

Course Review – Noona Clavier

By Kevin M Coan

The modern piano pedagogy field has a rather large “hole” in regards to teaching materials: there are relatively few courses that focus on linear, contrapuntal music in preparation for the classical masterworks. The Noona Clavier Method is one method that fills that hole. The unfortunate situation with this course is that Lorenz has begun to sunset it, basing that decision on rather poor sales. If you were to do a survey among piano teachers, however, you would be hard-pressed to find very many teachers who have even heard of the method. I am of the opinion that if more teachers knew about the course, Lorenz would experience sufficient sales to justify keeping the course in print. Lorenz has begun to make some of their materials available in “print on demand” format. I plan to inquire as to whether they would be willing to put Noona Clavier in that category.

Clavier also fills the need for good teaching material for teens and adults. It is similar in that regard to the “Accelerated Piano Adventures” method of the Fabers. It progresses faster than other courses designed for children, but not so rapid that older students feel frustrated. Not all older students will find the course suitable, however; it is designed for the older student who is capable of moving more rapidly than in a standard method. Older students who need to move slowly should look to other courses.

My first choice for students interested in classical music is “Artistry at the Piano” by Jon and Mary Gae George. Noona Clavier is my second choice. Teachers who are looking for a good classically focused course may find this one to be more to their liking than Artistry, however. Where Artistry begins with a period of study away from the piano and apart from the use of pieces, Noona Clavier uses the more familiar approach of pieces on the black keys, letter name pieces on the white keys, and then reading on the staff. Thus, it does not demand as radical a shift in methodology as Artistry.

Clavier consists of two books at each of four levels: Noona Clavier Method, and Noona Clavier Repertoire. The “Method” book contains method, theory, and technic in one volume. The “Repertoire” book contains the bulk of the pieces of this course. About 75% of the music of the course is contained in the Repertoire component.

The various parts of the course take some getting used to as far as coordination is concerned. One does not take the Method book strictly page by page. The material is broken into units, with five units in each book. Often the method book has as many as eight pages of theory work (i.e., a full unit) all in a row, followed by a similar number of pages of pieces. It is best to put together a lesson syllabus or outline to coordinate the various activities. In the syllabus I have put together in the FILES section of this group, I match the content of the theory to the pieces that utilize that theory. Following my syllabus results in a very smooth progression of topics, pieces, and lesson activities.

The Method books have a technical section at the end of each book. This is in addition to the exercises and etudes that occur in the body of the books. The technical section includes a few exercises plus scales, arpeggios, and chord progressions. The teacher is free to include elements from these pages in the weekly lessons as needed.

Clavier is based on a number of premises:

- 1. The course is designed to prepare students to play classical masterworks.*
- 2. Such preparation needs to focus on the linear, contrapuntal use of the hands more so than a focus on chords and harmony. The latter is not neglected in this course, however.*
- 3. The best preparation for the masterworks lies in learning pieces that are imitative of classical styles right from the very start. Thus, the level one pieces have titles such as "March Militaire," "Bagatelle," and "Dorian Design."*
- 4. Reading is best approached by focusing on groups of notes rather than individual note naming. Students should master intervals before individual notes by reading their first pieces in fixed positions and just focusing on the intervals. They then should learn individual notes by learning a few (nine) selected guidepost notes and then learning to "measure" all other notes by intervals from those guideposts. That is the exact approach used in level one of "Clavier."*
- 5. Music theory should focus on both traditional harmony study and on the study of style. Clavier has a strong emphasis on the historical periods and on the characteristics that each period exhibits.*
- 6. Older students want a piano course that is "anti-cute." To achieve that, the covers of the books feature a grand piano on a stage at Carnegie Hall. The pages of the books are in black and white. The artwork consists of ink drawings that do not overpower the page. The drawings that do exist are not insulting to the intelligence of teens and adults.*
- 7. Older students can progress more rapidly than children can, and they need a course that moves more rapidly. Clavier covers the elementary stage in two levels and the intermediate stage in two levels. The final pieces in level four are Burgmuller's "Ballade" and Kabalevsky's "Study in Am," pieces that appear in level five of most other methods. Both pieces appear in the Alfred Basic Piano Course in level five. It is fair to say that this course progresses about 30% faster than standard methods such as Alfred Basic Piano or Bastien Piano Basics.*
- 8. While students need multikey work, Clavier is NOT organized around a systematic study of the keys. Instead, it is organized around a study of the periods of music history. Pieces are included in most keys, however, with the exception of the keys of Ab, Db, and B. Scales, chords, arpeggios, and cadences are featured in all major and minor keys.*
- 9. Students deserve conservatively edited original masterworks. There is no use of simplified music in the course. The editing in the masterworks is quite close to some urtext editions.*
- 10. Students should learn to compose music in the styles of each period of classical music. Clavier has a considerable number of composition assignments.*
- 11. Technic work should consist of a few basic finger exercises, scales, chords, and arpeggios in all keys, and excerpts from the pieces that the student is studying. The excerpts should serve as the primary means of technical practice.*
- 12. The repertoire of the masters should serve as the "inspiration, the means, and the ultimate goal of piano study."*

Level one focuses on learning to read and play music intervallically. One feature that came as a surprise to me was the fact that the first 27 pages of the Method book consist entirely of off-staff notation. Unit one features black key pieces, with finger numbers in the notation. The student learns quarter, half, dotted, half, and whole notes. Considerable attention is paid to technical details such as hand position and dynamics. The first piece requires the student to play a piece that utilizes frequent hand position changes over a four-octave range. The theme from "The New World" Symphony is the concluding piece of this section.

