

The Official Journal of Missouri Music Teachers Association

WINTER - February 2008

[www.missourimta.org](http://www.missourimta.org)

Vol. XXXIX No. 2



*Marilyn Lowe*  
*Missouri Teacher of the Year*

## The Pros and Cons of Method Books

### by Julie Knerr

The more I teach and the more I teach teachers how to teach, the more I question the purpose of the traditional method book. By “traditional method book,” I am referring to a series of books specifically designed for teaching piano to children in the elementary years of study, books such as *Piano Adventures*, *The Hal Leonard Student Piano Library*, *Celebrate Piano*, *Bastien Piano Series*, *Alfred's Premier Piano Course*, *Music Tree*, and many others. As piano teachers, we are blessed with a variety of materials that are not available for teachers of, for instance, the oboe. I am grateful, as I am sure many piano teachers are, for the many attractive materials available to piano students. However, recently I have become disenchanted with the pedestal on which we piano teachers tend to place the “Almighty Method Book” as if a method book is the only tool required for teaching piano to children. In this article, I am *not* advocating a method book ban. I like method books. I use method books! I'm writing a method book! However, I would like to explore the pros and cons of using method books in an attempt to put method book in its proper perspective.

#### Pros to Using Method Books

There are many reasons to use method books, including three listed below. I suppose that is why there are so many method series and why they are so popular with piano teachers, and why I'm sure the oboe teachers are jealous!

##### Systematic Presentation of Reading Notation

First, method books provide a systematic introduction to the basics of reading music notation at the piano. A step-by-step approach to musical terms, symbols, and reading notation is invaluable to the piano teacher. As methods have evolved over the years, from middle C methods like the *Thompson Piano Course*, to intervallic methods like Clark's *Music Tree*, to eclectic methods like Faber's *Piano Adventures*, teachers have been assisted in fine tuning their ability to teach the reading of music notation.

##### Ease of Use

Second, because of the systematic presentation of concepts and the gradual leveling of pieces, method books provide an easy entry into piano teaching for the young teacher beginning a teaching career. I know that when I first started teaching piano after college, I would have been clueless as to how to sequence pieces and concepts if not for the method book.

##### Motivation

Third, method books are motivational. Much of what I learned about piano teaching, I learned from playing for ballet classes. I once had a little piano student who was eight years old. She was also in a ballet class I accompanied for, and she did not like ballet! However, she refused to quit ballet, because each year that she progressed, she got a *new colored leotard*, corresponding to her new level in ballet. That annual new leotard kept her studying ballet for three years longer than she might otherwise have continued.

The same is true in piano. Students are always excited to get a new book, to see they are progressing to a new level, and to compare which level books they are in with their friends. Without method books, piano lessons might be reduced to a series of never-ending pieces, without a measurable standard that helps the student to measure their progress. I believe that this form of extrinsic motivation is necessary for many children in order to help them stay motivated until they reach a point where they want to study piano because of the intrinsic joy it gives them.

#### Cons of Using Method Books

The pros of using a method book are important, but I would argue that the cons are equally significant and that many piano teachers, myself included, may not have carefully considered that using the method book as the primary focus of piano lessons can have serious detrimental effects.

##### Missing Aspects of a Well-Rounded Music Education

First, in order for a child to gain a well-rounded musical education at the piano, development of the following skills are essential:

##### **Necessary Skills for Piano Students**

- |                          |   |   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| -Performance             | <b>-Repertoire study</b>                        | <b>-Reading music notation</b>                        |
| -Aural training          | -Listening and imitating sounds and rhythms     | -Technique  |
| -Tonal colors in playing | -Rhythmic pulse in the body                     | -Reading and executing rhythmic patterns              |
| -Improvisation           | <b>-Ensemble playing</b>                        | -Social network of musicians and pianists among peers |
| -Music history           | -Music theory/analysis for understanding pieces | -Composition  |
| -Listening to music      |   |   |

Method books focus primarily on the reading of music notation to the exclusion of many of the other necessary skills. (Bold items in the list above show the basic contents of method books.) Recently I have begun viewing method books as primarily “grammars to teach reading music notation.” Just as a French grammar book, which is designed to teach the basics of reading and writing French, will not help a person learn to speak French unless paired with practice in speaking French through conversation with French speakers, so the use of a method book alone may teach the student how to read music notation, but may neglect other essential aspects of piano education.

