

# Course Review: Bastien – Music through the Piano

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*Review by Kevin M Coan*

Music through the Piano, by James and Jane Smisor Bastien, is a great representation of the intensive multikey approach to piano instruction. It is, in my opinion, the most teachable of the multikey courses, and for the student, has one of the more interesting piece selections of the courses still in print. The distinguishing characteristic of this course, in comparison with other courses of this type, is an extensive 14 unit pre-reading phase. All of the multikey development, including tonic and dominant seventh chords, is done without the student having to read a single note on the staff!

It is important to understand exactly what materials constitute each level of MttP. Here is the progression:

- Primer Level  
Pre-Reading Experiences  
then:  
First Reading Experiences
- Level One  
Reading 1  
Writing 1  
Magic Finger Technique 1
- Level Two  
Reading 2  
Writing 2  
Magic Finger Technique 2  
Playtime at the Piano 1
- Level Three  
Reading 3  
Writing 3  
Magic Finger Technique 3  
Playtime at the Piano 2
- Level Four  
Piano Literature 1  
Sonatina Favorites 1  
Writing 4

## Major Scales and Pieces

- Level Five  
Piano Literature 2  
Sonatina Favorites 2  
Writing 5  
Minor Scales and Pieces
- Level Six  
Piano Literature 3  
Sonatina Favorites 3  
Writing 6  
Czerny and Hanon for the Intermediate Grades
- Level Seven  
Piano Literature 4
- Level Eight  
Piano Literature 5
- For levels 1-4, there is an optional supplementary volume of recital type pieces entitled “Bastien Favorites.” The pieces in these collections are also published individually.

The titles of the various components are not always descriptive of their contents. The Reading books actually constitute the “method” books of the course. The Writing books provide a comprehensive course in music theory at the keyboard. More of the work is done at the piano than written in the book. Sight-reading, for example, comprises a third of the material in the Writing books. Playtime at the Piano actually consists of introductory literature. While the title of the books suggests that they are supplements, Playtime at the Piano actually forms a critical component of the transition from chord-based music to piano literature. Failure to include the series in the core program leaves a large gap in the student’s preparation for the masterworks.

Pre-Reading Experiences is a 14-week development of the basics of music apart from staff note reading. The student learns to find the pentascale position of all twelve major keys and then to play short pre-staff pieces in those keys. He also learns to find the I and V7 chords (three-note version) in those keys. Note values through eighth notes are developed in both simple and compound time. Several approaches to counting are provided.

The book provides numerous pre-reading pieces, with chords in the later part of the book, in all of the various keys. Typically, the student is required to play each piece in several keys. Since finger numbers are used to provide the pitches, transposition amounts to finding the pentascale of the transposed key and simply playing the same fingering.

About half way through the book, the student is introduced to the concept of step and skip, both at the keyboard and on the staff. Other elements of notation are introduced, and in the last three units, the student learns to name the lines and spaces on the staff. While he is learning to name the notes, the pieces continue in off-staff notation. By the end of the book, the student is playing pieces with melody and accompaniment in all keys in simple and compound time, knows rhythmic elements, and knows all of the lines and spaces. This is all accomplished before the pupil is ever asked to read a single piece on the staff.

The second part of the primer phase is covered by the three-week book "First Reading Experiences." FRE is a combination note speller and first reader. The book has two major divisions. The first division provides a 21-day program of intensive note reading development. The second division provides additional review note spelling for an additional four weeks.

In the first division, the material is divided into daily lessons. There are really 8 daily lessons for each week: 7 actual lessons plus a review page. The student is supposed to complete the first daily lesson right after his or her lesson. He then completes one page per day for the other six days. The review lesson is to be done on the day of the lesson, before the lesson. I have found that schedule to be a bit excessive. In addition, I do not have the student practice on Sunday, and I do not assign work on Sunday. Generally, I treat the review lessons as actual lessons; in other words, I consider the first division to consist of 24 daily lessons. I assign 6 of those lessons each week, completing the first division in four weeks rather than three.

The daily lessons typically have the student writing sets of notes several times: all the line notes, all the space notes, all the treble staff notes, etc. There is usually a set of notes to name in note-speller fashion. Part of most lessons asks the student to set out some of the flash cards and to time himself in naming all of them. Many lessons include a chord progression to play several times. Each regular lesson concludes with one or more short sight-reading pieces that utilize several different keys.

If one follows the suggestions in the front of FRE, one would start FRE during the last three lessons of PRE. This works if the student takes two lessons per week, which the series was designed for, but it creates problems if the student takes the more typical one lesson per week. During days 15-21, the student is directed to specific assignments in the first pages of the level 1 materials. I do recommend starting the level 1 materials in the way directed by FRE.

The second section of FRE provides a page of note spelling for each week after he or she completes the first division. At the same time, the student would be working in Reading 1 and Writing 1. I have found the additional note spelling drill to be a perfect match for most students' needs at that phase of their training.

