

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Level 2A: Pattern Recognition and Five-Finger Positions

BY RANDALL FABER

Does an emphasis on five-finger patterns hinder or enhance the development of reading skill? One might easily adopt a negative stance having encountered students who are dependent on reading by hand position. But we need to ask if a student's dependence on five-finger positions is an inevitable outcome of teaching these patterns, or does dependence result from imperfect sequencing of concepts?

If a student initially learns to read using five-finger positions, there is a potential problem. But if the student first learns the basics of reading, we can then use five-finger positions to enhance reading skill by eliciting visual, kinesthetic, and aural pattern recognition. This is why major and minor five-finger patterns are taught in Level 2A of *Piano Adventures*®—after the basics of reading are acquired in the Primer level and Level 1. With the fundamentals of note recognition and intervallic reading firmly in place, this multikey approach can take hold without liability.

In this issue we look at Level 2A with special focus on pattern recognition. (See previous issues of *The Piano Adventures*® *Teacher* for topics at the Primer Level and Level 1.)

A student who reads only note-by-note misses the musical picture. Why? Because music is coded in *contour* and *context*. Contour of musical line depicts phrasing and the expressiveness of changing pitch. Contour is decoded through recognition of pitch direction and interval. Context suggests another level of pattern recognition. Context provides harmonic meaning through recognition of chords, key, tonic/dominant relationships, and so on. Context provides artistic meaning through recognition of form and motivic relationships, as well as more subtle relationships found through conscientious study of the score.

From the standpoint of artistry, understanding of contour and context can reduce a dense score to relative simplicity, and thus provide musical meaning that leads to expressive playing. From the standpoint of reading skill, an ability to grasp contour and context simplifies the reading process by allowing visual information to be processed in “chunks” through recognition of familiar patterns.

To explore the pedagogical applications of pattern recognition, we might consider five types of visual pattern recognition required for reading music, or if you prefer, for deciphering musical contour and context:

- ◆ Intervallic reading (step/skip/same)
- ◆ Five-finger patterning
- ◆ Recognition of chord names
- ◆ Recognition of chord function
- ◆ Rhythmic “chunking.”

If we set aside rhythmic pattern recognition, which has its own sequence that spans Primer to advanced levels, we find a sequence of visual processing in the first four types. Linear processing of intervallic reading takes on meaning in the context of five-finger scales (pentascales). Because five-finger patterns tend to suggest root position chords, a vertical dimension emerges. Recognition of chord names takes on meaning with recognition

of chord functions—the relationship of chords to scales and key. Ultimately, recognition of chords and inversions is achieved, even in diverse musical contexts, through an elliptical scanning of the score that grasps both horizontal and vertical dimensions.

This sequence of pattern recognition unfolds in the levels of *Piano Adventures*®.

- ◆ The Primer introduces intervallic reading and Level 1 reinforces it.
- ◆ Level 1 introduces five-finger tonality in C and G, with emphasis on tonic and dominant scale steps.
- ◆ Level 2A delivers the multikey perspective with transpositions to D, A, and to minor five-finger patterns.
- ◆ Level 2B adds meaning to triad recognition with awareness of key and key signature, the full major scale, and consequent recognition of primary chord functions—I, IV, and V7.
- ◆ Level 3A reinforces and expands recognition of both chord names and chord function.
- ◆ Level 3B introduces chords in their inversions, and also minor tonalities.
- ◆ Level 4 reinforces these minor key patterns with special focus on the V7 in root position, while offering additional work on chord inversion recognition.
- ◆ Level 5 introduces new flat-key patterns while working over recognition of I, IV, and V chords in any inversion and in any key.

Intervallic Reading

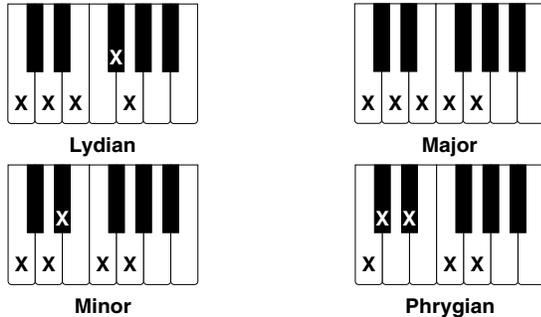
Decoding contour requires recognition of direction (up, down, same) and interval span (step, skip, fourth, fifth, and so on). This reading skill is not a substitute for note recognition, but a skill to be learned concurrent with note naming. For this reason, the Primer level merges note-name recognition with intervallic/directional reading. These skills go hand-in-hand. Consider that note-name recognition is essential for student confidence. A student should “know that she knows.” In contrast, a student who cannot identify note names tends to approach music reading timidly. He/she wonders, “Should I know?” and worse, “Does my teacher know that I don't know?” So intervallic reading alone does not suffice. Yet, directional/intervallic reading is not of secondary importance. It is essential for grasping musical contour and for fluent sightreading. Intervallic reading is pattern recognition in its most elemental form. Consequently, it is of paramount importance. Yet, it rests on a foundation of note recognition.

Five-Finger Patterns

Why are five-finger positions a necessary part of piano pedagogy? *Because our hands have five fingers.* We therefore cannot escape the relevance of five-finger patterns at virtually any level of piano playing. We need intimate familiarity with five-finger positions on the keyboard and on the staff. (True, we may extend

the hand to reach beyond adjacent seconds. But the stretch usually involves the thumb, while the other fingers rest on adjacent steps of a scale.)

Ideally, a pianist should become familiar with all modal combinations of five adjacent fingers on the keyboard.



