

## Survey of Methods for Beginners 4

More than any other country, the United States has led the other nations of the world in training large numbers of recreational pianists. Piano lessons have become standard fare *per se*, and an acceptable social activity as a part of general childhood education. Regardless of talent or excessive motivation, millions of students are engaged in the pursuit of musical instruction as an extension of the general learning process. Often it is not the intent or purpose of those studying to become professional musicians. Rather, for the majority who study, the general philosophy is based on the premise that musical instruction is for the acquisition of a special skill which will enrich and broaden their lives. Music becomes a satisfying experience that gives direction to the basic needs of self-expression, an appreciation for beauty, and an outlet for emotional release.

Due to the great popularity of piano instruction, this country has produced a large body of teaching materials over the past forty years. The sheer bulk of this output is sufficient to overwhelm anyone who endeavors to become knowledgeable on the subject. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to sort a number of these methods into groups and to discuss briefly those which are used most frequently. Out of necessity, the methods surveyed will be limited to those published in the United States which are currently in print.

### *TEACHING GOALS OF METHOD BOOKS*

The word "method" is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a systematic plan followed in presenting material for instruction." The word further connotes a procedure which develops one integrated system of learning. Since method books have planned objectives for systematic progression, one should consider the specific goals outlined by each book or series.

Without thought or reference to any particular method of instruction, list your own teaching objectives. Consider basic skills that your students should have attained after a few years of instruction. The following

list of teaching objectives is offered as a guide. These ten points represent general goals which would be endorsed by most piano teachers—no doubt you will think of many more.

After a few years of instruction students should be able to:

1. Understand the entire keyboard, not just part of it
2. Recognize notes fluently, including ledger line notes above and below the staff
3. Recognize chords and be able to play them (major, minor, augmented, and diminished)
4. Understand tempo markings, meter signatures, key signatures, and generally used musical terms
5. Improvise
6. Transpose
7. Harmonize melodies
8. Sight-read
9. Accompany
10. Memorize a number of pieces each year

### *Educational Philosophies*

Philosophical concepts in education have changed greatly during the past five decades. Years ago elementary education of all sorts was looked upon as being necessarily strict; learning was a bitter pill that had to be swallowed before any good resulted. Old-school disciplinarians did not spare the rod or the dunce cap.

Students were not given the opportunity to enjoy the subjects they were studying. They often were forced to memorize long poems and essays, and they were required to learn tedious rules and facts whether they understood them or not. They were required to recite, copy and practice for the sake of training and discipline.

Piano lessons, too, often tended to be difficult and tedious. The child was taught to sit stiffly on the piano bench, with his arms in a certain fixed position. His fingers and wrist had to be held just so, and if it took him months to learn these beginning essentials, it was for his own good. If he survived these basics, he was taught scales and exercises for a period of time before the playing of musical compositions was even considered.<sup>1</sup> Students were trained so precisely in strict fundamentals that the mortality rate of student drop-outs was considerable, and those who survived were surely destined for the concert stage.

Fortunately, much of this stern autocratic approach to teaching along with the famous “willow switch” and the well-known “rap on the knuckles” is gone. The majority of students today are learning to enjoy music. Lessons are presented in such a fascinating and challenging way that practically every pupil is intrigued with his lessons and with his progress.

Although teaching methods have progressed markedly in the past ten years, it is difficult for some teachers to adjust to today’s methods because of the way in which they were taught.

<sup>1</sup>Actually many of the European piano methods still appear much the same today—primarily exercises, scales, and a stiff dose of the “classics.” See: *Piano Method* by Bartok-Reschofsky (Boosey & Hawkes: English edition, 1968); and *Die Klavier Fibel* by Willy Schneider (Heinrichshafen’s Verlag, 1960).

The forces of tradition make it quite difficult to introduce new teaching methods. Besides the inertia of existing methods, there is the problem of avoiding threat to teachers using the traditional approach. It is understandable that experienced teachers will resist change if they are made to feel that the way they have been teaching is inferior or that they must learn new skills. They will insist that the old way is the best way and find fault with the innovation.

