

Course Review – Monell: It's Piano Lesson Time

By Kevin M Coan

In my honest opinion, there is a place for purely recreational piano study. I am referring to those students who want to take piano lessons purely for their on enjoyment. They have little interest in theory and music appreciation except to the extent needed to be able to play their music properly. Often these students are on the slower side, or at least want a course that offers a path of little resistance. For this type of student, William Monell's new piano method, "It's Piano Lesson Time," fits the bill well.

IPLT is an all-in-one course in seven volumes. Like other all-in-one methods, the course takes more than one "book" to cover a "level." The seven books of the course cover the ground of a typical four or five level method. The final piece of the course is the Prelude in C from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, including a printing of the melody to Ave Maria.

IPLT has two paths to the beginning level. For students up to seven years of age, there is a two-part beginning program entitled "Piano for the Small Fry." Some teachers will recognize a companion program by the same publisher for guitar. For students eight and up, that same ground is presented in Book 1 of It's Piano Lesson Time. Students who complete books 1-A and 1-B of Piano for the Small Fry progress directly into Book 2 of It's Piano Lesson Time. Naturally, those who complete IPLT Book 1 also progress to Book 2.

The books are quite attractive, with illustrations that look like they came out of an elementary basal reader. There are pages devoted to written exercises others that feature technical work. The course is "piece" oriented, however; the majority of the pages feature performable music

The course advertises itself as an "easy, basic course." There is nothing false in that advertisement: in fact, one would be hard pressed to find a better description of the method. Just about any student would be successful with this course, which is the intention of its author.

The course is entirely traditional in its approach. There is no pre-staff period in the course; on-staff note reading begins at the first lesson. The first pieces start with middle C plus one other note. New notes are added one or two at a time working outward from middle C. Memorization of notes is the only reading strategy emphasized in the program. Intervals are taught, but not as a reading strategy. The student is expected to learn each new note as it is presented. Several pieces and numerous written drills provide the needed practice to make this happen. The student in IPLT Book 1 reaches page 25 before all five notes in each hand have been presented.

The concept of step and skip first appears on page 25 as well. The first topic that does not relate directly to note leaning and rhythm is that of phrases and slurs. The student is taught to drop

onto each phrase and to lift the hand at the end. The word legato appears for the first time in connection with the slurs. Dynamics appear for the first time after the presentation on slurs. Staccato touch follows as a contrast to the legato touch just presented.

Accidentals are presented in Book 1 (and in Piano for the Small Fry Book 1-B) in the last third of the book. They are presented correctly from the start, avoiding any concept of sharps or flats only being black keys.

The hands in this course stay in the middle C position until page 51 of IPLT. The only moves happen in conjunction with the octave-higher and octave-lower signs. Page 52 presents the C major hand position, which is used for the remainder of the book. Intervals through the fifth are presented in both melodic and harmonic form. Harmonic intervals form the harmonies used in Book 1.

A surprise for me was the inclusion of the damper pedal in book 1 (1-B of PftSF). It is not only an isolated instance; rather, there are “pedal studies” included at this phase. This seems inappropriate for the type of student who would use this course. I also found it interesting that ear training is included in the course. Although this is a “theory light” type of course, sufficient theory is presented to form an adequate study should the student “discover he or she has talent” and desire to pursue advanced music study.

Scales appear quite early in the course (Book 1), and they are used to justify the existence of key signatures when they appear in Book 2. These appear with finger crossings in both contrary and parallel motion with hands together. Eighth notes also find their way into the music as early as page 10 of Book 2. Extensions out of the five-finger position also begin in Book 2.

Harmonic study continues in Book 2 with the presentation of the triad. Only the I chord is used in Book 2, however. The other harmonies are limited to two-note intervals. The student learns these chords in the keys of C and F major.

Book 3 begins with a study of the key of G major. This is followed by the presentation of the remaining notes of the staff. Drills using the Every Good Boy approach abound to help the student master staff note names. The dotted quarter note is presented in Book 3. Sufficient practice is given through numerous pieces to help the student master that concept.

Book 3 also begins the process of filling out the remaining notes of the primary chords. Most of the rest of Book 3 is spent developing proficiency in the I IV and V7 harmonies in the keys of C, G, and F. Hand positions extend to the octave include melodies that use the 1, 3, 5, and 8 notes of the scale with one hand.

Book 4 develops proficiency with leger lines. It also introduces triplets, transposing, and the keys of D major and D minor. Hand over hand arpeggios are used in a couple of pieces.

Additional minor keys are developed in Book 5: Am, Dm, and Em. Connected pedal is practiced in several pieces. Moving sixths in one hand appear in a couple of selections. Chord inversions

receive special emphasis in this level. Two-part passages in a single hand are taught towards the end of the book. 3/8 time appears for the first time in this book. Sixteenth notes are also studied.

Counterpoint is developed in book 6. This level also develops legato thirds and sixths, syncopation, the chromatic scale, and more work with compound time, including 6/8. Dotted eighth/sixteenth combinations are studied. The four historical periods receive nice treatment, although original pieces appear for only some of the periods. Major, perfect, and minor intervals are explained and used. The level of difficulty includes Burgmuller's Music of the Angels.

Level 7 introduces the keys of Gm and Cm. One song teaches the student to play an accompaniment against a vocal part. Augmented and diminished triads are thoroughly explained. Seventh chords are taught, and double-sharps and double-flats are explained. The trill is correctly explained, differentiating its performance in various historical styles. The final piece of the book is the C major Prelude from the Well-Tempered Clavier.

There are not many original classical pieces in the course; most of the pieces are either simplifications, arrangements of orchestral pieces, or Monell originals. Quite a few of the pieces are chordal, although later books do teach counterpoint.

All in all, the course offers a nice choice for the casual student, progressing at a comfortable pace and teaching the essentials needed for the targeted audience. I would not recommend the course for serious study. The course does not purport to be multikey; C, D, G, and D are the only major keys included. The study of the classics does not receive major emphasis. But for the kind of student that the book is advertised towards, the course is a nice addition to the choices available.

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