The importance of major and minor five-finger positions may be obvious, but let's cite three reasons:

- ◆ Major and minor five-finger patterns (pentascales) reinforce recognition of major and minor triads.
- ◆ Major and minor five-finger patterns prime the student for major and minor scales, which form the basis of tonality.
- ◆ Major and minor five-finger patterns highlight the tonic and dominant notes to provide contextual meaning, meaning which retains importance when learning the full major scale.

Because five-finger patterns span adjacent notes, the fingering for seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths is predictable. This predictable and simple context is ideal for reinforcement of intervallic reading and for developing a corresponding kinesthetic memory. In fact, five-finger patterns invite (virtually demand) intervallic reading, particularly when transposed.

It is the predictability of five-finger positions that can get a teacher or student into trouble. For this reason, many pieces at Levels 1 and 2A require moving the hand between familiar positions. This movement between positions sharpens the student's reading, mitigates position dependence, and invites motion that can prevent a locked wrist.

The Queen's Royal Entrance

Grand March Words by Crystal Bowman

The score is in 4/4 time and features a piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The lyrics are: "Hail! Hail! Hail her maj - es - ty! Here comes the Queen! Here comes the Queen! Hail her maj - es - ty!"

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One might argue, why have familiar hand positions at all? Why so much "C Position" at Level 1, for instance? It's a valid question, an argument that sets the challenge of unfamiliarity against the comfort of predictability. The apparent dichotomy

resolves when we recognize that unfamiliarity is best encountered from a base of familiarity. We do not want an overwhelmed piano student; we want a confident piano student. We do not want to hear pieces played badly; we want to hear fluent, musical playing. We do not want home practice to be burdened by unresolved questions and confusion; we want home practice to be successful.

Here is where real-life issues of teaching take precedence over idle argument, where the experience of studio teaching supercedes ivory-tower pedagogy. Familiarity and comfort breed confidence and musicality. Familiarity and repetition build pattern recognition. Familiar patterns are eventually processed as "chunks," freeing up attention for the inevitable challenges of the unfamiliar.

Note the three modalities involved with five-finger pattern recognition:

- ◆ Staff recognition is *visual*
- ◆ Keyboard topography is *kinesthetic*
- ◆ Aural perception of five-note tonality is *auditory*

Since music making involves these modalities in combination, the pedagogical use of five-finger scales provides a playing field for exploring the integration of elementary patterns—visual, kinesthetic, and auditory.

Occasionally, it's helpful to spotlight a specific modality. For instance, the shift from major to minor (or vice versa) is aurally striking. We introduce five-finger patterns in terms of black and white, which is visual. We also stress the feel of the pattern. The pairing of D and A Major highlights both their visual and kinesthetic similarities.

The diagram shows two examples of five-finger patterns:

- D Major:** Keyboard diagram shows notes D, E, F, G, A. Piano accompaniment shows a scale starting on D with fingering 1 2 3 4 5 and 5 4 3 2 1.
- A Major:** Keyboard diagram shows notes A, B, C, D, E. Piano accompaniment shows a scale starting on A with fingering 1 2 3 4 5 and 5 4 3 2 1.

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Much has been written that recommends teaching from the student's strongest modality (visual learners, kinesthetic learners, auditory learners), but one of the demands and the benefits of playing music is that it merges multiple modalities. The visual mode may dominate Western civilization in this century, but music is primarily an auditory art, with tremendous kinesthetic demands on the performer. Music instruction, then, should focus on developing skill in all these modalities.

Rhythmic "Chunking"

Eighth notes are not presented in *Piano Adventures*® until Level 2A. This allows the student to be at ease with rhythm at the Primer and Level 1. The beat can be quite fast, unhampered by intruding eighth notes. This promotes a rhythmic fluency based on meter, instead of a slow, interrupted beat. One readily recognizes the increase in musicality.

By not subdividing the beat, these early levels present a limited set of rhythmic values which the student can readily "chunk" into macro patterns, such as 1 1 1-2 or 1-2 1-2.

When eighth notes are introduced at the beginning of Level 2A, they are presented in rhythmic groupings:



Thus the student is led to read eighth notes, not as individual counts or sub-counts, but in the context of a meaningful rhythmic pattern that is felt kinesthetically, not just intellectually.

Famous People



With a strong beat

f Sing the names of fa - mous peo - ple:

1 on

3 A - bra - ham Lin - coln, Ben - ja - min Frank - lin,

5 Chris - to - pher Co - lum - bus, A - ma - de - us Mo - zart,

7 Rob - in Hood, Bet - sy Ross, San - ta Claus, Jack Frost, Cin - der - el - la, too!

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Summary

Repetition of predictable and reliable patterns (aural, kinesthetic, and visual) leads to recognition of these patterns. We can't assume that random occurrence of principal patterns will lead to recognition of them. Our goal is to equip students with tools of pattern recognition. We accomplish this with systematic presentation of patterns and a matching repertoire.

"Multikey" piano teaching is, of course, not new. What is new in *Piano Adventures*® is the placement of multikey reading *after* the skills of individual note recognition and intervallic reading are consolidated. Just as proficient music reading requires more than simple note recognition or intervallic recognition, the "context" of multikey reading is insufficient on its own. The context itself becomes a crutch. However, as part of a well-sequenced, multifaceted reading strategy, five-finger patterns offer uniquely valuable opportunities for many time-honored teaching techniques. Through transposition, "question and answer," harmonization, ear training, and a carefully conceived repertoire, working with five-finger patterns lays a foundation of multi-modal pattern recognition that ultimately leads to a refined sense of tonality and intelligent, fluent music reading. ■■■

PIANO

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by Nancy and Randall Faber

Level 2A Piano Adventures®



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