

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Synergy at the Primer Level

BY RANDALL FABER

Many teachers remark that *Piano Adventures*® is easy to teach—that it progresses smoothly, almost teaching itself. One might assume that ease-of-use implies a simplistic design. But such an assumption would be like hearing the smooth purr of a sports car engine and inferring simplistic engineering. Smooth performance comes from sophistication of design. In the method, it is the hundreds of interrelating details of pedagogical design that cause it to work so smoothly.

These details lie “under the hood”—not readily apparent, but accessible with a deeper look. While the method functions well even when a teacher doesn’t know all of its inner workings, an understanding of the pedagogical plan can amplify teaching results. That is the goal of this column: to make explicit the inner workings of *Piano Adventures*® so as to maximize results for students.

In this issue, we look at the synergy among certain concepts presented at the Primer level. (Our plan is to move up by level in subsequent issues.) Pedagogical techniques can have exponential value when taught in combination. We look at three such elements:

- presentation of new notes with varied fingerings (to develop note-reading skill)
- use of arm weight (for tone production and technique development)
- braced third finger (for rounded hand shape and firm fingertip)

While each is introduced for its own purpose in the *Primer Lesson Book* or *Technique & Artistry Book*, the three concepts reinforce each other in synergistic fashion when the teacher conscientiously integrates them in subsequent pages.

Varied Fingering

One of the pioneering features of *Piano Adventures*® is the introduction of new notes using varied fingerings. Thus you can teach a specified set of notes (such as those that surround Middle C) without a fixed, preset hand position (such as Middle C Position). Middle C March, for example, introduces Middle C as played by fingers 1, 2, then 3. Consequently, the student does not equate Middle C with finger 1.

Middle C March

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

Treble G, the next note introduced, is played with finger 3 as often as with finger 5. In *Best Friends* finger 3 plays Treble G, while the LH finger 3 plays Middle C. Bass F is similarly played by LH finger 3 in *My Invention* and *The Dance Band*.

Best Friends

Quickly

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

In addition to enhancing note recognition and preventing equating of a finger number with a given note, this varied fingering has technical value. To understand this, we look at one of the “technique secrets” from the *Primer Technique & Artistry Book* and a teaching technique presented early in the *Primer Lesson Book*.

Arm Weight

The ability to release the weight of the arm into the keyboard is the basis for good tone production. It requires the undoing of an automatic and unconscious muscle response that holds the arm up, in suspension, for routine life activities—like holding a pencil, grasping a fork, or waving to grandmother. Breaking this reflex is not quickly or easily achieved. Yet, it is of such importance to piano playing that *Piano Adventures*® addresses arm weight early and continues to refine the concept at later levels.

Failure to use arm weight in piano playing places excessive burden on the fingers. Instead of over-taxing the finger muscles and tendons (with the risk of incurring physical problems like tendinitis), the pianist should use gravity efficiently to overcome the weight of the key. The weight of the arm can be dropped, thrust, tossed, balanced on the fingertips, and transferred finger to finger. Effective handling of arm weight forms the basis of an effortless, virtuoso technique.

The *Primer Technique & Artistry Book* introduces arm weight as “technique secret” number four, using an exercise called Heavy Wet Ropes. The student experiences the feeling of heavy arms by imagining them as waterlogged ropes. The eventual release of heavy arms into the lap gives the sense of dead weight.

There is ample opportunity to apply the concept of arm weight, beginning with the pre-reading pieces (in the *Lesson Book*) that traverse the range of the keyboard—*Two Black Ants*, *Into the Cave*, *Balloons*, *The Escalator*, and others. In each of these, a brief pattern is repeated in lower or higher octaves.

Two Black Ants

start in the **MIDDLE** of the piano

Use **Left Hand** fingers 2 and 3. Play on the 2-black-key groups. (Your teacher will demonstrate.)

2 3 2 3 play together

Two black ants

move **DOWN** to next lower group

2 3 2 3 dig - ging down

move **DOWN** to next lower group

2 3 2 3 to their home

move **DOWN** to next lower group

2 3 2 3 in the ground!