##### Presentation of all Concepts Based on Reading Level

Second, method books strive to keep all skills presented (few in number that they may be) at the same level and progressing in difficulty in a parallel manner. The level of progression is paced primarily to the student's reading ability, rather than the more musically fulfilling and, I would argue, important aural, technical, or rhythmic aspects. Thus, the motto of the method book can be stated, “Children must only play pieces and exercises for which they can read the music notation.” This is seen most notably in the rhythm, technique, and the pieces presented in the method books.

**Rhythm.** Although young children can imitate very complicated rhythmic patterns aurally, many of the most popular method books restrict the pieces in the first book to quarter, half, and whole note values in order not to confuse children intellectually with fractional subdivisions. Playing slow rhythmic values not only is boring for the children, but even prevents them from developing and understanding rhythmic pulse. Tapping fast rhythmic patterns within the framework of a slower rhythmic body pulse is a much more secure manner of teaching rhythm.

In my early days of teaching, I followed the method book's plan for introducing slow rhythms before fast ones. Often, when students learned eighth notes in the second book, they would not play the eighth notes in proportion to the quarter notes. The eighths were either too fast or too slow. Now I introduce eighth notes aurally and notationally right from the beginning of study, along with the slower note values, using a Kodaly-based syllabic system of counting (ta, ta-ti). I have had much greater success with this manner of presenting eighth notes, and it is more fun for the students as well.

**Technique.** Children are capable of playing more difficult pieces than they can read. However, in method books, the pieces presented are all within the student's reading ability, to the detriment of technical development. Teaching technical exercises and pieces by rote as a supplement to the method is useful to avoid this pitfall.

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from p. 13)

**Repertoire.** Method book pieces are kept very simple in order that the children are able to read the notation for all pieces they play. Very little sophistication in repertoire appears until perhaps the third or fourth book of the method series. Also, inclusion of the standard piano repertoire is minimal at best. Once I had a high school transfer student who was in the sixth book of a method series. He informed me that he did not like classical music. I soon discovered that he thought that method book pieces were “classical music.” Once I introduced him to some standard repertoire at his level, he learned that he really did like classical music. Since the piano repertoire is so vast, it would be a disservice to students to not allow them to play standard repertoire until they are finished with a method book series.

#### Limitations of the Printed Page

Third, I know that many readers might argue with my first point above, that method books do not include many concepts from the list of Necessary Skills for Piano Students. A reader may say, “That’s not true! The method book I use teaches rhythm, improvisation, and composition.” I would answer that it is true that method book authors of current methods have seen the limitations of older method books and have tried to incorporate more concepts. However, because of the limitations of the printed page, and because of the “students should only play what they can read” rule, many of these concepts are dumbed down or presented in a cursory manner at best. What especially worries me is the fact that piano playing is first and foremost about loving the sound of music, listening to the sound of the piano, and shaping the music in a way to create a sound picture in the air. However, aural concepts are very difficult to teach through a book. Therefore, when a teacher relies primarily on a method book as the main curricular source for a child’s piano education, aural training suffers. Because the method book is primarily a “music notation grammar book,” there is a danger that a student will learn to rely on the eyes rather than the ears for making music at the piano.

#### **Solutions**

With all these cons, what is a piano teacher to do?

