become increasingly homogeneous from the third year onward. From this stage, distinctions between students entering from outside and those trained within the institution's own system become minimal.

In the examination observations of students trained within the institution's own system, it was determined that technical foundations were largely established, musical ideas became more individualized, and stylistic knowledge moved beyond conceptual understanding to become embodied through experience. These proficiency levels, corresponding to the "advanced" and "professional" categories in Table 1, indicate that graduates enter professional working life with a stronger degree of preparation. The issues observed in these students did not fall below the "advanced" level, and deficiencies were rarely identified in parameters such as phrasing, pedal use, articulation, formal awareness, and finger agility. The errors that occurred were not linked to foundational technical weaknesses, but rather appeared to stem from momentary circumstances—performance-related human errors rather than chronic or systematic deficiencies. Furthermore, the repertoire performed by these students exceeded the minimum expectations of the curriculum. All etudes selected for examination performance belonged to the romantic and post-romantic traditions.

The intensive repertoire requirements mandated for each end-of-term examination effectively compel students to prepare and present a full recital program. Within a single academic year (two semesters), students are expected to perform a complete classical sonata, two virtuoso etudes, a romantic work, a modern-period work, a work by a Turkish composer, and one complete concerto. These repertoire demands function as indirect preparation for stage performance. Considering that this process is repeated eight times throughout undergraduate education, graduates enter professional life with a developed technical foundation and musical competence, as well as substantial stage experience. In this sense, the 12-year program establishes a high-level objective and leaves it to students to determine how they will apply and experience this level in their professional trajectories.

In conclusion, the 12-year conservatory piano education program not only develops students' technical proficiency to a high standard but also cultivates musicians with extensive musical knowledge, interpretive perspective, and a deeper awareness of their own artistic identity. As a result of this training model, students are able to approach international standards more readily and graduate with stronger readiness for professional life.

## Discussion

The quantitative scoring results indicate that students in the 12-year programs were positioned at higher proficiency stages than those in the 4-year programs across all assessment criteria—technical proficiency, musical proficiency, and repertoire/form mastery. These findings are consistent with earlier research demonstrating that long-term, early-starting integrated conservatory education substantially enhances students' artistic and professional competencies and technical proficiency relative to shorter programs (Koçkar, 2001). In piano performance assessment, rubric-based evaluation systems are considered important for reducing subjective inconsistencies between evaluators (Turgut & Dalkıran, 2021); the structured scoring framework employed in this study provided objective, comparable data across both program types and across five developmental levels.

At the graduation stage, the majority of students in the 12-year program were observed to cluster within the advanced and professional performance ranges, whereas students in the 4-year program were predominantly concentrated within the basic and intermediate ranges. These findings align with the broader literature on developmental trajectories in musical training: early-age piano education is considered important not only for technical development but also for the formation of musical hearing, rhythmic perception, and long-term musical awareness (Kırca & Soykunt, 2024), and planned, progressive technical studies beginning from the

elementary level play an important role in preparing students for advanced repertoire (Özdamar, 2025). The significant mental and physical advantages of beginning piano education at an early age further support these outcomes (Çelikten Hepgüler, 2025).

The findings related to the 4-year conservatory programs confirm that the absence of a compulsory performance-level requirement at admission results in the co-evaluation of beginner- and advanced-level students within the same cohort—a structural problem also identified by Karataş and Şengül (2018) in their examination of piano lesson contents across institutions offering professional music education in Türkiye. Significant variability in proficiency levels among students graduating from Anatolian Fine Arts High Schools was also previously documented by Avcı (2013), further corroborating the present study's findings. Students who entered the 4-year program with an existing foundation achieved higher scores in repertoire and technique, whereas those who began from scratch demonstrated only limited progress throughout the education period. A substantial proportion of students in this group were unable to reach the "advanced" level criteria even by the end of the program.

In contrast, the findings regarding the 12-year conservatory programs suggest that students' technical and musical development follows a more homogeneous pattern from the upper undergraduate years onward. The high entry requirements and the long-term, gradual curricular structure reduce level heterogeneity among students over time. Consistent with the view that advanced music performance environments involve continuous evaluation and high artistic expectations (NourAllah, 2026), the 12-year curriculum's intensive end-of-term examination demands function as indirect preparation for stage performance, effectively cultivating concert-readiness alongside technical proficiency. In graduation examinations, the criteria related to the performance of concertos, virtuoso etudes, and large-form repertoire were largely met, and technical issues or performance errors were more momentary and temporary in nature. A similar pattern was reported by Aktaş (2022) in a comparable study of cello education, where the match between academic training and professional demands was found to be stronger in long-term programs.

Overall, these findings underscore a central paradox within the Turkish piano education system: despite significant differences in training duration, curricular intensity, and graduate competency, the two program types confer nominally equivalent diplomas. This structural inconsistency creates serious pedagogical and institutional challenges, calling for targeted policy interventions, as elaborated in the Suggestions section below.

