

**FAMILY TREE**

# The “Masonic” Touch

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Being a member of the Lowell Mason family in 19th-century America was like being one of the Bach boys. Mason was a compiler and composer of hymn tunes, a conductor, and president of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society. He was also the prime mover in getting music introduced (in Boston, in 1838) into public school education.

Two of his sons, Daniel Gregory and Lowell, became music publishers. The youngest son, Henry, joined Emmons Hamlin in making reed organs in Boston. In 1883 Mason & Hamlin began to manufacture pianos. Another Daniel Gregory (Henry’s son) made his fame as a composer, a writer on music, and the head of the music department at Columbia University.

William, the patriarch’s third son (1829-1908), was a pianist. At 20, he followed the path of most American musicians—he went to Europe for “serious” study. He moved around during his five-year stay. In Leipzig he studied with Ignaz Moscheles, in Prague with Alexander Dreyschock, and in Weimar with Liszt.

It was while working with Liszt that Mason came to appreciate the importance of accentuated, elastic movement. He noted in his autobiography that Liszt’s demonstrations “let in a flood of light upon me.... When he wrote to me later about my own piano method, he expressed the strongest approval of the exercises on accentuation.” He also credited Liszt with devising the “two-finger drill,” a technique that later became associated with Mason’s own name.

It was as a teacher and author of books on technical training that Mason carved his particular niche in keyboard history. Working in his New York Steinway Hall studio, he produced several influential publications, the most notable being *Touch and Technic*, op. 44, the four volumes of which were published in 1891-92.

When I first came upon this work, it struck me as a method so basic and naturally musical that I wondered why no one had ever shown me these techniques, and why Mason was hardly ever included in the lineup of the technical “giants”—Deppe, Leschetizky, Breithaupt, Matthay, et al.

Mason’s idea is simple. All pairs of adjacent fingers, in each hand, are exercised in rhythms that are then doubled. There are two “rhythms.” In one, the accent is on the first note.

**Second slow form. Rhythm I**  
*J* = 96

Right Hand  $\frac{4}{4}$  1 2 3 4 5 etc.  
 Left Hand  $\frac{4}{4}$  5 4 3 2 1 etc.

**First moderato form. Rhythm I**  
*J* = 138

In the other “rhythm,” the second note is accented.

**Second slow form. Rhythm II**

**First moderato form. Rhythm II**

Mason’s ideas about “elementary forms of scale treatment” are further evidence of his belief in the importance of rhythmic (accentuated) technical practice.

Right Hand

Left Hand

Particularly ingenious are the scale forms he developed to keep the mind occupied and the ear engaged. These exercises may look obvious, but when you try them yourself, you’ll find that your mind and ear must remain “on task.”

**No. 3 Fours**

**No. 5 Nines**

Although William Mason is not often listed in the pedagogy “pioneer” category, his contributions to piano playing and teaching mark him as a late 19th-century leader in these fields, and the value and breadth of his theories should be more widely acknowledged. As Reginald Gerig notes in *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*, Mason “seems to have been the first original thinker in America in the area of piano technique.” ■■■