#### Proper Perspective toward Method Books

First, piano teachers must put the method book in its proper perspective. It is a tool for teaching music notation and for providing motivation. That is its main purpose. For all the other necessary aspects of piano education, the piano teacher must find other materials, strategies, and activities. Researching materials, attending workshops and conferences, and talking with other music teachers are a few ways piano teachers can learn to expand their curriculum to include more of the important aspects of a well-rounded piano student. Although this kind of curricular development requires work and creativity, this is also what makes piano teaching fun and keeps a teacher learning and growing as a professional piano teacher.

#### Teaching Concepts at Various Levels

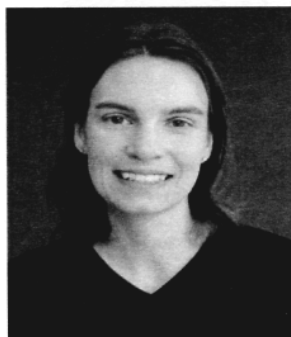
Second, in the process of expanding their curriculum from the piano method alone to include many other activities, piano teachers should realize that it is healthy for curricular topics such as technique, rhythm, and reading to progress at different rates. For example, a student can study out of a method book to work on reading notation; learn by rote some repertoire pieces that are too difficult to read but well within the student’s musical and technical understanding; work on various technical exercises that lay a firm foundation for piano playing, but which may be too complicated for a student to read; learn to recognize, imitate aurally, and improvise with rhythmic patterns of all types; and listen to music by the great composers and study the form of these pieces. The curriculum is only limited by the teacher’s creativity. This type of teaching frees the teacher from the limits imposed by the “Notation or Bust”-based method book.

#### Student/Parent Time Commitment

Third, piano teachers should realize that in order to teach all the Necessary Skills for Piano Students, a large amount of time with the students is required. I would like to do some research into the origin of the American phenomenon of the 30-minute per week piano lesson. Playing the piano is a complicated skill. The ideas that children can progress adequately when they see the teacher for 30 minutes per week and that parents will take piano study seriously with such a minimal time commitment are ludicrous. Ballet takes up 1 ½ to 4 hours per week of a child’s time in class with a teacher. Soccer takes up how much time? 5 hours per week? Children watch TV an average of 26 hours per week, according to <http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>. And we expect children and parents to take piano study seriously with 30 minutes per week?

One way teachers can increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and time problems in piano study is to offer children a private lesson/group class combination for piano study. I firmly believe that this is the best way for children to learn piano, for the social aspects and performance experience for the student as well as for efficiency in the presentation of concepts for the teacher. However, group teaching is another article!

I do believe that the method book is useful. In fact, I am currently working on one that uses some of the ideas presented in this article. However, in my work on my own method book, I have found that there are some things that cannot be taught through a book. The method book is by design a limited entity. Therefore, I would encourage all piano teachers to knock the method book from the piano teacher’s pedestal and work towards more creative ways of teaching in order to ensure an enriching and engaging course of piano study for all piano students.



**Julie Knerr**

**Julie Knerr** recently completed her PhD in Music Education with an Emphasis in Piano Pedagogy at the University of Oklahoma. Additional degrees include double MM degrees in Piano Performance and Piano Pedagogy from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a BM in Piano Performance from the University of Puget Sound. Before coming to the University of Missouri, she was on the piano faculty at Oklahoma City University. Dr. Knerr serves on committees for the National Conference for Keyboard Pedagogy and the National Group Piano and Pedagogy Forum. In addition to maintaining several private studios around the country, she has served as an adjudicator for the Oklahoma State Music Teachers Association festivals, and her work in pre-college group teaching has been presented at the Music Teachers National Convention. In the summer she teaches on the faculty of Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, and in the summer of 2005 she inaugurated Norman Piano Day Camp at the University of Oklahoma. In addition, Dr. Knerr performs as a collaborative pianist around the United States. Dr. Knerr’s current research interests include elementary level piano technique, lesser known pre-college piano repertoire, college group piano pedagogy, and she is currently co-authoring a children’s piano method.