LOW

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

Each pattern is initiated with a drop of arm weight, and is finished with a lift of the hand that initiates a new drop into the next octave. Notice that the thumb is not used in these early pieces. This allows an easy drop of arm weight into the tall fingers 2, 3, and 4, avoiding a gripping thumb and collapsing wrist.

The Old Clock introduces quarter-note rhythm using a steady, rhythmic drop of arm weight into alternating arms: right-left-right-left. This delivers a strong sense of pulse and puts the student in touch with the larger motions of piano playing.

The Old Clock

Hand Position

Eyes stay on music!

play fingers 2 and 3 at the same time

R.H. (right hand)

3 2

Tick Wind

tock it

tick up

tock so

goes it

the will

old not

clock. stop!

L.H. (left hand)

2 3

tick it

tock up

tock so

goes it

the will

old not

clock. stop!

Play 2 times!

Teacher Duet: (student plays in the middle of the keyboard)

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

All the Stars Are Shining (the initial “artistry piece” in **Technique & Artistry**) explores arm weight applied to a grand gesture and the implications of arm weight for dynamic change. These same concepts are mirrored at the end of the **Primer Lesson Book** in *The Bells of Great Britain*.

In discussing varied fingering, we observed the frequent use of finger 3 for a given note. Finger 3 invites a drop of arm weight. In contrast, fingers 1 and 5 tend to tense the hand and pull the wrist down. Finger 3 also promotes a tall knuckle, which itself carries the weight of the arm. Contrast this to fixed hand positions, which foster tension and minimize coordinated involvement of the arm.

Braced Finger 3

The thumb can be a useful brace for a flattened fingertip. Placed behind the tip of an offending finger, just below the last knuckle, the bracing thumb rounds the hand and firms a potentially collapsing fingertip. The student’s first activity at the keyboard occurs in the Lesson Book with *The Pecking Hen* and *The Pecking Rooster*. Here the braced finger 3 is used to round the hand as the student explores pitch direction—pecking higher, then lower, up and down the keyboard.

The Pecking Hen

FOR RIGHT HAND ON WHITE KEYS

Put your thumb behind your 3rd finger to help give you a good hand position.



Start in the **middle** of the piano. Using your 3rd finger (braced with the thumb) play all the white keys going **HIGHER** – to the right. This is going **UP** the keyboard.

Listen to how the keys sound! When the keys are higher, the sound is higher.

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

In the **Technique & Artistry Book**, the bracing technique is hinted at in *Making O’s*, the exercise for “technique secret” number three—firm fingertips. This drill accentuates a firm fingertip by bringing the thumb and each fingertip together, then looking for the “O.” (This is done in the air, away from the keyboard.) With just a slight adjustment of the thumb, *Making O’s* becomes effectively synonymous with the braced finger technique of *The Pecking Hen*. *Making O’s* and the braced finger 3 reinforce each other to make the concepts of rounded hand shape and firm fingertip more vivid, and the exercises more effective.

Integration

While varied fingering, use of arm weight, and the braced fingertip are each effective in individual context, significant value derives from the way in which these concepts work in tandem. The student need not be concerned with the technical details of this integration and, in fact, shouldn’t be bothered with terminology at this age. That can come at a later stage of pianism. But the teacher’s understanding of how these concepts integrate can prevent bad habits and, with an occasional touch of the hand, can mold an impressive technical foundation.

To understand this integration, we need to explore the concept of alignment. When the arm, hand, and playing finger are in a straight line, arm weight can flow directly into the fingertip. If the playing finger and forearm show an angle at the wrist, there is a misalignment which breaks the distribution of arm weight. The tall knuckle and rounded hand shape facilitate use of arm weight by preventing a collapsed knuckle and collapsed wrist. The finishing touch is to align a tall knuckle over the playing finger to provide a platform for balancing the arm.

