

A COMPARISON OF *THE MUSIC TREE, PIANO ADVENTURES,*
AND HAL LEONARD STUDENT LIBRARY
FOR BEGINNING PIANO TEACHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This document investigates three important contemporary methods for beginning piano students, comparing their similarities and differences and commenting on their strengths and weaknesses for students with different natural abilities. The study will allow the reader to determine which method might work most successfully for individual students. Three outstanding methods chosen for this study are *The Music Tree* (2000) by Frances Clark, Louise Goss, and Sam Holland, *Hal Leonard Student Library* series (1996) by Barbara Kreader, Fred Kern, Phillip Keveren and Mona Rejino, and *Piano Adventures* (2003) by Nancy and Randall Faber.

Piano methods present organized plans for learning that can facilitate the progress of students through the beginning stages of piano instruction. They concentrate on dividing the elements of performance into individual skill sets, introducing and developing them, and then combining them. This document will show the progression of material in these methods in the most fundamental areas: note learning, technique, and rhythm.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many piano teachers rely on method books for at least the first two years of instruction and are always searching for the best materials for their young students. Among the earliest methods published in the United States were John Thompson's *Teaching Little Fingers to Play* and *The First Grade Book*; both appeared in 1936 and are still in print. A multitude of method books for children have been published in the past thirty to forty years; currently there are more than forty different children's piano methods on the market. As of March 2012, the most recently published piano method was *Succeeding at the Piano* by Dr. Helen Marlais, appearing in 2010.

Piano methods present organized plans for learning that can facilitate the progress of students through the beginning stages of piano instruction. They concentrate on dividing the elements of performance into individual skill sets, introducing and developing them, and then combining them: for instance, rhythm will be introduced disassociated from pitch and vice-versa; as these skills develop, they will be combined to allow the student to play pitches in rhythm.

This document investigates three significant contemporary methods for beginning piano students, comparing their similarities and differences and commenting on their strengths and weaknesses for students with different natural abilities. The study will allow the reader to determine which method might work most successfully for students with different learning speeds or different natural abilities. The three methods chosen for this study are *The Music Tree*

(2000) by Frances Clark, Louise Goss, and Sam Holland, *Hal Leonard Student Library* series (1996) by Barbara Kreader, Fred Kern, Phillip Keveren and Mona Rejino, and *Piano Adventures* (2003) by Nancy and Randall Faber. For simplicity's sake, these will be identified in this document as *The Music Tree*, *Hal Leonard*, and *Piano Adventures*. These well-known method books are widely available. In the following chapters, this document will show how progress is made in the most fundamental areas: note learning, technique, and rhythm.

The following chart (figure 1) lists the graded levels of books in the three sets to be evaluated. Appendix A gives list prices as of the writing of this document.

Figure 1. Graded Levels in the Three Series.

Number of books	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>The Music Tree</i>	<i>Time to Begin</i>	Part 1	Part 2A	Part 2B	Part 3	Part 4		
<i>Hal Leonard</i>	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5			
<i>Piano Adventures</i>	Primer	Level 1	Level 2A	Level 2B	Level 3A	Level 3B	Level 4	Level 5

CHAPTER 2

PRE-READING AND READING

The Music Tree, *Hal Leonard*, and *Piano Adventures* offer different teaching strategies in their approaches to pre-reading and reading. Pre-reading and beginning staff reading will be discussed and compared in this section. The importance of pre-reading is expressed by

Dr. Rebecca Johnson, editor of *Perspectives in Pedagogy*:

Pre-reading experiences open up the entire keyboard without using ledger lines, develop the recognition of the groups of two and three black notes, and logically lead to learning the names of the white notes. All of this is experienced without the distraction of the grand staff.¹

Basic rhythmic values and dynamics are usually included in pre-reading sections as well.

Pre-reading

Pacing and Opening Pages

Hal Leonard uses sixteen pieces in the pre-reading section; *Piano Adventures* moves at a faster pace with only fifteen pieces, but presents fewer concepts. *The Music Tree* takes the greater part of its first book, fifty-five pieces, for pre-reading. The reader may refer to Figure 2

¹ Rebecca Johnson, “*Perspectives in Pedagogy*,” <http://www.claviercompanion.com/sept-oct-09/perspectives> in *Pedagogy* (2009), accessed 13 July 2012.

below for an overview of the musical elements presented in each method and the point at which they are introduced.

Figure 2. Comparison of Pre-reading Sections.

