

Course Review – Noona: Mainstreams Piano Method

By Kevin M Coan

The “Mainstreams Piano Method” by Walter and Carol Noona is the first piano course published by the husband and wife team. It represents one of the first attempts to blend the three commonly accepted approaches to learning music: use of an initial middle C position, the multikey method, and the guidepost/interval reading strategy. “Mainstreams” also integrates a musical approach to repertoire and a comprehensive skills approach to musicianship, similar to the techniques advocated by Robert Pace. It is almost John Thompson meets Robert Pace meets Frances Clark.

The course advertises itself as being appropriate for students in the 8-11 age range. The only problem is that the course is quite accelerated, so much so that not many 8 year olds could handle the course in succession. I would consider 9 to be the minimum age for this course; I would not list a maximum age. This course is an ideal choice for teenagers and adults who want a comprehensive approach to music study. The pacing is typically right for them, and the black and white illustrations are not so overpowering that older students would find them offensive.

This curriculum includes extensive work in composition, improvisation, harmonization, transposition, and arranging. It is one of the few courses that specifically includes assignments for the student to learn pieces by ear. At the same time, the pieces in the course are beautifully written, and they include a wide range of genres: classical, popular, jazz, sacred, folk, and contemporary. Students invariably take to the pieces, and the exercises in musicianship are written in a non-threatening way that encourages the student towards success.

There are four components to each “phase” (level) of the course:

- “The Pianist” – the primary method book of the course
- “Pencil and Paper” – written and keyboard theory
- “Projects” – a three-in-one collection of the following
 - Exploration – sight reading, harmonic analysis and formal analysis
 - Creativity – composition and improvisation assignments
 - Technique – drills and etudes
- “The Performer” – recital pieces

Unfortunately, teachers may have difficulty getting “Projects” or “The Performer” for Phase 4, since those books are temporarily out of print. I have been able to find an ample supply, however, in local music stores.

The four books of the course are not tightly coordinated. Teachers who are accustomed to each page in the method book being tied to a specific page in the theory book etc. may need some time getting used to

using four independent resources together. The student will often be studying different topics in each of the books. The bottom line is that the teacher should not make any attempt to “coordinate” the books. Just teach from each component as if each one came from a different series. Think back to the days when we had Michael Aaron for the course, Dozen a Day for technic, McIntosh for theory, and Pieces are Fun for repertoire.

The teacher will want to assign short portions from each section of Projects. Another approach is to rotate between the various sections. There is ample material in these four books to take up most of a lesson time. The teacher will need to exercise caution in selecting any additional supplemental material, as it is easy to over-burden the student with this course. If the teacher wants to slow the progression down, I would recommend using parts of the Michael Aaron course as a supplement. If the teacher wants additional repertoire, he or she should limit that repertoire to one additional book.

The “Pianist” books are written in a multikey sequence, with the exception of Phase 1. Phase 1 begins with an extremely brief pre-reading section, using letter name melodies. It then uses an intervallic approach to reading, emphasizing guideposts. The student is expected to memorize the names of the guidepost notes initially. He is taught to measure from these notes to the other notes on the staff. The course begins with middle C as the first guidepost, and then adds treble clef G and bass clef F. Towards the end of Phase 1, bass and treble C are added. In Phase 2, bottom line G and top line F are taught. Phase 3 completes the guideposts with leger C above and below the grand staff.

Because the first guidepost is middle C, one might mistakenly conclude that Phase 1 is using a middle C approach. Teachers need to understand the difference between a true middle C approach, which this course is NOT, and a guidepost/interval approach that merely uses Middle C as the first guidepost. In a true middle C approach, the notes are presented one or two at a time; the student is expected to memorize EACH note. With a guidepost/interval approach, the student learns ONLY guidepost notes from memory. Intervals are used to measure to unknown starting notes. They are also used to follow the other notes of the melody line. “Mainstreams” utilizes this latter approach, with middle C as the first guidepost. The treble G and bass F guideposts are introduced soon thereafter as explained in the previous paragraph. Memorization of the non-guidepost notes should be taken up only after the guidepost/interval reading is secure.

In Carol Noona’s workshops, she demonstrates how to use cue notes: whenever the student encounters an unknown note, she draws in a tiny “cue” note representing the nearest guidepost note. The student then measures the interval (a 2nd or a 3rd in most cases) to the unknown note, using that technique to identify the note. By doing this habitually over a period of time, the student gains a permanent mastery of the entire staff. The guideposts form a “skeleton” on which the remaining notes hang. The effectiveness of this approach is now fairly accepted in the piano teaching profession.