Unit two presents the names of the white keys and notation that uses letter names in the notes. Several exercises develop the correct execution of the phrase. Various hand positions are utilized to avoid fixation on any one position. The concept of modes is presented; the first pieces in the unit use the Aeolian and Dorian modes. The major keys of G and C, and the minor keys of D and A are also used in several five-finger position pieces. Rests are also taught in this unit. In preparation for the intervallic emphasis of the reading sections, intervals of 2nds and 3rds are taught at this time.

Unit three begins the study of staff notation. The Repertoire book is started at this time as well. The presentation begins with movement on the staff: up, down, repeat, step, and skip. The treble clef G, bass clef F, and middle C guideposts are presented as the means for identifying the first notes. The student is also taught to measure from the guideposts to other notes that are a 2nd or 3rd away from the guideposts.

The first pieces use either a C major or G major five-finger position and intervals of 2nds and 3rds. Pieces utilizing both hands together either in unison or in parallel motion appear very quickly in the unit. After three such pieces, eighth notes are introduced. Composition assignments include writing melodies using a given rhythm and writing answer phrases to given question phrases. Other topics of this unit include transposition, legato, staccato, phrases of various lengths, and dynamic shading. One of the repertoire pieces uses a D minor position. No explanation is given regarding the new position; the student is expected to apply the concepts he has learned to the new piece.

Unit four focuses on guidepost reading in positions outside of the pentascale positions. Bass C, bass F, middle C, treble G, and treble C form the focus guideposts in this unit. Initially the pieces begin on guidepost notes. Later pieces begin on notes that have to be "measured" from the guideposts. A couple of pieces have "cue" notes drawn in: guideposts from which the student measures the starting note of the phrase. Several technical exercises develop the concepts of parallel and contrary motion. Later pieces begin to include some hands together work in oblique motion. The Repertoire book features an outstanding piece designed to develop finger and hand independence when playing contrapuntal styles. Intervals are extended to include 4ths and 5ths. A favorite piece of most students is the theme from the fourth movement of Brahms Symphony No. 1.

The fifth and final unit of level one introduces accidentals. Sharps, flats, and naturals are all presented quickly in succession. The pieces include examples of accidentals lasting through an entire measure and accidentals being canceled by a natural or by a bar line. The definitions of accidentals make clear that sharps and flats can be either black or white keys. The unit concludes with a number of pieces that allow a student to synthesize all of the concepts and skills that are taught in the first level.

Level two forms an ambitious transition from teaching pieces to original classics. Significantly more “ground” is covered in this level than what is included in a single level of most courses. Level two ends the “elementary” portion of the course: the final piece in the Method book is March in C Major by Shostakovich, a piece commonly chosen for its practice of accidentals. Sometimes students who have been successful up to this point find the pace of level two just a bit more than they can handle. The teacher should be ready with supplemental music to assist the student during this phase. A few students may need to switch to an easier program at this point.

Unit one of level two expands the reading range to the full grand staff plus ledger lines between the staves. Additional guideposts are introduced: bottom line G in the bass and top line F in the treble. This system provides a G, C, and F guidepost on each staff. A second major topic is that of half and whole steps. Once these are defined, the Dorian mode is defined in terms of the half and whole steps that make it up. A third topic is a review of intervals through the 5th.

Unit two begins a study of the key groups. The group I keys (C, G, and F) are presented, including the pentascale, tonic chord, and key signature for each key. Intervals are extended to include 6ths, 7ths, and octaves. Ear training is provided for these intervals. Work with phrasing focuses on two- and three-note groups. Several of the easier Kabalevsky pieces from Op. 39 are included in this unit.

Unit three begins with a study of the primary chords and cadences in the group I keys. While there is ample coverage of this topic, Clavier does not make tri-chord work a major focus of the course. Students will learn enough to pass any association or guild exam in theory, but will not spend months of playing “Lightly Row” harmonized with blocked chords. A second topic of this unit is tetrachord scales divided between the hands. As with all of the Noona courses, scales are presented in this format in level two for the purpose of learning the sharps and flats of each scale. Thumb crossings are taken up in level three, based on the premise that delaying that topic is better for building the hand. Dotted quarter notes and finger extensions are two other topics taken up in this unit.

Unit four tackles a potpourri of topics. The unit begins with a development of the damper pedal. A couple of pieces focus on comparing major and minor keys. 6/8 meter is taught in this unit, including an explanation of compound time. A discussion of outer ledger lines concludes the unit. The two ledger C’s form the final two guideposts of the Noona system.

