

## International Christmas

### About the Series

I'm quite surprised 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) or "ta-ki-da", "ta", "ta-da" (Takadimi)

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 ore 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 student who want to try playing the pieces with 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](mailto:music@primarychords.com).

## About the Book

The seven pieces in this book were carefully chosen not only to represent music from various countries, but also to explore various tonalities and hand positions. The songs are well-known in their country of origin and easily found on You Tube for those people not familiar with the melody or the pronunciation of the lyrics. In the case of the French, Spanish, German and Italian songs, I've supplied English lyrics which don't rhyme but provide a fairly accurate rhythmic translation.

The first song in this book comes to us from a time when a penny was actually worth something, and you could even buy something for a half-penny ("ha-penny") coin. *Christmas is Coming* is in A major, an unusual key for a beginner book, but I firmly believe we are duped into thinking that anything other than C, F or G major is difficult because we don't encounter it often enough in our early reading experiences. Be sure to demonstrate how easy it is to play the black keys with the long fingers.

The next piece, *Il est né, le divin enfant*, is a traditional French carol first published in 1862. I've written it in 4/4 time, but it should be felt in cut time as soon as the student is able to play up to speed. Have the student stand away from the piano and swing his arms back and forth as he sings the words in the language most comfortable to him. Have him swing twice per bar (right then left) and then try again swinging four times per bar (right/left/right/left). If you exaggerate the awkwardness of four swings, he'll surely agree that two pulses makes the most sense. The pre-reading format explains the "road map" for the piece, whereas the on-staff version uses the Italian term *da capo al fine*.

My friend Yolanda taught me *Campanas de Belén* and I apologize that I could not include the entire song in this book. If you have a Spanish-speaking student who would like the music to the last two lines of each verse, please contact me and I'll send you a .pdf file in either the pre-reading or on-staff format.

Many beginning Christmas books contain *O Christmas Tree*, so I debated whether to include *O Tannenbaum* in this book. My affirmative decision was based on the fact that I wanted a piece with dotted rhythms and this piece clearly shows the difference between the dotted eighth – sixteenth - quarter pattern ("Christmas tree") and the two eighth - quarter pattern ("loyal are"). When you sing the words with your students, really emphasize the preciseness of the dotted pattern. Some students may be quite satisfied to play the rhythm by rote whereas others may want a more mathematical explanation of the division of the beat. Here's something which works well in my studio. Grab a handful of wooden stir-sticks the next time you are in Starbucks. Or ask the manager for a bunch (I was given an entire box once I explained that I was a teacher intending to use it in my music class.) Give the student a stick and tell him it represents one beat – in this case, the quarter note. Ask him to break the stick in half. That's two eighths. Have him show you two eighths in the score. Now ask him to break one of the smaller pieces in half again. Tape one of the little pieces to the larger piece. That's the dotted eighth – sixteenth pattern. Find it in the score. Look at how much longer the first piece is compared to the second piece. Listen to how the quickly the short piece propels the music to the note which follows. Thank you to Joseph Fridman for this great idea!

*The Wexford Carol* is a medieval tune which uses the harmonies prevalent during that time. It may sound a bit strange to our modern ears as we are so used to music in major or minor keys, but this one is written in two ancient Church modes. The Dorian scale is what you get when you play from D to D on the piano with just white keys. The Mixolydian scale is achieved by playing from G to G with just white keys. Every time your students forget to play an F# in the key of G major, they are simply playing in G Mixolydian! *The Wexford Carol* starts in G Mixolydian, but moves to Dorian with the introduction of the B<sup>b</sup> in measure 9. The result is a hauntingly beautiful melody, a worthwhile addition to our harmonic vocabulary.

During the summer of 2011, I had the pleasure of meeting my Italian friend Franco's daughter for the first time. Franco had told me previously that every child in Italy knows "*Tu Scendi dalle Stelle*," so I asked her if she

would sing it for me, and she did so in her angelic six-year-old voice. I hope you enjoy this song as much as I do. It's the longest one in the book and has the additional challenge of two hands playing at the same time. Start by introducing the melody only, and add the alternating F and B<sup>b</sup> only when the student is ready. Or omit the LH entirely, with the exception of measures 23 and 51. Either way, it's lovely.

*Amen* is no more a Christmas song than is Handel's *Messiah*, yet both seem to be performed most often at Christmas time. Each verse tells a chapter in the life of Jesus. To really get the most out of *Amen*, sing it gospel style with your student. Movement, clapping and dancing are an integral part of African music. Get off the bench and move! There are many versions of the lyrics to this song, so feel free to add more verses if you wish.

I hope you are able to use some or all of these pieces at your next Christmas concert.

Joan Blench, July 2012