Techniques that are now traditional were, of course, at one time new. And, naturally, no teaching method has failed to undergo subtle changes in response to changing values of the culture.<sup>2</sup>

Teaching methods employed today should reflect the general evolution that has occurred in all phases of instruction. The teacher’s style and technique of presentation should be oriented toward today’s youth. Teaching should be relevant. The teacher should focus on the needs and objectives of students today, not those used twenty years ago.

### *Middle C Versus Multiple Key*

Although there are numerous method books available by many different authors, essentially there are two basic approaches to teaching beginners in this country at the present time: one is the traditional “middle ‘C’ method,” and the other is the more recent “multiple key method.” Most teachers who are presently instructing children in piano grew up on the first method of instruction. It has been only within the past ten years that the multiple key method has been used with any frequency.

The middle C approach has been firmly established in the United States for many years. It was popularized by John Thompson’s *Teaching Little Fingers to Play*, published by the Willis Music Company in 1936. Thompson, and others before him, began a trend of teaching beginners which has persisted to the present, and the middle C method is still the most frequently used instructional procedure among teachers today. The popularity of this approach is evident; even a cursory glance at subsequent methods reveals that *most* books are patterned after Thompson’s blueprint.

The basic procedure of the middle C approach is to learn facts one at a time and eventually develop a musical picture. Whereas, the basic procedure of the multiple key approach is to present whole concepts and then break them down into parts.

The instructional technique of the middle C method requires the student to place both thumbs on middle C and begin playing (Ex. 4:1).

Ex. 4:1. Example of a middle C method: single line melody.



<sup>2</sup>James L. Kuethe, *The Teaching-Learning Process* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1968), p. 141. Reprinted by permission.

Without previous keyboard experience the student begins to play little melodies while simultaneously learning notation and rhythm. The method of instruction presents single line melodies divided between the hands. Later, melodies are written mostly in two parts (Ex. 4:2). Finger numbers are given

Ex. 4:2. Example of a middle C method: two-voice melodies.

for every note in most courses. The keys of the pieces are limited almost exclusively to C, G and F. Theoretical concepts such as intervals, chord structure and use, transposition, harmonization, the order of sharps and flats, key signatures, etc., may or may not be included; generally these presentations (if given) come later in the course.

The multiple key approach is a completely different concept of instruction, and is in direct contrast to the middle C method. Although not new, the multiple key method is only now beginning to find acceptance among an increasing number of teachers. A great deal of credit for the development and promulgation of this concept should be given to Raymond Burrows (*The Young Explorer at the Piano*, Willis Music Company, 1941), and to Robert Pace (*Music for Piano*, Lee Roberts Music Publications, Inc., 1961), both of Columbia University.

The procedure of the multiple key method is to learn all twelve major five-finger positions (Ex. 4:3) within the first few months of instruc-

Ex. 4:3. Example of a pre-notated multiple key pattern.

Patterns to be practiced in the keys of (C, G, F) (D, A, E) (Db, Ab, Eb) (Gb, Bb, B)	
R. H.	
L. H.	

tion.<sup>3</sup> Directional reading is developed by establishing the concept of intervallic relationships, mainly steps (seconds), skips (thirds), and repeated notes (Ex. 4:4). Later on, directional reading is further developed by continuing

<sup>3</sup>The twelve major positions are most easily learned by dividing the keys into groups according to those which are related by both sight and touch—example: Group I keys (C,G,F) have all white keys in the tonic chords; Group II keys (D, A, E) have a white, black, white composition in their tonic chords; Group III keys (Db,Ab,Eb) have a black, white, black composition in their tonic chords; Group IV keys (Gb,Bb,B) are not related by sight or touch, because each is different.

