

Vogt – Piano Discoveries

Review by Kevin M Coan

Piano Discoveries by Janet Vogt and Leon Bates is Heritage/Lorenz's alternate piano curriculum to the Noona courses. It was written to support those teachers who prefer a traditional Middle C, memorize-the-notes approach to teaching.

The bulk of research in this area indicates that a majority of pupils learn best from an intervallic approach that includes the use of landmarks of some sort. For most pupils, the one-note-at-a-time approach, as is used in Piano Discoveries, almost always works, but it is an inefficient approach, and it does not produce the best sight-readers. The problem lies in the initial teaching of notes in isolation, and relying on rote memory to master them. If a note-memory approach is coupled with a later teaching of intervals, however, it can produce good sight-readers in the long run.

Some students simply do not respond well to an intervallic approach. This is especially true of those students who have difficulty with spatial reasoning. These students often struggle with math in school, especially with problem solving where some aspect of geometry is involved, such as finding area or figuring out how many fence posts are needed to enclose a field. For them, an approach such as the one used in Piano Discoveries is a perfect fit. While I would not recommend this course for the majority of pupils, I can endorse it for these students.

Piano Discoveries is not a multikey method per se, but the course does include work with keys up to three sharps or flats. Key signatures are introduced in level 1B with pieces that actually use the sharps or flats. There is sufficient theory and musicianship to make for a complete program.

The course does not have a technic series specifically coordinated to the method, but there are ample technical exercises in the method itself. Each level has only two required components: the lesson book and a theory workbook.

There are quite a few positive things about PD. First of all, except in the very beginning pieces, the majority of the music in PD is quite interesting. Vogt, Bates, and Kelsey have a great talent for writing interesting compositions, and they seem to have launched out on a project of producing a plethora of them. Since the publication of PD, the authors have released several sets of supporting repertoire books: the Master Class Series, Ask the Professor, Star of the Show Solos, Outrageously Fun Solos for the Formerly Bored Piano Student, Poetry at the Piano, and Superstar Solos and Stickers. In particular, Superstar Solos and Stickers, Master Class Series, and Ask the Professor each give the teacher a page-by-page supplement to the PD method, providing an additional repertoire application of each lesson. With a slower student, one could use one, two, or all three of those books to reteach every single lesson in the primary method!

A second positive feature of the course is that much of the music is contrapuntal in style. Chords and harmony receive appropriate emphasis, beginning in level 2, but the pieces offer a welcome relief to the overage of chordal writing that dominates many programs. Therefore, beginning with level 1A, the books could make a good supplement to a course that is harmonically based.

In the later books of the course, the authors provide very helpful suggestions for practicing and performing the pieces. The Master Class Series is especially useful in this regard; the premise of the series is that each lesson imitates a master class study of the repertoire selection.

There are a few shortcomings in the series as well. My biggest complaint is that there is not a single white spot on any of the pages in the first six levels of the course. After trying to read notes plastered on green, orange, purple, and other colored pages, my eyes got very tired. I have to imagine that could occur with students as well. The pictures are extremely juvenile, limiting the use of the course to pupils ten and younger. I actually found that frustrating, as there are some wonderful recital possibilities I would have liked to use with older pupils, but I would not dare present these books to them.

Publishers seem to demand finger numbers to a greater degree than is necessary, and this series is no exception. Normally I would suggest white out, but that would hardly blend in with the colored pages of the program! One would need to purchase a Crayola box of 64 colors of orange out, purple out, etc., to accommodate this program!

There are literally hundreds of note-naming exercises in this course, but only a few intervallic exercises by comparison. Thus, the series is based on the false belief that music reading involves deciphering individual notes faster and faster. But students who are using note memory as their primary reading strategy may well need these exercises in order to become proficient readers. It would be tragic, in my opinion, to subject most students to this endless drill.

I personally plan to use the course and some of the supplemental materials supplementally. I currently use Schaum's Making Music Method in its regard, but I could use a backup course for students who have siblings already using MMM. I could also see myself using the course as an alternative to the Glover Method for Piano for students who are spatially challenged. But the overpowering graphics of the course, the childish pictures, and the incessant note naming drill limit its usefulness for a wide range of students.

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