

Course Review – Noona Comprehensive Piano Library

By Kevin M Coan

Noona Comprehensive Piano Library is exactly what its name implies: a thorough, comprehensive program of piano instruction that leaves no important aspect of piano study untaught. It features a multiple book structure, with a “Lesson Book,” “Playing with Sound” (theory and ear training), and “Complete Performer” (both TECHNIC and REPERTOIRE combined) at each level. The teacher should be aware that the “Complete Performer” books are not just repertoire books, as is the case with most other courses, but rather a combination of both technical studies and recital material. For the Primer and Starter levels, “Complete Performer” is re-titled as “Young Performer.” In addition, at three of the levels, a “Comprehensive Skills” book provides essential work with scales, chords, and arpeggios.

The Library includes several resources for supplemental recital material as well. “Time to Play” is a collection of two, three, and four-page solos for each level. “Four Hand Duets” offers ensemble material for each level (except Primer/Starter), and “All That Jazz and Pizzazz” features music in the popular vein.

NCPL is designed for the average student, although it is challenging enough for use with brighter students as well. If the Noona Magic program is used for the beginning stage, this course can also accommodate the needs of the somewhat slower student. The course is not designed for special needs students, however. Such students would do better either with the Noona Basic Piano method, or with a more success-oriented course such as the “David Carr Glover Method for Piano.”

NCPL is a gradual multikey method that features an early introduction to key signatures and a systematic development of all major and minor keys by the end of the course. Scales, chords, cadences, and arpeggios are thoroughly developed in all the keys, and pieces are featured in the keys of C, G, F, D, A, E, Bb, and Eb major and Am, Dm, Em, and Gb minor. I would have preferred to have at least one piece in every major key. I personally use the level 4 Lesson book from “Piano Town” to provide pieces in the missing keys of Ab, Db, Gb, and B major.

NCPL differs from “Noona Basic Piano” in a couple of ways. First is the fact that NCPL is organized using multiple books at each level, where NBP is an “all-in-one” approach. Second, NCPL includes considerably more classical masterworks at the intermediate levels than NBP. Noona Basic has 25% classics at level 3 and 50% at level 4. The Comprehensive method has 75% classics at both levels. NCPL also provides considerably more written work than NBP, and the theory work includes specific exercises in ear training. Another difference is that NBP does not begin in the middle C position, whereas NCPL does. Both methods focus on the development of intervallic reading from guideposts, regardless of the position they begin with.

The unique feature of NCPL lies in their "Complete Performer" books. These books integrate technic and performance repertoire to ensure that technical drill does not become an isolated entity unto itself. Each new technical skill is presented, and then drilled in exercises and etudes. Finally, the newly mastered skill is applied to exciting solos and recital pieces. When the student sees the reason for the technical drill, they are more likely to put their heart into practicing the skills. This makes the NCPL "Complete Performer" books more like the Piano Adventures "Technique and Artistry" books rather than the PA "Performance" books.

The Noona Comprehensive Piano Library offers two beginning points. For students in the 4-7 age range, there is the "Music Magic" program. Music Magic is comprised of two levels: PrePrimer and Primer. The PrePrimer consists entirely of off-staff work, utilizing both finger number melodies and letter name melodies. The Primer level consists solely of staff reading in the middle C and C major positions. For students in the 7 and up age range, there is a Starter Level that covers this same material in a single level. Many of the pieces in the Primer level are also included in the Starter book, although the latter progresses much more rapidly. Both the Primer and Starter levels lead directly into level one, which is then followed by level one-plus (1+), then levels two, three, and four. The 1 and 1+ levels are two separate levels, similar to the 1A and 1B levels of some of the other methods. Level 1+ is NOT an optional level, as one reviewer incorrectly stated.

The reading approach in NCPL utilizes a guidepost/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. By teaching those pieces by rote first, the teacher avoids having the student develop the habit of note-by-note reading. The only concepts to be developed at that point are finger numbers, dynamics, and rhythmic values.

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 begins by presenting the guideposts of middle C, treble G, and bass F. The student is then taught to measure from those guideposts to the starting note (i.e., spot placing), and then to read the remainder of the phrase or motive by interval. Middle C is used as the first starting position, followed by work in the C major position. This is NOT a traditional middle C course, however, in which the individual notes are taught one at a time. Rather, reading is approached in groups of notes by following the melodic contour intervallically. In the process of continually spot placing unknown notes, the student masters the names of the individual notes.