Ex. 4:4. Example of basic directional reading patterns.

the expansion of intervals through the octave. Almost from the beginning, I and V7 chords are used, and melodies are harmonized with these two chords (Ex. 4:5). The following elements of theory are stressed throughout multi-

Ex. 4:5. Melody harmonized with I and V7 chords.

key courses: (1) intervals, (2) chords (tonic, sub-dominant, dominant, major, minor, diminished, augmented), (3) the order of sharps and flats, (4) key signatures, (5) transposition, and (6) harmonization.

A comparison of the middle C and multiple key methods is offered (Ex. 4:6) to discover areas of emphasis in these diverse approaches. The following comparisons are based on general areas of knowledge that a student may or may not have been exposed to after approximately a year of instruction.

From the following comparisons (Ex. 4:6) it might be concluded that the student would experience a greater variety of material using the multiple key method than with the middle C method. While this is basically true, the correct presentation of any material is essential; success cannot be guaranteed automatically by the materials chosen. The teacher, not a set of books, is the determining factor in quality results.

In many instances teachers have produced skilled, finished pianists using what would appear to be almost any materials at hand. Conversely, other teachers appear to be using excellent materials, but unfortunately the results produced are consistently poor. Teachers should realize that a "method" alone will not do the job for them. Some teachers become so attached to one author's course that they will not consider using another method even for supplementary purposes. This is a very narrow view and unnecessarily limiting. Quality teaching is determined by the *results* the teacher achieves, not necessarily by the methods used. Nevertheless, a gifted teacher using superior materials will be most likely to produce outstanding results.

	MIDDLE C METHOD	MULTIPLE KEY METHOD
<b>Melodies</b>	centering around middle C, especially at the onset of lessons	encompassing all 12 major five finger positions
<b>Notation</b>	largely confined to a two octave range and limited mainly to the white keys on the piano, with the exception of F#, Bb, and C#	four octave range including all the white and black (sharps and flats) keys, also ledger lines above, below and in between the staves
<b>Rhythm</b>	somewhat restricted to 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, especially in the beginning stages of lessons, although within the first year, students would have been introduced to 6/8	similar, although 6/8 is usually introduced much earlier in this presentation
<b>Theory</b>	basically nonexistent “theory” is often nothing more than exercises in drawing the treble and bass clefs, note spelling, writing note values, writing counts, etc.	considerable intervals, chords, key signatures, and keyboard harmony are interwoven as basic ingredients in the general musical program
<b>Chord usage</b>	quite limited in this approach block chords are almost never used or explained, however, various types of broken chord basses are used as accompaniments to melodies	frequently used all major, minor, diminished and augmented chords are used in both block and broken form, and these are clearly explained and systematically used
<b>Order of sharps and flats</b>	excluded the order of #'s (F, C, G, D, A, E, B) and b's (B, E, A, D, G, C, F) is <i>not</i> used or explained in this approach	included students learn the order of sharps and flats in the first year of lessons and review these in subsequent years
<b>Key signatures</b>	quite limited the student is told that if there is an F# in the key signature, the piece is in G, but there is no attempt to systematically teach all the key signatures	emphasized continually all major (and later, minor) key signatures are explained and used; by frequent reference to “key,” the student becomes aware of the tonal center

<b>Transposition</b>	some suggestions for transposition are sometimes given, but keys suggested usually are those of C, G, or F	considerable almost from the onset of lessons students are directed to transpose their pieces into a variety of keys
<b>Harmonization</b>	quite limited the harmonization of given melodies is virtually nonexistent in this approach	frequently used single line melodies are presented for students to harmonize in various keys
<b>Improvisation</b>	excluded	included students are given four measure <i>question</i> phrases and are told to improvise or create their own four measure <i>answer</i> phrases
<b>Creative work</b>	very limited, almost nonexistent	included, made a part of the general music program
<b>Technique</b>	included finger drills are used mostly in the key of C, and scales are presented early in this approach	included finger drills are used in all 12 keys in various ways: for legato and staccato touch, balancing of tone, phrase studies (down-up wrist motion), and for forearm rotation; scales are presented later in this approach
<b>Sight reading</b>	limited to the keys of C, G, and F (dependent on the student's ability)	reading facility is developed in many keys (dependent on the student's ability)
<b>Comprehensive, inclusive musical program</b>	somewhat limited confined mostly to the learning of pieces, technical studies, and scales	inclusive and challenging: repertoire, sight-reading, theory, technique, and creative work constitute the general music program

It is difficult to produce a complete listing of method books. Some are out of print. Each music store carries different method books. And new method books are being written continually. Therefore, the author has relied chiefly on a list provided by Ralph Pierce of the Ralph Pierce Music Company in Pomona, California, titled "Music for the Piano." This listing has been recently compiled and contains most of the courses currently in print. Even this list, which is not entirely complete,<sup>4</sup> is quite staggering when seen in its entirety displayed in the store. The Pierce Music Company has one of the finest selections of piano music in this country, and Mr. Pierce has conscientiously attempted to stock every beginning piano method. Unfortunately, most music stores are unable to carry a large inventory of piano music. Because of the expense involved, most stores are somewhat justified in not stocking every method book in print. Due to the sheer bulk of piano instruction books, they often are considered the anathema of the sheet music business.

An alphabetical list of method book authors includes the following:

*Aaron, Michael	Mathews, William
*Bastien, Jane Smisor and James Bastien	Mopper, Irving
Benner, Lora	*Nelson, Harry and Allison Neal
Blake, Dorothy Gaynor	*Nevin, Mark
*Brimhall, John	*Oxford Piano Course
*Burnam, Edna Mae	*Pace, Robert
Burrows, Raymond and Ella Mason Ahearn	*Palmer, Willard and Amanda Vick Lethco
*Clark, Frances	*Pointer System
*d'Auberge, Alfred	Quist, Bobbie Lee, Ruth Perdew, and Anne Demarest
*Davis, Jean Reynolds and Cameron McGraw	Remark, Marguerite
Diller-Quaile	*Richter, Ada
*Duckworth, Guy	Rodgers, Irene
Eckstein, Maxwell	*Schaum, John W.
*Fletcher, Leila	*Stecher, Melvin, Norman Horowitz, and Clair Gordon
Frisch, Fay	Steiner, Eric
Frost, Bernice	*Thompson, John
*Gillock, William	Wagness, Bernard
Girlando, Florence	Werder-Paul
*Glover, David Carr	*Westmoreland, John and Marvin Kahn
Hirschberg, David	*Weybright, June
Kahn, Marvin	Williams, John M.
*Kasschau, Howard	*Zepp, Arthur
Kreutzer, Hilda	<i>*indicates courses to be surveyed</i>
Lake, Ian	
Levine, Henry	
Lyke, James B. and Maryland D. Blatter	

<sup>4</sup>There is little information on piano method books; and we have been unable to find a survey of method books. Therefore, information has been obtained primarily from publishers' catalogs.

From this list of forty-eight entries, how many names have you seen before? How many courses are familiar to you? There are probably only about ten names from this list which "ring a bell"—the others are apt to be unfamiliar.

Courses range in years from the very old (like the Williams, Thompson, and Oxford courses) to the very new (like the Bastien, Gillock, Glover, and Palmer courses). As a basis for comparison the teacher should have at least a working knowledge of the better known courses regardless of when they were written.

The courses which are used with some frequency will be found in music stores of any size. The teacher should make an effort to keep abreast of the new courses published by searching these out in the music store. If the store has a limited piano sheet music department and does not subscribe to new issues, information on new courses can be found in magazines such as *Clavier* and *Piano Quarterly*.

To acquaint students and teachers with methods that are used with some frequency, the author has chosen twenty-six courses to survey.<sup>5</sup> The survey is purposely limited to American publications.

