

Course Review

Piano All the Way by William Gillock

By Kevin M Coan

Piano All the Way by William Gillock is a gold mine of beautiful music and exceptional pedagogy hidden in a series of books that represent just about the worst in publishing quality. I would pay good money to get the rights to this series and then republish it with the industry quality it deserves. I am a firm believer in teaching students to learn to appreciate music for music's sake. I teach them to disregard pictures, titles, and other cutesy elements and to focus solely on the music. One would definitely need to adopt that philosophy with this course. It would be well worth doing, however; the course is that good!

There are five levels in the method books of the series: 1A, 1B, 2, 3, and 4, plus a "post method" level 5. The course was not written in the typical style of modern methods, with three or four components at each level that progress through the entire series. Instead, there are books with various titles that work together to form a complete curriculum. The publishers print a chart on the back of the books that coordinate which books come when in the series.

No student will need all of the books in the program. Most students will profit from using the Piano All the Way, Theory All the Way, and Technic All the Way books at all levels, except that the technic and theory books are probably unnecessary at level 1A. In addition, all students should use the three-book "Accent" sequence: Accent on Majors (level 3), Accent on Majors and Minors (level 4), and Accent on the Black Keys (level 5). Selections can then be made from the other "parts" of the curriculum on a student-by-student basis.

The teacher should understand the purpose of several of the components of the series:

Theory All the Way provides both written and performing theory reinforcement of the material taught in Piano All the Way. The pages are coordinated unit by unit between the two series. In addition, there are numerous ear-training exercises throughout the series. For some ironic reason, the series does not go "all the way" to level 4. One aspect is quite annoying: the teacher's notes for the ear-training drills are on the same page that the student is to write his responses. The only way to achieve genuine ear-training is to avoid using the teacher's music and to create different examples at random.

Technic All the Way is really an independent sequence of exercises that are not genuinely coordinated to Piano All the Way. Level 1A has to be taught entirely by rote. The notation in levels 1B and 2A repeatedly introduce elements that have not been taught in Piano All the Way. Although claiming to be tied unit for unit, there are more units in the technic book than in the method book. The series gets an F- in my mind for coordination.

If a teacher chooses to use the Technic All the Way, it will be more effective NOT to use the books with the “indicated” levels. If the pacing in Technic All the Way moves more slowly than Piano All the Way, enough so that Technic All the Way 2A finishes at the same time as the Piano All the Way 2, and Technic All the Way 2B is used with the Piano All the Way level 3, the coordination between the two series “fits” much more naturally. For example, Technic All the Way level 2B is purely a scale book; traditional scales are taught in level 3 of Piano All the Way.

The second issue for the teacher to decide is whether or not the student needs the copious number of exercises included in Technic All the Way. In my own use of the curriculum, I found that students in general made better progress when Technic All the Way was left out of the program than when it was included.

Accent on Solos is a three book series of repertoire for repertoire sake. The level 1 Accent on Solos book coordinates with Piano All the Way level 1B. Levels 2 and 3 match their appropriate levels. The level 1 book provides great repertoire material for that phase. The teacher will need to decide whether or not students need the additional repertoire at levels 2 and 3. The following books make a better choice for most students beyond level 1.

Folk Songs and Rhythmic Dances is a level 2 set of 24 pieces in all major and minor keys. The pieces are a mixture of familiar tunes, such as “Alouette” and the “Star Spangled Banner,” with easy dance pieces in classical and romantic style. The book provides practice with primary chords and other basic multikey skills using high interest music. Accidentals are used rather than key signatures to help the student with accuracy of the sharps and flats. Most students can profit from this book.

Accent on Majors (level 3), Accent on Majors and Minors (level 4), and Accent on the Black Keys (level 5) develop competency in the various major and minor keys. The first two books focus on keys that begin on white tonics. The third volume completes the circle with the keys that have black tonics. The books give the student technical and theory work in each key followed by a recital-quality piece in the same key. These pieces are of the same quality as many of the classical works of the master composers. They are not just pedagogical reinforcement material. This series is so outstanding that it makes good material for students using any course. All Piano All the Way students should use these books.

Accent on Rhythm and Style introduces the level 4 pupil to the various periods of music history. While all of the pieces are Gillock compositions, these pieces are genuine reflections of the styles of the master composers. The book provides teachers with quality material for teaching elements of style. Most students will find this book profitable. It is also highly useful to students using other methods.

Accent on Analytical Sonatinas is a level 5 introduction to the elements of the sonatina form. The book provides three complete sonatinas, each in a different historical period style. The music is analyzed as to form, providing the teacher with a superb resource for introducing these topics to intermediate students. A student completing these three works is ripe and ready for the Clementi and Kuhlau Sonatinas. Some students would be ready for the Clementi and Kuhlau works without needing this book. Those who do study these compositions, however, will have a full appreciation for the works of the master composers.

Piano All the Way is intervallic in its approach to reading. The C's and G's on the staff form the landmarks used in this course. Because middle C is the first landmark taught, and because some of the first pieces center around middle C, some teachers mistake this course as being middle C in its methodology. It would be unfortunate for a teacher to miss the landmark and interval emphasis of the course and to try to teach individual notes by memory.

