

Favorite Classical Composers

About the Series:

I'm quite amazed at how quickly some method books push our beginner students into note-reading. There is so much to learn in the first few months, and just when students are beginning to get used to the very basics, we introduce the grand staff. Why not spend more time developing solid technique, freedom of movement around the keyboard, and exploring interesting rhythms?

Pre-reading pieces don't have to be boring! Children may not know the word "syncopation," but they can imitate it. They may not understand fractional math behind 6/8 time, but they know what it feels like to rock a baby to sleep or skip down a sidewalk. Many of our nursery rhymes are in 6/8 time, yet if our beginner books write them at all, they appear in 3/4 time. Why do we wait so long to introduce something which our students instinctively know and feel?

Jane Smisor Bastien had students tapping and playing compound time rhythms in Book 1 of "The Very Young Pianist" back in 1970. She used the syllables "three-ee-eighths", "quar-ter dot" and "quar-ter eighth," but one could easily chant the same rhythm as "ti-ti-ti", "tam" and "ta-ti" (Kodaly) or "du-da-di", "du", and "du-di" (Gordon).

Much has been written about the "sound before symbol" approach to music teaching. We spend our infancy listening to sounds, our toddler years forming words and sentences, and our pre-school years singing and refining our vocabulary. We start recognizing alphabet letters on the page, then move to words and finally short sentences. Music reading should follow the same sequence. Sing the songs first. Feel the rhythms. Move to the beat. The challenge of note-reading, whether on staff or off staff, is made simpler when students play something they already know.

I've been teaching piano for over 25 years and it never ceases to amaze me how many students equate the note D with finger number 2 of the right hand. It's our own fault for not providing them with enough pre-reading supplementary material which involves playing in different positions and exploring the range of the keyboard.

Have you noticed how many method books start with pieces on the black keys, yet as soon as the staff is introduced, the black keys are all but forgotten as the student plays piece after piece in C major? It doesn't have to be that way. Students should feel comfortable playing in many keys and many hand positions and the best time to do that is before we complicate matters with note reading.

The Next Step Pre-Reading Series™ was developed to allow students more time to spend in the pre-reading stage. Unique to the series is that students learn a piece first in pre-reading, and then get the opportunity to see the same piece written on the grand staff. The notes, hand position, and number of measures per line are exactly the same. Teachers should explore the on-staff version with their students, reassuring them that, in time, they will learn how to read all the notes without need of little letters inside the note heads. A grand staff page with guidepost notes serves as a handy resource for students who want to try playing the pieces with the more "grown up" notation.

Use the Next Step Pre-Reading Series™ in conjunction with your favourite method book. I'd be very interested in hearing your feedback. I can be reached at music@primarychords.com.

About this Book

The six pieces in this book were carefully chosen to represent various hand positions, time signatures, and rhythmic elements. The themes are in the same key as the original piece.

When I was going to University, we often made up lyrics to help us identify melodies which might appear on our history exams. I can still remember many of those words today. I hope that the lyrics I've provided to the six pieces here will help teach students a little bit of music history as they learn to appreciate the music of the Classical period.

I confess that most of what I knew of classical music as a child came from Bugs Bunny cartoons, and I think it still holds true today that the theme from Mozart's Sonata in C is familiar thanks to its background-music appearance in movie and television. I remember the first time I tried playing the K. 545 sonata. I was able to get through the first twelve measures relatively easily and gave up shortly after. Hopefully the inclusion of the main theme in this book will inspire students to tackle the sonata more successfully when they are older.

Mozart spent a good portion of his childhood traveling in unheated horse-drawn carriages throughout the European countryside. He and his sister were often sick, and on one occasion Nannerl almost died. When concerts were delayed due to illness, Mozart would spend his time composing. During their two-year Grand Tour of Europe from 1763 - 66, Mozart met famous royals, learned how to speak several languages fluently, and thanks to the promotional efforts of his father, earned a reputation as a *wunderkind*. Despite his childhood fame, he never did secure a permanent position which would have given him the financial security he so desired.