### SURVEY OF TWENTY-SIX PIANO METHODS

Aaron, Michael	Piano Course	Mills/Belwin, Melville, New York.
	<i>Method Books</i>	Piano Primer (1947); Grades 1-5 (Grades 1 & 2, 1945; Grades 3 & 4, 1946; Grade 5, 1952).
	<i>Technic Books</i>	Piano Technic, Books 1 & 2 (1948)
	<i>Supplementary Books</i>	Note Reader (1960); Duet Book; Note Spelling Game; others.
	<i>Adult Books</i>	Adult Piano Course, Books 1 & 2 (Bk. 1, 1947; Bk. 2, 1952).

### METHOD BOOKS

*Piano Primer* is an introductory book designed especially for young beginners, ages five to eight. Elements of rhythm and notation are traditionally presented in a logical, systematic manner. The book is patterned on the middle C concept, and only single line melodies divided between the hands are used exclusively on the white keys.

*Grade 1* presents attractive melodies mostly in the 5-finger positions of C, G, and F. Clear, concise explanations are given for such basic elements as 5-finger position, transposition, triads, and scales. Finger numbers are used liberally for almost every note.

Grades 2 through 5 become successively more difficult and reach approximately high school level difficulty. Original compositions and music by master composers comprise the bulk of the materials in these remaining four books.

### TECHNIC BOOKS

*Piano Technic, Book 1* presents 25 original etudes designed to supplement first and second year study. *Book 2* contains 21 original studies

<sup>5</sup>It is helpful to have most of these courses available for students enrolled in piano pedagogy. By actual examination of the books, students will gain useful information about each course and will be able to make meaningful evaluations.

exercises using 33 different patterns. Most of the exercises are in C and move up the keyboard on the white keys. The book contains a useful combination of finger studies, chord drills, double note exercises, and some exercises for balance of tone. Books 2 and 3 become progressively more difficult; many of the studies in these books are based on well-known tunes ("Swanee River," "Greensleeves," etc.).

*Let's Learn Major Scales and Chords* is a first year collection of easy studies mostly in 5-finger positions. *Let's Learn Minor Scales and Chords* is more difficult.

*Let's Get Technical* is about a fourth year collection of exercises for the development of arpeggios, octaves, double thirds, and other intermediate presentations.

### SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKS

*Little Songs and Solos* is an attractive 20 page collection of supplementary first year reading pieces. The majority of the pieces are in 5-finger positions (mostly C, G, and F).

A number of the supplementary books appear under the title *Social Piano Course: Let's Learn Chords, Let's Improvise*, others. This title implies that the books in this series are for recreational use for the less serious student.

### CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF PIANO COURSES

Upon close scrutiny it can be discovered that *all* method books have strong and weak features. No one series has a corner on the market containing a magic blueprint which will automatically produce first-rate pianists. However, there are some guidelines which may be used to determine quality features in method books and to help determine approaches that will assist the skilled teacher in developing knowledgeable young musicians. The following criteria are offered as general guidelines in evaluating beginning course books.<sup>6</sup>

#### Design and Format

1. Basic approach:
  - a. Middle C?
  - b. Multiple Key?
  - c. Other?
2. Format:
  - a. Is color used?
  - b. Are pictures and/or drawings used?
  - c. Is the music legible?
  - d. Is the size of the printing realistic for younger students?
  - e. Is the marginal material helpful without being cluttered, and is it written in children's language?
  - f. Is the book long enough to be practical, but short enough to give the student a feeling of accomplishment?

<sup>6</sup>This material is based on a set of guidelines used by David Piersel, Black Hills State College, Spearfish, South Dakota. Used by Permission.

