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Issues and Ideas:

Perspectives in Pedagogy

Rebecca Grooms Johnson, Editor

**A survey of current methods:
Succeeding at the Piano**

This issue continues Clavier Companion's survey of piano methods.¹ Each article in this series has three sections—an introductory synopsis by the Associate Editor, two articles written by teachers who have used the method extensively in their studios, and a response from the authors of the method surveyed in the previous issue. We hope that you find these articles to be an interesting and helpful overview of all the most popular methods currently on the market!

Succeeding at the Piano - by Helen Marlais

Publisher: The FJH Music Company Inc.

Levels: *Lesson and Technique Book* (with and without accompanying CD), *Theory and Activity Book*, *Recital Book* (with CD)—Preparatory through Grade 2A.

Proposed schedule for future releases: Grade 2B—May, 2011; Grade 3A—October, 2011; Grade 3B—April, 2012; Grade 4—October, 2012.

Alpha: This series espouses what the author terms “familiarity training,” in which new concepts are introduced in the order of listen, play, see, learn, and reinforce. The first half of the Preparatory books utilizes off-staff notation, with partial staff introductions to 2nds and 3rds. An eclectic approach to reading includes intervals, guidepost notes, middle C, and modified C positions. Rhythmic pulse is equated to heartbeats and initially uses unit counting.

Teachers may consider one of the strengths of this method to be its early inclusion of arrangements of melodies from the classical repertoire. Short paragraphs introduce the composers, and lyrics have been added to most of the themes. A majority of the pieces in the Preparatory books have teacher duet parts. Although

the covers of all the books show a group of students in a lesson situation, there is no indication that this series is particularly directed to teaching in groups.

Lessons and Technique: In addition to the author's contributions, repertoire in the *Lesson and Technique* and *Recital* books includes compositions by Timothy Brown, Kevin Costley, Mary Leaf, Edwin McLean, and Kevin Olson. Pieces are sometimes preceded by a “Before playing” list of preparatory activities, and occasionally followed by “After playing, ask yourself” questions such as “Did I count all the quarter rests?” Most of the pieces in the Preparatory, Level 1, and Level 2A *Lesson and Technique* books have lyrics, and continue to include arrangements of themes from the classical repertoire. The graphics are tasteful and age appropriate.

Various composers are referenced on the technique pages (e.g. “Technique with Beethoven—Major five-finger patterns and triads”), but without any overt reason other than, perhaps, to continue the method's emphasis on classical composers. Extensive suggestions are given for the correct technical approaches to the exercises. By combining the lesson materials with technical instruction, a more seamless integration between the two is ensured.

Theory and Activities: Six activities are presented throughout these books: Writing (drills and games), Time to Compose, Rhythm (with an emphasis on steady beat), Ear Training, Follow the Leader (rhythmic clap backs), and Parrot Play (melodic play backs). Pages are correlated with the *Lesson and Technique* books and are visually attractive.

Recital books: Correlated with, and continuing much of the format of the *Lesson and Technique* books, some pieces are preceded by “Before playing” suggested activities and occasionally followed by “After playing ask yourself” evaluative

¹ The aim of this series is to review the core materials of piano methods that are either new or substantially changed since a similar series of articles appeared in *Piano Quarterly* in the 1980s. Please see the September/October 2009 issue of *Clavier Companion* for more details on this project. For reviews of methods that are older or have not been revised recently, we invite you to revisit the original *Piano Quarterly* series.

questions. A majority of the compositions have lyrics and some have teacher duets.

Compact Discs: The *Lesson and Technique* books can be purchased with or without accompanying CDs; however, all *Recital* books contain the accompaniment discs. These recordings are unique in several ways. In the early pages of the preparatory books a voice counts off each piece (e.g. “one-two-ready-play”). Throughout the currently available levels of this series, this voice gives the title and page number of each piece, and interjects praise, pedagogic reminders, or evaluative questions at the end of the practice rendition. All solo pieces are played unaccompanied on an acoustic piano at both practice and performance tempi. Pieces with teacher duets have the practice tempo duets on acoustic piano, and occasionally the performance tempo duets are played by an acoustic string quartet—a refreshing sound after

many years of hearing sampled electronic accompaniments.

Teacher’s Guide: Currently available for Preparatory and Grade 1, this guide contains information about the author’s “familiarity training” philosophy and other pedagogic aspects of the series. Ensuing pages provide an overview of the *Lesson and Technique* books and discuss new concepts, reinforced concepts, teaching suggestions, practice steps, and technique tips for each page.

