

It's Never Too Late:

Adult Piano Study

Brenda Dillon, Editor



Brenda Dillon is on the faculty of Brookhaven College in Dallas, Texas, Project Director for the National Piano Foundation, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Conference on Piano Pedagogy and is a teacher who loves to help her adult students bridge the gap between wishing and doing.

A Question for Publishers: How Is Your Adult Method Different From Your Children's Method?

by Brenda Dillon

Several years ago the National Piano Foundation produced a three-part video entitled *The Possible Dream*. These videos focused on teaching adults and addressed, in humorous ways, much of what can go wrong. A particularly memorable scene showed an adult, quivering in his boots back stage, listening to a performance by a particularly talented little girl. The camera panned from the look of terror on his face to the music in his shaking

hands. That scene was painful to empathetic viewers, but empathetic or not, everyone laughed at the title and the picture of his piece—*The Happy Bunny*.

This issue, and in several future issues of **KEYBOARD COMPANION**, we will address the differences between children's and adults' methods, and why the authors, publishers, and teachers who teach these methods believe they work. For this first issue, Morty Manus from Alfred Publishing Co., Barbara Kreader from Hal Leonard Corporation, and Sandy Feldstein from Warner

Bros. Publications begin with their views, followed by the comments of teachers who explain why these methods work for them and for their students.

Including all adult methods in this format will take several issues, but we feel this question warrants this level of attention since most teachers place the highest significance on what methods and repertoire captivate and maintain the interest of their adult students. Once this question is answered, many other challenges of teaching adults fall into place. ▲

Alfred Publishing Company

Writing a successful method is more of an art than a science . . .

by Morty Manus

The writing of a piano method is a complex, arduous, difficult, exasperating, exhilarating, and time-consuming task. Over the years, many methods have been written; few have succeeded. While many teachers can probably write a better method for his or her own students than any of those published, what a writer must strive for in a published method is a kind of universal appeal to a wide-ranging audience—good for all, perfect for none. It is up to the teacher to take the materials available and personalize them to the needs of each individual student.

Students, young and old, are infinitely different from each other, and different in so many ways that it is almost impossible to quantify. To start, there is the age—children come in all ages and sizes and so do adults. Every year is important when evaluating a child. With an adult, perhaps each decade makes a difference. For any age, does the student have a strong desire to play? What about musical aptitude and prior musical experience? If it's a child, is the family supportive? The size and strength of the hands are important—even the geographical location of the student plays a role.

Factors to be considered when writing an adult course are fairly obvious—adults read text well, children less so. Adults like

concepts, children do not. Explanations, therefore, are more lengthy and theoretical in *Alfred's Basic Adult Course* than in our children's courses.

Adults' hands have a larger span and are stronger than children's. Adults can play three-note chords quickly, children cannot. This means the range of the music you have to work with will be much different. With adults, you can move to three-note chords fairly quickly and expand the musical range to intervals of 6ths, 7ths, and even octaves shortly thereafter. With young students you are much more limited. The student remains in 5-note positions for quite some time.

The kind of music is also quite different. Adults like to play familiar music they have heard before. To children, other than music they have heard within the family and on TV or perhaps songs sung in nursery school, almost everything is new.

Because one has a greater range of notes available, and, to a certain extent, more complex rhythms, when writing for adults, the choice of music is somewhat easier. With our *Adult Course*, therefore, familiar songs that can be played and sung are introduced quickly. In contrast, because of the 5-note position range limitation, and with only basic rhythms available, the pieces in our children's courses are largely original, composed for a specific learning situation. These pieces must not only be appealing

musically and in subject matter, but must also have a kind of familiar sound to them as well. I believe this is where we excel. Quite a few of the original pieces composed for *Alfred's Basic* have become well-known throughout the country. We've often overheard conversations between parents from different areas discussing their favorites.

Because adults can practice for longer periods of time each day, they sometimes progress fairly rapidly. To them, longer books are appealing. They want to work towards an ambitious and distant goal while feeling a sense of accomplishment in the large number of pages studied. Children, however, have a shorter attention span and like to get new books more often. An obvious difference, then, between the adult and children's courses is the number of pages within each book—our adult course, in one volume, contains 96 or more pages; each of the children's books (several volumes make up the course), run anywhere from 16 to 48 pages.

