

# Course Review – Piano Town

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*By Kevin M Coan*

Piano Town, by Keith Snell and Diane Hidy, offers the teacher a quality resource for comprehensive, skill-based, multikey teaching. When Kjos first released the method, they marketed it as the latest in innovation. It really is not that. Rather, it is a very practical course that integrates the best of the tried and true pedagogical methods that are currently in practice.

I welcome the release of this course. There seems to be a trend away from multikey teaching in several of the popular methods of our day. Instead of method authors planning for a comprehensive program of key development, they almost seem to avoid the topic altogether. It is not uncommon for some methods to have students playing for two or three years before even encountering their first key signature. In contrast, Piano Town continues the Bastien tradition of introducing key signatures at level one, with a program that completes the entire cycle by the end of level four.

In many aspects, Piano Town could be considered the “next edition” of Bastien Piano Basics. The scope and sequence of levels primer through two of both PT and BPB are so similar that the two courses could be used side by side. Both courses feature a strong harmonic emphasis. Both of them teach sharp keys through four sharps by the end of level two and all of the keys by level four. Both courses also draw from folk song literature for much of their practice material. A student completing either series would have acquired very similar skills.

On the other hand, Piano Town represents a significant improvement over some of the weaknesses of BPB. In BPB, there are very few examples of masterwork literature. Piano Town features quite a few such works, including many teaching favorites. Generally, these pieces are in their original form, although a few of them are simplifications. Cutesy titles have been given to the pieces, however, along with storybook type illustrations. In any event, the classical repertoire represents a welcome relief to an otherwise steady diet of folk tunes harmonized with primary chord patterns.

One major improvement that Piano Town has made over the Bastien books lies in the approach to note learning. BPB relies on learning notes in five-finger positions, with no systematic strategy for decoding unknown notes. Piano Town, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on landmark reading. Bass F, treble C, and middle C are the first notes taught in the course. The remainder of the book relates all new notes to those landmarks. The middle C position is used for the first pieces, but other positions are introduced in the primer level as well. By the end of the primer level, the student encounters pieces using almost the entire grand staff.

My only criticism of the reading approach in PT is that the authors do not carry the landmark concept far enough. After the three initial landmarks have been taught, there are no additional

ones ever introduced. A teacher can easily remedy that situation, however, by simply selecting a few additional notes to mark as landmarks.

There are some very nice teaching features of the course. All explanations of new material are given within the music itself, rather than at the top of the page. This forces the student to look through new music to discover things that need to be prepared ahead of time. In addition, the authors include questions at the beginning of each piece that require the student to look through the entire piece. The strength of this practice is that it enables the teacher to use a discovery approach to each new topic. As the student answers these questions, he or she encounters the new elements and their explanations. Because the explanation occurs with the element itself, the student sees that each topic actually relates to the music rather than being something isolated and irrelevant.

The entire course is organized into unit themes. The piece titles, illustrations, and lyrics all relate to the common unit theme. The theme is also carried into the technic and performance components. A change in the art and illustrations theme signals a change in the learning objective as well. The themes all revolve around the imaginary city of "Piano Town." The illustrations feature children of the target age involved in every day activities relating to the unit theme. As an example, one of the themes is work. One piece features a builder; another one features a fireman, etc. Another unit is built around dinosaurs. As the books progress, the maturity level of the themes "grows" with the student.

In spite of the cutesy format of the primary books, the theory books are entirely in black and white without pictures. The pages are clean and uncluttered, and there is an ample supply of exercises. In my opinion, there are enough practice examples that the teacher can exercise some selectivity in assigning them. Not every student will need as much practice as the book provides. A wise use of the exercises might be to assign some of the exercises to go along with the lesson, and then plan for a program of systematic review by assigning the remaining exercises several weeks later. For example, one could assign page 14, rows 1 and 2 while teaching the material of page 14. In the same assignment, one could assign rows 3 and 4 from page 7, covering material from several weeks ago.

The technic books are illustrated, but the exercises include some valuable "raw" technic work. For example, there are often some very straightforward five-finger drills that are to be transposed up and down the keyboard or into several keys. While some of the technic work includes the use of etudes, the authors have not attempted to turn all of the technic work into something artificially musical. Many of the raw technical drills make for great warm-up work. I personally have chosen to list some of this first on the student's assignment sheet to use for this purpose.

Transposition is a very strong feature of the entire curriculum. The authors have an obvious objective of making the student confident and competent in all of the keys. A student completing this course will have achieved that objective.

There is some creative work in the theory books, especially in regards to harmonization. The program does not, however, require the student to write compositions in their entirety. There seems to be some attempt to avoid open-ended projects and assignments. There also is not any specific ear training work. A teacher who wants to emphasize student creativity will need to add that type of work apart from the course.

Teachers choosing this course need to understand the role of each of the components of the course. The authors have NOT written the Lesson Books to be complete in themselves. In particular, the pieces in the lesson books support the discovery approach to the lessons. Their purpose is to provide practice for the new lesson topics and for illustrations of those topics. The nature of those pieces is very “pedagogical.” They are designed for preparation use and not for performance purposes. After learning each preparation piece, the student is ready for the corresponding performance piece in the Performance Book. A student learning only the Lesson Book pieces would receive a steady diet of preparation without the fulfillment of learning any of the compositions for which he is preparing! In this series, therefore, the Performance Books are an essential component of the course.

Many teachers have come to enjoy Keith Snell’s Piano Repertoire series, also known as the Kjos Piano Library. Piano Town was written specifically to lead into the Repertoire series. When a student completes level four of Piano Town, he or she is ready to begin level three of the Repertoire books in the Kjos Piano Library. The theory, scale, and etude books of the Library provide natural extensions of the theory and technic books of Piano Town as well.

The Kjos catalog suggests that the preparatory level of the Kjos Piano Library can be used with level two of Piano Town; level one of the Library can be used with level three of Piano Town; and level two of the Library can be used with level four of Piano Town. The teacher will need to decide if this additional classical repertoire is needed beyond what is already contained in the course books. If the teacher does decide to include this additional literature, perhaps the Essential Piano Repertoire book would make the best choice in that situation.

I am sure that some teachers will opt for switching to the KPL entirely when the student reaches Piano Town level two. I would consider that course to be an unfortunate decision. The primary benefit of PT lies in its multikey teaching. Switching to a literature-only curriculum deprives a student of the benefits of a skill-based, comprehensive approach. Staying with Piano Town through level four and then following that with level three of KPL is the approach recommended by the authors; it is also the blueprint I find to provide the best overall training.

I consider Piano Town to be one of the better choices teachers can make for a core method. A teacher can use this course with confidence, knowing that the method provides thorough development of all of the important objectives of a well-rounded music education. If used with the four basic components, the course provides both the skill content and the musicality needed for a complete program. I look for this series to become increasingly popular as teachers discover its outstanding worth.

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