3. Sequence and progression of materials:
  - a. Does the series as a whole keep the student advancing in a *steady* manner, not by spurts?
4. Purpose of the course:
  - a. For individual study?
  - b. For group study?
  - c. For a combination of individual and group study?
5. Note range:
  - a. Does the series encourage the student to gradually explore more and more of the keyboard?
  - b. Is the range confined to a central portion of the keyboard?
6. Methods of counting:
  - a. Numerically?
  - b. Syllabically?
  - c. Other?
7. Presentation of rhythm:
  - a. What types of rhythms are encountered as the series progresses?
8. Chords and scales:
  - a. How and when are these presented?
  - b. Are both block and broken chords used?
  - c. How many different types of chords are used?
  - d. Are both major and minor scales presented?
9. Theory:
  - a. Are intervals used?
  - b. Are chords presented?
  - c. Is keyboard harmony included?
  - d. Is functional harmonization included?
  - e. Is transposition emphasized?
  - f. Is creative work included?
  - g. If separate books are used, how well does it integrate with the basic course books?
10. Supplementary materials:
  - a. What types and varieties are available as part of the course?
  - b. Including all supplementary materials, does the course claim to be complete as is? (Few, if any, courses are "complete" in themselves.)
11. Form and structure:
  - a. What opportunities are offered throughout the course to teach musical form?
12. Musicianship:
  - a. Is the student given an opportunity to develop musicianship or creativeness?
  - b. Is undue emphasis given merely to the mechanics of playing the piano?

### Fundamental Features of Method Books

1. Is it a comprehensive course of study?
  - a. Does it include a logical, practical *sight-reading program*?
  - b. Does it include a sensible *theoretical program* based primarily on keyboard harmony?
  - c. Does it include a practical *technical program* geared to basic keyboard fundamentals?

- d. Does the course offer a variety of *supplementary books* for reinforced learning at different levels of advancement?
2. Does the music make sense to the student?
  - a. Is the music tasteful and appealing to children?
  - b. Is the rate of progression gradual rather than abrupt?
3. What will the student have learned upon completion of the course?
  - a. Will he be able to sight-read fluently?
  - b. Will he be musically literate in basic fundamentals?
  - c. Will his technic be sufficient to allow him to perform various levels of repertoire accurately?
4. What length of study time will it take for the student to become musically literate?
  - a. Two years?
  - b. Three years?
  - c. Never?

### *THE TEACHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD NEW APPROACHES*

An open mind should be kept at all times toward new or innovative methods. However, this should in no way imply that one should blindly accept a new method simply because it is the latest publication available. The pros and cons should be weighed carefully before embarking on a new system merely for the sake of trying something new.

Times change, pupils' needs change, and basic goals need periodic reevaluation. Many teachers today accept the fact that the majority of their students will not play in Carnegie Hall or even become professional musicians. Therefore, a functional approach to teaching is a more practical path to follow at least for the first few years of a student's career. Elements of keyboard harmony, theory, improvisation, and creative work lay a better fundamental foundation than merely learning to play a few pieces each year. Many of the standard older methods simply do not include these elements of practical musicianship.

Teachers are not easily persuaded to change their basic approach to teaching. Part of the problem here is that of comfort. If the teacher is thoroughly familiar with one type of instruction, it takes work, study, and above all, experimentation and practice to learn another procedure. The good teacher continues to learn and experiment with new methods. Every "method" will have its day. The successful teacher will set realistic student goals and use every ounce of creativity and expertise available to achieve those goals.

### *FOR DISCUSSION AND ASSIGNMENT*

1. List the goals you consider to be of prime importance which should be covered in a method series.
2. What basic function should a method series serve?
3. The two basic approaches to teaching beginners are the middle C method and the multiple key method. Describe these approaches. Alternatives to these two approaches are found in other methods; describe these.

4. A complete program consists of reading, repertoire, technique, and theory. Which of the method books surveyed provides these materials? Are these methods "complete," or should supplementary books be used?
5. Would you use one series exclusively, or would you use a variety of books by different authors?
6. Make a detailed survey of a piano method for a class report. Discuss presentations of notation, rhythm, intervals, chords, etc. Discuss basic concepts presented in the course and their development. Make a critical judgement as to the progression of materials. What will the student have learned upon completion of this course?
7. Using your knowledge gained from examination of numerous beginning methods, plan and write a first lesson presentation as it would appear in a printed course. Design it the way you would like to begin teaching. Teach it to another class member.