

The Essence of the “Artistry” Method

By Kevin M Coan

“Artistry at the Piano” is an approach to teaching piano that is radically different from any other piano method on the market. Jon and Mary Gae did extensive research into the various ways that piano has been taught historically. They identified a correlation between how piano was being taught and when large volumes of beautiful music were being published. They then sought to incorporate those pedagogical techniques into their approach to the method.

The fundamental focus of Artistry is on making beautiful music. Most of our courses today focus on learning to READ music for a considerable period of time and then transition into a focus on the MUSIC itself. With Artistry, once pieces are introduced, the focus is always upon the music and the artistic performance of it. A second focus of Artistry is on preparing all necessary skills prior to using them. Thus, Artistry is a SKILLS-driven course, with each skill then being APPLIED to excellent music. Where most of our courses disguise the skill in some form of “piece,” Artistry teaches the skills in isolation without attempting to “hide” the fact that hard work must precede the ability to use the skills in a performance.

When Artistry begins the playing of pieces, the authors want the student’s attention to be devoted totally to the musicality of the piece. Thus, there are NO PIECES solely to develop note reading. There are NO PIECES solely to develop rhythm skills or technic skills. All of the pieces are there for their outstanding musical quality. They are there for the student to learn ARTISTRY.

The course begins with the book “Introduction to Music,” the “primer” level. It takes 12-14 hours of lesson time to cover that level. The teacher can take 10-12 one-hour lessons, 5-6 two-hour lessons, or any other combination that works for the teacher and student. The course’s author covers the book in a weeklong “piano camp” setting, with 5 two-hour sessions.

At the introductory level, rhythm forms the foundation. The course begins with rhythm study in simple time; all activities going forward are done in rhythm. Rhythm is studied away from the piano using movement activities and clapping/tapping. Rather than studying individual note values in isolation, the student studies rhythm patterns. The student learns rhythmic phrasing as well. Dynamics become part of the rhythm study, with the student learning to identify the “directed movement” within each “etude.”

The second unit of the book covers pitch. “Pitch” is the correct term for what we usually call “notes.” To be “pure” about it, “pitch” is the highness or lowness of a sound, where a “note” is a written symbol depicting a pitch. In the pitch unit, the student again does not focus on individual notes in isolation, but rather on MOVEMENT of notes along a contour. In the first pitch unit, the student studies the intervals of prime, second, and third. In various reading “flashes,” the student “reads” short motives of three to six notes. At first, the notes are clefless, with the starting note happening virtually on any key. The student learns to identify the various fingerings that are possible to produce each intervallic sequence. Once interval reading is secure, the student learns various anchor notes (i.e., landmarks), using the five C’s as primary landmarks, and treble G’s and bass F’s as secondary landmarks.

The third unit of the introductory level provides the technical foundation needed to produce beautiful legato playing, proper phrasing, and good tone. Whole body exercises are included, with a progression that gradually refines itself down to the finer movements needed for individual finger control. Phrasing is taught and emphasized immediately in Artistry. In the technical foundation, the student “earns the right” to touch the piano as he or she demonstrates the ability to observe correct body, arm, hand and finger posture and the ability to phrase properly.

The technical phase includes some short “etudes” at the piano in pre-staff notation. These develop the ability to play a) in rhythm, b) with proper technic including phrasing, c) with dynamics and expression, and d) with proper observance of intervals of seconds and thirds.

In the fourth unit, the student returns to the study of rhythm as he or she learns eighth note duplets and triplets simultaneously. With duplets, the student learns to break the quarter note into two eighth notes. With triplets, he or she learns to break the dotted quarter note into three eighth notes. Copious rhythm drills provide side-by-side comparisons of rhythm patterns using duplets with highly similar patterns using triplets. There are also patterns that begin with incomplete measures and ones that use other rhythmic patterns. Again, the emphasis is on groups of rhythms, not on isolated note values. It is important to note that 9/8 time is taught as “three beats per measure with the dotted quarter note receiving the beat,” not as “nine beats per measure with the eighth note receiving the beat.” By the end of this unit, the student has a command of 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 3/8, 6/8, 9/8, and 12/8 time, with note values through eighth notes.

The fifth unit concludes the work with pitch, with the student focusing on intervals of fourths and fifths. Through the combination of intervals and anchor notes, the student gains a command of all 37 notes on the staff and ledger lines. Before studying full length pieces, he or she masters all of the “note reading” he or she will ever use. Thus, piano lessons do not “study note reading,” but rather, they “USE note reading” to “study MUSIC.”

In the last unit, the student begins to play etudes using all of the intervals, notes, rhythms, and touches that have been developed in the book. The work culminates with several pieces that begin the change of focus from “reading preliminaries” to “artistic performance.”

Beginning with level 1, “Artistry at the Piano” is organized into sixteen master Lessons: four levels, with four “Lessons” in each level. These 16 Lessons form units of study, with each master Lesson taking eight to twelve weeks to complete. There are four REQUIRED components at each level: Workbook, Musicianship, Repertoire, and Ensemble. Nothing in this set is optional: a teacher who thinks he or she is going to pick and choose things out of the course should probably look for another course. There is a flow of activities from book to book in this course that requires each component to be in place. Understand that there is no “method” book; the flow of the method begins in Workbook, then flows to Musicianship, and then to Repertoire, etc.

Workbook begins each master Lesson, with about three weeks of activities. Workbook is not really a good name for the component, since all new material is introduced first here. In Workbook, new concepts are presented and developed through both written and playing activities. Every lesson has a rhythm section in which the student taps out new rhythm patterns. These patterns prepare the student for the pieces in the Musicianship book. The Workbook also develops the theory and creativity concepts to be learned by the student. Finally, every Workbook lesson includes one or more pieces, where the student will be able to apply all the concepts and skills he or she has been learning. These are not “pedagogy” pieces, but rather, pieces that the student will need to practice and add to his or her performing repertoire. The first pieces that the student learns in each master Lesson are the ones in Workbook.

Musicianship follows each Workbook lesson, providing three weeks of new material plus considerable weekly technical practice. Each Musicianship lesson includes additional rhythmic patterns, this time preparing the student for the Repertoire pieces. This is followed by various technical patterns. Each technical pattern uses the new technical skills AND the rhythm patterns being developed in the Lesson. It is expected that the technical patterns will be practiced daily, and that they will be practiced with various touches, various dynamics, and transposed into various keys. The patterns are of the "Hanon" variety; transposing them does not simply involve playing do-sol in each key, but rather involves using all 8 notes of the scale. Thus, the student gains a true command of all of the notes of every scale.

Musicianship also includes ear-training activities, which the teacher should integrate naturally into the lessons as they are developed. The ear training includes both pitch and rhythm activities. Ear training forms a part of every Artistry lesson.

Each of the Musicianship Lessons includes several short pieces that begin the application of all of the rhythm, theory, and technical skills that have been developed. Because the student has PREPARED every necessary detail (rhythm, technic, notation, theory, etc.), he or she is able to study these pieces POSITIVELY. With proper preparation, he or she should be able to play each piece correctly on a first reading of the piece. Lessons become a focus on making beautiful music, not on correction of errors. It is this "positive pedagogy" that forms the philosophical basis of the entire Artistry curriculum.

The pieces in Musicianship require careful practice and mastery. Although many of them are on the short side, they make interesting additions to the student's performing repertoire. Some students will even elect to play some of these pieces in recitals and performances.

Once the student masters the preparation pieces in Musicianship, he or she turns to the longer pieces in Repertoire. With the Repertoire pieces, the foundation work has been laid. The pieces in Repertoire are there for their artistic and musical value, not primarily for pedagogic value. Each Repertoire piece is a "miniature masterwork:" a Jon George original composition that imitates the style and works of one of the master composers. From the very beginning, these pieces are designed to be studied for several weeks, not assigned one week and "checked off" the next. The student learns to progress from "rough draft" to "finished, memorized, performable piece" over a three-week span.

Once again, each Repertoire piece has been prepared by all the prerequisite skills and rhythms in the work up to that point. Each Musicianship piece has also paved the way for success with the Repertoire piece. Thus, the positive pedagogy finds its ultimate reward in the successful performance of real pieces of beauty.

The final component of each master Lesson is the Ensemble work. The Ensemble pieces provide two or three duets that use the same skills that have formed the basis of the entire Lesson. The Ensemble pieces are the only pieces that do not need to be used strictly in the "rotation." The course's author typically uses them one or two "Lessons" behind the other books. Since these pieces are typically quite challenging, it is often valuable to use that component the same way. Thus, the student might begin the Ensemble Lesson 1 pieces while beginning Workbook Lesson 3.

It is critical to understand that with Artistry, the course itself is designed as a master preparation for original masterworks of the teacher's (and student's) choosing. 100% of everything in "Artistry at the Piano" is composed by Jon George. It is NOT the authors' intentions that the student study only music by Jon George! Rather, the teacher will need to select good classical literature, either from a good literature series such as the Alfred Masterwork

Classics, Celebration, or the Frances Clark Library, or from single-composer volumes such as the Alfred Masterworks or the G. Henle, Peters, Vienna Urtext, or Kalmus editions. At level 1, where most of the masterworks are not yet attainable, the teacher is free to select his or her favorite teaching collections or to use pieces from other methods and series.

I have found the Francis Clark Library to be a perfect fit with Artistry at the Piano. Before writing Artistry, Jon George composed for Francis Clark. About a third of the pieces in The Music Tree were composed by Jon. Several supplements in the FCL consist entirely of Jon's music. It is not surprising that the sequence of topics in Artistry follow the same scope and sequence of the classical pieces in the FCL Literature and Contemporary Literature books. I recommend starting the level 1 Literature and Contemporary Literature books about midway through Artistry level 2. Most students complete a level in the FCL about every three to four master Lessons in Artistry.

Certain key elements stand out as being critical to the entire Artistry approach:

- *The study of notes and rhythms as patterns, not as individual note or note values*
- *The centrality of the phrase as the foundation for the study of each piece*
- *The focus on music as "directed motion," with a destination both in terms of rhythm and of pitch*
- *The focus not just on music being "right," but on it being beautiful and interesting*
- *A focus on preparing all prerequisite skills ahead of time, so that the focus of repertoire lessons is not on skill development but rather on skill application and on beautiful music making*
- *A positive approach to the learning of pieces that emphasizes correct playing from the very first contact with each piece, and a conscientious avoidance of "corrections"*
- *A consistency in presenting new concepts holistically. The "big picture" is always shown to the student before he or she is asked to master smaller details. Fragmented teaching, in which various details are spread out over an extended time without providing the student a unifying conceptual framework, is conscientiously avoided.*
- *The active participation of the student in the decision-making process. The teacher does not "tell" the student to "bring out the crescendo in line 2," but rather, he or she leads the student to compare various "versions" of line 2, so that the student chooses himself to emphasize a crescendo in line 2 because that makes line 2 more beautiful and interesting.*

Once a teacher has taught "Artistry at the Piano", his or her teaching will never be the same again. Even if the teacher continues to use other courses (I certainly do), he or she will forever focus on the teaching of music as the application of skills prepared ahead of time to beautiful music making.

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