

FAMILY TREE

Big Red

BY MARIENNE USZLER

“My mother was a music teacher ... She had lots of students, school children, from the first through the twelfth grade. ... I got to know ... the music books—the shiny red covers for the beginners and the dull yellow covers for the advanced ...” These words from Gail Godwin’s novel *The Odd Woman* are a testament to the ubiquity of the Thompson and Schirmer books. (For the record, the “odd woman” was *not* the music teacher.) The Thompson books, our focus here, are internationally recognizable—like Coca-Cola.

Although his fame now rests solely on his creation of *The Modern Piano Course*, John Thompson was a performer, composer, and transcriber. His earliest music training was in Philadelphia. He toured for some time in the United States and Europe as a concert pianist, but his health suffered. He then began his long career as a teacher, first in Philadelphia and Indianapolis before joining the faculty of the Kansas City Conservatory of Music in 1918. From 1930 to 1939 he was Director of that school.

Teaching Little Fingers to Play and *The First Grade Book* were published in 1936. They were an instant success. Like Coca-Cola, Thompson developed a winning formula. He provided music in a format appealing to the young player, and he also provided uncomplicated and visually attractive instructional aids for the teacher. It was a combination that clicked, on all levels. The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Grade Books followed quickly.

The *Adult Preparatory Book* came out in 1943, *Melody All the Way* (a new course) in 1949, and the *Easiest Piano Course* in 1955. Supplementary books and sheet music filled out the Thompson Library, among them *Keyboard Attacks*, *Note and Scale Spellers*, *Etudes*, *Graded Technique*, and *Studies in Style*. Almost all of these are still available, some with updated illustrations and CDs, not Thompson’s work, of course.

My own little fingers began with that horizontal red book. I played my favorites with zest—Steam-boat Round the Bend (loved those “chugs”), *The Juggler* (showing off with quick hand crossings), and—the winner—From a Wigwam (the left-hand tom-toms and three notes together!). I colored the pictures, read the information, and zipped through the book. I don’t recall being daunted by “Something New Every Lesson.” You could move to the next book in a hurry!

Play both hands together. R. H. Group. B is the first BLACK key to the LEFT of E.

Now, after seeing American piano methods through a half-century of evolution and proliferation, what are my thoughts about *The Modern Piano Course*? There is a satisfying mix of well-known melodies and instructional pieces. The layout is clean, the music is easy to read, and the attractive artwork adds interest. But there is no reinforcement, new concepts are introduced arbitrarily, the reading range expands quickly, and explanations are often inadequate. In 1936 no one had yet taken into account the actual principles underlying proficient music reading nor considered that where a student plays on the keyboard in the early stages of learning implicitly influences technique.

I now wonder how many teachers introduced *Teaching Little Fingers* the way Thompson intended. He offers teachers detailed directions on how to give the “first three lessons.” Before they go to that Birthday Party, students should learn notes on the keyboard from A through G, finger numbers, stepping and skipping, basic rhythms, and the staff, time signature, and measure bars. Playing by rote in different octaves is encouraged.

TO THE TEACHER
HOW TO PRESENT THE FIRST THREE LESSONS IN TEACHING LITTLE FINGERS TO PLAY

FIRST LESSON
The musical examples in the first three lessons are to be taught ENTIRELY BY NOTE. (i.e., imitation). The purpose is to teach the NAMES OF THE KEYS ONLY. The notes will be learned later.

FIRST PATTERN
SECOND PATTERN

FIRST LESSON AT THE KEYBOARD
Learning the Keys C D E

FIRST LESSON IN NOTATION
Learning the Grand Staff, Old Style, Bass and Treble

The preface to the *First Grade Book* provides pithy and friendly teaching advice, rather like a word-to-the-wise column. “A note by note conception of music is not only antiquated but apt to lessen interest and retard progress.” “The same keyboard attacks used by the great artists should be taught in miniature to the beginner.” “Practically all of the examples in this book remain in the five-finger position. For this reason transposition is quite easy.”

Although his approach was not original, Thompson’s big red books are classics. Millions of them have been unpacked from book bags, decorated with stickers, and propped open on all sorts of racks, from player pianos to digital keyboards. Some of the (probably) billions of little fingers that played Papa Haydn’s *Air*, launched *Paper Ships*, and beat the *Wigwam* tom-toms are now arthritic. But those pages and pieces still represent a standard achieved, if now surpassed. The worldwide community of piano teachers owes JT his own Certificate of Merit. ■■■