Point of introduction	Elements introduced		
	<i>The Music Tree</i>	<i>Hal Leonard</i>	<i>Piano Adventures</i>
before introducing the quarter note	2 pieces Two hands: LH 2+ RH2	2 pieces + 3 exercises Two hands: LH 3+ RH 3	2 pieces: LH 32+ RH 23 2 pieces: LH 432+ RH 234
before introducing white keys	20 pieces (one page) quarter note, half note <i>piano</i> and <i>forte</i> slur, 8va, music alphabets	5 + 2 longer pieces quarter note, quarter rest whole note, clusters half note, half rest measure, double bar line	5 + 1 longer piece quarter note, half note whole note <i>piano</i> and <i>forte</i> double bar line, repeat sign
before the staff appears	33 pieces dotted half note, intervals: 2 nd + 3 rd + 4 th time signature: 4/4, 3/4, 5/4, 6/4 whole note	8 + 1 longer piece music alphabets <i>piano</i> and <i>forte</i> repeat sign time signature: 4/4	9 pieces music alphabets step, C position measure, <i>mf</i> dotted half note
total pieces	55	13 + 3 longer pieces	14 + 1 longer piece
* <i>HL</i> covers: quarter rests, half rests, and time signatures, but not dotted half notes or <i>mf</i> dynamic yet.			

Some piano teachers may complain about the slow pace taken in *The Music Tree*, but others will believe there is value in spending more time in pre-reading. Obviously, the teacher should adapt these materials to the needs of each student.

These three methods follow the trend toward using black keys at the beginning of study as do most modern piano method books. This is not a new strategy: Chopin chose to start with black key scales in the nineteenth century. Jane Magrath writes that Chopin did not begin with C position because it is not the most natural hand position: “The scales with the most black keys

were taught first because they felt more natural under the hand.”² In the beginning of these three method books, pieces and exercises are all played on the groups of two and three black keys because these are easy to see and to find as music moves across octaves. Early playing on the black keys and the use of fingers 2, 3, and 4 may be helpful in creating a more natural hand position. The goal is to allow the hand and arm to be aligned with fingers in a gently curved position.

After the initial pre-reading stage, beginners will not play on the black keys until the sharps and flats are introduced; this does not occur in the first book of any of these three methods. Students need to develop a sense of keyboard geography. Games in which students must find the groups of two and three black notes by feel and by sight encourage this.

The three methods open in very different ways. *Piano Adventures* is very careful to discuss body posture, hand positions, and direction of movement up and down the keyboard. In order to tell how to sit at the piano, it reminds the students to check the distance from the keyboard so that arms and elbows can hang loosely. Finger numbers and finger drills follow. *Piano Adventures* gives very imaginative details to teach a curved hand position (making the letter “C”) and touch (tapping on the keys, which the authors call “pecking rooster hen”). Before starting the first piece, *Piano Adventures* gives easy instruction for recognizing high and low direction on the keyboard.

low ← middle C → high

down ← middle C → up

The first pages of *The Music Tree* focus on reading and listening. Two main characters, Bobo (a floppy-eared dog) and Chip (a chipmunk), cartoon characters that resemble stuffed

² Jane Magrath, “Musings: Chopin’s teaching,” <http://claviercompanion.com/jay-june-2010/musings>, accessed 14 January 2013.

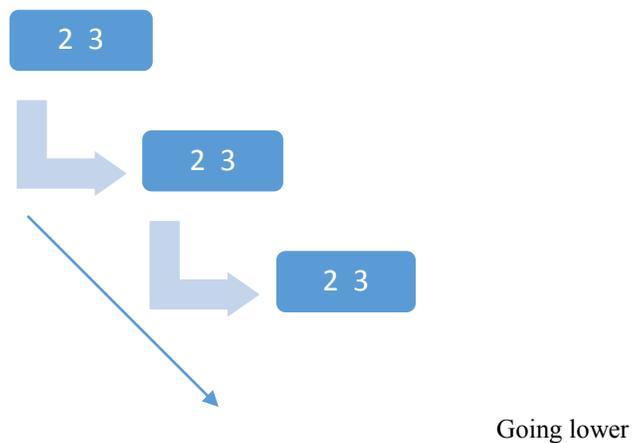
animals, are used to accompany students through the learning process. *The Music Tree*, unlike the others, uses quarter notes in the first pages but without teaching the label or rhythmic meaning. The purpose is to teach students to distinguish the right hand from the left hand by using the stem direction on quarter-note shapes. *The Music Tree* teaches up and down by literally moving the quarter notes in an arc up and down the page.

Hal Leonard uses the first three pages to teach high and low on the keyboard, distinguishing the left hand from the right, finger numbers, and, unlike the others, preparation for musical pulse. It is interesting to note that this method asks students to feel their heartbeat to understand regular beat and pulse.