## Conclusion

In Türkiye, piano education is provided through institutions that are limited to a 4-year undergraduate program in some cases, whereas in others, it is delivered through a long-term structure spanning a total of 12 years, encompassing secondary education, high school, and undergraduate study. This difference in education duration directly influences student proficiency and leads to professional disparities among graduates. An examination of the curricula of institutions operating under these different durations confirms the emergence of such level differences. To identify the nature of these differences more concretely, end-of-term examinations were observed, and the resulting level distinctions were documented.

The findings indicate that although a student in a 4-year program may become a competent performer, reaching virtuosity within this framework is not feasible. Studies in music psychology suggest that advanced music performance environments involve continuous evaluation and high artistic expectations, increasing the importance of systematic and long-term professional training processes (NourAllah, 2026). Although exceptional cases were observed during examinations, these do not alter the overall pattern. Moreover, it does not appear realistic for graduates of the 4-year model to consistently meet international standards, consistent with the findings from a comparable study by Aktaş (2022). In contrast, within the 12-year education model, despite some variation among institutions, the observed levels did not fall below a defined threshold. The 12-year program not only aims to develop technical virtuosity but also assumes responsibility for cultivating musicians

with broad repertoire knowledge and advanced interpretive awareness. Examination observations indicate that the program largely achieves this objective. This outcome may be attributed to the substantial advantages—both mental and physical—of beginning piano education at an early age (Çelikten Hepgüler, 2025).

At this point, a key problem emerges: although graduates of institutions providing piano education of different durations are not equivalent in practice in terms of proficiency, they are often treated as equivalent in theoretical or official terms. For instance, a graduate of a 4-year program may formally be eligible to work in institutions operating within the 12-year framework. However, due to differences in training level, it is not practically feasible for a graduate of a 4-year program to teach within a 12-year program. This issue should not be considered solely in terms of piano instruction. In 12-year programs, piano departments function as the core department of the institution. Other departments rely on the piano department for auxiliary piano and accompaniment (Korrepetition) courses, and a graduate of a 4-year conservatory piano program may not be able to meet the required level for these courses due to foundational deficiencies. This is also related to the fact that in the 12-year system, training durations for other instruments are similarly long and consequently their performance levels are higher.

Moreover, when the level difference is considered in relation to piano as a professional specialization, it also appears unlikely that a student who entered a 4-year program from scratch and graduated from it would be able to teach professional-level courses within the 12-year system. This is because the graduation level of the 4-year program corresponds more closely to the secondary education stage (approximately 9th–10th grade) within the 12-year model. Regardless of the effort invested, this level cannot be expected to reach the undergraduate graduation standard of the 12-year program. For this reason, the knowledge and experience of a graduate whose proficiency corresponds to the high school level of the 12-year program makes it unrealistic for them to teach undergraduate-level courses and beyond.

The situation where both programs formally confer the same title—"State Conservatory Piano Major"—creates the impression that the educational level is theoretically equivalent. However, based on the curricula analyzed and the findings derived from observed end-of-term examinations, the graduation levels of these programs are far from equal. One might consider the possibility that a 4-year program graduate could teach only at the secondary education level; however, even this would not constitute a fully adequate instructional outcome. An instructor who continues to experience foundational problems at the basic level may be unable to provide sufficiently complete and structured training at the beginner and basic stages. In a potential objection process, the system's treatment of these distinct levels as equivalent may lead to significant legal complications.

In conclusion, the present study confirms that differences in conservatory program duration have a profound impact on the technical, musical, and professional competencies of piano graduates in Türkiye. Addressing these disparities requires both structural reforms within programs and formal policy changes regarding diploma recognition. The suggestions presented in the following section are offered as practical steps toward achieving greater standardization and quality in piano education.

## Suggestions

To reduce the level differences identified in this study and establish a quality standard in institutional piano education in Türkiye, the following suggestions are proposed. These were developed based on the problems identified throughout the research, and aim to address the central question: "How can the level of 4-year piano education programs be raised effectively?"

### Level Requirement in Admissions to Four-Year Piano Education Programs

Based on the data obtained, it is evident that no performance level is currently required for admission to this program and that candidates who have no ability to play the piano may be admitted solely through an ear-training examination. Although playing the piano during the entrance examination may provide an advantage, candidates are not required to do so. Data derived from final examination observations

indicate that many applicants to the program already possess some ability to play the piano. While this level is not necessarily professional, it was determined that candidates often enter the examination with at least some partial foundational background. At this point, the most effective approach for raising and standardizing student level is to introduce a defined performance requirement in admissions. As an example, the entry-level repertoire should include: one complete sonata, at least one virtuoso etude (C. Czerny and M. Moszkowski etudes may be appropriate for a minimum threshold), one romantic-period work, and one free piece or a modern-period/Turkish work. Conducting an entrance examination with this repertoire would allow identification of candidates who can pursue undergraduate-level education in a healthier and more progressive trajectory. The horizontal development process identified in the evaluation of examination observations would naturally diminish, and sustained progress would be more reliably supported. Moreover, ensuring that candidates enter with comparable proficiency levels would also contribute to greater pedagogical fairness, as the required repertoire presupposes a substantial technical foundation developed over a period of at least five years. A 4-year conservatory model does not inherently pose a problem when admission requires a defined level of proficiency. Such models exist internationally and can successfully provide undergraduate-level education alone. The main issue in the Turkish context is that 4-year programs often begin piano education from scratch at the undergraduate stage. Introducing an entry-level performance requirement would therefore support alignment with international standards and enhance overall educational quality.

