

Course Review – Hal Leonard Student Piano Library

By Kevin M Coan

One of my least favorite things to do is to publish a review of a piano course that is well liked and widely used, when my comments are more on the critical side than on the praise side. Such is the case with the “Hal Leonard Student Piano Library.” Perhaps it is best to outline what a good piano course should consist of, and then explain how the HL course falls short of those objectives.

It is my conviction that a method should consist of a sequence of skill development units, with those skills then being applied to good musical repertoire. The skills should be the driving element of the method. In the “old school” thinking, a method was a series of pieces, with skills being taught “as needed.” The repertoire was the driving element of the course.

When the emphasis is on the “process” of learning these skills, rather than on the “product” of the repertoire, the skills become TRANSFERABLE to all types of repertoire. If the student just learns pieces, he is dependent on the teacher for each piece. It is extremely important, therefore for a method to be skill-based.

One of Frances Clark’s famous lines was this: “A student should never be asked to do anything that he or she has not been prepared for.” Thus, he or she should never encounter something in a piece of music that requires a skill or concept that has not first been taught and practiced prior to learning the piece. I hold to that philosophy entirely. When that maxim is violated, the teacher presents opportunity for frustration on the part of the pupil.

Any presentation of a skill should follow a three-fold process: preparation, presentation, and follow-through. In the preparation phase, the student should encounter the concept in a non-formal way, without being asked to learn any symbols or practice any skills. He simply becomes aware that the concept or skill exists and will need, at some point, to be learned or practiced. During the presentation phase, the student learns the skill or concept, learns the symbols for the skill or concept, and develops a full understanding of the concept in relationship to the “whole” and in relationship to the skills and concepts he already knows. Part of the presentation phase includes the application of the new skill or concept to practical repertoire. In the follow through phase, the student continues to receive additional practice of the skill, and additional opportunities to use the skill.

Only a skill-driven method is going to include these steps. In a piece-driven method, the maxim is “something new every lesson,” to quote John Thompson. Lessons consist of learning new pieces, with new pieces including new skills and concepts. There is not the spiraling of skills into

cycles of preparation, presentation, and follow-through. While the student may be learning a lot of fancy pieces, he or she is not mastering skills that can then be transferred to the independent learning of any piece using those same skills.

Hal Leonard advertises quite openly that the reason one should use their course is that they offer beautiful music. Indeed, they do. But that is just about all that they offer. The music is the totality of the course. The skills are “tacked on” as needed, rather than becoming the driving force of the course.

The HL authors talk in their workshops about the reason for publishing a music-driven course. In their belief, students do not practice. They believe that if the music is interesting enough, it will motivate the student to practice. They also believe that students are not interested in learning skills, except to the extent that those skills let them learn the pieces. Thus, the piece becomes the driver of the method, and the skills are tacked on.

In the HL method, the “method” book is not the foundation for developing the skills of the other books in the library. Continually throughout the library, new skills are included in the supporting repertoire, even in the Solo Books that specifically “go” with the course. In Book Three, for example, most of the pieces in the Lesson Book are in five-finger positions with some use of extensions to sixths. In the Solo Book, however, the pieces include some rather challenging position shifts for which there has been no preparatory work whatsoever. If one uses any of the supplemental books, there are even more challenges and concepts that have not been taught in the course. The result is that the students become frustrated when using those books. Quite a few teachers have commented on problems they have had with HL Solo Book 3 in this regard.

Because skills are secondary, quite a number of them are delayed. If the teacher uses supplemental music from another source, the student is likely to encounter the need for those skills well before they have been developed properly in the method. Unless the teacher is highly skilled (and some are, thank goodness!), there is not going to be a careful, systematic development of that skill. Rather, it is going to get “thrown in” in the process of learning the piece. With HL, most of the skills a student learns happen in the supplemental music, not in the method itself. That, in my opinion, is not the product of a good method.

An important part of the development of skills is a mastery of the major and minor keys. In order to be a competent musician, a student needs to master the notes, key signatures, scales, cadences, and arpeggios of every major and minor key. That does not happen by itself. It only happens when there is a systematic presentation of the keys, with specific training in each of these elements. There is quite a bit of research, especially that of Robert Pace and James Bastien, that supports the philosophy that the earlier that development takes place, the more likely it will become a permanent part of the student’s capabilities. When students encounter only the key of C, or even only the keys of C, G, and F, for an extended time period, they develop a mindset that makes adding more sharps and flats to the key signature difficult. I have had teachers tell me, “My students aren’t afraid of key signatures.” I then give those same students

a simple piece from Book One of Pace's Music for Piano that uses a five-finger position in B major, for example, harmonized with I and V7 chords. Those same students are at a total loss as to what to do. They fumble through the piece, and seldom play it correctly. If, however, they have received proper multikey training starting in level 1 or 2, they can sit down and play that piece instantly from sight.