First Pieces

When comparing the first piece in each method's lesson book, it is obvious that *Piano Adventures* has the best idea. Both *The Music Tree* and *Hal Leonard* start with quarter notes even though they have not been introduced; *Piano Adventures* uses finger numbers which make more sense (see figure 3). *Piano Adventures* also reduces the difficulty of the first piece by asking the student to use the longer fingers (2 and 3) on one hand only. It asks students to play on eight octaves, which almost covers the entire keyboard. At this point, the direction of notation could be confusing and must be carefully explained. The musical notation first presented goes down the page and the sound gets lower, but the notation actually reads from left to the right, the physical direction of higher notes on the keyboard (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Music Notation in the *Piano Adventures*.



In *The Music Tree*, the student reads notation moving up the keyboard first, and then down, which seems better. The first two pieces cover four octaves and require coordination in both hands, alternating right-left. Also, students choose the beginning octave. The rest of the notation is easy to understand. The easiest piece begins with simple up and down notation using the quarter-note symbol mentioned above. Since students already know that stem-up indicates right hand and stem-down indicates left, and since the symbols are printed moving up and down the page, students can figure out how to play up and down the keyboard by themselves, even without a teacher’s instruction. *The Music Tree*’s basic design centers around their philosophy—“discoveries and using what you have discovered”—a design that carefully and slowly builds on what students have previously mastered.

It is convenient for students to start with both 2nd fingers for the first piece in *The Music Tree*, but the result could be inappropriate flattening or over-curling of the fingers. According to *The Music Tree*’s teachers’ handbook, the reason for using the 2nd finger is that it is the most

natural and strongest finger. The teacher must take care to demonstrate well and to remind the student to maintain a more natural hand position.

Another problem of this method book is the pace. There are eight very similar pieces at the beginning of unit one in *The Music Tree*. Students could be bored by the slow pace if the teacher does not adapt to the level of the student. I like the approach to listening, to teaching high and low sounds, and to equating that with direction on the keyboard. The use of the cartoon characters reinforces the learning process by also noting what the teacher is explaining; for example, Bobo will make a comment: “When notes look higher, they sound higher and you play up the keyboard to the right.”

Hal Leonard tries to avoid the problem with curling fingers mentioned above by using the 3rd fingers instead of 2nd fingers. Students are instructed to put both thumbs behind the first joint of both 3rd fingers. The intent is to give more support and to eliminate the flat finger problem. (This approach may or may not be helpful, depending on the teacher's skill in guiding the student toward an "effortless" technique.)

My biggest complaint with this method is that it does not present enough pieces to reinforce what the student is learning. The teacher who uses this will do well to add pieces or use other books to reinforce pre-reading skills.

Reading

The three methods transition from pre-reading to reading in diverse ways. *Piano Adventures* takes a big step and uses the grand staff as it introduces its landmark notes which are middle C, treble G, and bass F. *Hal Leonard* uses the five-line staff to introduce treble and bass clefs one at a time, and then moves to the grand staff smoothly. *The Music Tree* introduces the

staff in stages by using first only two lines, then three, etc., to allow the student to learn seconds, then thirds, and then larger intervals. The grand staff appears at the very end of the first book (page 68) when students can read notes with confidence and more security.

Overall, the following are the three most well-known categorical approaches to introducing notational reading: middle-C, multi-key, and intervallic. For some time, the middle C approach (a form of limited note recognition centering on the five notes above and below middle C) was the most common way to begin learning notes. John Thompson was the early leader in middle-C learning and in note reading that expanded from the middle C approach. Even now, the most common way to learn treble clef space notes is to spell the word "FACE" and to learn treble line notes as the first letters of "Every Good Boy Does Fine." With the publication of Frances Clark's *The Music Tree* in 1955, the intervallic approach to reading appeared and changed the way many young pianists learned to read. It became a process of recognizing how notes relate to each other by the size of the interval separating them.

Marianne Uszler writes, "Clark's *Time to Begin* was the most highly developed of the off-staff reading approaches, one that advocated the use of two-, three-, and four-line staves before the introduction to five-line and grand-staff reading."³ *The Music Tree* also teaches the landmark notes (treble F, middle C and bass G) so students can use them to find other notes by direction and interval. The setting of the slow pace of *Time to Begin* does have merit. The students who use *The Music Tree* should be very familiar with landmark notes and be able to read intervals fluently. The second book begins with recognition of the interval of a 2nd up and down from the landmark notes.

³ Marianne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, Elyse Mach, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher* (New York: Schirmer Books A Division of Macmillan, Inc, 1991), 88.

