

## The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

# Level 2B: The Power of Primary Chords

BY RANDALL FABER

Perhaps the favorite application of music theory in piano instruction is the teaching of I, IV and V7 chords in that well-worn cluster surrounding the root-position I chord. This aspect of piano pedagogy identifies Level 2B of *Piano Adventures*®, just as the subhead “I, IV, and V7 chords in the Keys of C, G, and F” identifies *ChordTime*® Piano (Level 2B) in the *PreTime to BigTime* Supplementary Library.

This simple chord formula is favored for good reason:

- ◆ The chords are easily accessible
- ◆ They reduce the harmonic language of many diverse styles to a common denominator
- ◆ They provide a basis for creative applications in arranging or composing.

### Staging the V7 Chord

The earlier levels of *Piano Adventures*® work with a two-note V7 chord that lies readily under the hand. This allows for easy and rapid switching between I and V7 chords. Use of the more common three-note V7 chord tends to sacrifice the student's rhythm at the bar line. The moving of finger five and the span of the 6th demand significant attention from the student performer. In contrast, the *Piano Adventures*® use of a two-note V7 chord allows the student to maintain rhythmic fluency and, importantly, the musicality of a flowing meter.

2-Note V7 from Level 1                      3-Note V7 from Level 2B

In ramping up to the three-note V7 at Level 2B, we next address two prerequisites: 1) the interval of the 6th and 2) the definition of the *leading tone*. These concepts are given meaning in the teaching of the major scale. The student hears the *leading tone* move by half step to the tonic. Now the student hears the leading tone of the V7 chord move to the tonic note in its resolution. Indeed, this leading tone is the new note of the V7.

At Level 2B we introduce the 6th, the leading tone, the tonality of the major scale and, building on the student's experience with the two-note V7 chord at Levels 1 and 2A, we introduce the three-note V7 with little liability and with greater understanding.

### The Chord Accompaniment

It is not enough merely to read the notes of a chord, or even to recognize the notes as a chord. A student needs to understand the role of chords in accompanying a melody. So, immediately after introducing the three-note V7, we present a two-hand accompaniment for *Camptown Races* with the melody displayed on a third staff. This “piano/vocal” score provides much insight for the student: a conceptualization of melody and accompaniment, of chord progression, the prevalence and utility of I and V7 harmonies, and a valuable introduction to ensemble playing.

## Camptown Races Duet

Stephen C. Foster  
(1826-1864, American)

I recommend two activities as followup to playing this exercise.

- ◆ Use the LH of *Camptown Races Duet* to accompany a descending 5-note scale in the RH.

Harmonize RH melody

As an alternative, begin with 3rds in the RH: E-G, descending to D-F, to C-E, then to single notes D and home to C. Both of these exercises illustrate the process of harmonizing and help students conceptually group scale steps 1-3-5 and scale steps 2-4 into their respective I and V7 camps.

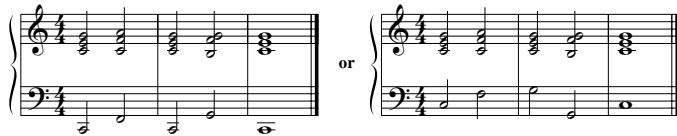
- ◆ To anchor the student's understanding of I and V7 harmonies, I always ask the student to repeat the exercise playing only the chord *root* in the left hand.

LH chord roots

My students and I like these bass notes played down low—where they growl. After playing the dominant a fifth *above* the tonic, play the dominant a fourth *below* the tonic. (Use LH finger 2 on C and finger 5 on G.) This activity offers significant insight into the role of the bass player in an ensemble, and can be great fun.

Playing roots in the bass can be continued as the level progresses. For instance, the upcoming waltz pattern (*Carefree Waltz*,

Lesson Book, p. 20) can be transformed into a two-hand accompaniment by using the chord root in the bass and RH chords on beats 2 and 3. (See Carousel Ride and Waltzing RH in the Technique & Artistry Book.) Be sure to use this LH root exercise when the IV chord is introduced. The typical I-IV-I-V7 cadence takes on significantly more meaning when played with left-hand roots:



Though we don't burden the student with reading in every key as yet, you can still work the cadences through numerous transpositions. See, for instance, the I-V-I and I-IV-I cadences which are presented in all keys at the back of the Level 2B Technique & Artistry Book. Again, repeating the exercises with roots in the bass deepens understanding and significantly enhances pattern recognition.

**Chord Symbols**

With each new key (C, G, and F), chord patterns are presented under the heading "Reading Chord Symbols." The student encounters this at the outset with Boom! Boom! (Lesson Book, p. 19), which immediately follows the Camptown Races Duet.

**Reading Chord Symbols**

Play I and V7 chords in the Key of C by reading the chord symbols below.

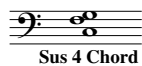
Use L.H. **I V7 I V7 I** Use R.H. **I I V7 V7 I**

After the student blocks the chords, ask for an accompaniment that follows the given chord progression. I often draw bar lines between the chord symbols to show a chord chart more specifically. The chord patterns on p. 19 constitute a 4-measure chord pattern followed by the tonic chord. If you play and then repeat the first four bars of either of these patterns, you produce a very common 8-measure chord progression. In fact, the first of the chord progressions is that of Boom! Boom! on that very page. The other progression is that of Camptown Races on the preceding page. This latter pattern is also the chord progression (in metric augmentation) for Carefree Waltz, which is the following piece.

Time spent listening, memorizing, and transposing these chord progressions is time well spent. Then, let your student loose to create melodies and various accompaniment patterns based on these chord progressions and those that follow. The creative questions that end each unit (p. 21, for example) will provide nudges toward such work. For most students, though, you'll want to push the creative activities even more. It's amazing how much similarity there is among chord progressions, and how much value is derived from working them over and over.