Omega: Although the latter half of the series is currently in production, Dr. Marlais indicates that the concepts and repertoire in the concluding Grade 4 books will equip students for the repertoire in *Succeeding with the Masters* Volume 1, *The Festival Collection* Book 4, and *In Recital* series, Books 4 and 5. A concept chart of the remaining levels is available on the FJH website: <http://www.fjh-music.com/piano/satp.htm>. ▲

Artistic performance from day one

by Gail Lew

My first introduction to *Succeeding at the Piano* (SATP) was in Los Angeles at the 2010 Music Teachers Association of California convention. There was super-charged excitement in that standing-room only session. I was immediately drawn to the clever cover art featuring an artistic drawing of Helen Marlais teaching a group class seated around the grand piano, and I was anxious to try the new method in my own studio.

Comprehensive approach

This series presents new, innovative ideas, combined with tried and true piano pedagogy. *SATP* uses an integrated pedagogical approach: reading is a combined Middle C, intervallic, and multi-key approach; rhythm is internalized by the student and learned like a language; technique is incorporated into the *Lesson and Technique* books, ensuring that correct technique is learned from the beginning; repertoire includes terrific motivational music; and the CDs are both innovative and educational. The mixture of classical themes by master composers such as Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, and Brahms with FJH composer originals is excellent. Students get to know “Papa Haydn” from day one. What fun! It’s all part of a comprehensive music curriculum that not only develops good posture, hand position, and practice habits, but also includes reading, rhythm, technique, theory, ear training, playing by ear, music history, and composition. For a complete approach, students need the *Lesson and Technique Book*, the *Recital Book*, and the *Theory and Activity Book*.

Logical learning sequence

Spanning the first half of the Preparatory book, there are plenty of off-staff reading pieces that introduce quarter, half, dotted half, and whole notes, with 3/4 and 4/4 time signatures. A strong pedagogical foundation is laid in this section with technical work on “Perfect Piano Hands” and warm-ups that address arm weight, strong fingers, and flexible wrists (see Excerpt 1). Emphasis is given to steps, repeats, recognizing notational direction, and intervallic reading. New concepts appear in orange boxes, and green “After playing” boxes offer ideas to develop musicality. From my perspective, the Preparatory Level seems best suited for the five- to seven-year-old beginner, and for students requiring exhaustive reinforcement; it may, however, be too slow for the precocious, quick learner. With many instructions for the teacher included on the page, it seems to be rather text-heavy.

Excerpt 1: “Technique with Papa Haydn” from Helen Marlais’ *Succeeding at the Piano Lesson and Technique Book*, Preparatory Level.

Technique with Papa Haydn
Learning a natural hand position

1. Hand position is very important. It is the first step in making a beautiful sound.

- People play the piano all over the world! Look at Papa Haydn and the piano student as they place their hands over the globe.

2. Imagine that your hand is covering the top of the little globe. Now form your own rounded, natural hand position for playing.

- Look at your hands—do you notice your curved fingers?
- Do you notice the space between your fingers?
- Do you notice how your knuckles look?

L.H. (Left hand) R.H. (Right hand)

PLACE A CHECK MARK IN THE SPACE FOR EACH DAY YOU PRACTICE

| | | | | | | |
|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY |
|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|

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Lesson and technique together

It is great to see a method that *combines* lesson material and technique rather than putting them in separate books. From the very beginning phrasing and artistry are emphasized in every lesson. Students are introduced to the idea of playing beautiful phrases by creating a rainbow in the air. The “Before playing” and “After playing” points develop musicianship, good practice habits, and excellent listening skills. Using a highly effective spiral approach to learning, numerous topics are introduced at once with a later return to each concept.

Eclectic reading approach

“Guide Notes” and intervallic reading are utilized in a combined reading approach (see Excerpt 2). Students learn on-staff Guide Notes Bass F, Middle C, and Treble G, which are then color coded in red. Early-level pieces remain in stationary positions, but are not restricted to a typical Middle C position. Thankfully, thumbs do not always play Middle C! This integrated approach to music reading avoids problems with students becoming locked into any one position.

Grade 1 emphasizes multi-key work and thoroughly reinforces all of the concepts introduced in the Preparatory Level. The traditional F-A-C-E is presented for treble staff spaces and adjacent spaces are related as the interval of a third; however, the names of the treble staff lines are not included, nor is there any mention that thirds can also be line-to-line.

Natural rhythm

Off-staff reading begins with unit counting, and then moves to metric counting when the student is introduced to the 4/4 time signature. Quarter notes are initially related to the natural rhythm of walking and to the beating of the heart. No confusing rhythms are introduced since eighth notes and dotted quarter notes are not presented until Grade 2A.