The three methods being discussed also approach the teaching of intervals differently. In *The Music Tree*, the order of intervals introduced is 2nd, 5th, 3rd and 4th, but the other two method books are in the order of 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th. *The Music Tree*'s idea is pedagogically sound because playing the interval of the 4th creates the most uncomfortable hand position, and it appears last. Playing with fingers 1 and 5 is easier than with fingers 1 and 3, and that is the reason that the interval of the 3rd appears after interval of the 5th in this method book. With this better plan, *The Music Tree* allows students to read and play comfortably all over the keyboard very early in their study. Intervallic reading also facilitates transposition. It is the strength of *The Music Tree*.

It is difficult to classify *Piano Adventures* and *Hal Leonard* because they use mixed approaches. In Dr. Rebecca Johnson's article "*Perspectives in Pedagogy*," she called it the "eclectic reading approach." She states that "most current methods use some degree of an eclectic reading approach, with several of them beginning with one of the more specific approaches."⁴ *Piano Adventures* and *Hal Leonard* seem designed to offer the strengths of all three approaches.

Hal Leonard tries not to lock the hand into the same position for too long. Frequent changes of positions could confuse students and using the thumb on a white key in a five-finger position could encourage unnecessary tension and overcurling of fingers. The teacher may want to change some of the printed fingerings to make passages easier to play and more comfortable in the hand (especially small hands.)

⁴ Rebecca Johnson, "Perspectives in Pedagogy," [http://www.Claviercompanion.com/sep-oct-09/perspectives-in pedagogy](http://www.Claviercompanion.com/sep-oct-09/perspectives-in-pedagogy) (2009), accessed 13 July 2012.

Hal Leonard has both hands playing in sequence but using different combinations of fingering: RH 123, LH 432; RH 23, LH 4321; etc. It adds the thumb when C, D, and E (fingers 1, 2, and 3) are introduced. I began to notice a problem when one of my young students asked: “Do I have to use my thumb? I don’t like it.” Then I realized that his tiny hand was unbalanced due to mixing long and short fingers too soon. Therefore, using fingers 2, 3, and 4 for CDE is a better choice. The plan for intervallic reading in *Hal Leonard* is to introduce intervals of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th in book two, and the 6th in book three. The interval of the 7th is introduced in unit one of book four. It would be even better if it could be postponed until book five because the 7th requires stretching the hand. *Hal Leonard* also talks about landmark notes when the staff is introduced, but the piece given for the bass clef and F line starts with the A (below middle C) on the top line in the bass clef rather than bass F which is one of the landmark notes.

Piano Adventures is more focused on middle-C and multi-key reading. According to PianoTeaching.com, *Piano Adventures* has established the new model for piano methods with its composite approach to note reading. The ability to read music is developed by effectively integrating three skills: 1) discreet note recognition, 2) intervallic reading, and 3) multi-key understanding.”⁵ In its Primer, *Piano Adventures* does spend more time on B, A, and G (one note a time) in the left hand and uses "FACE" as the space notes in the treble clef. There is a silly reading for the notes D, E, and F from the theory book in the primer level, but it works well. “The cat (C) chases the duck (D) under the staff. The duck climbs up and lays an egg (E) on the first line. Then she flies (F) away through the first space!”⁶

⁵ Piano Teaching.com: Teacher FAQs.

<http://pianoadventures.com/teachers/faqs.html> (2011), accessed 27 August 2011.

⁶ Nancy and Randall Faber, *Theory Book: Primer Level*, Piano Adventures (Fort Lauderdale: The FJH Music company Inc., 1993), 24.

Intervallic reading is taught in *Piano Adventures*, but not as extensively as in *The Music Tree*. The student can use both discreet note recognition and intervallic reading skills as dual strategies for finding the notes by using one or the other to double check the correctness of the notes. In the primer level, steps and skips move both up and down. Basic ideas and the intervals of 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th are introduced in level one. The interval of the 6th appears in level 3A (which is the 5th book in this method), and the interval of the 7th is taught in level 5 (which is the last book). This arrangement is beneficial because not all students have big hands, and it usually takes the first two years to finish level 2B. A multi-key approach is taken at level 2A since students are by then secure in note reading. Basic five-finger positions are more comfortable so transposition is introduced. At level 2B, students are able to play arpeggios in most of the major and minor keys. The pace is fine because the book always provides several pieces for reinforcement before introducing the next new note or interval. The approach is step-by-step and easy to understand. Also, although the repertoire reinforces reading all the time, landmark notes are not used. This creates a gap in the reading approach. Adding an extra note-spelling book would solve this problem

CHAPTER 3

TECHNIQUE

Most piano technique books accompanying a modern method series, including the three discussed here, reinforce hand positions, 5-finger patterns, chords, pedals, legato and staccato, etc. The lesson books themselves also teach some basic technique. The approaches to these issues by *Music Tree*, *Hal Leonard* and *Piano Adventures* are evaluated in this chapter.