Reading 1 and Writing 1 are carefully coordinated unit by unit. The teacher needs to guard against trying to force the student into a unit per week mold. The teacher should instead simply assign the various pieces at a pace that matches the student's readiness. In my experience, most students will complete about 2/3 of a unit in a weekly lesson. And while most students will master most of the pieces in a

week's time, there is usually one or more pieces that most students have to continue to practice for an additional week.

The Reading books follow the standard format of any normal piano method: instruction at the top of each page followed by one or two pieces on the rest of the page. Two-page pieces do not occur until Reading 3. All of the pieces in Reading 1 remain in a fixed position. Most of the pieces are in pentascale position, but a few of the pieces use different notes of the scale to ensure that the student is actually reading the notes and not just rushing to the pentascale position based on the key signature.

Early in level 1, the student is taught the rules for determining the key from the key signature for all the major keys. He is expected to be able to find the pentascale position from there, and then to verify that the notes of the piece actually use a pentascale position. Whenever minor keys are featured, the student is given the key, until minor keys are introduced in level 5 in the Minor Scales and Pieces book and again in the level 6 Writing book.

The first seven units of Reading 1 feature single line melodies without harmonization. In unit 8, the student is given chord names for harmonization, but no actual notes. Finally, in unit 9, the last unit of the book, the student is given blocked chords written in actual notes for harmonies. The student should then write in the notation for the harmonies in unit 8. At this level, only the I and V7 chords are used.

Many pieces in this book contain a directive for transposition. I typically add additional transposition assignments. In fact, there is no reason that every piece should not have some type of transposition assignment.

The Writing 1 component is far more than a written theory book. Each unit includes a page of sight reading drills, and most of the units include playing drills. New rhythms are typically practiced by playing chord progressions in the new rhythm patterns. Other drills include note spelling, key signature practice, and chords and chord progressions.

Magic Finger Technique 1 begins half way through Reading 1 and continues through the first half of Reading 2. It is one of the best technique books I have seen for elementary students. The exercises are to be played chromatically upward in all major keys. They include elements of touch as well as drills requiring differentiation of the hands: staccato in the right hand vs. legato in the left, loud in the left hand vs. soft in the right, etc. Phrasing is given proper emphasis in several drills.

In level 2, the student learns the IV chord, and intervals of sixths, sevenths, and octaves begin to appear in the pieces. Gradually the student learns to extend out of the five-finger position. Interestingly, the middle C position appears for the first time in Reading 2. It is likely that the student would have encountered it previously through his or her supplemental music.

Some students using a multikey series develop pentascale fixation. Reading 2 helps the student to learn to read both notes and fingering and to move out of pentascale positions. In my opinion, it is one of the better methods for helping a student through that transition time. Also, Reading 2 makes a good entry point for the series with students who have not been exposed to playing in all keys.

This series is the only one I know of that offers a “transfer student” book, “Multikey Reading,” to help students coming from other series into this one. The student would cover MR first, which teaches the student to play in all keys with I, IV, and V7 harmonies. He or she could also begin work in Reading 2 and Writing 2 and be fully caught up by the end of Reading 2.

Starting in level 2, a fourth component is added to the student’s curriculum: Playtime at the Piano 1. I find the title of this series to be unfortunately misleading, as it has caused many a teacher to disregard the importance of this component. Playtime begins the study of pieces that are not in the structured positions of the Reading books, and the study of pieces in contrapuntal style rather than in the harmonic style of the Reading series. The books include easy pieces by Turk, Bartok, Kabalevsky, and others, to prepare the student for the all-classical studies of level 4 and beyond. Any student using this series needs to include Playtime in the curriculum.

In Reading 3 and Writing 3, the student accomplishes two major goals: to learn to play harmonies that use various accompaniment patterns other than blocked chords, and to learn to play all over the keyboard apart from any fixed position. This keyboard freedom is further developed in Playtime at the Piano 2. The pieces become increasingly interesting at this level as they cease to follow the structured forms of the previous two levels.

The student who completes the first three levels of this curriculum will have a fine command of the major and minor keys. He also will have encountered some of the easiest examples of classical literature. Fortunate indeed is the student whose teacher chooses this series.

Starting in level 4, the “method” book is replaced by a literature series. Many teachers have used the Bastien Literature program for years, totally unaware of the fact that the books were part of the Music through the Piano curriculum. Each literature book features standard four-period literature in original form. The pieces have been edited in a conservative fashion so that the student can readily perform from the edited version without having to mark phrasing, articulation, fingering, dynamics, or pedaling. An interesting feature is that volumes 1, 2, 4, and 5 are strictly in historic order, where volume 3 is in order of difficulty. Consistency might have made more sense. The literature series continues now through level 8 (equivalent to level 10 in other series).

Volume 1 (level 4) includes: Bach Minuet in G, Minuet in Gm, Minuet in G, and March in D, Beethoven Sonatina in G, Schumann Merry Farmer, Wild Horseman, Soldiers’ March, and Kabalevsky Dance, Quick March, Little Song, and Waltz. These lists are not comprehensive.

Volume 2 (level 5) features these works: Beethoven Sonatina in F, Clementi Sonatina in C (Op 36 #1) Bach Minuet in D and Polonaise in Gm, Schumann First Loss, Kabalevsky The Clown, Bartok Children’s Song, Play Time, and Hungarian Folk Song.