More than just theory

Can theory be "fun"? The answer is YES! Correlated with the lesson books, the theory books include writing and note-spelling activities, rhythm experiences, ear training exercises, sight reading examples, "Time to Compose" opportunities, and other diverse, creative, and fun activities. I especially love the early introduction to master composers (see Excerpt 3). In "Follow the Leader" sections, students listen to and clap back rhythms. "Parrot Play" activities give students an opportunity to play back short melodic patterns of well-known songs. These activities are perfect for my group theory classes.

Motivating repertoire

Succeeding at the Piano contains interesting and creative original music with fresh appeal, captivating titles, and a variety of styles and genres. The development of hand independence is also a big plus of this method. Melodies are either divided between the hands, or harmonized with intervals or single notes. Genres are varied and include folk, blues, country, traditional, classical, and contemporary (see Excerpt 4). Pedagogically sound arrangements of classical themes encourage students to gain an appreciation for the classics. Katherine, for example, was anxious to play all the pieces by Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin, and she has quickly moved to pieces from Kabalevsky, Op. 39; the *Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook*; and a collection of early Mozart pieces. Student favorites include *The Merry Farmer* (Grade 1), *Japanese Pagoda at Night* (Grade 1), *Hungarian Dance No. 5* (Grade 1), *Angelfish* (Grade 2A) and *Festival in Seville* (Grade 2A).

Lesson Book p. 30

Key signature: All F# and C# in the piece are sharp.

With energy

Festival in Seville
by Timothy Brown

mp

mf

mf

30 FITHCO

Adding interest

The accompaniment CDs help students to achieve musical, artistic, and educational goals; and best of all, the students love playing along with the recordings. Using the CDs helps students learn, reinforces correct practice habits, and provides students with an opportunity to play many of the pieces with a string quartet accompaniment. Most of the songs have lyrics that young students can easily relate to and fall within an average vocal range. Each piece has a single track in three parts. In Part 1, the students hear their part with the teacher duet at a "practice speed." In Part 2, after the student plays the piece with the accompaniment, Dr. Marlais gives a short verbal instruction or affirmation that is ideal for home practice (for example, "Did you remember to use your Perfect Piano Hands?" or "Playing steadily while counting aloud will help you play even better."). Then, in Part 3, students play the piece at performance tempo with the accompaniment.

Meeting my goals

The goal of my studio is to instill a life-long love of music, and I choose methods that will help me attain that goal. *SATP* achieves this on several levels: the colorful graphics really appeal to students; the generous use of classical themes makes them feel that they are playing "important music"; the short pieces are easily mastered with 100 percent accuracy within one week; students develop smart practice habits; and above all, students develop a love for music. ▲

Matching the curriculum

by Sylvia Coats

I tell my university pedagogy class to develop their own curriculum for each student based on what they think the student should know and be able to do, and it really helps when a beginning method matches that curriculum. *Succeeding at the Piano* is a welcome addition because of its sound pedagogical basis and delightful music. Dr. Marlais is an excellent musician and pedagogue, and she brings her extensive background and creativity to this recently published method. It is written for five- to nine-year-olds and should take six to nine months for each level. I had my pedagogy class use *SATP* Grade 1 with a group of ten-year-olds who had prior piano background, and one of my colleagues uses the method with a quickly advancing six-year-old.

Sound before symbols

In learning to read music, I want my students to be able to hear and sing melodic movement up and down in steps and skips—to audiate what they see on the page. *SATP* lets students first experience concepts through sound and feel, and then learn to associate the sounds with musical symbols. *SATP* combines conventional note reading (Middle C), intervallic reading, and multi-key reading approaches. Some students might find this hybrid approach to reading rather confusing, so the teacher may need to stress consistent reading habits for each new song. For instance, always find the first note from the closest landmark, then say direction, interval, and note name.

Students learn to read by grouping notes into patterns, hearing the sound, and associating them with the feeling of the pattern in the hand. Concepts are experienced before learning their names.

For example, in the Preparatory book students see space and line notes in the introduction of 2nds before the staff is introduced; they clap back eighth-note rhythms by ear before they are introduced in Grade 2A; and they see four beats in a measure with bar lines before the time signature is added. Thus, students will have an "aha" moment when they put a name to the concept that they have already discovered. The music will make sense to them.

My students who begin lessons in September learn about melody and rhythm first by ear and later with off-staff notation. Then, when given Christmas music during the holiday season, they are very motivated to learn to read these on-staff pieces. *SATP* enables students to read successfully by using seasonal music to motivate them.

Feeling the pulse

Succeeding at the Piano teaches rhythm through movement activities such as walking, marching, clapping, or tapping while counting aloud. In learning rhythm, I want my students to use their whole bodies to move to the pulse, while clapping the rhythm. Once they develop a sense of beat, rhythms are easily related to a steady pulse. In the early stages of the method, I recommend choosing one movement from the suggested list of activities to develop a consistent approach to learning the rhythm in each new song. For example, always step to the beat while clapping the rhythm. Lyrics are also spoken and sung in rhythm. The steady quarter pulse is compared to the feeling of a steady pulse of a heartbeat, and clever illustrations picture hearts in quarter noteheads (see Excerpt 5).

