

Proud to be Canadian!

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 the Book

The six pieces in this book were carefully chosen to represent various regions of Canada as well as tonalities, time signatures, and minor hand position shifts.

My Paddle's Keen and Bright is probably the easiest song in the book. It's well-known to anyone who has been canoeing at summer camp. Turn your piano bench into a canoe by sitting sideways, legs straddling the bench, and pretend to paddle as you sing the song. If you have two piano benches or a piano bench and a chair, you and your student can each have your own canoe.

Land of the Silver Birch is a traditional folk song using native imagery. It works well as a partner song with My Paddle's Keen and Bright. Students can play both pieces back to back without needing to move their hand position or change tempo. For extra challenge, one person can play My Paddle and the other person can play Land of the Silver Birch at the same time. Feel free to temporarily cross out the half note D's in the boom diddy ah da section if a student has difficulty putting hands together. Be sure they play the eighth notes with strong finger 2!

Un Canadien Errant is my all-time favourite Canadian folk song. It is so beautifully simple and yet so touching. It was written in 1842 after the Lower Canada Rebellion. What child can't relate to the story of a man who misses his family and friends? There are plenty of recordings on You Tube if you are unfamiliar with French lyrics.

Little Old Sod Shanty comes to us from the United States, but the pioneering aspect is appropriate to the Prairie Provinces as well. My grandfather immigrated to Canada in the late 1920s, leaving his wife and daughter at home in the old country. It took him twelve years to earn enough money to buy a homestead, clear the land and buy his family passage to Alberta. I can't help but think of him when I sing this song. The references to the messy house also make me think of my kids' bedrooms, but that's another story.

Feller from Fortune is a rousing folk tune from the Maritime Provinces. Sing it with your students several times. Move to it. You don't need to explain the math behind 6/8 time. When they feel the rhythm in their bodies, students will naturally make the connection between the long and short notes. The complete song has a few colourful verses which I've deliberately left out in the lyric section at the back of the book.

O Canada is the longest piece in the book – three pages – and it involves moving the hands out of position temporarily to hit some black keys, but the effort is worth it. Everyone should know how to play our National Anthem.

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

Joan Blench
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