If this sounds esoteric, don’t be dismayed. The braced fingertip and/or *Making O’s* handle the issue of alignment beautifully. And it can be done on the keyboard—right when the problem occurs. If a fingertip collapses or the finger and arm appear out of alignment, ask the student to “Make an O” with the finger still on its key. Making an O not only curves the errant fingertip, but it brings the arm, wrist, hand, knuckle, and finger into alignment, restoring a balanced platform for arm weight.

It is clear from the above that bracing finger 3 implicitly aligns the finger, hand, and arm. Thus a braced finger 3 is ideal for experiencing a drop of arm weight into the key. At the same time, the concept of varied fingering provides ample opportunity to use a braced finger 3. Notice the value, for example, of using finger 3 to kick off the downbeats in *My Invention* and *The Dance Band*. A braced finger 3 can be used here to ensure alignment and to increase the sensation of arm weight.

This is particularly useful in *The Dance Band* which presents the concept of time signature. The drop of weight into beat 1 ensures that the student feels the meter. And the use of finger 3 on the F ensures that the student learns the note. The student might first play using a braced finger 3, then repeat without the thumb brace.

The Dance Band

With energy 1 on
?

mf Peo - ple danc - ing all a - round, clap - ping to the big band sound.

3 on
?

I can't stop my feet when I hear that big band beat!

Copyright © 1993 The FJH Music Company Inc.

There are many places where the braced finger can be used:

- with the sequential use of finger 2 in *Frogs on Logs*
- with RH finger 3 on G in *Let's Play Ball!*
- with RH finger 3 on G in *Rodeo*

Even in *Lesson Book Level One*, you might come back to bracing finger 3 in teaching staccato with *Mexican Jumping Beans*, and in the arm weight exercise *Bongo Drummers*, with its four octaves of Gs.

You can find similar applications in the *Primer Performance* and the *Technique & Artistry* books. These sophisticated concepts are revisited in different ways at higher levels. Though *Piano Adventures®* does not expect perfect execution from the student at this level, a foundation is laid at these early lessons that allows a natural, problem-free technique to develop.

“Right” from the Beginning

It is easy to teach by finger number in a fixed hand position, but students then stumble and must re-learn the notes. It is easy to let students lock wrists and flap their fingers, but then tensions must be undone and technique re-vamped.

It takes effort and concentration for the student to recognize and associate a note with its corresponding key—but much less effort than having to erase learned finger-number associations. It takes effort and concentration to help a student balance arm, wrist, and finger in coordinated fashion—but much less effort than having to undo years of practiced tension. The combination of teaching techniques discussed here and used in *Piano Adventures®* just might help the student “get it right” the first time. ■■■

PIANO

Adventures®

by Nancy and Randall Faber

Primer Level Piano Adventures®



Lesson Book FF1075

Fingering is varied as new notes are presented. Additional emphasis on step/skip recognition provides a marriage of intervallic reading and note recognition.



Theory Book FF1076

Along with essential writing activities, the Theory Book presents sight-reading and ear-training instruction for each unit.



Performance Book FF1077

This engaging and expressive collection of pieces offers a varied repertoire while reinforcing the Lesson Book concepts.



Technique & Artistry FF1096

The “Technique Secrets” lay a foundation of physical gesture with an ear toward expressive playing. Each unit culminates in an “Artistry Magic” page with tips for artistic performance.



Christmas Book FF1137

“Sightreading Stocking Stuffers” follow each Christmas selection. These melodic variations build on the aural familiarity of the tune to promote recognition of musical patterns, and thus reading skill.



Popular Repertoire FF1256

Appealing popular standards are arranged to reinforce the concepts of the level. Each selection is paired with an Activity Page that addresses harmony, rhythm, ear-training, or other important musical skill.

T H E
F · J · H
 M U S I C
 C O M P A N Y
 I N C.

for more information, visit our website at:
www.fjhmusic.com

PIANO ADVENTURES®
SETTING THE STANDARD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY