

# Course Review – Celebrate Piano

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*By Kevin M Coan*

Celebrate Piano is the piano course currently in print that most consistently applies all known music education principles that research has demonstrated to be effective in teaching piano. As far as skill development is concerned, Celebrate Piano, in my opinion, is the closest we have come to a “perfect” piano course. The major drawback to the course is that the format and illustrations were designed to appeal to children who are 6 and 7 years old. While the course can be used with 5 and 8 year olds as well, some students outside of that age range may find the format to be counter-motivational. Some older students do not object to juvenile material, however, and this course can be used with success with them.

I personally have used the course with an adult male who approached the course with the idea of learning pieces for his nieces and nephews. This approach may make the course palatable to a wider range of older users.

A second drawback to the course is that some of the pieces are “weird” sounding. These pieces have little performance value; one would never learn them apart from their pedagogical value. The number of pieces in each unit is somewhat small, probably on purpose. The teacher will want to choose supplemental repertoire to support the course. Many teachers are finding the Piano Solos books from the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library to be a perfect fit for this purpose. The HL books seldom require skills that have not already been developed in the CP books, and they offer pieces rich in musical quality. Use the Hal Leonard book with the same book number as the level of Celebrate Piano.

Celebrate Piano blends the best features of a landmark/interval reading approach with the best features of the intensive multikey approach. In addition, the course consistently applies the preparation – presentation – follow-through cycle that applies the research of Brunner. To that strategy effectively, it is important for the teacher to use all of the elements of this course as designed by the authors. Skipping sections and/or pieces undermines the learning spiral that is carefully structured into the curriculum. In my opinion, a teacher who wants to mutilate a piano course with a pick-and-choose attitude should find one besides this one.

The course takes some getting used to, especially if teachers are accustomed to a turn-the-page-and-teach method. There are only two books at each level: Method and Solos. Each Method book is divided into six units. A unit provides material for one, two, or even three weeks of activities. Each unit consists of three sections. The first section provides warm-up and presentation material for the new skills and concepts of the unit. The second section provides four to six application pieces for those skills and concepts. The final section provides theory, musicianship, and reinforcement activities, including ear training. The teacher will need to develop lesson plans for progressing through each unit by selecting activities from each of the three sections of the unit.

The Teacher's Guide for this program is absolutely essential for effectively implementing the curriculum, not so much for the commentary, but more so for the tables that explain the purpose of each activity and where the activity falls in the structure of the curriculum. Those tables will help the teacher in developing lesson plans. In addition, the TG offers a suggested teaching sequence for the activities in the unit. Those suggestions disappear in the higher levels of the course; the authors assume that the teacher will have "caught on" as to how to organize the lessons and will be capable of doing the structure himself. We teachers often complain that our students don't want to have to think, but sometimes we are guilty ourselves of that same sin. Celebrate Piano forces us to do quite a bit of thinking as we design effective lesson plans for our students.

The reading strategy in CP is one of the two outstanding features of the course. The teacher needs to understand the underlying philosophy, however, in order to be able to profit from the activities. Students begin with two entire units devoted to rhythmic activities and to learning how to move on the piano. Rhythm forms the core of this method (as it should in all of our teaching). The student never learns "the notes" and later "adds" the rhythm. Rather, the student learns the rhythm as the skeleton upon which he hangs all other activities, and then "adds" the notes. The work of Max Camp clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach, so much so, that his research demonstrates why so many students never become successful as pianists. Following the activities in this course will minimize the problems that are created by a notes-first approach.

After rhythm is secure, reading begins with learning to follow the interval mapping of a melody line. This is a key factor. At no time is the teacher even permitted to refer to "notes" by name. The student doesn't even know the names of the keys yet! The entire focus is on music as the movement of notes towards a direction. Notes are not discussed in isolation at this juncture. The student reads "first note – 2nd up, 2nd down, repeated note," etc. "First note" is found solely by looking at a picture of the keyboard key.

AFTER intervallic contour reading is secure, (I feel like I need to repeat that word, "after"!), the student is taught the names of the keys on the keyboard. The notation changes at this point to giving a letter-name for the starting note of the piece. Every other note in the piece is still read solely by interval. An entire unit is then devoted to the interval of a 3rd. The final unit introduces the student to pieces requiring mixed intervals. It is important to realize that the student finishes the entire 1A level without having learned a single staff note name. (Hurray for the authors for having accomplished this!)

Level 1B begins with a review of these concepts. FINALLY, bass C, middle C, and treble C are introduced as landmarks. Note name cues now disappear from the staff notation, as the student now knows three notes on the staff, plus intervals of 2nds and 3rds. This gives him access to fifteen notes on the staff with very little additional effort! At first, all notes begin ON a landmark. Later on, the student is taught to "spot-place" notes by measuring from a known landmark to the starting note of the may have had. Once the starting note has been decoded, all other notes are still read by interval.

In a later unit of level 1B, the landmarks of bass F and treble G (the clef landmarks) are taught. The student can now "read" every note on the staff from space A in the bass to space E in the treble,

although he has only memorized five landmark notes! Think of the logic of this. There are 37 different notes in the range normally used in music reading (from four ledger lines below the bass staff to four ledger lines above the treble staff). Go home and try to memorize a 37-digit number. It probably will not happen. Why do we think a student can memorize 37 staff notes? Now memorize a phone number. Easy, right? The reason that phone numbers have 7 digits is that the human brain can comfortably memorize up to 7 things. In Celebrate Piano, there are 7 landmarks. Every other note on the staff is found by using the spot placing strategy of measuring intervallically from those landmarks. As the student goes through this spot placing thought process repeatedly, he eventually plants a permanent knowledge of all of the notes on the staff, but in an organized structure that enables rapid retrieval in the brain.

This is why phonics works in teaching reading of words. Although the English language is not entirely phonetic, learning words from their phonetic sounds provides the brain with a logical “filing system” for the words of our language. Advanced readers obviously have a vocabulary of thousands of words that are recognized by memory. But a word-only approach is ineffective in teaching beginning reading, because it does not provide the brain with a logical filing system for storing the various words. By teaching phonics, the brain does develop this logical filing system. Even though good readers no longer “sound out” words, having done so repeatedly establishes the rapid-retrieval ability in the mind.

This is the same effect that continual spot placing and intervallic reading has in music. When an advanced musician looks at notes, we do not spot place and measure to a landmark. But if a musician has repeatedly done the spot-placing process, the retrieval process for the now-memorized note is much more rapid. The result is better sight reading. Celebrate Piano fully implements all the elements of this strategy into a teachable piano curriculum.

A second major element that research shows is effective is that of multikey teaching. The sooner students gain a command of the notes of each of the major and minor keys, their scales, cadences, and arpeggios, the sooner the student is able to use those skills to rapidly sight read and perform pieces in all of those keys. Celebrate Piano implements a learning spiral for the development of multikey proficiency beginning in level 1B. At first, accidentals are taught, remembering at all times to use a gestalt, holistic approach (meaning that the complete “big” picture is always presented before the individual details are developed). Therefore, white key sharps, flats that occur on repeated notes in a measure, and accidentals other than F# and Bb are presented all in the same lesson.

In level 2A, there is a learning sequence to develop the pentascales of each of the keys. CP divides this teaching into those that use sharps and those that use flats. Only accidentals are used at first, so the student can focus solely on the whole and half step patterns. By the end of the level, the student moves readily to the pentascale of any key. In the final unit of this level, ALL sharp keys are presented at once. The exciting feature for me is that when the student first encounters a key signature in any piece at all, it is one with four sharps! He has already mastered the E major pentascale. The key signature, rather than becoming something frightening, is merely a shorthand system for notating something he already knows. The only one at the lesson who is afraid of the four sharps might just be the teacher!

In level 2B, the flat keys are similarly developed. Since F major is the grand exception to all the key signature “rules,” the first flat piece is in that key. But quite rapidly, the student moves into playing pieces in five flats and other “scary” keys, except that the student is not scared.

