

# The Importance of Selecting a Good Core Piano Course

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*By Kevin M Coan*

I frequently am asked why I place such a large emphasis on piano methods rather than just focusing on training good teachers. I want to make clear that from the start that I consider the teacher far more important than the method in determining the success of the student. It is for that reason that I take on private pedagogy students. Nevertheless, I have found that with MOST teachers, things that are included in a course tend to get taught, and things not in a course tend to get ignored. Many of us supplement for the weaknesses in a particular method, of course, but for the most part, if something is not well presented in a course, it usually is not well taught in the studio either. Thus, choice of piano courses plays a big role in what goes on in most teaching situations.

I hold tenaciously to the concept that good teaching is the development of a hierarchy of SKILLS that then get APPLIED to good repertoire. Good teaching recognizes the twin roles of holistic teaching (presenting the whole before the parts) and spiral teaching (returning to the same topic on multiple occasions). Good teaching recognizes the three-fold process of preparation, presentation, and follow-through. It takes tremendous skill to organize all of a teacher's teaching into those categories. In my observation of the majority of teachers, if the piano course does not organize the material according to those educational principles, the teacher does not usually do so either.

I believe that a GOOD piano course can be one of the most valuable tools a teacher has. A gifted course author ensures that the materials develop a comprehensive set of musical skills. It is much easier to identify what a course develops well, however, than to identify what is MISSING in a course. Far too often, I find that a teacher has not even analyzed what is and is not taught in a course; they often blindly follow the materials because they "like the pieces" or the students "like the pictures."

To show you what I mean, take a course you are now using as a primary method. Identify the specific page in the course where each of the following skills is developed:

- The scale, cadence, and arpeggio for the key of B major
- The use of contractions for hand position shifts
- The appoggiatura and grace note
- Adding articulation and dynamics to a baroque piece
- Four-note chord inversions (C E G C in one hand) with the fingering patterns for each (1 2 4 5 vs. 1 2 3 5)
- Identification of the historical periods of music and their characteristics

I am guessing that you found about half of these concepts to be non-existent in the course!

A GOOD piano course provides for the needed spiraling that a student needs for each new concept. Ask yourself these questions: What are you going to teach Johnny in the next four weeks? What are you doing today to prepare for each of those concepts? If you are like most of us, you do not know what you plan to do in four weeks, and you are not doing anything to prepare for those concepts! However, if you have a GOOD piano course, the course itself will prepare for those upcoming concepts. Now think about these questions: What did you teach Johnny in the past six weeks? What are you doing with EACH of those concepts to follow through and apply those skills? If you have a well-written piano course, the course itself is providing for this follow-through and application.

In many piano courses, the four-book plan utilizes "blocked" teaching. As an example, suppose that the new concept is sharps. The lesson book presents sharps – with no prior preparation, of course. The theory book, assigned in the same lesson, provides exercises in writing sharps and finding sharps on the keyboard. The technic book throws some sharps into the exercises. The repertoire book has a piece or two using sharps. Everything in that lesson pertains to the single topic of sharps. All of the reinforcement material is given all at once. There is no preparation in the preceding weeks and no follow through in the subsequent weeks. Rather, a blocked approach covers a topic all at once and then moves onto a new topic the same way. Most teachers even take great pains to make sure that all four of the books are "coordinated" to be on the same topic all at once.

In a GOOD piano course, there is preparation in the weeks before sharps are presented. This might mean finding half steps on the keyboard. It might mean NOT using the word "sharp" nor its symbol during this phase. Once the presentation phase is reached, the course would show the WHOLE picture of sharps in a single lesson: that sharps can be black or white, that the symbol applies to the whole measure, and that a note might be sharped even though there is no sharp symbol directly in front of that note. Of course, there would be some immediate application of sharps in the pieces and theory. Finally, the course would provide for follow-up activities on the topic of sharps. On a recurring basis, for the next four to six lessons, some aspect of each lesson would reinforce and apply sharps in various situations.

If a teacher writes out lesson plans, he or she may very well include the holistic and spiraling process into those lessons. Rarely, however, do I meet a teacher who actually does that, although I have. For the most part, teachers start out on page 1 of the course and "see how far they can get" by the end of a lesson. If that course is organized according to sound educational principles, good teaching is more likely to take place. If it is based on a blocked approach, it is highly likely that blocked teaching will take place in the lesson.

