

Course Review – “New Horizons: Piano Course for Busy Adults” by Walter and Carol Noona

By Kevin M Coan

I was delighted to learn that Lorenz/Heritage Music Press has decided to put this two-level piano course back in print through their “print on demand” program. One can only order the books directly from Lorenz. When an order is placed, Lorenz prints the necessary copies the next day and mails them out. The entire process takes a day or two at the most. The copies are in black and white. For this course, that has little impact on the end product.

“New Horizons” was written for the adult who has a genuine interest in learning to play both classical and popular music well, and who wants to learn basic musicianship skills such as improvising, arranging, and transposing, but who does not have a lot of spare time to devote to this endeavor. The course uses a streamlined approach that avoids “busy work” while still providing sufficient practice of important concepts and skills. The pacing of the curriculum is moderately accelerated to enable the adult to experience the gratification of mature-sounding music early in the program. The course avoids gimmicks, however, and focuses on solid pedagogy that will enable the student to retain the material even if the student is able to study the piano only for a couple of years.

“New Horizons” consists of two all-in-one, 96-page volumes that cover the same ground as four standard teaching levels. Each level is divided into ten units, with each unit taking a typical student a month or so to complete. The sequence of topics is quite similar to the “Noona Basic Piano” method, and several pieces appear in both courses. “New Horizons” reaches about the same level as Book 10 of “Noona Basic Piano,” with the exception of the inclusion of “Fur Elise.” The authors admit that some students may find “Fur Elise” to be a bit on the difficult side.

Like all of the Noona courses, “New Horizons” blends guidepost and interval music reading with a solid multikey study. The course begins with a pre-staff unit that introduces the student to letter-name notation. Rhythms include note values of quarter notes through whole notes. The student becomes acquainted with intervals through the fifth on the keyboard, and he learns to play melodies harmonized with tonic chords and a two-note version of the dominant-seventh chord.

Reading begins in unit 2 by presenting the students with the two clef guideposts plus the middle C guidepost. The first pieces use the C major pentascale pattern. The student is taught to play hands together quite quickly, in unison at first, and then in parallel motion. The book includes specific instruction regarding intervals on the staff through the fifth. By the end of the second unit, the student is playing

melodies harmonized with I and V7 chords, and he or she will have encountered at least one piece that requires him or her to extend one finger beyond a purely five finger position.

The third unit introduces accidentals, eighth notes, the G major pentascale position, and legato thirds. The student is given the choice of “opting out” on the legato thirds if he or she finds the coordination too difficult.

In unit four, the student focuses on reading from guideposts: Bass C, bass clef f, middle C, treble clef G, and treble C. The student is taught to measure from a known guidepost to an unknown note (i.e., to spot place). Interval recognition is extended to sixths.

Unit 5 adds the IV chord to the student’s vocabulary, and two additional guideposts to his or her reading skill. Dotted quarter notes are developed in a couple of the pieces. The unit concludes with several selections where the student must complete the harmonization.

Unit 6 introduces the key of F major, the concept of minor keys, and syncopation. The student learns how to take a simple version of “Mary Ann” and to re-arrange it using various accompaniment patterns and variations. He also learns to change the piece to a minor sound.

Improvising skills continue to be developed in unit 7 as the student learns to use intervals through the octave and additional chord techniques to arrange several pieces in various styles. In particular, he or she plays “Scarborough Fair” in three different versions. The blues pattern is also presented.

Unit 8 presents the key of D major, 6/8 time, and additional accompaniment patterns. The student’s reading range is extended to include the ledger lines.

In unit 9, the student encounters scales, first in tetrachord fashion divided between the hands, and later in standard form with finger crossings. He or she learns the key of A, the order of sharps and flats, and the rules for finding the tonic given a key signature. Additional work with 6/8 time develops the concept of compound time.

The final unit of volume 1 completes the group II keys with several pieces in E major. Cut time is used in one of the pieces. The book concludes with an arrangement of Offenbach’s “Can Can.” Although volume 1 includes only pieces in the group I and II keys, the appendix includes pentascales and cadences in the group III and group IV keys for reference. All of the major scales are also printed out in the reference section. Volume 1 reaches the same difficulty as level 2 of Noona Comprehensive Piano or book 6 of Noona Basic Piano.

Volume 2 begins with a review unit for students transferring from other methods. Lead lines, major and minor triads, chord symbols, and the C, G, F, D, A, and E major scales are included in this review. A major thread of volume 2 focuses on accompaniment patterns. In the first unit, the waltz bass is featured as the students learn the “Blue Danube Waltz.” “Morning Has Broken” is featured in the lead line work.

Unit 2 features minor scales in all three forms. The concept of relative minor keys is developed. Pieces focus on the key of A minor. Compound time is reviewed as students form several accompaniment patterns to “Johnny Comes Marching Home.” The unit concludes with an arranging project that shows the

student some very effective techniques for creating variations. The theme from the "Polovtsian Dances" makes a rich repertoire selection.

Unit 3 gives the key of D minor some attention, followed by the western bass accompaniment pattern in "Camptown Races." Chord inversions are included in the major technical project for the unit.

Unit 4 develops the key of Em with additional work on accompaniment patterns and variations. "Minka," "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen," and "Greensleeves" are featured pieces. Rolled chords occur in "Greensleeves."

Unit 5 features eighth-note triplets plus the keys of Bb major and G minor. Favorite student pieces are included in this unit: "Beautiful Dreamer," "Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho," "Amazing Grace," and "America, the Beautiful." Unit 5 reaches the same level as level 3 of most standard courses.

Unit 6 introduces sixteenth notes, including the various combinations. The requisite "Arabesque" by Burgmuller is present, of course, plus Bach's "Musette in D." Several pieces feature the key of Eb major.

Unit 7 presents the keys of C minor and Ab major. The Burgmuller "Ballade" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" are student favorites developing these two keys. Syncopation is discussed, although syncopated rhythms have been featured since early volume 1.

Unit 8 concludes the key sequence with the key of F minor. "Spinning Song" is the featured repertoire piece; it is used to present the concept of parallel major and minor keys. Augmented and diminished triads are drilled and used in a lead-line harmonization exercise.

Unit 9 features the chromatic scale. Additional work with triads introduces double sharps and double flats. Seventh chords are also taught, and a major harmonization project is included that utilizes all five types of seventh chords. The 1-5-10 bass pattern is also taught in the project.

Unit 10 concludes with a brief overview of the periods of music history. Featured repertoire includes "Minuet in G" from the AMB Notebook, "Für Elise," Chopin's "Mazurka in F," and an adaptation of Joplin's "The Entertainer." Reference material includes the harmonic and melodic minor scales in all keys.

"New Horizons" makes a great choice for a basal course for about 50% of adults, those who pick up new concepts easily and who are willing to practice consistently and complete assignments faithfully. Students who need a lot of reinforcement of new concepts and skills will probably find this method to progress too rapidly for their needs.

The method will also not be a good fit for students who only want to learn to play music "from the notes"; there is quite a bit of emphasis on creativity, harmonization, improvising, arranging, and composing in this method. While the course prepares students adequately for classical performance, the method really focuses more on the skills needed for pop music improvisation. Unlike many modern methods, the course includes considerable multikey work, covering keys up to four sharps or flats.

For the right student, "New Horizons" is a very effective course that enables the student to cover a lot of ground in a short time. The course deserves greater use than it has experienced since its publication. The quality of instruction in the method is much higher than most of the mediocre courses on the market. The

course, however, will fail with weaker students; teachers will need to evaluate the caliber of a potential student thoroughly before deciding on this method.

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