

# Course Review – Noona Basic Piano

By Kevin M Coan

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*The Noona Basic Piano course is perhaps my favorite course to teach. I would rank only “Artistry at the Piano,” “Celebrate Piano,” and Noona’s “Mainstreams Piano Method” slightly higher than this course. I have a “history” with Noona Basic in terms of student success. I have never had a single student failure with this method. It is also the course I chose for teaching my own son.*

*I consistently recommend that new piano teachers begin by using this course. Subtitled the “All-in-One” course, NBP is a true “turn-the-page-and-teach” method that removes the burden of having to coordinate several books at the same time. New teachers often have difficulty with lesson time management, and one or more books get neglected in a given lesson. With NBP, when time slips away, the teacher simply does not assign as much in that lesson as might be customary. Since NBP is also a method in which all students can be successful, the new teacher does not have to be concerned that the course will progress faster than some of his or her students can handle. Each book is divided into “Lessons,” which are really units that take two or three weeks to complete. The teacher should not feel bound to these divisions; it is perfectly acceptable to assign a page or two from the end of Lesson 3 and a couple of pages from the beginning of Lesson 4 in the same week.*

*A key feature of this course is that the student progresses rapidly through each individual book. Instead of having to assign one or two pages from each of several books, the teacher assigns four to eight pages all from one book. Therefore, the students complete each book in two to four months. This gives the student a sense of accomplishment. He or she is proud to boast that he or she is in Book Four after only a year and three months of lessons. Of course, the teacher is fully aware that the student is about a third of the way through level two, but the student can focus on the book numbers for his bragging rights.*

*NBP offers two choices for the beginning book. Students who are five, six, or seven begin in the Starter Book. After completing that level, they progress to Book 1, but they skip the first two Lessons (units) in that book and continue with Lessons 3 through 7. Completion of the Starter Book does not qualify a student to skip Book 1. Students who are eight or older can start directly in Book 1, but they start with Lesson 1. Note that Book 1 is a necessary level regardless of age.*

*Noona Basic Piano is a gradual multikey method. By the end of the course, the student will have played several pieces in every major key and in every minor key that begins on a white key. In this area, NBP is superior to Noona Comprehensive Piano Library, which omits actual pieces in the major keys of Ab, Db, Gb, and B. Noona Basic differs from the Comprehensive course in that Basic uses more teaching pieces, which are needed for the multikey work, and Comprehensive includes more original classical masterworks. In level 3 (Books 7-9), Noona Basic consists of 75% Noona compositions and 25% classical pieces. In level 4 (Books 10-12), Basic uses 50% Noona works and 50% classical works. Noona Comprehensive utilizes 25% Noona pieces and 75% classic masterworks at both levels.*

*The multikey work forms the skeleton of the Noona Basic method. The keys of C, F, and G are taught in Book 2 (level 1B) and utilized in Books 3 and 4. Beginning in Book 5, each book contains an entire unit devoted to the study of a key. In some books, two units cover two different keys. The following is the overall sequence:*

*Book 2 – C major, G major, F major*

*Book 5 – D major*

*Book 6 – A major*

*Book 7 – E major*

*Book 8 – Bb major, A minor, D minor, E minor*

*Book 9 – Eb major, G minor, B minor*

*Book 10 – Ab major, C minor, F minor*

*Book 11 – Db major, B major*

*Book 12 – F# major, Gb major*

*Reading is developed using a guidepost and interval strategy. Initially, the student reads finger-number melodies, which may be taught either by “reading” or by rote. I recommend that these melodies be taught by rote (imitation) at first. Once the student knows the piece, the teacher can show the student the notation that supports the piece the student has been playing. The only concepts to be developed at that point are finger numbers, dynamics, and rhythmic values. By teaching those pieces by rote first, the teacher avoids having the student develop the habit of note-by-note reading.*

*The second phase of the reading strategy is to introduce letter name melodies. The concept of playing in a rhythm will most likely be established by that time, and the teacher can present these pieces as a type of reading exercise. Both the middle C and C major positions are utilized in this phase.*

*Staff reading is introduced by teaching the student the guideposts of middle C, bass F, and treble G. The student is then shown how to follow an intervallic contour by playing simple melodies that include only stepwise motion. Next, the bass C guidepost is taught, and the student is shown how to read in a C major position from the known guideposts. The intervals of 2nds and 3rds are utilized in these early pieces.*

*Beginning in Lesson 5 of Book 1, the student moves to the G major pattern, and the intervals of 4ths and 5ths are taught. Lesson 6 introduces the middle C position and eighth notes, and Lesson 7 introduces accidentals.*

*It is important for the teacher to understand the reading strategy that is being used in Book 1. The student is NOT expected to have learned the names of any notes other than the guideposts at this stage. Rather, the student is told which position each piece is in. Through a guided reading process, he or she is helped to identify the starting note of each phrase. He or she then reads the remainder of each phrase independently by direction and interval, not note by note.*

*In Book 2, the student is taught the process of “measuring,” also known as “spot placing” in some courses. When a student encounters a note he or she does not yet know, he or she is taught to find the nearest guidepost note and then to measure the interval from the guidepost to the target note. The entire note reading development depends on the student’s mastery of this process.*

*New material is introduced in the subsequent Books as follows:*

*Book 2 (level 1B) – The book begins with review and drill on reading and accidentals. This is followed by an extensive development of measuring from guideposts, using pieces that do not stay in standard pentascale positions. In Book 2, all of the staff guideposts are introduced. Key signatures occur for the first time in keys of F and G major. Quite a number of pieces include two and three note phrases, as well as phrases of longer duration. Dotted quarter/eighth note rhythms and several syncopated rhythms occur in some of the pieces. The use of the damper pedal is also developed.*

*Book 3 (level 1C) – Triads are presented (for the first time), and I and V7 progressions occur in many of the pieces. A presentation of sixths enables the student to experience three-note versions of these chords. Transposing is carefully taught. At this level, there is a systematic progression of studies and pieces to develop position shifts. The concepts of contrary and parallel motion are developed and featured in pieces.*

*Book 4 (level 2A) – This level includes extensive development of ledger line reading and ledger C guideposts, polymetric music and contemporary sounds. Numerous pieces focus on phrasing and articulation. This level is a consolidation level to develop reading skills, with outstanding recital selections in the process.*

*Book 5 (level 2B) – Topics include sevenths, half and whole steps, tetrachord scales, the IV chord, compound time, finger crossings, preparation for traditional scale fingerings, and the key of D major.*

*Book 6 (level 2C) – Order of sharps and sharp key signatures are presented. Traditional scales are developed in this level, with each unit focusing on a key with pieces to apply the scale and chord work to. Keys of C, F, G, D, and A are included. This book is also extremely valuable as a supplement for students using other methods because of its extensive scale work.*

*Book 7 (level 3A) – Chord inversions receive special emphasis at this level. Other topics include the key of E major, syncopation, chromatic scales, and scales in parallel and contrary motion.*

*Book 8 (level 3B) – Minor keys of Am, Em, and Dm are introduced, along with flat key signatures, the key of Bb major, and triplets. This level includes various accompaniment patterns. Numerous classical pieces begin to appear at this level.*

*Book 9 (level 3C) – Sixteenth notes are featured in a number of pieces. The keys of Eb major, B minor, and G minor are featured. Counterpoint is formally presented. The G major “Intrata” by Bach is included. “Caramba!” is an exciting recital piece in Spanish style.*

*Book 10 (level 4A) – Keys of Ab major, C minor, and F minor are presented. Other topics include the various combinations of sixteenth notes, including dotted eighths, pentatonic and whole-tone scales, and the concept of style. The Burgmuller “Ballade” and Ellmenreich’s “Spinning Song” are featured pieces along with some Schumann favorites. A very playable version of the Star Spangled Banner in Ab makes a good recital piece.*

*Book 11 (level 4B) – The four periods of musical style are thoroughly developed, including the topic of ornamentation. The keys of B and Db major each have a unit to themselves. Augmented and diminished triads are featured. Sonatina form is studied and applied to the Clementi C Major Sonatina. The Gm Minuet from the A.M Bach Notebook is another teaching favorite included in this level.*

*Book 12 (level 4C) – Keys of F# and Gb major are presented, including an incredibly exciting blues number in F# major with double sharps. Double flats occur in one Gb piece. Variations of seventh chords are studied, and arpeggios are practiced in all keys. More work with style and form complete the course. Fur Elise is the concluding reward piece.*

*Although Noona Basic Piano is designed as a “theory light” method, the course contains more theory work than many competing courses. All of the important topics are included in the course; there is simply less written drill than with the Noona Comprehensive method. Harmonization, transposition, improvisation, composition, and arranging are all included in this course. There are no specific ear training exercises, however.*

*The authors assume that the teacher will use flash cards to develop note recognition, beginning in Book Two. Teachers who prefer written reinforcement may wish to use a note speller. I sometimes use the Schaum Key-Note Spellers or the older Schaum Note Spellers with this series. I also have used Right from the Start as a supplemental sight reading resource starting also with Book Two.*

*There are plenty of pieces that develop traditional tri-chord harmony, which expands in later levels to a wider array of chords, inversions, and cadences. Various accompaniment patterns give variety in the later levels to the blocked chords used in the earlier levels. The compositions in NBP, however, include a reasonable supply of non-chordal styles, including some contrapuntal work.*

*Because the student uses only one book at a time, this course is easy to supplement. The teacher will need to guard against over-supplementing this course, however. Since lesson, technic, theory, and repertoire are all included in each book, the teacher should consider this course to be the equivalent of three or four books. Perhaps no more than one or two supplemental books should be added to the student’s load, or the course will begin to drag. Instead, the teacher should consider assigning additional pages within the course itself rather than continually seeking supplemental work in more and more books.*

*In my opinion, Noona Basic Piano is one of the best courses currently on the market. It is an easy-to-use method, especially for new teachers, and it is one that a wide range of students can be successful with. Although its name implies a rather bare-bones approach, the course is anything but that. All of the important topics are taught and taught well. A student completing this method will be well on his or her way towards preparing for the advanced works of the masterworks.*

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