Technique Books

Most methods include at least three or more books in each level to meet the needs of teachers and students. A separate technique book may or may not be offered. I believe it is helpful to start with an easy book as a warm-up at the beginning of the piano lesson or practice session. Students warm up the hands, review note names, and settle into the physical and mental attitude of playing the piano. Also, beginning with short, easy pieces gives the students' confidence because they have begun by accomplishing something. A perennial favorite, though not associated with the methods discussed here, is Edna-Mae Burnam's *A Dozen a Day*, which groups short exercises in sets of twelve.

Hal Leonard and *Piano Adventures* both offer their own technique books which are well written. *The Music Tree* provides only two books for the first two levels; these are lesson and activity books. Though neither of these books is strictly a technique book, *The Music Tree* provides a special warm-up at the end of each unit which can be used as an assignment for the

week or as a review for the next unit. The warm-ups are usually very short and manageable for students. When the warm-ups move to a higher level of difficulty, the exercises are given athletic names (finger builders, scale Olympics, and chord capers, etc.) to make them more attractive. For pricing of these books, see Appendix A.

Hal Leonard presents the piano technique book as an interesting musical fitness plan. According to the authors, who like participating in sports, playing the piano is a physical activity, and an exercise plan is needed for staying physically fit.⁷ Each warm-up precedes an etude on the same page. The authors suggest using the warm up to learn to play the corresponding etude with expression. On each warm-up page the technique books identify new skill concepts, and they provide a check list. Unfortunately, these pages become cluttered, especially with explanations, although these may be helpful for young teachers, parents, or students. My suggestion would be to put each warm-up on a separate page, immediately preceding its etude, instead of squeezing both onto the same page. Otherwise, the layout is clean and notes are large enough to be easy to read for young students.

⁷ Barbara Kreader and others, *Piano Technique*, (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Co., 2000), Book 2, 2.

Figure 4. *Hal Leonard* technique book, page layout, and my suggested rearrangement.



The *Piano Adventures*' technique book is entitled "*Technique and Artistry*." When Joan Last wrote about technique, she noted that attention should be given to the finer points of artistry—phrasing, expression, tone production—even at an early stage.⁸ Therefore, technique is not just to build proficient fingers, but also to deliver expression or emotion through the music. These *Piano Adventures*' technique books are organized into units that correspond with the lesson book as indicated by correlating pages. A title, illustration, and often lyrics are given to each exercise. The book features subheadings such as "technique secrets" and "artistry magic." It provides major and minor scales at the end of the book. Many descriptive images and exercises encourage students to think creatively in terms of sound quality and musical character. For example, the title "Light as a Feather" gives the student a sense of the lightness and delicacy needed for the piece. The student is first instructed to place four fingers on the closed keyboard lid and to lightly tap the staccato rhythmic pattern with the word "whisper." Because the student does not depress the keys, the hands can stay light and weightless. The student is learning not

⁸ Joan Last, *The Young Pianist: an approach for teachers and students* [1954], 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 33.

only how to play the piece but also to pay careful attention to the character of the music and to the dynamics and other expressive indications.

Technique in Lesson Books

This section will compare the basic techniques that are covered in the lesson books. For the most part *The Music Tree* delays playing hands together until its second book (unit 4, part 1). The short pieces are cleverly written in using the same fingering in each hand or the idea of mirror images to make the music easier to play and to coordinate between hands. *Hal Leonard* also delays playing hands together until book 2 (unit 1, p.8) when both hands play the same pitches using different fingerings, which tends to be harder than the approach used by *The Music Tree*. Although *Hal Leonard's* music sounds pleasing, it is not as well designed to be easy in putting hands together. *Piano Adventures* requires both hands to play together at the very end of the primer book (unit 8, p.55) by using the interval of the 5th and then again in book 1 (unit 1, p.11) with repeated notes.

Piano Adventures once again is the earliest to use all five fingers in the primer book (unit 5). After describing how steps (up and down) are written line to next space or space to next line, it focuses on C and G as landmark notes. Then the gap is filled with DEF to make the complete CDEFG. Although it is the earliest to begin C position at this point, *Piano Adventures* succeeds with three entertaining pieces that are easy for students to play well. Students are usually excited to be able to use all five fingers.