In Phase 2, the “Pianist” book takes the student on a tour of the four basic key groups:

- *Group 1 – C, G, and F. These keys have all-white tonic chords.*
- *Group 2 – D, A, and E. These keys have a white-black-white tonic chord.*
- *Group 3 – Db, Ab, and Eb. These keys have a black-white-black tonic chord.*
- *Group 4 – Bb, B, and F#/Gb. These keys each have a unique tonic chord pattern.*

The student learns the pentascale of each key and the tonic and dominant seventh chords in their three-note versions. The pieces, however, are highly musical, not just pedagogical. The students could easily use several of them for recital purposes. The student is taught to make variations on each of the pieces by varying the accompaniment patterns. If the piece uses blocked chords, the student may be asked to improvise a waltz bass or to create one using some other form of broken chords. Some of the assignments include directions to use boogie bass patterns, western bass patterns, and the Alberti bass. The student is also asked to transpose the pieces to other keys.

Towards the end of the Phase 2 book, the student is given projects with ear training and improvisation. A typical assignment might be: "Find "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" by ear in the key of D major. Harmonize it using the I and V7 chords in blocked form. Then change the accompaniment pattern to two or three other patterns. Finally, transpose your favorite version to all twelve major keys."

Phase 3 focuses on the major scales. The student takes another tour through the major keys, this time in key signature order. The student studies the scale and cadences in each key, the latter of which now utilize the sub-dominant chord. The progression of keys includes keys with seven sharps and flats. The pieces use all three chords, plus all of the notes of the major scale. Other topics at this level include chord inversions, ledger line notes, and additional accompaniment patterns. Original classical masterworks begin to appear at this phase. The book concludes with additional ear training and improvisation projects, which now include the sub-dominant chord and melodies that utilize all of the notes of the scale.

Phase 4 provides an intensive study of the minor keys and scales. All three forms of the minor scale are presented, and the student is given the opportunity to write some minor key pieces of his own. Ornaments are also taught and utilized in several pieces. The course teaches the student to recognize the performance practices of each of the historical stylistic periods. The program concludes with a careful development of arpeggios.

There is a progression of rhythmic elements in these phases as well. In Phase 1, only quarter, half, dotted half, and whole notes are used, along with their corresponding rests. Phase 2 introduces eighth notes. Phase 3 introduces dotted quarter notes and triplets, both in simple time and in compound time. Phase 4 focuses on the various possible combinations of sixteenth notes. Interestingly, syncopation is taught in all four phases.

The major feature that distinguishes this course from most other courses (other than Pace's "Music for Piano," Olson's "Music Pathways," and Bastien's "Music through the Piano") is the extensive development of musicianship skills. In the Exploring section of each "Projects" book, the student reads short melodies, typically eight measures long. He is led to discover patterns, sequences, chord and passing tones, and other musical elements that help speed the development of sight reading skills. He is then directed to transpose these pieces into several other keys. This is highly similar to the work in the Pace "Creating Music" books. Later, in the Creating section of "Projects," the student writes pieces of his own that use the same elements that were the focus of the Exploring section. This too is similar to the Pace "Creating Music" material.

The feature that distinguishes this course from some of the other skill-oriented multikey courses is the heavy inclusion of very performable pieces, both in the "Pianist" (method) books and in the "Performer" books. In the "Pianist" books, the pieces are opportunities for the student to apply the new skills being

developed in the lesson material. In the “Performer” books, the pieces focus on pure musicality. Where the pieces in “Pianist” Phase 2 focus on applications of I and V7 harmony in all keys, the “Performer” pieces at that same level focus on hand position shifts, phrasing, dynamics, and capturing the spirit of the composition. The “Performer” pieces rarely utilize five-finger positions. In this way, the student gains experience in both the musicianship skills and in the performing skills. It is essential to use both the “Pianist” and the “Performer” books together to get a balanced curriculum. The most beautiful pieces are definitely in the “Performer” books.

While classical masterworks are included within the four books of the course, a two-level component was written for Phases 3 and 4 entitled “The Classical Performer.” Those two books have been replaced by a single volume entitled “Easy Piano Classics.” I highly recommend that the teacher introduce that book when the student reaches Phase 3 of “Mainstreams,” spreading the 50 or so pieces of EPC over a two or three year span. By using “Mainstreams” and “Easy Piano Classics” together, the student will receive a well-rounded music education, and he will be well on his way to becoming an advanced musician.

“Mainstreams” is a perfect choice for teens and adults because of its blend of classical and popular styles. The course moves rapidly enough to keep students of that age interested, and most students are able to realize their performance goals in a fairly short period of time. It is also common, however, for teachers to encounter teens or adults who need to move at a slower, step-by-step pace. This course should NOT be used for that type of student, as it moves too quickly for them. Such students would do better with Olson’s “Music Pathways” course, which takes things at a much more relaxed pace. The Glover “Adult Piano Student” series would be another good possibility for them. But for the right student, the “Mainstreams Piano Method” is an exciting introduction into the world of beautiful music and comprehensive musicianship. It is my favorite course for the older student.

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