The Steady Beat

Rhythm marks time in music.  1 HEART BEAT =  (QUARTER NOTE)

With your teacher.

- Stand in place and clap this beat: 
- Stand and lightly tap your head with your hands to every beat.
- Walk around the room and swing your arms back and forth with every beat.
- Sit on the piano bench and sway to the beat.

Which picture shows you a steady beat? Circle it!



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Integrating lessons and technique

One of the major strengths of this method is the combining of healthy technique with the lesson book repertoire. This integration brings attention to technique so that it is a "must" for student and teacher, rather than only a supplement. "Technique with Papa Haydn" makes the exercises enjoyable, while students learn how their bodies feel when playing the piano in a healthy, tension-free way. Six basic techniques are taught in the *Preparatory* and *Grade 1* books: posture and finger, hand, and arm position; arm weight; flexible wrist; two-note slurs; weight transfer; and rotation. In *Grade 2A* the basic techniques are reinforced and become more complex.

Varied genres

A buffet of folk, classical, jazz, and original music appeals to students and teachers, and the longer pieces in the *Recital Book* are appropriate for class lessons and recital performances. Many classical themes are included in each book, with music adapted from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Offenbach, Chopin, and Brahms. The

Staccato

To play with a short, separated sound means to play *staccato*.

To play *staccato*, once you play the key, lift your wrist and forearm quickly to leave the key.


A note with a dot under or above it tells you to play *staccato*!

Play and listen to the difference in sound. *Staccato* and *legato* are opposites!

Before playing:

- Prepare the harmonic intervals.
- Tap hands together and count aloud.

Maracas

Lively  by Kevin Olson

mf See the ma - ra - cas, play - ing the cha - cha.
They play a san - ba, on to a rhu - ba.

They click and clack and keep a steady my beat.
Oh, these sta - ra - cas make me move my feet!

After playing, ask yourself:

- Did I play *staccato*?
- Did I play with "Perfect Piano Hands"?

DUET PART: Kevin Olson (student plays 1 octave higher)

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theme from Chopin's *Fantasia Impromptu* in *Grade 1* is a lovely arrangement with a teacher duet. Added lyrics and composer histories help students make classical music a part of their daily lives.

Various styles, articulations, and scale forms, including major, minor, modal, and pentatonic, keep the songs fresh and musically inviting. Pieces are harmonically varied to engage the ear and make colorful sounds. Teacher accompaniments complement the student parts—they are interesting, yet simple enough not to distract. I predict "Maracas" will be a hit with any student (see Excerpt 6).

Thoughtful practice

SATP encourages students to think during their practice. “Before playing” points are excellent and help students develop good practice habits, while “After playing” assessments encourage students to listen carefully as they play. The illustrations are lovely, often humorous, and support the musical concepts. Text in colored boxes draws attention to helpful tips, and occasional red text in the score gives gentle reminders. If your students are distracted by the amount of text on the page, you can choose from the many good suggestions and highlight what to focus on in their home practice.

Musicianship skills

Learning to listen is vital in developing a sensitive musician. The theory books maintain this focus rather than presenting the mindless drill of some theory books. Students are asked to listen and clap back rhythm patterns and to sing and play folk songs by ear. By listening and singing intervals and melodies, students associate what they hear with what they see. Composition, improvisation, transposition, and ear training are integrated consistently throughout the method. These musicianship skills reinforce the reading approach with the sound coming before the symbol so that students develop “inner hearing.”

My home state of Kansas holds an event once a year called Music Progressions, during which examinations are given in repertoire, theory, history, and listening. *Grades 1* and *2A* of *SATP* fulfill the Level 1 and 2 requirements by introducing major and minor pentascales, white note triads, and tonic and dominant notes.

Guiding the teacher

A Teacher’s Guide is available for the *Preparatory* and *Grade 1* books. The introduction explains Dr Marlais’ pedagogic philosophy and clearly outlines her approach to reading, theory, technique, musicianship, and repertoire. I plan to use it as a reading assignment in my pedagogy class, and I think that intern teachers as well as experienced teachers will appreciate the lesson plans for each unit. The well-constructed curriculum of *SATP* encourages conceptual instruction rather than merely teaching the pieces.

I always urge my pedagogy students to prepare students for success with challenges that are attainable. Helen Marlais writes, “The method is designed to create excellent musicians with a passion for music.” *SATP* succeeds in making music learning engaging and enjoyable. ▲

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