In both our courses, the student is taken to a level of being able to play the works of some of our greatest composers. At the conclusion of both courses, the student has gained not only a knowledge of music but has gained the technical skills to move even further ahead.

After all is said and done, writing a successful method is more of an art than a science. There is no magic formula that in-

sure success. Our authors seem to have an intuitive sense as to students' needs and likes. The true test is in the using—does the course hold the student's interest while skills are being acquired? *Alfred's Basic Adult Course* and the children's courses (*Alfred's Basic Prep Course* and *Alfred's Basic Piano Library*) have been used with millions of students all over the world and continue to be used widely. This attests to the fact that these goals are being met.

Our thanks and gratitude, however, go to the piano teacher without whose guidance, patience, and inspiration, no method would work successfully. ▲

* * *

by Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield

In all my years of teaching, this is probably the easiest question I've ever had to answer. The Alfred adult method

works because it has been designed by people who understand the needs and goals in motivating the adult student:

1. It provides a wide range of repertoire that is musically satisfying. Adults need to feel that they are playing "real" pieces immediately.

2. It clearly explains and reinforces musical, technical, and theoretical concepts. Adults have expressed joy with the Alfred method's exceptional ability to communicate musical ideas at an appropriate pace—they never feel overwhelmed or patronized.

3. It simplifies reading by using the intervallic and chordal approach in clear, concise language. The chordal accompaniments result in richer sounding pieces and a stronger theory base.

4. It provides a sophisticated layout and

cover designs that are attractive to adults who so often need visual satisfaction as well as auditory fulfillment. The clearly organized pages with diagrams and new concepts highlighted make reading look unthreatening.

5. It supplies many well-written supplementary books that fulfill the student's desire to learn additional repertoire. Outstanding classical collections as well as beautifully written original works such as the duet books by Dennis Alexander are appealing to students of all ages. Adults are especially motivated by ensemble repertoire and enjoy making music with others.

While I have used the *Alfred Basic Adult Method* with my students and pedagogy classes for years, I am especially thrilled with the new *Adult All-In-One Course*. Since adults want to understand music, this all-inclusive method provides clearly explained theoretical concepts reinforced with written exercises, as well as application/correlation with the learning of repertoire. The most innovative aspect of this new method is Alfred's attention to addressing the special technical needs of the adult beginner—lack of agility, flexibility, and an overall high degree of tension. The correct physical approach to playing the piano is stressed from the beginning of the book and reinforced throughout. Adult students will realize that correct technique will result in easier learning and therefore greater enjoyment in playing.

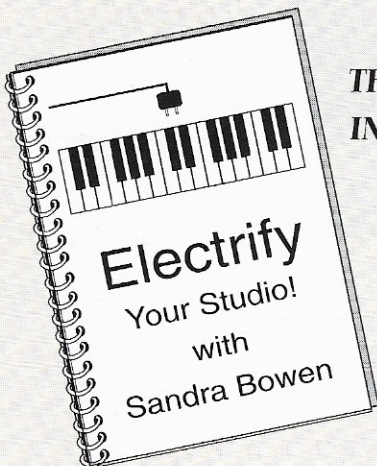
Therein lies the success of the method—adults are motivated to learn because they enjoy playing the repertoire and understanding the technical and theoretical foundations of music. ▲

* * *

by Joanne Marie Barnaba

In our large private music school, the entire Alfred method is one of our very favorite series. Our piano students range in age from 4 to 70, but more and more adult students are taking lessons. Many of them have misgivings about feeling "too old," and they wonder aloud if other adults are taking lessons. Another concern is whether or not they will be given children's books. They also want to learn to play very quickly.

The Alfred adult method addresses all of these concerns. All our adult students have loved the course! Most of the time, they begin working out of three books. The lesson book has all of the main material and is the core book for most students. Then we add the *Theory* and *Pop Adult* books for a comprehensive assignment. Students who are interested or who take longer lessons enjoy



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adding a third book, like the *Finger Aerobics* book, the *Hymn Book*, the *Ear Training Book* (which is excellent), or *Flash Cards. Adult All Time Favorites* is a real hit. Most adults want a book with tunes that are recognizable so their family can sing while they play, as well as famous classical themes. All of these books are perfectly correlated so that the level for the student remains the same. They do not get bored with the material.

If a typical adult begins in September, by November they are asking to play some holiday music. The *Alfred Adult Christmas Book* correlates very well with where the student will be at that time in the core book. The duets written for teacher and student are some of my favorite duets in the whole series. They are beautifully written and challenging, but not too difficult for the student.

By February, we have an adult recital. Favorite pieces from the series for 1st and 2nd year students are *Theme from Love Story*, *The Entertainer*, *Sonata Pathetique*, and *Johnson's Rag*.

Alfred's Basic Adult Piano Course is a proven success in our music school. Many of our adults have been making successful progress for several years. The method has been able to resolve all of their concerns and meet all of their individual needs. ▲

* * *

by Pamela Craver

The biggest challenge in teaching adults is that they want to learn everything yesterday. Also, they cannot understand why their hands will not do what they tell them to do. Sound familiar?

I have tried several adult methods over the last 20 years. None seemed to satisfy the wants and needs of my adults until the *Alfred Basic Adult Piano Course* came along. I use this method with students around age 15 and older.

My students like this series for several reasons:

1. The amount of repertoire is staggering—everything from jazz to classical to country to sacred.
2. The *Finger Aerobics* book is specifically geared toward hands that have never done anything like playing piano.
3. The lesson book is concise and explains concepts clearly and therefore hastens the learning process and reduces the frustration of the student (which is sometimes the result of the student's desire to learn too quickly).
4. The ear training book provides a listening skill which can carry over to other areas of life.
5. The *All-time Favorites* book has a wide

variety of well-written music, giving the adult a sense of accomplishment in a minimum amount of time.

6. The *Sacred Music Book* allows the adult student to be able to play well-arranged, well-known hymns that have been carefully chosen to match their individual skill level.

7. The theory book is designed to allow adults to write what they have learned and, therefore, know that they understand.

8. The pieces in all books are familiar to the adult student, so learning and accomplishment come quicker.

Alfred is the only adult method I use; it

meets the needs and wants of the adults I teach. Our biggest challenge is to teach them to be patient since that is when learning can and does take place. ▲

- Morty Manus, President of Alfred Publishing, Co., Inc., is co-author of Alfred's Basic Piano Library and Alfred's Basic Adult Piano Course.
- Ingrid Jacobson Clarfield is Associate Professor of Piano at Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, New Jersey.
- Joanne Marie Barnaba is the owner/operator of Joanne Marie's School of Piano with studios in Clinton, North Utica, New Hartsford, and Whitesboro, New York.
- Pamela Craver, NCTM, has private music studios in Fayetteville and Hope Mills, North Carolina. ➤

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by Barbara Kreader

My particular adult student's name was Katie, but I think all teachers have heard some version of this comment: "I only want to learn how to play *Clair de Lune* and the hymns from my church hymnal. I don't care anything about other music and all those chords and scales." She followed this statement with the other-shoe-just-dropped question: "How long do you think it will take?" Children and adults are alike—they begin piano lessons because they want to play music rather than clap quarter notes. Yet adults differ from children in the following respects:

- They come to lessons with already-developed musical tastes.
- They bring their previous negative experience with technique and theory as boring activities that have nothing to do with the music they are playing.
- They expect dramatic results in a limited amount of time and don't want to "sound dumb" while they are learning.
- They can quit whenever they want.

The Adult Piano Method: Play by Choice by Fred Kern acknowledges these facts about

teaching adults by:

- Focusing on the music first.
- Relating the technical and theoretical elements to each piece.
- Giving students a way to participate in a full-sounding musical experience from the beginning.
- Giving them ways to learn the music faster and challenging them with activities that expand the playing possibilities for each piece.

Music They Want to Play

The Adult Method: Play by Choice offers adults music they can enjoy and play without embarrassment. Neither *My Crunchy Cereal* nor *Trot, Pony, Trot* appears in this method. Instead, each chapter offers grown-up music in three styles: classical, pop, and folk. From his experience teaching adults for over 20 years, Dr. Kern chose only those pieces already well-known as adult favorites, like *Pachelbel's Canon*, *Für Elise*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *You Needed Me*, *Deep River*, and *Alleluia*.

To keep the focus on the music itself, the 37 pieces presented in this method appear in a separate pull-out section. Also, the 10

volumes in Dr. Kern's *More for Your Adult Method* series offer supplementary pieces in each of the three styles. A chart at the beginning of each book coordinates particular pieces with chapters in the lesson book.