Hal Leonard is as anti-multikey as a course could get. In its original edition, key signatures were not even introduced until Book 4. In the revised edition, they are at least introduced in Book 3, which is definitely an improvement. However, only key signatures with one sharp or flat are included. Book 4 makes no continuation of that development. In fact, Book 4 has only pieces with no key signature or with one sharp in the key signature. We have to wait until Book 5 to return to the key of F major and D minor, and we have to wait until the end of Book 5 to encounter keys with two sharps or flats. There is nothing in the entire course that develops the scales, key signatures, cadences, and arpeggios, etc., of all of the major and minor keys. There are not even scales in any key beyond the two sharp or flat level. Again, this is not my definition of a good course.

A good piano course has a systematic approach to learning to read music. The course also avoids allowing the student to develop incorrect reading habits along the way. We need to realize that the human mind will always revert to the elements that it is familiar with rather than learning new concepts, if it is given the opportunity to do so. For example, if we teach our students to play from finger number notation, and we then present them with letter name melodies that still have the finger numbers written in, their minds will not read the letter names at all. It is a myth to believe that the student will begin to associate the letter names and the numbers. Rather, their minds will read the numbers only, and ignore the letters altogether. When it comes to reading staff notation, the human mind will do anything it can to avoid having to learn this strange notation that musicians have come up with. While the teacher thinks the student is learning how to read music, that may not truly be happening at all in the mind of the student.

With Hal Leonard, in Book 1, when staff reading is introduced, there are pictures of where the student has to place his or her hands. In addition, there are finger numbers on the first note of every motive that begins on the staff, and whenever the melody changes staves. As long as the student understands intervallic reading, he can learn every piece in Book 1 without having to learn a single note by its note name. He simply has to look at the picture, start with the finger written in the music, and read by interval from there.

That would be perfectly acceptable if the course later had units that developed note name reading. But Book 2 begins right away in other hand positions, with additional notes being added to what the student already does not know. Moreover, he does not know the notes he is supposed to know, because he did not have to learn them in order to play the pieces in Book 1. The teacher is unaware that he does not know those notes, because he has been playing the pieces successfully all along. But the mind, being normal and human, has substituted an incorrect process that permitted itself to avoid having to learn the note names.

Hal Leonard does teach the C, G, and F guideposts. It does not, however, teach any other guideposts after that. Rather, the course requires the student to memorize note names a few at a time. This reverts back to the old school approach of note memorization. There is no systematic development of a PROCESS in which the student learns a way to decode ANY note independently. The result is that when students hit Book 3, they have an insufficient command of the notes, and they have no strategy for figuring out the ones they do not know. Progress in HL often comes to a grinding halt right at Book 3. The teachers who teach HL sometimes say "I do not like the course from Book 3 on, but I like Books 1 and 2." What they do not realize is that the problem they are encountering in Book 3 was created by Books 1 and 2 when those books failed to give the student an effective method of learning the notes.

A good piano method has a systematic development of technical skills. The student will be learning finger dexterity, phrasing, scales, etc., in all of the keys in a systematic manner. Once this process is underway, the student will be able to transfer those skills to just about any pieces that use the skills. In HL, because the pieces are the driving element, the technical drills are specific to the pieces. The technic drills ARE good preparations for the specific pieces they accompany. They are not, however, a systematic development of GENERAL skills that are transferable to all other pieces. They prepare the student ONLY for the piece they are tied to.

A good piano course includes preparation for the classics. In a good course, there are units that develop an understanding of the various periods of music history. There are also units that develop ornaments and other stylistic elements. Once those SKILLS have been learned, they can be applied to ALL of the music of each period. But once again, HL is PIECE driven. The only development of ornamentation happens when the course writes out the realization of the particular ornament in the piece. There is no teaching of how to perform that element in any situation. There is also no development of the differences in performing each ornament in the various historical styles.

A good piano course has good music. Hal Leonard wins first place in that regard. True to its promise, the Hal Leonard Student Piano Library offers good music. So do most supplemental repertoire collections. What the HL course does not offer is a piano course. It is a collection of pieces driven by the pieces themselves. It is not a systematic source of instruction in the skills needed to play all pieces.

What is the best use of all of these beautiful pieces, then? In my opinion, the best use of these pieces is the same as the best use of any repertoire collection: use them as supplemental repertoire to a GOOD piano method. Since the HL course delays presenting skills, there is seldom the situation whereby the student would be encountering a needed skill in one of the HL pieces that had not already been properly taught and developed in the GOOD piano method. Thus, the HL pieces become outstanding ways to apply the skills developed by another method.

Yes, HL has good music. The best a teacher can do is to use that music in a supplemental way. What the HL course does not have is good skill and concept development. It does not purport to

be a skill-driven method. It is not multikey. It does not even have a reference table with all of the scales. It enables students to develop false reading habits that skirt the learning of notes until the student is too far down the road and the teacher finally notices. It does not teach historical styles. All in all, it only teaches skills specific to the pieces in the course. Once the student completes the course, he or she is still teacher-dependent, because he or she has not acquired a systematic set of skills that can be transferred to ALL other music. That, in my mind, does not make for a good method.

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