## Part-Time Preparatory Programs

Conservatories that provide 4-year undergraduate education also have the authority to offer vocational training at the secondary and high school levels prior to undergraduate study. Within such part-time programs, students may continue attending their current schools while receiving conservatory-based training focused exclusively on vocational courses. These typically include solfège, music theory, and instrument lessons. When students begin these courses before entering undergraduate education, the time they spend with the piano increases, allowing them to develop greater familiarity and control over the instrument at an earlier age than would be possible through undergraduate training alone. Solfège and theory courses further support this development by strengthening musical literacy and comprehension. As a result, students may enter undergraduate entrance examinations with stronger preparation and, if desired, reach a level that enables them to meet the repertoire requirements outlined in Suggestion 7.1 above. The primary distinction between part-time conservatory programs and external private lessons or certificate programs is that instruction is delivered and systematically monitored by specialists within the conservatory. Since students receive more structured and professionally guided education than they typically would outside the institution, they are likely to begin undergraduate study with greater readiness. Moreover, this model effectively extends the duration of training. If students are enrolled in part-time programs starting at least at the high school level, they may complete approximately eight years of piano education when combined with undergraduate study, which would directly influence their graduation-level outcomes.

There is no inherent disadvantage in implementing both Suggestions 7.1 and 7.2 together to raise student proficiency. Conservatories offering 4-year undergraduate education can require a defined performance level in the entrance examination and also support candidate preparation through part-time education in advance. However, in contexts where institutions lack sufficient instructional staff to accommodate increased course hours in part-time programs, where conservatories have only recently begun operating, or where there is limited demand for part-time education, introducing an admission-level requirement becomes particularly necessary.

## Preparatory Year Before the Four-Year Undergraduate Program

It is proposed that requiring students to complete a preparatory class for at least one year (two semesters) before entering the 4-year undergraduate piano

program may contribute to raising overall proficiency levels. During this preparatory period, students could develop their technical foundations and, at minimum, progress beyond the "beginner" level. If undergraduate education begins at the "basic" level rather than at the "beginner" level, the likelihood of reaching the "advanced" level by graduation becomes considerably higher than under the current system. An example repertoire recommended for technical foundation-building and stylistic development during a one-year preparatory period is as follows:

- J. S. Bach, Two-Part Inventions
- C. Czerny, Op. 299 Etudes
- M. Clementi, F. Kuhlau, Sonatinas (three movements)

For the development of musical expression and stylistic-period awareness, the following repertoire may be included:

- F. Mendelssohn, Songs Without Words
- B. Bartók, Mikrokosmos
- A. A. Saygun, İnci'nin Kitabı

The level represented by this repertoire is intended as a minimum threshold, and the works are provided to exemplify appropriate repertoire selection across periods and styles. It is considered that this selection would be sufficient for students to reach the "basic" level within the first year. Once students begin the undergraduate program, they would then possess the necessary foundation to build more effectively upon this base. Naturally, such development would be possible only if weekly piano lesson hours in the preparatory class are at least six hours, and if supporting courses, such as solfège and theory, reinforce the learning process. This arrangement may also help reduce level differences between students entering the program with prior experience and those beginning from scratch.

## Differentiated Diploma Classification for Twelve-Year and Four-Year Programs

An examination of the curricula of these two programs indicates that there are substantial level differences even in the minimum developmental targets expected throughout undergraduate education. Preparing diplomas in a way that explicitly reflects these differences would help prevent confusion that may arise after graduation. Although both programs graduate students under the title of State Conservatory Piano Major, this designation creates the impression that the educational level is theoretically equivalent. However, based on the curricula analyzed and the findings derived from observed end-of-term examinations, it was determined that the graduation levels of these programs are far from equal. If these programs cannot be brought closer to one another in terms of outcomes, it would be appropriate to indicate this difference directly on the diploma. For example, the duration of the completed program may be stated on the diploma—including a phrase such as "4-year program" or "12-year program" would help clarify the level and officially reflect the distinction. Additionally, descriptors such as "virtuoso" or "professional" may be included on diplomas awarded within the 12-year program, accurately reflecting the level that students graduating from the 12-year model are able to reach.

In a potential objection process, the system's treatment of these distinct levels as equivalent may lead to significant legal complications. For this reason, indicating program differences on the diploma is important to protect the standards of institutions offering 12-year education and prevent potential legal issues in the future. In this way, institutions seeking to recruit staff would be able to announce vacancies with this distinction stated explicitly, and expectations for candidates would be communicated in a clear and formal manner.

In conclusion, implementing the recommendations presented in this study would contribute to improved educational quality, prevent confusion arising from level differences, reduce disparities between institutions providing education of different durations, and support graduating students in representing a more standardized proficiency level than is currently the case.

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