Once pentascales are secure, the full scale can be developed by putting pentascales together. In actuality, of course, scales are composed of two tetrachords. But the first note of the upper tetrachord is the fifth note in the lower pentascale. So even though only four of the five notes of the lower pentascale are used for the lower tetrachord, knowing the full pentascale enables the student to immediately find the starting note for the upper tetrachord. The only piece of research that CP does not use is the technique of fingering the lower tetrachord 5-4-3-2 and the upper tetrachord 1-2-3-4. Doing so enables the student to utilize the tactile memory of the pentascales he has been playing for over a year and to transfer that knowledge to the tetrachord scales.

(Teachers often argue that the 5-4-3-2 followed by 2-3-4-5 avoids having the thumb on a black key. We need to realize that there is NOT a rule that says the student should avoid having the thumb on a black key. There IS a rule that says: IN A SCALE PASSAGE, we are to avoid having the thumb on a black key. This is because finger crossings occur over the thumb or with the thumb under the fingers. That is not practical unless the thumb is limited to white keys. But in other types of passages, especially in chordal passages, the thumb occurs repeatedly on black keys. In octave passages, the thumb plays on EVERY key. Tetrachord scales do not involve thumb crossings. Neither do pentascales. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable to allow the thumb to play on black keys. The tactile memory principal is far more important than trying to adhere to a rule that does not even really apply to the tetrachord scale situation.)

Celebrate Piano properly applies the principles of teaching extensions as the first movement out of the five-finger position. As key signatures are being developed, CP also is developing sixths, teaching the student the principle of extending DOWN a HALF step, but UP a WHOLE step. With just that simple extension, the student is now using all 7 notes of the full scale.

Level 3 of CP introduces harmonization with the traditional primary chords. I love the fact that the authors waited until this level to begin this work; doing so prevents the student from premature use of the hand to play chords that he is not physically ready to play. But AFTER playing for two years with single notes and harmonic intervals, and AFTER having learned to balance melody and accompaniment with these smaller harmonizations, he is ready to use the now-strengthened fingers to play these chords while still keeping the melody and harmony in balance.

Level 4 makes the final transition from tetrachord scales to scales using traditional fingering with thumb crossings. The student is now well on the way to complete multikey mastery.

Celebrate Piano also is built around a carefully-developed ladder of rhythmic skills. Level 1 includes only notes that have one, two, three, and four beats. Level 2 begins work with dividing the beat by teaching eighth notes and dotted quarter/eighth note combinations. Level 3 develops compound time, where the beat is divided into three parts. Level 4 completes the progression with the introduction of sixteenth notes. Rhythmic clapbacks and playbacks develop rhythmic memory, and they help to plant these patterns permanently into the mind. This is consistent with research that demonstrates that effective

sight reading depends on the rapid recall of patterns, rather than the rapid deciphering of individual notes and their counts.

Frederick Harris specifically designed Celebrate Piano with the intent that students graduating from CP would follow their study with the Celebration literature series. The CP Teachers' Guide includes specific references to pieces in Celebration Level 1 to include with each of the units in CP, beginning with CP Level 3, Unit 4. Interestingly, the suggested order of pieces according to the Celebrate Piano Teacher's Guide is different from the order suggested in the Celebration Teacher's Guide.

It comes without surprise that I highly endorse the use of this method, especially with students in the 5 – 8 age range. Fortunately, a similar course exists in a format that does not use the storybook illustrations featured in Celebrate Piano. Music Pathways, by Lynn Freeman Olson, uses most of the concepts of CP that have been pointed out here, but in a mostly black and white format with minimal illustrations. Music Pathways is actually a forerunner of Celebrate Piano; Marvin Blickenstaff was a co-author of Music Pathways, as well as a co-author of the Celebration series that Celebrate Piano leads into. Thus, teachers could develop an entire studio curriculum based on the use of Celebrate Piano for younger students, and Music Pathways for older students. Students who are taught using either course will receive a comprehensive, well-researched music education.

Because the Celebration series is designed specifically to support the Royal Conservatory of Music examination program more so than as an intermediate "method," I have a preference for using the intermediate levels of Music Pathways as a follow-up to Celebrate Piano rather than the Celebration books. Level 3a of Music Pathways overlaps a bit with Celebrate Piano Level 4, but I still use that level with a student upon completing CP. The remaining levels of MP make a perfect follow-up to the instruction in CP. In my opinion, Levels 3a through 5b of Music Pathways offer some of the best intermediate piano teaching available today.

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