Until Frances Clark published the "Look and Listen" series (now "The Music Tree"), there was not a single course on the market based on spiraling, intervallic reading, or comprehensive musicianship. Even today, most courses are organized according to the blocked teaching

philosophy. When a course is based on holistic and spiraling concepts, some teachers complain that the method “jumps around too much.” These teachers fail to see the value of the three phases. They are much happier when a course follows a blocked/linear approach. You often hear comments such as “I like this course, because it gets down to business right away.” What the teacher is really saying, however, is that he or she does not understand the need for the preparation phase.

You will see a number of common threads in every piano course I endorse:

- They all use holistic and spiral teaching.
- They all teach reading by landmark and interval.
- They are all multikey.
- They all include a comprehensive approach to musicianship.
- They all approach teaching as a set of concepts and skills to be applied to repertoire.

I would like to say that all of the courses I endorse feature great repertoire. Unfortunately, not all of them do. A “perfect” piano course certainly would. In some cases, however, it is necessary for the teacher to add additional repertoire to the course to round out the student's learning. Nevertheless, the teacher must never allow the repertoire objective to override the ultimate guiding principle of good holistic and spiral teaching of skills that are then applied to repertoire. What you will find as a common thread in the courses I endorse is that most of them leave the teacher room to add the repertoire element based on the teacher's assessment of the student's needs.

When I recommend a piano method, I always insist upon the use of all of the core components of a course. When a teacher omits the theory book, for example, his or her students are typically weak in theory. Some teachers cover those issues in another way; in my experience, most of them think they do, but in reality, they do not. Some teachers like to use an alternate theory or technic series from their main method. Sometimes that makes for an excellent curriculum. In other instances, it creates a total disconnect between what the student is learning in the supplement versus what the student is learning by way of pieces. It can run interference with the concept of APPLYING the skills to performance music.

I recommend that teachers continue a method through the intermediate years. In my opinion, too many teachers cease to be teachers at the intermediate level. Instead, they become coaches of pieces. The problem is that if we only coach pieces, the students only have a repertoire of pieces when they are through. They do not have a set of transferable concepts and skills when they are finished.

I often enter into conversations with teachers about our students. When I ask a teacher what a student in his elementary years what he is learning, the teacher will tell me a concept. When I ask the same question about an intermediate student, the teacher will give me the names of pieces. What this somewhat reveals is that the teacher is not thinking in terms of transferable skills and concepts, but rather, just in terms of pieces. If a good piano course is used at the

intermediate level rather than just a literature collection, the focus on skills and concepts is more likely to continue through the intermediate years.

With all of that in mind, here is my current endorsement list:

Fully Recommended:

- Albergo – Celebrate Piano (the most complete application of all of these principles in a single course)
- Noona – Noona Basic Piano
- Noona – Noona Comprehensive Piano Library
- Noona – Mainstreams Piano Method
- George – Artistry at the Piano (assuming that the transposition recommendations are consistently followed)
- Olson – Music Pathways (with repertoire supplements)
- Gillock – Piano All the Way
- Snell – Piano Town (although this uses block teaching mixed with spiraling)
- Bastien – Music Through the Piano (assuming use of supplements that incorporate contrapuntal playing)
- Pace – Music for Piano (with repertoire supplements)
- Pace – Piano Plain and Simple (for adults)
- Clark – The Music Tree

Conditionally Recommended:

- Glover – The David Carr Glover Piano Library – assuming use of the Chords and Keys component. This course uses blocked teaching, however.
- Glover – The David Carr Glover Method for Piano – assuming use of the Chords and Keys component. This course uses blocked teaching, however.
- Bastien – Bastien Piano Library – assuming use of a supplement that includes contrapuntal playing. This course uses blocked teaching, however.
- Faber – Piano Adventures – assuming use of supplements that incorporate multikey development earlier than in the course itself.
- Alexander – Alfred Premier Piano Course – assuming use of supplements that incorporate multikey development earlier than in the course itself.

In listing these courses, I am speaking solely as to choosing a core piano method. I believe that almost all published material can be considered acceptable for supplemental use.

I highly recommend that every teacher take advantage of every training opportunity that presents itself. The teacher is the most important element in any teaching situation. Nevertheless, a good teacher can do an even better job when he or she is armed with an arsenal

of quality piano methods. I hope that the principles presented in this article will help him or her to do so.

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