**The Sus4 Option**

As a transition into the three-note V7, I often teach the sus4 chord. (Sus4 means sustained 4<sup>th</sup>.)



In contemporary pop usage the 4<sup>th</sup> needn't resolve to the 3<sup>rd</sup> (unlike the Baroque 4-3 suspension). We teach the sus4 chord in

Adult Piano Adventures® because of its contemporary sound. The sus4 chord is also very easy to play because there is no shift to a 6<sup>th</sup>. Certainly the V7 in a typical keyboard voicing is not the most beautiful sound. Whether we prefer the Haydn and Mozart orchestral voicing of V7 heard over a tonic pedal-point or the sustained 4<sup>th</sup> chord of a rock guitarist, both voicings are replicated by the sus4 chord. Not only is the sus4 an effective substitute for the V7, it can even substitute for the IV chord, with the G functioning as an added 9<sup>th</sup> (F chord in the key of C). Thus every tone of the major scale can be harmonized by either the I chord or the sus4. Share this with your students and they will credit you as being much more hip than the method writers!

**The IV Chord**

While we're on the subject of hip, the IV chord rates in this regard. Notice how Boxcar Rumble (Lesson Book, p. 11) sets the student up for the barrelhouse I-IV left hand with its 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> alternation. You might revisit this piece after the IV chord is learned, adding the omitted chord tones to the LH pattern. For a somewhat easier variation, repeat each chord before changing harmony. You'll still want to play a chord on every beat, but the harmonic rhythm slows to a change of chords every two beats instead of every beat.



**Accompaniments That Dance**

Yes, those left-hand accompaniments can use plenty of practice. The Technique & Artistry Book is very helpful in this regard. The issue has less to do with coordination than it does musicality. We have all heard plenty of thumping thumbs in left-hand accompaniments. To remedy—or better—to prevent this malady, Technique Secret No. 3 at Level 2B specifically works for a *light thumb*. In fact, all of the "technique secrets" at this level converge to provide coordination and beauty in a left-hand accompaniment. A drop of arm weight (Heavy Arms) initiates the LH pattern. The energy flows through a slur gesture (Painter's Brush Stroke). The Weightless Thumb ensures a lightness for the non-downbeats. And skillful connected pedaling (Pedal Pushers) provides a finishing wrapper of sound.

The entire level is designed to achieve beauty and efficiency by playing several notes with a single gesture. This is applied specifically to left-hand accompaniments through a combination of "drop" and "up" touches indicated by arrows (Technique & Artistry Book, pp. 14-15).

**Waltzing L.H.**

**Tipping over the "Snowman" Chords**

Students typically recognize chords on the staff only when notes are stacked in thirds. I call this the "snowman chord" syndrome.

Our goal at Level 2B (and the levels that follow) is to tip the chord over so that a harmony is recognized when it spans horizontally across the measure and vertically over both treble and bass clefs. Our first tool in this perceptual transformation is the Cross-Hand Arpeggio (Unit 2, p. 6). Indeed, the Cross-Hand Arpeggio distributes chord tones over several measures and between clefs.

We ask students to identify and label all familiar chord names, often circling the chord tones in the music. The chord letter name should be written above the staff where the chord first occurs, usually on beat one. This is easy in Spanish Caballero, which immediately follows on p. 8. Notice the two-measure harmonic rhythm (chord change every two measures) and the shift to more rapid chord changes near the end of the piece. Taps on p. 12 plays out the C major chord for nearly the entire piece. The River (Popular Repertoire, p. 12) centers almost entirely around G and C chords. Whether in the Lesson Book, Performance Book, Popular Repertoire, or a ChordTime book, ask the student to label with a pencil all chord letter names that look remotely familiar.

Next, identify *chord functions* whenever possible. We are limited at this level to I, IV, and V, so we have to be content with just the chord letter name in some cases. Chord functions are typically written under the bass clef using Roman numerals. Chord letter names are best written above the treble staff.

For pieces that consist only of primary chords, I help the student chart out the chord progression in block symbols on a separate sheet of paper. Such pieces usually fall into 4-bar phrases that combine into an 8-measure section. By visually charting the chord pattern into these 4-bar groupings, we find the simplicity of the harmonic progression. For instance, the next song is Shave and a Haircut (p. 13), which reduces to

I	I	I	V7	
V7	V7	V7	I	

This is a common chord pattern that transcends many styles: from Schubert Ländler and the opening of the Brahms' Lullaby (Performance Book, p. 30) to cartoon themes such as "I Taut I Taw a Putty Cat" from Popular Repertoire Level 1.

Sometimes 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> endings make the 4-bar groupings memorable. Consider Ashokan Farewell from Popular Repertoire, p. 20. The Activity Page for this piece works out the harmonic analysis. Yet, charting in this manner makes the pattern even more explicit.

:	I	I	IV	IV	
I	I	IV	V7:		
			V7	I	

Whether we synthesize accompaniments from a given chord pattern as in Reading Chord Symbols, or we analyze to find the chord pattern in an otherwise complex piece, primary chords provide a common denominator to which we can relate aurally, visually, and kinesthetically. The power of primary chords is in their simplicity. And, as many have heard me say in the context of artistic interpretation, "Always look for the simplicity." ■■■

# PIANO

## Adventures®

by Nancy and Randall Faber

### Level 2B Piano Adventures®



#### Lesson Book FF1084

With focus on the major scale and primary chords in the Keys of C, G, and F, Level 2B integrates the basics of music theory with appealing repertoire.



#### Theory Book FF1085

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



#### Performance Book FF1086

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



#### Technique & Artistry FF1099

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 FF1140

"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.



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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.

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