Alleluia comes from the motet "Exsultate, Jubilate" which Mozart wrote for his favorite castrato while in Milan in 1773. He was 17 years old and he and his father were touring Italy hoping to find a permanent appointment. Mozart was never very good with money and oscillated between periods of extravagant spending when commissions were good, and penny-pinching when requests were less frequent. He died during one of those lean periods and, according to Viennese custom of the day, was buried in a common grave outside the city walls. Fellow musicians and admirers helped support Mozart's wife and two children financially during the first few years after his death.

Throughout his life, Mozart had a special fondness for opera and tailored his writing to show off the best features of each cast member. I've transposed the Alleluia down an octave, but when you play it as a duet with your student, the melody will be back in the soprano range. When teaching this piece, I would encourage the student to sing the words, noticing the natural breathing points at the end of every fourth measure. Have the student play each phrase super legato.

Allegro in F is known by pianists as the second in the "Twelve Easy Pieces" set by Haydn, but the theme originally comes from the fourth movement of his String Quartet, Op. 72, and No. 2. Haydn wrote 68 string quartets, 52 piano sonatas, and over a hundred symphonies during the course of his long life. He was a major influence on Mozart and Beethoven, and is considered to be the "Father of the Symphony" or "Father of the String Quartet" because he truly solidified sonata-allegro form.

The articulation in this piece is very important to creating the Classical style. Be sure your student plays each staccato note, and connects any notes without a staccato dot. During the lesson, sing the words with exaggerated articulation so your student hears the two-note slur pickups to measures 1 and 9, and the syncopations in measures 12 - 14. You can draw slur lines and accent marks in the music to help remind him of the sound.

Capriccio in G, Hob XVII:1 is based on the folk song "Acht Sauschneider müssen sein," a children's song which discusses how many men are required to castrate a hog. Even though Haydn spent most of his adult life surrounded by the formalities of court, he never forgot his simple roots, and incorporated much folk music into his compositions. Prince Nicholas Esterhazy was very fond of Haydn and although he

demanded a lot of music, gave Haydn a considerable amount of musical freedom. I imagine the prince would have been quite amused to hear this delightful Capriccio (all eleven pages) based on such a simple melody.

After learning the main theme from this book, invite your student to listen to a recording of the original. Have him count how many times he hears "his" song being played. Let him know in advance that sometimes the song will be like an ordinary tree and sometimes it will be like a Christmas tree covered in tinsel and ornaments and shining lights. Pretty fancy stuff!

The duet part allows the student to play the melody first, then the teacher or more advanced student joins in above with a fancy accompaniment part based on the first variation.

I really debated about whether to include the Ode to Joy in this book as it appears in so many primer method books. Unfortunately, the piece rarely shows up with the proper syncopation at the beginning of measure 13 and is usually found in C major rather than the original key of D major. Since the D five-finger position is such a comfortable position, it made sense to write this little arrangement in the Next Step Pre-Reading Series.™

Students are usually quite surprised to discover that this simple little melody is actually part of a very long (24 minutes) and complex movement to an even longer (67 minute) and more elaborate symphony. I had the extreme honor and fortune of singing in the choir when we performed the Choral Symphony as part of the 2011 Classical Music Festival in Eisenstadt, Austria. My lyrics for this piece try to reflect the spirit behind the original German text by Friedrich Schiller.

Beethoven's Romance in G comes from the second movement of the Sonatina in G which, if memory serves me right, I played for my grade 3 exam. I could have written it in 3/4 time for this book, but I intentionally kept it in 6/8 so that students can feel the rocking motions of compound time. I wish we had some way of attractively beaming together note groups which move from treble to bass staff as I would have liked the second pulse of each bar to be clearly seen. Circle the last three eighth notes in measure 7 and 11 to show your students that these notes truly belong together.

I hope you enjoy teaching these pieces and your students have just as much fun playing them.

Joan Blench
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