

# Course Review – Music Pathways

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*By Kevin M Coan*

Music Pathways by Lynn Freeman Olson is one of the finer piano courses on the market. It utilizes the same learning concepts as Celebrate Piano, which I consider to be pedagogically the closest to a “perfect” piano course currently in publication. Music Pathways is not quite as perfect, but it is still an excellent, thorough, comprehensive method that is especially suited to group work. That should not deter teachers from considering the course for private lessons as well, however.

The premise of this course is that the best approach to piano study is a blend of the landmark/interval approach with a multikey focus. I heartily agree with this blend, and Music Pathways implements that strategy in an effective way.

Music Pathways is organized into two broad divisions, each of which is organized differently as to levels and titles of books. The elementary division consists of two levels, with Books A and B making up level 1, and Books C and D making up level 2. The intermediate division consists of three levels, which break into six books: 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 5a, and 5b.

The elementary books have three components:

- Discoveries – the method book
- Activities – the theory book
- Solos – the repertoire book

The Discovery books provide “chapter” by chapter lessons that cover music reading and basic multikey skills. Each lesson includes a daily warm-up drill. The Activities books include some technical work, but the primary focus is on theory and musicianship skills. The Solo books provide a full-length repertoire piece for each chapter in Discoveries. Some chapters include two or even three such pieces.

The intermediate books have three components as well:

- Musicianship – the method and theory book
- Technique – exercises and etudes
- Repertoire – original masterworks that apply the musicianship and theory

The Musicianship book looks at the Repertoire pieces from several points of view: melody, harmony, style, form, rhythm, and expressive elements. The Technique book provides a thorough treatment of pure and applied technique, and it includes both exercises and etudes. The Repertoire book provides four-period literature in historical order.

The elementary books are well designed for group use. The books feature shorter pieces that can be easily learned in a group setting. They provide a common core of skills that all students

need. The teacher is then expected to select additional performing repertoire for each student based on his or her abilities. Thus, the teacher can have students of varying abilities in the same group. They share the common core work together, but then have differentiated assignments in their repertoire selections. I highly recommend using the sheet music that coordinates with the course, as well as a selection of the following supplements:

- Book A:
  - Right from the Start – a supplemental reader
  - George – Musical Moments
- Book B:
  - Near the Beginning
  - Audience Pleasers 1, first half
  - Play for Fun, first half
  - Pop! Goes the Piano 1, first half
  - George – Configurations 1a
- Book C:
  - Further Along
  - Audience Pleasers 1, second half
  - Play for Fun, second half
  - Pop! Goes the Piano 1, second half
  - George – Configurations 1b
- Book D:
  - Audience Pleasers 2, first half
  - Pop! Goes the Piano 2, first half
  - George – Configurations 2a, 2b

The music is rather modern in the course books. I like to use a supplemental course that fills in with more traditional-sounding music, and which complements the course with a different approach. I use the “Belwin Piano Method” by June Weybright for this purpose. It is a traditional course, but it still features intervallic reading and few finger numbers. The skills in the BPM seldom require concepts that have not been developed in Music Pathways first.

The “A” level books begin with two “chapters” on rhythm. Blocked fifths are used to develop the concept of short vs. long sounds in chapter 1. This is then refined to quarter and half notes in the second chapter. A nice rote piece in the Solo book for chapter 3 gives the student a “preview of coming attractions” through a piece that includes harmonic thirds and black-key seconds plus use of the pedal.

Chapters 3-5 then develop the concept of intervallic reading, using partial staves. Skips/3rds are taught first in chapter 3, followed by steps/2nds in chapter 4. I especially like that approach, because it prevents the student from locking into an all-steps mentality. For each piece in these

chapters, the student is given a hand position to use and a starting finger number. The remainder of the piece is read totally by intervals: the student does not know key names or note names at that point.

In chapter 5, white key names are introduced. The starting position is now given by referencing the key name. The piece is still read by interval after the first note, not by note name. The goal is to have intervallic reading fairly secure before staff reading begins.