Volume 3 (level 6) incorporates the following masterworks: CPE Bach Solfeggietto, J S Bach Inventions 1, 4, and 8, Beethoven Fur Elise and Minuet in G, Burgmuller Arabesque and Ballade in Gm, Clementi Sonatina Op 36 #3, Haydn Allegro Scherzando, Elmenreich Spinning Song, Grieg Sailors’ Song, Elfin

Dance and Puck, Kuhlau Sonatina Op 55 #1 and #3 Schubert Waltz in Bb, Heller Avalanche, and Tchaikovsky Italian Folk Song and Polka.

Volume 4 (level 7) contains the following pieces, among others: Bach Invention #13 and #14, Telemann Suite in A, Beethoven Sonata Op 49 #2, Haydn Sonata in C, Mozart Rondo Alla Turca and Sonata in C, Chopin Polonaise in Gm, Preludes in A, Cm Em and Bm, Heller Curious Story, Schumann Blind Man's Bluff, Important Event, Knight Rupert, Kabalevsky Four Rondos and Sonatina Op 13, Satie Gymnopedie, and Shostakovich Prelude Op 34 #19.

Volume 5 (level 8) features such works as: Bach French Suite in E major, Haydn Sonata in D major, Mozart Sonata in Bb Major, Chopin Minute Waltz and Waltz in C# Minor, Grieg Wedding Day at Troldhaugen, Debussy Golliwogg's Cake Walk and Arabesque No 2, and five of Tchaikovsky's Bagatelles.

A second literature component at each level is a collection of sonatinas. The teacher will already be familiar with the ones included in these books. The series is very reasonably priced and makes a great addition to other programs.

The Writing series continues through level 6. I highly recommend that every student continue the series through the full program, since some very important topics are developed in volumes 4-6. Additional topics that are included in these later levels include:

- Minor keys
- Chord inversions
- Degrees of the scale
- Major and minor scales
- Augmented and diminished triads and inversions
- Additional accompaniment patterns
- Rhythm patterns
- Counting principles in simple and compound time
- Seventh chords

The technical program of levels 4 and 5 consists of the study of the major and minor keys, followed by pieces in those same keys. The pieces are designed mostly for key mastery rather than performance. For level 6, the technical component is "Czerny and Hanon for the Intermediate Grades." The first 20 exercises from the Hanon Studies are included. The Czerny portion consists of a mixture of selections from The Little Pianist, Practical Method, the Preliminary School of Velocity, and the School of Velocity.

The Bastiens also wrote several supplements to this series that make use of the multikey training developed in the course:

- Bastien Favorites – recital pieces, often above the indicated grade level. Levels 1-4
- Walt Disney Favorites – level 1
- Rock 'N Blues for Fun – level 1
- Folk Tunes for Fun, More Folk Tunes for Fun – levels 1 and 3

- Hymns for Piano – levels 1 and 3
- Stephen Foster Favorites – level 2
- Duets for Fun – levels 2 and 3
- Pop, Rock 'N Blues – levels 2, 3, and 5
- First Sonatinas – level 3
- Scott Joplin Favorites – level 4
- Country, Western 'N Folk – levels 4 and 5

Music through the Piano is one of the few true intensive multikey courses still in print. Now that the Oxford Piano Course has been withdrawn from print, the Robert Pace materials are the only other course of this type that are fully available. In my opinion, this method is easier to teach than the Pace courses, and the music is more palatable both to students and teachers than the Pace. The written work is not as demanding as well.

This course fell into limited use when the Bastien Piano Library was released. At that time, teachers were still overwhelmed by the intensive multikey approach, and they somewhat disbelieved that real students could handle such an approach. The gradual multikey concept introduced in the Bastien Piano Library went a long way to helping teachers overcome their fears of the multikey concept by using a gradual multikey approach. Today, large numbers of teachers are quite comfortable with multikey teaching, but now are totally unfamiliar with Music through the Piano. Although most have taught a gradual multikey course, many have still not tried the intensive method.

I believe that MttP should be much more widely used than it is, and that teachers should try teaching this series with academically good students who are eight years old or older. The course almost teaches itself, unlike the Pace, which requires some training to be able to use it correctly. Once a teacher has taken a single student through the series, he or she will realize what a hidden treasure this course is. I predict that any teacher who tries the series will like it, and will be amazed at the results it produces. They will also discover that the intensive multikey approach is very teachable, and that most students in the average or above average category handle the approach with little difficulty.

My only criticism of the series is that it could use more work with linear, contrapuntal styles earlier in the course. There are linear pieces in the Playtime at the Piano components, and those books should be considered an essential component of the course. I typically provide additional linear style pieces by using selected pieces from one of the traditional style piano courses, such as Thompson, Schaum, Eckstein, d'Auberge, or Weybright (Belwin Piano Method). Most frequently, I tend to use the Weybright, since there are very few finger numbers, and the series shies away from fixed hand positions. But even if a supplemental book is not used, Music at the Piano provides a thorough, well-rounded curriculum for average and above average students who want a comprehensive music education.