Unit five takes up the topic of key signature rules. The order of sharps and flats is also taught. The remainder of the unit focuses on the group II keys: D, A, and E major. Several composition assignments require the student to harmonize melodies in these keys. In addition, however, the student is asked to compose a piece with an ostinato bass and a set of variations on a theme. The chordal work is also balanced with a couple of masterwork selections that focus on musicality. Kabalevsky’s “Night on the River” from Op. 27 concludes the Repertoire book of this level.

Level three begins first of two intermediate levels with Bach’s Prelude in G (sometimes titled Intrata). Unit 1 focuses on the Baroque period and on counterpoint. A thorough explanation compares and contrasts the contrapuntal and harmonic style of composing. The second major topic of unit one is that of major scales, two octaves with thumb crossings. The key-group approach of level two is abandoned at this level in favor of an emphasis on the circle of fifths. Scales are grouped into three sets. The first set appears in the body

of the course. The other two sets appear in the technical section at the end of the book. It is assumed that the teacher will present the scales spaced out over several weeks rather than all at once.

Unit two presents a discussion of the four historic periods of music. Several exercises reinforce that discussion, including one in which the student is asked to list three compositions for each of the periods. The student is free to choose pieces in the course or pieces in other books the student has used or is using. A second major topic of this unit is that of chord inversions in all major keys. The student is asked to transpose a chord inversion study to other keys. Triplets are taught in this unit as well.

Unit three introduces sixteenth notes in their various combinations. Of course, the requisite Burgmuller Arabesque is present. A second topic is that of the modes. Students are asked to compose pieces in the Dorian and Mixolydian modes. Alla Breve is introduced in this unit. The final topic of the unit is that of harmonic minor scales. Other forms of the minor scale are deferred to level four.

Unit four begins with the topic of formal analysis through the study of a suite composed by the Noons. The students are required to mark two classical pieces with indications of form. A nice lesson is given on the topic of opus numbers and catalogue markings. The final topic of the unit is that of extended authentic cadences in all keys.

Unit five is a study of contemporary period music. Pentatonic and whole tone scales are presented and applied to pieces. Twelve-tone music is briefly presented. Kabalevsky's Toccata concludes the level.

Level four brings the student to the upper intermediate level of study, just ready for such pieces as Fur Elise. A student completing this level can progress comfortably into level six of the Alfred Masterwork library or another comparable literature series. He or she could also begin the Henle Syllabus developed by Donald Beattie in "Guide to the Masters."

Unit one adds 3/8 time and 32nd notes to the student's rhythmic experience. Minor keys receive attention at this level; the topics of relative and parallel minor keys are presented in this unit, as are the three forms of the minor scale. In addition, the major and minor modes are contrasted with the other modes (Dorian, etc.).

Unit two focuses primarily on the topic of ornamentation. Trills, mordents, turns, appoggiaturas, and acciaccaturas are carefully explained and applied to pieces.

Unit three discusses the subject of form, sonata form in particular. The Beethoven G major sonatina illustrates both form and ornamentation in the Method book, and the Clementi C major sonatina appears with all three movements in the Repertoire book. Other topics of this unit include the blues scale and a review of the modes.

Unit four introduces the chromatic scale. The four types of triads (major, minor, augmented, and diminished) are developed at this time. The unit concludes with further work with inversions of those triads.

Unit five focuses on the topic of arpeggios, with some very exciting and beautiful pieces that use them. The other major topic of the unit is that of the quality of chords in the major and minor scales. Cadences are

practiced in all inversions. Burgmuller's Ballade and Kabalevsky's Study in A minor conclude the unit and the course.

I feel that Noona Clavier Method fills a need for more teaching material of a contrapuntal nature rather than simply pieces in chordal form. In addition, teachers are constantly asking, "What should I do with my older students who find children's material too babyish but most adult methods too ambitious?" Clavier is a perfect solution. It presents a more sophisticated approach to piano study for students interested in a serious study of classical masterworks. "Artistry at the Piano" by Jon and Mary Gae George is the only other piano course that takes a similar approach. The Repertoire books of Noona Clavier make a perfect companion to the "Artistry" course. In addition, Clavier offers a good alternative for siblings of students already in "Artistry." I find "Artistry" to be a somewhat better course than Clavier in its thoroughness. But some teachers will find that Clavier follows a more familiar scope and sequence, making it a more comfortable course for them to teach.

At the present time, all of the Method books are in print, and levels 1 and 3 of the Repertoire books are in print. The current Repertoire series is a merger of "Styles" and "Divertimenti" from the original "Gifted Pianist" series. "Styles" level two is still in print and can substitute for that level. For level four, a standard literature program can fill in for the missing repertoire, or one can use the "Easy Piano Classics" by the Noonas. In either case, the course can still be used somewhat intact for students in the 10 and up age range. The course is of better than average quality, and it can provide a wonderful vehicle for preparing students for the masterworks of piano literature.

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