Piano All the Way is also intensively multikey, both in its development of musicianship skills and in its repertoire. The course gives the students several complete tours of the full circle of fifths. Level 2 of Piano All the Way presents all major keys using only I and V7 chords and accidentals. Level 3 tours all major and minor keys with traditional scales and key signatures. Folk Songs and Rhythmic Dances contains a single-book cycle of all of the keys. The Accent on Majors... sequence also gives the student a complete tour of keys.

The following is a level-by-level of the method books of Piano All the Way:

Level 1A begins with material that is nearly identical to Francis Clark's Time to Begin. The first pieces are simple patterns played on the black keys, moving up or down an octave upon each repetition. Midway through the book, the names of the white keys are introduced. The student then encounters clefless staves that help him or her to measure steps and skips. The student does not read note names at any point in Level 1A. Instead, he completes the level with a good mastery of intervallic reading using repeated notes, seconds, and thirds.

Level 1B introduces on-staff reading from five landmarks: bass C, bass G, middle C, treble G, and treble C. Teachers used to bass clef F might find that they need to get used to using G rather than F. This curriculum consistently uses only C's and G's and landmarks. Intervals through the fifth are utilized in the pieces. No black keys are included in this initial introduction. Piano All the Way does not use a "thumbs on middle C" approach. Instead, the student is required to use various fingerings on different keys by measuring from the landmarks. Each new Unit in this book introduces a new pair of landmarks. By the middle of the book, position changes are utilized. Because of this, students using this course do not develop a frozen-position mentality. The student completes level 1B with fluency in reading notes on the white keys from bass C to treble C. Students who need additional reading or performance music can benefit from using Accent on Solos level 1 at this stage.

Level 2 expands the reading range to the entire grand staff and develops proficiency in all major keys. No key signatures are used in this level. The philosophy is that students need to develop accuracy in the notes of each key. Accidentals are therefore written in for each of those notes. Hand position shifts abound at this level. Scales are taught at this level in tetrachord fashion divided between the hands. Tonic and dominant seventh chords are drilled in all of the keys using the four basic chord groups.

Because the pieces are not confined to single hand positions, the student is able to play some very exciting music at this level. Since the student makes considerable progress through the book, additional supplemental material will most likely be necessary. The Folk Songs and Rhythmic Dances book is a great addition to this level that provides a piece in each major and minor key. If more performance pieces are needed, the Accent on Solos level 2 book offers some interesting selections.

Teachers should begin adding masterwork repertoire towards the end of the level 2 book. The Alfred Masterwork Classics Level 2 book would be an appropriate choice. The Francis Clark Library could also be introduced at this time, beginning with their Level 1 Literature and Contemporary Literature books. Since the Gillock curriculum includes only Gillock compositions, the use of a companion literature series is almost essential. The use of such a series was intended when the course was being written.

Some students might benefit from the addition of an “optional” level inserted here. Gillock has an alternate course entitled Now I Can Play. Book 3 of that course makes a very good transitional book between Piano All the Way levels 2 and 3. Now I Can Play 3 introduces key signatures and traditional scales in the keys that have white key tonics. A supplemental book Seven Pieces in Seven Keys provides additional repertoire type material in these same keys. Students who have started struggling with each new piece in Piano All the Way level 2 might just welcome the relaxed demands. Most students, however, will be able to progress directly from Piano All the Way level 2 to level 3.

Level 3 completes the landmark ladder with all of the C’s and G’s on the grand staff plus the leger C’s above and below the grand staff. Level 3 also provides a thorough treatment of all the major and minor keys, including their key signatures. Scales are now taught in using traditional fingering. The pupil also gets to play a satisfying composition in each of the keys. The student leaves level 3 with complete multikey competency. Accent on Majors should be introduced at this level to provide advanced piece reinforcement of the multikey cycle. Accent on Solos also provides additional performance material of a general nature.

Level 3 of this course provides a wealth of material for multikey development using all of the notes of the major and minor scales. That makes this book a valuable addition to other piano courses that are weak in multikey work. Unlike many multikey “drill books,” the pieces in Piano All the Way 3 are mostly of recital quality. The student will have difficulty trying to decide which of these wonderful pieces is his or her absolute most favorite!

Level 4 focuses on chord inversions, historical style, and compound time. Sixteenth notes also appear for the first time at this level. Teachers will have no trouble getting students to practice these pieces. They are rich in musical excitement and reward. The Accent on Majors and Minors book should be studied by all students at this level. Most will find the Accent on Rhythm and Style to be valuable as well.

At Level 5, there is no specific “method” book. However, the Accent on the Black Keys and Accent on Analytical Sonatinas books make for an interesting curriculum. All students should study the first book, and many will benefit from the second. Students who are interested in jazz music will also want to study the famous New Orleans Jazz Styles that come in three volumes.

The Gillock Piano All the Way series is rich in repertoire in various keys. The course provides students with a wonderful introduction to the world of music. It is too bad that the books have such an unattractive format, as it causes the program to get much less usage than the series deserves. Hopefully teachers will be able to overlook that shortcoming and take advantage of the richness of this course. Maybe some day someone at Willis Music will get smart and republish the course with the finesse it deserves.

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