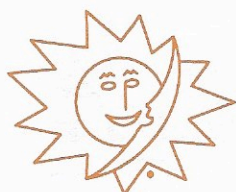
Facts, Preps, Reps, and Challenges

Adults and children are alike in two respects; they don't have time to practice and, when they do, they don't know how to do it. *The Adult Method: Play by Choice* addresses this problem by dividing each of the seven chapters in the lesson book into:

- **Facts:** definitions of the music concepts needed to play each piece.
- **Preps:** rhythm reading and technical activities that prepare students to play each piece.
- **Reps:** suggested practice activities.
- **Challenges:** activities that go beyond the pieces, challenging students to play by ear, improvise, read from a lead sheet, and create their own accompaniments.

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* * *

Certainly a publishing company believes in its method, but the proof of its value lies in the teaching and learning. **Christopher Cazorla** from Merrit Island, Florida bought *Play by Choice* to study on his own. He reports: "I am very pleased with the content of the material and how it is presented. I have learned more from it in two weeks than in six months of previous study. Kudos to Fred Kern." Hearing such a comment might make teachers cringe, but Cazorla's comment points up an important fact about adult study—if the teacher doesn't give the student the content he wants, he will go looking for it on his own.

* * *

Roberta Borst, an independent teacher in Oak Park, Illinois, currently uses *Play by Choice* with three adult students. She says, "Different ages have different tastes. Kern's book gets them started with adult music, but I also rely on the supplementary *More for Your Adult Method* books to give them more music at every level. The thirty-something student likes Andrew Lloyd Webber-type Broadway show tunes; the forty year old loves the folkie stuff and the classic rock pieces; and my older students enjoy the *Choice Sing-Along* book. I also like the way Kern's book links the concepts with the individual pieces themselves. Adults are impatient learners. They want to learn only what they need to know to play each piece."

* * *

Julie Romeo, Director of Educational Programs at Brook Mays Music in Dallas, Texas, teaches *Play by Choice* in a group setting. "The students love the music. It's exactly what they want to play. They also love the choices they get to make. When I add music from the supplementary *More for Your Adult Method* books, I can teach everyone the same concept—eighth notes, for example—which some choose to learn by playing classical music while others choose country. The disk is the best part. The orchestra backgrounds are hip and create great group ensemble experiences."

* * *

Carmen Doubrava, an independent teacher and a faculty member at Brookhaven College in Dallas, says, "Adults enjoy the music in *Play by Choice*. They certainly prefer it to playing *Jingle Bells* and *Oh Susannah*. You should see the looks on the faces of students 30-50 years old when you present them with music they've seen in their kids' and grandkids' method books. I once lost a student because of *Jingle Bells*. He was a surgeon, a perfectionist, and when he couldn't

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"My adults use the practice guidelines and facts sections on their own. These sections are written in adult language, and students can refer to them for review. Adults like choices. Although they may not play every piece or learn every theoretical fact in the book, they stay motivated because they can choose the music they like and learn exactly what they need to know to play each piece."

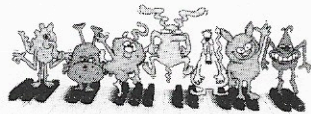
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T. J. Lymenstull, Professor of Music at the University of Southern California, uses *Play by Choice* because it includes "music that students know, appreciate, and respect. The choice and variety of music appeals to the typical student. Teachers can always add a technical or rhythm exercise to a method, but they can't change the music itself.

"I especially like the 'Preps' included in each chapter. They are organized in a way that gives the responsible teacher an opportunity to show students how to take

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the music apart and learn it. The 'Preps' prepare them and then guide them as they practice on their own." ▲

Barbara Kreader is Senior Editor for Educational Keyboard Products at Hal Leonard. She has also maintained a private teaching studio since 1974. ➤

by Sandy Feldstein

Creating study materials for adult students is both challenging and exciting. In preparation for writing the *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method*, we carefully considered adult learning patterns as a whole and built the method accordingly.

Adult students are highly motivated with strong goals in mind. They are taking lessons because they want to learn how to play the piano. They know they will have to practice in order to play well. They don't usually have an understanding, though, of how much practice it will take. All students (adults and youngsters) need an immediate sense of accomplishment. The long-term goals must be reinforced by regularly occurring successes.

