

Course Review – Alfred Basic Piano

By Kevin M Coan

The Alfred Basic Piano Library is one of the most thorough, carefully researched, and carefully designed piano curriculum on the market. I have two reservations about the methodology, however, that cause me to give it a conditional recommendation: 1) a positional approach to note reading, and 2) an unreasonably gradual approach to multikey development. Those reservations should not prevent a teacher from considering this course for core use with students, as the benefits of the method far outweigh its shortcomings.

As is true with many of the modern multi-component series, it is important to use the Lesson, Theory, and Recital books of each level at a minimum. The Lesson books focus primarily on the skills and concepts being developed, and the course uses primarily short pieces for this development. Longer recital length pieces are to be found mainly in the Recital book, making its use critical to a well-rounded curriculum. The Theory component contains both written and playing activities, which should not be overlooked either. An optional core item at levels 1A through 4 is a Theory book. Teachers can decide whether or not to include that resource.

The course consists of seven levels: 1A, 1B, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Level 1A is really a primer level, and level 1B is really equivalent to other courses' level 1. The authors disliked the idea of starting with anything that was not labeled "1." The interesting aspect of the Alfred method is that this core series is amplified with numerous branches where the pace can be sped up or slowed down. For young children, levels 1A, 1B, and 2 can be replaced with the Prep Course, which expands those three levels to six slower ones. For older students, levels 1A and 1B can be replaced with Complete Level 1, and levels 2 and 3 can be replaced with Complete Level 2&3. This speeds the pace up for more capable students. Another option is to replace levels 1A – 2 with the Chord Approach 1 and 2. That series features a faster progression as well, and features the introduction of chords at level 1 rather than waiting until level 2. Recently, an All-in-One option has been made available, which covers levels 1A and 1B in three books that include Lesson, Recital, and Theory material in each book. Level 2 is covered similarly in books 4 and 5. All of these branching options return to the basic course at level 3 or 4 as appropriate.

Alfred Basic is a gradual multikey series that covers both major and relative minor keys in all keys up to four sharps or flats. The introduction of the corresponding minor keys is especially valuable; this is one of the few gradual multikey courses that cover the keys of F#m and C#m, for example. The only issue I have with this plan is that the progression of keys is extremely gradual, and the key of C major is overused extensively. The key of G is introduced in level 1B, D in level 2, and F in level 3, along with Am, Dm, and Em. Level 4 introduces Bb and Gm, level 5 introduces A, F#m, Eb, and Cm, and level 6 develops E, C#m, Ab, and Fm. I find the delay of F major until level 3 to be unacceptable, since a great deal of supplemental material will include that key at levels much earlier than level 3. The authors made that choice because they always teach the scale and chords of each key, and they felt that the F major scale should be delayed since it requires crossing over finger 4 even for the one octave scale.

The primary feature of Alfred Basic is the use of intervallic reading, with both melodic and harmonic intervals. At the same time, the course requires the student to learn the notes of each hand position through the use of flash cards. I would have preferred the use of landmarks; the course introduces the clef landmarks, but they do not refer to them for the learning of notes.

A feature of the intervallic reading is the use of “programmed sequencing” of the intervals. For example, numerous pieces feature harmonic seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths in that sequence. This is done repeatedly before using the intervals in mixed sequences. My experience with the course has verified the value of this programming.

Another feature of the course is a carefully designed plan for developing hand position shifts. In level 2, the course introduces moves from fifths to sixths in several patterns. Later, blocked sixths in moving sequences are included. In level 3, extended hand positions are carefully developed. I do not know of any other course that covers this material as carefully.

The music quality of Alfred Basic is excellent, except in the pieces that are purely pedagogical in the Lesson book. I do consider the use of one of the repertoire components essential in this method. The standard book is the Recital book, but the course offers a number of alternatives: a Fun book at levels 1A through 3, a Repertoire book at levels 2 through 5, and the Masterwork Classics at levels 2 through 10. (The level 2 book is labeled Level 1-2, but that is a mislabel, in my opinion. The book is purely level 2.) The fun book is merely an alternate Recital book. The Repertoire book features classical pieces that are coordinated to the skills being taught in the course books (instead of being in historical order). The Masterwork Classics books are standard literature collections of pieces in historical order by composer. At level 4 and up, another alternative is Masterpieces with Flair and Melodious Masterpieces. Levels 4 and 5 are included in Book 1 of that series, and levels 6 and 7 are covered in Book 2. Book 3 covers levels 8 and 9.

Alfred Basic covers the historical styles, including the CORRECT performance of ornaments, in levels 4 through 6. No other course I have encountered, except for the Noona courses, covers this material as thoroughly. Many of the pieces considered to be student favorites are included in the repertoire: Spinning Song, Ballade, Fur Elise, the Clementi Sonatina, etc. The authors force the use of both the Lesson and Recital book by putting the first movement of the Clementi Sonatina in the Lesson book and the second and third movements in the Recital book. Boo!

I have rated the course as conditionally recommended, the condition being the use of some form of supplement that introduces key signatures earlier and more completely than the Lesson books do. I use Glover’s Chords and Keys with the series, starting C&K level 1 with Alfred Basic level 2, and C&K level 2 with Alfred Basic level 3. I also use Olson’s Right from the Start with level 1A to force the student to read outside of a fixed position earlier than is introduced in Alfred Basic. As a whole, however, I consider this course to be an excellent one, especially due to the coordination of very useful classical collections to the core method. Students interested in the classics, but who require a carefully sequenced presentation of skills, will find this course to be a perfect fit.