

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Level 4: Lyric Playing

BY RANDALL FABER

In the last issue, we characterized Level 3B as *fast* playing. In Level 4 the student learns *lyric* playing—the ability to project and beautifully shape a melody.

We positioned lyric playing *after* fast playing because it requires more mature expression. I like to discuss the excitement of speed and the expressive quality of lyric playing as contrasting modes of expression—both powerful in different ways. Whereas all students relate to facile speed at the keyboard, most need to be coached into the expressive mode. With exposure, most students find the more subtle expression personally rewarding.

Lyric playing isn't entirely new to the student. Back in Level 2A we devoted a unit to Shaping the Phrase. Building on the Level 1 Wrist Float-off, the Technique & Artistry secrets gradually develop more sophisticated wrist gestures. Painter's Brush Stroke at Level 2B particularly addresses shaping the slur. At level 3A, the Round-Off ensures the student hears a softened phrase ending, and the Wrist Circles of Level 3A lead to use of the wrist to shape a longer phrase. Level 3B Technique & Artistry worked with Voicing the Melody to develop melodic projection. Now, here at Level 4, the repertoire is specifically tailored for beautiful handling of melody.

Is it advantageous to organize the method levels by such repertoire characteristics? Might this even counter our fundamental principle that students need a variety of repertoire? Indeed, one of the attributes of Piano Adventures® is its variety of musical styles. Let's examine why this variety is important, then consider how a distinct flavor or focus within a level enhances learning.

Variety of Repertoire

In most teaching studios, there is a range of musical tastes among students. Some students tell us their preference upfront, but, generally, we have to explore a range of sounds to find the style that really resonates with the individual. Broad exposure to various sounds and styles helps the teacher and student uncover a special interest—a personal sound. Once identified, we might celebrate this interest with a tailored supplement from the PreTime to BigTime library—such as Popular, Classics, Jazz & Blues, Rock 'n Roll, Hymns, Ragtime & Marches. As an alternative, we might choose from the correlating Piano Adventures® Popular Repertoire Book or from literature collections in The Developing Artist Library.

The motivational impact of this customization can be dramatic. In addition to harnessing the magnetic attraction to an individual's favorite musical sounds, this process personalizes piano study. This shift in "locus of control" from teacher to learner constitutes a major move toward intrinsic motivation. Not only will the student willingly practice more, but will open up to learning at the lesson and at home. We find more attentiveness, better retention, and a significant change in the communication dynamics. The right music makes all the difference.

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Motivation isn't the only benefit of exploring many styles. A variety of styles invites a range of fundamental competencies which coalesce into the essentials of intermediate piano playing: note-reading, chord recognition, steady tempo, dynamic contrast, pedal coloring, coordination of fingers, wrist, arm and torso, technical gestures, long line, melodic shaping and projection, and so on. While this list is not intended to be comprehensive, even for elementary piano pedagogy, it nonetheless suggests a range of skills with an implication of sequence. The method levels provide proper sequence, and the repertoire characteristics of each level help ensure a depth of focus.

Focus of Repertoire

It is easy to assume that once *taught*, a concept is *learned*. Experience tells us otherwise. Neuroscience informs us that cognitive patterns must be repeated to be retained. If at level 3B we didn't immerse the student in the coordinated movements of fast playing, motor patterning would not become automatic. If we taught I, IV, V only in a single unit, there would be little or no recall of this a year later and no primary-chord recognition in the interim. So the entirety of Level 2B focuses on the primary chords, the bulk of Level 3B focuses on fast playing, and Level 4 focuses on lyric playing. By immersing the student in the defining character of the level, motor patterns, perceptual patterns, and cognitive patterns become reasonably lasting—not yet robust, perhaps—but sufficiently stable for the move to the next level.

Lyricism

Let's examine the Level 4 characteristic—lyricism. The lyric is the text of song, so lyricism refers to the singing quality in instrumental playing. The pianist does not simply accompany the singer; the pianist emulates the singer. We breathe the phrase, project the phrase, shape the phrase, and we imbue it with meaning—just as the voice does so naturally. In lyric playing, we give meaning to each phrase without words. Our goal in lyric playing is to bring the melody to the fore with intention and sensitivity. We don't just *play* the melody, we *speak* the melody through our instrument. When we give each note meaning—as in the spoken word—a melody takes on special magic. It becomes a personalized, poetic communication—indeed, a song without words.

The magic of melody often comes from its context. In other words, a melody derives its character, in part, from the colors of the accompanying voices. The setting critically frames the melody. How is the melody set against the accompaniment? To what degree does it contrast in dynamic? Does the accompaniment invoke the mood?

Invariably, students play the melody too softly. Students need to be taught to project the melody way above the background setting. Not just louder—a lot louder. This is accomplished with the drop of arm weight and its roll through the melodic phrase, but

also with the softening of the accompaniment. We're after big projection, but also big contrast, which is made possible by intentionally softening the accompanying voices.

Lyricalism requires sensitivity to the contour of the melody. Are there expressive leaps? If so, might we stretch time through the larger interval? Does the melody *fall away* (characteristic of Viennese Classical) or *move toward* (as in the late Romantics)? How does the wrist assist phrase shaping? Does the passage invite wrist circles that can help transfer arm weight finger-to-finger?

Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag

A rag may seem the furthest thing from lyricalism. But if we analyze the melody structure of Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag, we find interesting phrase patterns. The opening phrase, which outlines the I and V chords, is *two* measures in length, and repeats. At measure 5, intensifying in its flirtation with the parallel minor, the phrase is *one* measure in length, and repeats. At measure 7, the phrase becomes motivic as a *half-measure* pattern, arpeggiating the C minor tonality up the keyboard. Now, having shortened the phrase to almost nothing and as if to resolve the excursion to minor, the phrase length expands to *four* measures, and repeats. Attentiveness to this changing length of the phrases can make a world of difference in the expressive character of the piece. And, when we overlay this intelligently presented melody atop the staccato, dance-like left hand of ragtime, we have a context that lets the melody sing.

Leopold Mozart's Burlesca

Again, the bright, mischievous Burlesca of Leopold Mozart does not overtly suggest lyricalism. Yet, it has important implications for the study of melody. If we trim out the sequence material of the descending thirds (in sixteenth notes), we find a duet of melody and bass, in parallel 10ths.

In a four-measure grouping, the melody hovers around scale step 5 (dominant), then descends stepwise to scale step 1 (tonic). After an echoed repetition of these four measures, the descent from 5 to 1 is reiterated in a succinct two-measure grouping. This is echoed, and the piece wraps up with the opening statement. Recognizing this stepwise framework of the phrase adds simplicity to what can otherwise appear as a complexity of tones. When the performer conveys the simplicity, a melodic beauty unfolds.

The Gondola

This quintessentially lyric piece sets a cantabile melody against a repetitive, undulating arpeggiation. As in the Burlesca, the phrase shape of the B section derives from a descending line on the principal beats, floating downward in a simple, naturally expressive contour. Can you spot the C, B \flat , A descent in Mm. 12-15? See pp. 8 and 9 for the score and details on how to play this expressive piece.

Seaside Suite

The first two movements of Seaside Suite give a lyric voice to the left hand. The melody of Sailboats in the Wind is doubled in the top of the R.H. first inversion chords. The piece is effectively practiced by blocking the R.H. chords while playing the L.H. melody. Hold the chord through the measure where the harmony does not change. Each of the two-bar phrases should be shaped like the swell of a wave—a surging forward and a falling away. In the B section, the gusts of wind grow with each sequence from Mm. 9 to 16.

The second movement, Mysterious Cove, slows the tempo and sets a three-measure phrase against a placid background in the keyboard's outer ranges. The haunting L.H. melody in Lydian mode invites a controlled drop of arm weight that builds intensity through the turn of the phrase, then releases over time through the repeated Bs. The beauty rests in the color of the accompanying voices. The low fifth is not for loud support. It establishes a subdued anchoring of the F tonality (against the B \natural) which is immediately mirrored in the undulating R.H. repetitions.

The piece is an interplay of dynamic colors, both between the three voices (bass fifth, R.H. fifths, and melody) and through the dynamic swells that move the piece forward. (You might imagine surging and receding waves, or changing gusts of wind.) The final phrase is a long descending scale that requires a crescendo and diminuendo to give shape and direction.

Night Ride

I love the way this L.H. melody outlines the tonic chord in D minor, then melodically cadences dominant to tonic (A to D). On the repeat, the melody cadences in F, the relative major (Mm. 8-9). This is a great piece for L.H. alone work, where the student can grasp the harmonic simplicity and bring out the rich, cello voice.

Chanson

Chanson, literally meaning “song”, is explicitly melody over accompaniment. The melody is intentionally long and beautiful. Though the first gesture is a simple 3-note slur, the melody continues to unfold across seven measures. Use the pedal to sustain the D and take a new drop into the continuing phrase (pickup to measure 2). The long line invites awareness of direction in melody. Particularly effective is the move toward the A at measure 14, which then “rounds off” in its resolution to G. The B section pairs a bold move forward for four bars with a more relaxed surge and retreat in the alto voice. After moving forward again toward the unexpected F harmony at measure 27, the melody surges to the D (dominant) at measures 29 and 30, then expressively recedes.

Flowing, expressively

* Chanson is the French word for “song.”

Wild Flowers

Probably the highpoint of expressive lyricism would be the coloratura soprano singing an operatic solo cadenza. So we give this to the student pianist in Wild Flowers. The expressive quality of the cadenza is enhanced by the color tones of the *forte* chord at measure 27 which sustain beyond the fermata. The singer ascends freely to the high B with a crescendo, but also with subtle 2-note *diminuendi* in the appoggiaturas B-A, E-D, A-G. Soften the second note in each of these stepwise pairings while maintaining a legato throughout. Remind the student of the expressive quality of the F \sharp that begins the resolution. It is borrowed from the parallel minor (and from the B section) and also forms a tritone (three whole steps) against the preceding B. The finishing expressive gesture places the V chord atop the I chord (E major atop A major) through a *molto ritardando*.

The student learns that expression derives from the musical content, and yet needs to be infused by the performer. We find hints to expression in our analysis—our analysis of phrase shape, and even our theory analysis. Informed by the simplicities and subtleties of the score, we add the warmth and expressive power of human emotion. ■■■

PIANO

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by Nancy and Randall Faber

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