Hal Leonard includes two pieces using all five fingers in the beginning of book 2. The first one, on page four, is easier than some other pieces in book one. The right hand starts CDEFG then goes down, and then the left hand copies it in a lower octave. The second piece is

the *Ode to Joy* theme used by *Beethoven*. It motivates students because the tune is familiar and is not difficult if played non-legato, which is easier for beginning students to negotiate than legato.

The way *The Music Tree* presents the five fingers is very different. This book is organized around landmark notes and 2nds, 5ths, 3rds and 4ths above or below those notes. Eventually, this covers all five fingers. The music is designed to avoid more difficult fingering combinations, making passages feel more comfortable in the hand.

Another element in the development of technique involves the introduction of different intervals. All three methods present the larger intervals in the last books, but *Hal Leonard* does not delay the intervals of the 6th, 7th, and 8th as long, presenting them in books 3 and 4 (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Larger Intervals in Three Method Books.

	<i>The Music Tree</i>	<i>Hal Leonard</i>	<i>Piano Adventures</i>
6th	2B and 3 (unit 5) used as accompanying	Book 3	Book 2B
7th	Not introduced	Book 4 (unit 1)	Book 5 (unit 1)
8th	Not introduced , but appears in book 4	Book 4 (unit 4)	5 (unit 2) also naming intervals: P4, P5, P8

Compared to playing the interval of a 6th, playing a chord is a much more difficult skill. Even *Hal Leonard* delays this until book 3 (unit 4) after the major five-finger pattern CDEFG and whole and half steps are taught. Then the major triad CEG appears. *The Music Tree* is more

cautious, waiting until students are physically ready to play chords. Major and minor chords were discussed in book 2A (unit 4) but blocked chords are not required.

Piano Adventures begins teaching many basic techniques earlier than the other methods; this includes playing with both hands together and with all five fingers. It also presents chord playing earlier. The concept is easily understood, but some students find it difficult physically to depress all the notes of the triad at the same time. The progression in *Piano Adventures* moves from playing open fifths which feels easy in the hand (book 1, unit 7), to playing root-position triads in the next unit by beginning with the tonic and dominant pitches of the C chord and then adding the third. Most of my students like this approach and are pleased with the challenge, but a few still have trouble playing three notes together at this early stage.

The Music Tree is the only method that introduces the slur and legato in the first book; the other two methods wait until the next level. Faber does not push legato early. (This tends to encourage physical tension.)

Dynamics are presented as follows:

Figure 6. Dynamics in Each Method.

	1 st book	2 nd book	3 rd book	4 th book	5 th book
<i>The Music Tree</i>	<i>p, f</i>	<i>mp, mf</i>	<i>pp, ff</i>	< >	
<i>Hal Leonard</i>	<i>p, f, mf, mp</i>	<i>ff, pp, < ></i>			
<i>Piano Adventures</i>	<i>f, p, mf</i>	<i>mp</i>	< >	<i>pp</i>	<i>ff</i>

Hal Leonard perhaps gives too much information at one time.

Using the damper pedal is another skill that young pianists must acquire. *The Music Tree* and *Hal Leonard* both approach pedaling in two ways: one is to press the damper pedal down

and listen for imaginative sounds, and the other is syncopated pedal. Neither method includes detailed instruction; they simply introduce the pedal. Unfortunately, neither *Music Tree* nor *Hal Leonard* has enough reinforcing material for pedal exercises. The teacher needs to train students to put their right foot on the damper pedal with the heel always down and in contact with the floor; then to rock the foot up and down on the heel in order to use the ball of the foot to control the pedal. The student needs to learn to have the pedal ready from the very beginning of the piece even if the pedal sign is given only in the last measure.

When teaching syncopated pedal, it is better to think of “play on 1 and pedal on 2.” Open 5ths or white-key triads going up or down the keys work well for this.

Figure 7. Syncopated Pedal.

count	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
play	C chord		D chord		E chord		F chord	
pedal	up	down	up	down	up	down	up	down

There is only one short piece with pedal in Part 2A of *The Music Tree* (unit 1, p.5). The next piece with pedal is on page 13, a one-line piece that does not require a change of pedal but simply keeps the pedal depressed throughout. In part 3 (unit 10), *The Music Tree* teaches syncopated pedal. The first pedal sign to appear in *Hal Leonard* is in Book 2 unit 4, p.37, where the student depresses the pedal for the final two measures of the music. In book 3 (unit3, p.24) a one-time pedal change is required at the end. In another piece with pedal on page 35, the pedal is held for one measure. Finally, in book 4 (unit 1) syncopated pedaling is introduced.