Chapter 6 introduces three landmarks: leger C above the treble staff, leger C below the bass staff, and middle C. Each piece begins with one of the landmarks; the remainder of the piece is to be read by interval from that point on. As with the pre-staff pieces, 3rds are developed before 2nds. Chapter 8 shows the student how to begin on non-landmark notes, using spot placing from the known landmarks. The final two landmarks, treble and bass C, are brought into the student's reading range in chapter 9.

Chapters 11-14 develop 5ths and then 4ths. By the end of book A, the student has acquired a reading range of 37 notes: the fourth leger line below the bass staff to the fourth leger line above the treble staff. He will know note and rest values of quarter, half, dotted half, and whole, in meters of 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4. Most importantly, he will have developed a habit of reading notes intervallically in groups, not by naming individual notes.

Book B, the second half of level 1, is devoted to the development of pentascales in the major keys. Except for chapter 10, key signatures are not yet used; accidentals identify the necessary sharps and flats. Chapter 1 begins by introducing the student to half and whole steps and sharps, flats, and naturals. The half and whole step pattern for major pentascales is then taught, and the keys are introduced using the four key group approach: 1: C, G, F; 2: D, A, E; 3: Db, Ab, Eb; and 4: Gb, Bb, B. Unlike many multikey methods, the pieces are not confined solely to do-sol positions. Also, when the pentascales are used, the pieces utilize various octaves and even octave moves, to avoid a "frozen" hand position mentality.

Other topics in Book B include: transposition, eighth notes and rests, phrasing, sixths, and the damper pedal. The Solo pieces focus on playing outside of the five-finger position; many of them develop the student's ability to move freely over the keys.

Book C begins level 2 with an introduction to key signatures. A discovery approach is used to help the student see the reason for the key signatures. All of the sharp keys are presented at once, and later, all of the flat keys. The pieces utilize all of the tones of the scale. Compound time is a second major topic at this level. The approach is based on the dotted quarter note as the pulse, not the eighth note. Towards the end of this level, triads are introduced in all keys.

Book D develops sixteenth notes in their various combinations. The dominant seventh chord is taught and used in the pieces. The authors have made a conscious effort to create more interesting settings for the I and V7 work other than just using folk songs harmonized with block chords. In the last part of the book, the major scales of C, G, D, A, and E are taught using

traditional fingering. The course introduces two-octave versions of the scales from the start, requiring the student to cross under both the third and fourth fingers. The student also encounters classical masterworks for the first time at this level.

Levels 3a to 5b introduce a new format. In the Musicianship books, the student studies various topics such as melody, harmony, style, form, rhythm, and expressive elements. Within each topic, several selections from the Repertoire book are used as illustrative examples. A given piece will often appear under several different topics. Sometimes the student will see pieces he has not yet learned, and other times, he will see pieces he learned a few months prior. Thus, the Musicianship books do not “parallel” the Repertoire book. Instead, each piece is examined from several different perspectives in different units of the Musicianship book.

These levels also include a separate Technique component. These books include five-finger exercises, scales and arpeggios, and etudes by the master composers. A chart identifies particular exercises that are especially useful for each Repertoire piece being studied.

The teacher can use the Repertoire pieces in any order that he or she finds useful; the pieces are arranged merely in historical order. The pieces in these books appear in their original form with fairly conservative editing. Marvin Blickenstaff edited both this series and the Celebration series, and the editorial style is quite similar between the two. The progression is fairly gradual over the six books. All four historical periods are represented, although there are not a lot of selections from the romantic period in some of the books. Both standard teaching favorites and some lesser-known music is included in the selections.

Music Pathways, in my opinion, is one of the better piano courses on the market. My only major criticism of the course is that the music is not always all that interesting. The course, however, does not attempt to represent the student’s entire repertoire. The teacher is expected to introduce other repertoire from supplemental collections to round out the student’s musical education. Most students will enjoy that supplemental music much more than the pieces in this method. Nevertheless, the course provides the student with a well-rounded presentation of musical skills that can then be applied both to the Solo pieces in the course and to the supplemental music that the teacher includes. Students using the method will receive an outstanding musical education and skill development in the process.

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