

It's a Musical Day

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).

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.

About the Book

The seven pieces in this book were carefully written to represent various aspects of daily life from a child's perspective, while exploring various tonalities, moods and movement around the keyboard.

The book begins the same way many children begin their day – hurrying through their morning routine so they don't miss the bus. *Bus Ride* is in B major, an unusual key for a beginner book, but I firmly believe we are duped into thinking at five sharps is difficult because we don't encounter it often enough in our early reading experiences. B major is the easiest scale to play, although the RH pentascale is admittedly a bit awkward because of the fifth finger on F#.

My students love playing with the damper pedal. *Winter Snowfall* gives them the opportunity to explore the sound of the pedal and the various registers of the piano in order to create a beautiful mood piece. Start by standing away from the piano and sway gently back and forth with whole body movements while singing the lyrics of the second page. The first page will be much easier to play once the student recognizes the "Snow is gently falling" theme.

I don't know how many times I said the words "just a minute" and "be there soon" to my kids when they were young, but I'm sure they didn't appreciate waiting for me as much I wasn't fond of having to wait for them. I wrote *Waiting* to demonstrate to my students just how important it is to count out loud. The rests in this piece are only effective if you keep the beat super-steady, just like the underlying tick-tock of the left hand. And the final measure is a great place to demonstrate the drop-lift of the two note slur.

Pet Store Cha Cha was the catalyst piece for the entire Next Step Pre-Reading Series™. I entered it in the 2011 Alberta Piano Teachers Association annual composition contest, outlining my concerns that there aren't enough challenging pieces in pre-reading format. I wanted a recital-worthy piece with a catchy rhythm and some movement around the keyboard. I wanted students to be able to see the same piece in both off and on-staff notation. And I wanted something with lyrics that kids can relate to. The piece won first place and gave me the confidence I needed to pursue publishing this series. I still think it's a pretty cool song, and when I teach it, I suggest students omit the right hand in measures 7-8 and 11-12 until they are really comfortable with all the left hand moves.

We all know that music is supposed to help express our emotions, so why is it that there aren't a lot of pieces written which allow children to acknowledge their bad moods? I have a feeling kids may play *A Very Bad Day* long after they've "passed" onto harder books, simply because it gives them permission to pound on the piano! It might even be therapeutic to release our anger by shouting out the things which bother us the most while playing those loud clusters.

The next piece in the book returns to a more cheerful theme. *Great Group of Kids* uses tied notes to create a syncopated feel, especially when the piece is taken at a quick tempo. I would introduce this piece by chanting the lyrics out loud, feeling two strong pulses per measure. I purposely chose non gender-specific names, but you are free to change the words if it helps to make the piece more personal to the lives of your students.

After such a busy day of activities, it's fitting to close with a slow piece in gently rocking 3/4time. If you already have my book *Pentascle Magic*, your students will be experts on whole steps and half steps. See if they discover the whole-tone scale at the end of *Sleepy*. It's a great way to drift off to dreamland.

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