From my point of view, there are not enough pedal drills and practice in these two method books, but *Piano Adventures* spends more time and gives higher quality instruction, presenting pedal instruction step-by-step. Pedal is mentioned in an early book, and a whole page of drill appears in book 2B (p.30). Then a well-designed practice for right hand alone and pedal alone (p.31) precedes the addition of pedal to other pieces. Reinforcements emphasize pedal on pages 32-35.

CHAPTER 4

RHYTHM

Rhythm is arguably the most important element in music. It is like the foundation of the house. There are two aspects to rhythmic training: understanding note values and playing with a good sense of rhythm (or musicality and a feel for strong and weak beats.) The teaching plan for rhythmic notation in the method books being addressed will be compared in terms of note values, rests, and time signatures.

These three method books teach note values in pre-reading, but in slightly different orders (see figure 8). *The Music Tree* and *Piano Adventures* introduce rests after all the other note values have been presented; *Hal Leonard* introduces each rest with the comparable note value. *The Music Tree* teaches quarter (one beat), half (two beats), dotted half (three beats) and whole (four beats) notes, by ascending number. *Piano Adventures* puts the whole note before the dotted half note, thus doubling each value until the dotted note.

Figure 8. Introduction of notes and rest rhythmic values.

Order of introduction	<i>The Music Tree</i>	<i>Piano Adventures</i>	<i>Hal Leonard</i>
1	In 1 st book: quarter notes + half notes	In 1 st book: quarter notes	In 1 st book: quarter notes + quarter rests
2	dotted half notes	half notes	whole notes
3	whole notes	whole notes	half notes + half rests
4	In 2 nd book: quarter rests + half rests + whole rests	dotted half notes	dotted half notes
5		quarter rests	In 2 nd book: whole rests
6		In 2 nd book: half rests + whole rests	

The pace of teaching note values is another difference between these two method books. *The Music Tree* introduces the quarter note and half note on the same page and puts the quarter rest, half rest, and whole rest all together. On the other hand, *Piano Adventures* takes its time to treat each rhythmic value separately and gives at least two or more pieces for reinforcement. *Hal Leonard's* approach is problematic for two reasons: not only does the rest appear too early, but the method needs more pieces to reinforce one concept before another new one is presented. Clark has noted that one important reason for postponing the introduction of rests is obvious: “a

student should be fully secure with a strong feeling of pulse in sound before he tries to maintain that same strong pulse through silence.”⁹ In *Hal Leonard*, both the quarter note and the quarter rest are introduced at the same time. In the first unit, *Hal Leonard* presents the quarter note and quarter rest on page 12, whole note on page 14, and half note and half rest at pages 16 and 18. This is too much information for the first unit and the pace is too fast. With this approach, there is a great need for more reinforcement material between new concepts, such as quarter note, half note and whole note. Unfortunately, *Hal Leonard* does not fulfill the need.

Unlike the other two method books, *The Music Tree* uses the icon of the quarter note instead of the number 4 because it can help students to understand and remember the meaning of the time signature. Unit 6 of *Time to Begin* starts with 3/4 and 4/4, and then even adds 6/4 and the irregular key signature 5/4, which never appear in *Hal Leonard* or *Piano Adventures*. *The Music Tree* allows students to realize that different meters exist and can be counted. It is also a preparation for 20th-century music. It would be helpful if *The Music Tree* gave more than one short song in less common meters.

What is the first approach to feeling the beats? How does any method build rhythmic understanding into the body? Counting beats is part of math, but realizing rhythm is part of art. Every student can be musical. Students need to have a strong and steady sense of pulse, which is encouraged in the use of duet parts to be played by the teacher or on a recording. Jacobson thinks the method should encourage large-motor movement (whole arm) experiences such as clapping or tapping.¹⁰ This is done only in *The Music Tree*, which suggests swinging the full arm

⁹ Clark, Frances, *Question and Answers: Practical Advice for Piano Teachers* (Northfield: The Instrumentalist Company, 1992), 80.

¹⁰ Jeanine M. Jacobson, *Professional Piano teaching* (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing Co., 2006), 54.

and stepping. This method also builds rhythmic development through a rhythm reading section in each unit of *Time to Begin*.

There are four common counting approaches: Nominative/chanting, numerical/unit, metric and syllabic (see figure 9).

Figure 9. Counting Approach.