Those successes begin with the very first lesson. Even though many adult students have had some exposure to printed music, we take nothing for granted. We stress both the music alphabet and "guidepost" keys to provide topographical security. The student learns how to read, count and feel rhythm patterns, and to identify notes right away.

Note reading is introduced by a fail-safe diagram of the keyboard that visually relates to the notes on the staff. Directions are clear and concise, so the student will be able to practice confidently. We begin with the right hand C position, with letter notes to cement the reading relationship. Aerobic exercises help the student to get the fingers moving. And then, after just part of a lesson, the student is able to read and play three familiar folk songs. Practice hints are on the same page as the music, again providing at-home reinforcement.

The same procedure is followed for learning the left hand notes. (The left hand is in bass C position, setting the stage for harmonic involvement.) The left hand, after doing the aerobics, plays three folk tunes—but not the same three that the right hand played. Success! The student is making music! We then teach the student to play chords (and to understand their structure), again proving great progress.

Because adults' expectations are high, it's often not easy for them to accept the fact that physical skills don't necessarily match their intellectual skills. Coordination can't be taken for granted; no matter how ready and willing the mind is, the body has to be

programmed to coordinate the muscles to make eyes, ears, and fingers all work together. It's comparatively easy to see on the page how the hands must work together, but making that happen can require an amazing amount of tenacity. Building strength in the less dominant hand is important, which is one of the reasons that our finger aerobics begin hands separately. The hands-together playing is carefully structured, at an achievable pace.

Teachers and students like our use of "adult" music. *The Trolley Song*, *Mary Ann*, and *Singin' in the Rain* appear early in the book, as does an easy excerpt of a Brahms theme. (New rhythms, of course, are introduced as carefully as new notes.) By the end of the first book the student is able to play *Blue Moon* and *Over the Rainbow*.

Throughout the course we've concentrated on building success through visual reinforcement, sequential learning, good musical sounds in a variety of musical styles, and logically-programmed exercises, all fitting into the framework of sound educational philosophy.

The addition of a CD play-along to reinforce key song performance throughout the method is another stimulus for the adult beginner. The addition of computer software provides a self-correcting interactive program. The final technology support piece (a MIDI file of the accompaniments) allows the adult to isolate the left and right hands and adjust tempos to meet their own needs.

Whether for class or individual use, or self instruction, the *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method* focuses on all the needs of the adult beginner.

Of course, the success of any adult teaching method depends on the teachers who use it. Following are some of the comments we have received about the *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method*.

* * *

Marilyn Henderson, of O'Neill, Nebraska, says, "It helps so much to have teaching books that make my adults feel that they are making progress. The Feldstein book does that. My adult students and I especially appreciate the clarity of explanations. This allows the students to be more sure of practicing correctly at home be-

tween lessons."

* * *

Elsie Easterbrook, Glastonbury, Connecticut, believes that, "Most adult beginner books go much too quickly, without giving the student a chance to really get comfortable at the keyboard. The adult may understand the concept completely, but what good does that do if he or she can't get around the keyboard easily? The new *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method* leads the student to understand and apply the rules; the students are delighted to have 'ownership' of the knowledge. The course allows me to abide by my own rule of never talking down to a child or up to an adult."

* * *

Judith Eubanks, Waupaca, Wisconsin, believes that the *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method* has an excellent choice of music. "My students really like the mix of traditional and the popular standards. They like playing 'real' songs so soon. I particularly like the reinforcement of each new skill. The enhancement by use of the blue color is helpful to the student."

* * *

Carrying on the idea of the importance of how the music of an adult method appeals to students, **Sally Kibler**, Arcola, Illinois, says that, "The *Belwin Adult Keyboard Method* really does have appeal for my adult students, especially with songs like *Blue Moon* and *Over the Rainbow*." She adds, "I appreciate the layout of the book (nice, uncluttered look) and the adult-like use of colors. The course takes a logical approach, helping the students (and the teacher) achieve success."

* * *

Louanda Cropley, Bolivar, Ohio, adds, "The adults using the Belwin course can play well after a few lessons. That's encouraging for the student and teacher. I also like the old tunes that are included. It's good for students to learn some American standards, not just what's on the Top Ten. This course does a good job of teaching note reading, not reading by finger numbers." ▲

Sandy Feldstein, President/Chief Operating Officer of Warner Bros. Publications, is the author of the Belwin Adult Keyboard Method.

In the next issue:

How can we develop a social hook for the adult studying piano?