

## Section 12

### Selecting a Piano Series and Supplementary Music

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In 1982 when I was asked by Marianne Uszler to participate in *Piano Quarterly's* "American Beginning Method Project," I had no way of knowing the significance this series of evaluations would have on the field of piano pedagogy. Both the evaluations by college teachers of piano pedagogy and the responses by authors of each of the six beginning methods (or series) heightened interest in various beginning approaches. These included: 1) middle C, 2) multiple key, 3) black-key intervallic and 4) a combination of some or all three. The evaluations considered approaches to reading, technic, rhythm and various phases of musicianship and musical understanding. Organization and sequencing of materials were also discussed as well as the quality of repertoire used to illustrate each new musical idea.

Nearly every college piano pedagogy program took note of this project which took a few years to complete. Experienced piano teachers also studied these reviews to examine different approaches. In short, these reviews summarized the unique contribution American authors have had on piano teaching in America. And they provided a basis for evaluating any of the dozens of methods which appear on today's market.

What are the unique contributions of American methodology compared to European? In various summer European workshops where I've been a member of the faculty in piano pedagogy, I've had a chance to study beginning books from such diverse countries as Austria, France, Switzerland, and England. For the most part European piano books for children emphasize technical training for the fingers and the content tends to be mechanistic. Today, most American methods take into account psychological principles of learning which affect sequence and organization as well as discovery of musical elements. Further, they stress a unified approach to study, one which considers reading, rhythm, technic, repertoire and keyboard skills as a whole.

Folk music and repertoire by competent composers for young people are used throughout a quality series.

#### **A Warning**

It's an old saying that "teachers teach as they were taught." This certainly explains the phenomenon of various outdated middle C series still extensively used throughout the world. It's also easy to follow a charismatic leader in piano pedagogy and not experiment and think for one's self. Then too, it's comfortable to use one series year after year and not have to search for other books or develop one's *own* set of criteria to guide the musical progress of a young pianist.

#### **Deciding What to Teach**

Even since the *PQ* evaluations concluded in 1984 two author teams of the six American methods reviewed have published brand new sets of materials. The market is an exciting one and always undergoing change. Teachers must be willing to experiment with new ideas and approaches and evaluate results with their students.

If we have a philosophy and decide what we want to teach, how we want to teach it, what end results we want to observe in our students, then we will have a basis for selecting an appropriate set of materials to accomplish our aims. When the basics are taught through using a solid elementary series, the real joy comes when planning musical development for the young pianist at the intermediate level. Here, we are in control to select just the right piece, the right musicianship text or the right technic book from hundreds of choices.

#### **Questions to Consider About Reading**

1. Is the reading approach step-by-step?
2. In the beginning, do reading experiences start with graph notation and proceed to staff reading gradually?
3. Do reading exercises embrace the entire range of the keyboard?
4. Are landmarks (such as bass F, middle C and treble G, or others) utilized?
5. Are intervals learned early on in the instructional scheme?
6. Do black and white keys receive equal emphasis?
7. Does the repertoire reinforce the reading?
8. Does reading material appear regularly throughout the series?
9. Are sharps and flats introduced too quickly?

#### **Questions to Consider About Technic**

1. Do early phases of training involve a balanced hand (starting with fingers 2 or 3)?
2. Is control of sound emphasized from the beginning?

3. Are short assignments in technic easily checked?
4. Do the assignments involve various registers of the keyboard?
5. Are technical assignments dull?
6. Are mirror patterns utilized?
7. Do technical assignments involve transposition?
8. Do technical assignments develop the outside of the hands (fingers 1 and 5)?
9. Is the hand arch stressed throughout the series?
10. Are various touches explored?
11. How is the pedal introduced?
12. Is there ample experience in 5 finger major and minor patterns prior to scale playing?
13. Does arpeggiation play an important role (hand over hand)?
14. Is there solid preparation for shifts?
15. Do chromatic figures come under study?
16. Does the technic relate to and reinforce music studied?

#### **Questions to Consider About Musical Understanding and Musicianship**

1. Does the study of musical elements require a second book, e.g., "theory" book?
2. Is writing, notating and elementary composing an integral part of the text and easy to check at each lesson?
3. Are students taught to identify form in their compositions?
4. Do harmonization studies appear in a logical sequence?
5. Do students identify and label harmonies?
6. How is ear training developed within the text?
7. Is improvisation encouraged in the text?
8. All musical signs covered in a systematic fashion and reinforced through visual and written games?
9. Do twentieth century sounds appear in the text?
10. Do the compositions facilitate easy memorization?

Over the years I've given numerous workshops on literature for the young pianist which supplements whatever basic course the student studies from. Whether these workshops involve teachers in the United States or abroad, the reaction is always the same. First, the teachers are appreciative I have sifted and selected only music which has merit and which I've personally taught either in my home studio, in the piano laboratory program for children at the University of Illinois or in Illinois Summer Youth Music piano camps for middle school and high school students. Second, the teachers are always writing comments to themselves or jotting down the names of particular students when a piece they hear fits the needs of one of their students. The

handout becomes useful for planning repertoire because the teacher has *heard* the music, not just been handed a list with no aural reference.

David Kraehenbuehl's article "Is This Piece Worth Teaching?" and his session on this topic at the first meeting of the National Conference on Piano Pedagogy in 1979 made a lasting impression on me. His ideas as well as those of Robert Vandall who lectured to my piano pedagogy classes on this same topic gave me a set of criteria to judge supplementary music. These ideas are summarized below in the form of questions and help guide the teacher in selecting from the tremendous amounts of music available at music stores.

#### Judging Teaching Pieces and Collections

##### As Supplementary Music

1. Does the music have an appealing sound and give the child pleasure?
2. Is the music coherent to the child? Does it make musical sense considering the various patterns used and unity achieved within the structure? Are the elements used in an economical way?
3. Is memorization facilitated through the musical coherence?
4. Does the title have something to do with what is represented musically? Does the title stimulate the child's imagination?
5. Does the piece feel good under the fingers? Does it reinforce technical development?
6. Is the piece original?

The noted composer Robert Starer wrote in a 1974 issue of *Keyboard Arts* about what he felt were important characteristics of music written specifically for young people. He defined the primary qualities as "clarity, simplicity and directness." One can hardly go wrong when considering supplementary music by the following brief list of American educational composers 1) Tony Caramia, 2) Norman Dello Joio, 3) Jon George, 4) David Kraehenbuehl, 5) Lynn Freeman Olson, 6) Eugénie Rocherolle, 7) Catherine Rollin and 8) Robert Vandall.

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