Level One, which follows either the Primer or Starter level, continues the intervallic work with the introduction of 4ths and 5ths. The G position follows this work, and accidentals are introduced. Key signatures for the keys of G and F are also taught at this level, using pieces that actually utilize the sharp or flat from the key signature. A nice feature of the work with accidentals and key signatures is that there are specific drills on the finger movements and position shifts required to play some of the accidental combinations. In the latter portion of Level One, additional guideposts are introduced, and additional work with spot placing enables the student to play several pieces outside of the pentascale position.

Level One is followed by Level One-Plus (1+). This is NOT an optional level, but rather a standard level. It is NCPL's name for what other courses call level 1B. (I have seen a couple of teachers try to skip this level, and every one of them has reported a disaster in so doing!) Level One-Plus begins to lay the groundwork for harmonic study. Tonic and dominant-seventh progressions are taught, using a three-note version of the tonic, and an interval of a second for the dominant-seventh sound. Specific studies in transposition, harmonization, and improvisation are included in the Playing with Sound material, reinforcing the instruction in the Lesson books on those topics. In addition, the student encounters a number of position shifts in the pieces, with each type of shift anticipated in the technical work before the student is assigned the piece itself. Four additional guideposts are presented at this level, enabling the student to access a reading range of 37 notes, including notes as far out as the fourth leger lines.

Level Two extends the harmonic work to the full I, IV, and V7 chords in their three-note versions. Intervals through the octave are presented, and additional practice is included on reading leger line notes. Scales are presented in tetrachord fashion divided between the hands. The general concept of key signatures is developed, including the rules for finding sharp keys from their key signatures. Pieces and exercises include material in the keys of D and A major. Compound time is also introduced at this level.

Level Three introduces three additional keys: Bb, Eb, and E major. The rule for finding flat keys from a key signature is presented as well. Major scales form a central focus at this level, using traditional fingerings and thumb crossings. Both parallel and contrary motion exercises are included for each key. The key cycle is completed in the Comprehensive Skills component, which should be included at this level. Other work includes chord inversions and an introduction to some ornaments.

Level Three also begins a strong focus on classical masterworks. Most of the standard favorites are included in the Lesson and Complete Performer books. The stylistic distinctives of each of the periods of music are introduced at this stage, with representative works from each period included in the student's repertoire. The listening exercises also require the student to identify the correct period for pieces the student listens to.

Level Four begins a strong focus on the minor keys. The three forms of the minor scale are emphasized and applied to the performance pieces. Harmonic work includes the augmented and diminished triads, plus seventh chords and arpeggios. Advanced work with the chromatic scale is included. The topic of style is continued in this level, with specific lessons on the performance practices of each of the historical periods. In particular, each of the baroque ornaments is explained and drilled in all three components of the course. The final piece of the course is the Burgmuller Ballade.

The Noonas have taken into consideration the musical quality of the pieces included in NCPL. There is ample material for the teacher to use to develop artistry even at the Primer/Starter level. A fair number of pieces even in the beginning are two pages in length. Staccato and legato touches, dynamics, and phrasing are taught in the beginning levels and continued throughout the course. As was once presented in one of the Noona workshops I attended, the repertoire is the inspiration, the means, and the ultimate goal of all of the Noona methods. The pieces in the Lesson, Complete Performer, and Playing with Sound are appealing to a wide range of students, and they are worth playing apart from any pedagogical or technical value they may also have.

CD and MIDI accompaniment discs are available for each level, with Lessons, Playing with Sound, and Complete Performer included in a single disc per level. My only complaint with the CD's is that the Noonas chose not to include tempo fluctuations (i.e. ritardando and accelerando) in the CD recordings; all of the pieces maintain the beat set at the start of the piece or section. Dynamics are included, however, on the recordings.

The Noona Comprehensive Piano Library lives up to its name. A student completing level four of this course will be well prepared to continue his study at the advanced level and on into college or conservatory study. Fortunate indeed is the student whose teacher chooses this method for his or her study.

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