

# TEACHING MATERIALS AND LEARNING STYLES

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**K**eeping abreast of new method books and new repertoire is essential for teachers who are dedicated to high standards within the studio. This commitment to new music came into my life soon after I finished graduate school. I had just moved to Virginia, and a local teacher drove me to my first Northern Virginia Music Teachers Association meeting. Along the way, we talked about our favorite teaching pieces. As she mentioned some of hers, she referred to a few composers who were unknown to me. She was shocked that I didn't know the works of Jon George, John Robert Poe, or William Gillock, and invited me to her studio for a day of sharing.

That teacher gave me a gift that I will never forget. Besides exposing me to the work of some wonderful composers, I acquired an interest in new repertoire that I have carried with me ever since. No longer content to teach only the works of masters from the past, I now continually review new publications from living composers. Finding new gems to teach is like trying a new restaurant every week and discovering a delicious new meal at each one. Such experimenting is far better than eating the same meal at the same restaurant week after week, no matter how good it is!

## Method Books Then and Now

Method books have changed drastically over the last 50 years, and a short review of some of the disadvantages of the earliest method books offers insights into why authors have taken new directions in recent years.

### Earlier Methods

Although they provided a systematic approach to piano instruction, early method books had some major shortcomings.

- Material was presented with little, if any, reinforcement.
- Notes were immediately presented on the staff, usually with a middle-C approach.
- The same hand position was used for a long period of time, making it difficult to learn to read outside that position.
- Fingering was given for every note, resulting in a dependence on finger numbers for reading.
- Books were published with an unappealing black-and-white look.
- Difficult concepts were presented at a quick pace, with little regard to age-appropriate learning.
- There was little, if any, material on improvisation, harmonization, or theory.
- Supplementary books rarely existed.

## Contemporary Methods

Method books have progressed dramatically since those early years. Current methods take a vastly different approach.

- Methods usually introduce notes written off the staff, to enable students to become familiar with the keyboard before reading notes on the staff later.
- Methods incorporate a variety of approaches to reading, including multi-key, intervallic, and middle-C.
- Books are printed with colorful and appealing artwork.
- Books present difficult concepts at a manageable pace, with attention given to age-appropriate learning, based on advances in pedagogy.
- Today's methods present concepts systematically, with an integrated approach to rhythm, technique, and reading that is then reinforced throughout the books.
- Methods often include skills such as improvisation, harmonization, transposition, and composition.
- Supplementary materials are plentiful, including books for repertoire, technique, theory, sight-playing, workbooks, jazz, games, etc.

Perhaps the biggest change in method books in recent years is the addition of CDs and GM disks. These offer the student the opportunity to perform pieces while being accompanied by a variety of sounds, from orchestral to jazz. This innovative use of technology (discussed further in Chapter 43) assists students with musical skills such as rhythm, dynamics, and phrasing, while enhancing the sounds students create at the piano.

## Evaluating Method Books

If the same method book has been used for several years, experimenting with a totally new series can freshen the approach to lessons for teacher and student. Even if the teacher loves the method she is currently using, she may find that a different course of study has real value for certain students. Experimenting with a variety of methods makes it possible to match method books to individual learning styles, especially if the methods have dramatically different approaches.

There are several helpful questions teachers should ask when reviewing a method.

- When does the student begin reading notes on the staff?
- Does the method employ a middle-C, intervallic, or multi-key approach to note-reading?
- What method of counting is used (numeric, syllabic, metric)?
- When do the pieces move out of a five-finger position?
- Does the method allow the student to explore the complete range of the piano?
- How much fingering is indicated in the score?

- Is there adequate reinforcement of new concepts?
- What is the rate of progression? Does the student advance steadily? Quickly? Slowly?
- Are concepts presented in a logical sequence?
- What are the sources of the pieces (original compositions, folksongs, arrangements of larger works)?
- Are the pieces varied in style?
- Are the pieces harmonically interesting?
- When and how clearly are musical concepts introduced?
  - Dynamics
  - Tempo markings
  - Phrasing
  - Articulations
  - Pedaling
  - Harmony
  - Form
- How much theory is presented?
- Are transposition, harmonization, or composition introduced?
- Is the student encouraged to improvise?
- Is ear-training included?
- Are duets included in the book and, if so, what is the quality of the duet parts?
- Is the course for group or private lessons, or both?
- How many levels are there?
- What supplementary materials are included? How many books are in each level?
- Are the materials visually appealing?
  - Are they colorful?
  - Are there pictures?
  - Is the size of print satisfactory for a young student?
  - Does the book look daunting because of too much information on a page?
- Is the method better suited for certain age groups? (Younger students, older students, adult students.)
- Are CDs or GM disks available?

Music stores sometimes allow a teacher to preview books at home. A valuable summer project would be to review a number of method books, comparing answers to the questions above. Such research provides a broader understanding of the pedagogical approaches to piano instruction that are currently available.