Nominative/Chanting:	quarter,	quarter,	half - note	two - eighth
Numerical/Unit:	1,	1,	1 - 2	
Metric:	1,	2,	3 4	1 &
Syllabic 1:	ta	ta	ta - ah	ti - ti
Syllabic 2:	walk,	walk,		run-ning

The Music Tree uses counting by note value (numerical) and then metrical counting. *Hal Leonard* directs students to metric counting before the time signature is introduced, and after that it is both metric and numerical. *Piano Adventures* uses numerical and syllabic approaches for awhile and then metrical. No matter which counting approaching is used, the switch to metric must happen eventually. Nominative, numerical, or syllabic counting systems do not give students any clue of the beat they are on within the measure. These three counting systems also become confusing when different rhythms occur in each hand. Jacobson wrote, “While metric counting is unnecessary until the two hands have to play different rhythms simultaneously, at some point, any student who uses a counting system other than metric has to learn to count metrically.”¹¹ I like to use nominative counting initially for beginners because it can help in the

¹¹ Jeanine M. Jacobson, *Professional Piano teaching* (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing Co., 2006), 48.

memorization of note values. *Piano Adventures* is the only one (out of these three method books) that uses syllabic counting

CHAPTER 5

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKS

When the student is interested in a certain type of music, the teacher can use the supplementary materials that are offered by many teaching methods. Should the teacher only use supplementary materials from the same method series? The teacher can start with the same method series because the difficulty level is easier to control, but the teacher can keep exploring other music available in the market. When students play something they already know or something they like, they want to practice and learn. *Piano Adventures* and *Hal Leonard* offer a variety of supplementary music to motivate students.

Eight different kinds of musical styles from primer level to level four are offered by Faber's *Piano Adventures*: popular, favorites, classics, jazz and blues, rock'n roll, kid's songs, hymns, and ragtime and marches (for level 2B, level 3 and level 4 only). Students enjoy working on pop music, as well as jazz and blues, but not for recitals only. These collections are a great tool for personal musical growth and for helping young musicians experience the joy of playing the piano. They cover most students' needs in all kinds of music. Arrangements are very well written and the pictures on the covers are colorful.

Hal Leonard has the biggest collection of supplementary materials among these three method series. Supplements include: popular piano, showcase solo, showcase solo pops, patriotic, Christmas, classical themes, traditional hymns, composer showcase, seasonal Jewish songbooks, technique classics, piano ensembles, and other duet books. The core books do not

meet the need for a variety of music, but these supplements definitely help. The pieces can be used for fun, for additional reinforcement of reading skills, etc., and in overall musical and technical development.

The Music Tree provides the least number of supplementary books, offering only three books for level 3 and 4 (intermediate level): *Keyboard Technic*, *Keyboard Literature*, and *Student's Choice*. The art work is not appealing, but the music collection builds a strong foundation in technical and musical concepts. *Keyboard Literature* includes easier original works from the 18th, 19th, and 20th-centuries including compositions by Mozart, Haydn, Schumann, Bartók, and other master composers. *Student's Choice* includes different styles of music that students may wish to explore.

Two other books that *Hal Leonard* includes in its core are *Piano Practice Games* and *Notespeller for Piano*. For the transfer student who is not a beginner but cannot read well or fast enough, the teacher might consider adding a notespeller. It is rare to find notespellers for the right level because most of them are made for beginners only; however, *Hal Leonard* has notespellers for level one to level three-four. These can be used with any method series. Another excellent notespeller collection for the young beginner (age 4-6) is *Alfred's Pre Course* Notespeller level A and level B. *Hal Leonard's Piano Practice Games* is a companion to the Lesson book. Each piece has the same title as the one in the Lesson book, but in a simplified version that guides the student in an approach to practicing. I recommend adding it when using this method series because it helps to resolve the problem of insufficient reinforcement materials discussed in previous chapters.

For most students, the performance and theory books are the essential supplementary texts. *Hal Leonard's* theory software *Piano Ace* patterned after the award-winning program,

Music Ace, provides theory, ear training, and reading drills that are imaginatively presented and fun for students. It can be used successfully by students at home (or at a lesson) with any method series. Other supplementary materials, such as workbooks, sight reading exercises, and note-spellers are very useful, but in a thirty-minute lesson it is difficult to cover more material and the addition of more books is sometimes discouraging to students. Teachers should select supplementary materials based on the individual needs of students.

Hal Leonard in its *Solos* book does not offer any original or simplified versions of classical repertory and themes. Unlike other method books, *Hal Leonard* only uses its own music source—excellent modern composers, such as Bill Boyd, Carol Klose, etc. According to its authors, *Piano Solos* presents challenging original music that coordinates page-by-page with the *Piano Lessons* and *Piano Practice Games* in the *Hal Leonard Student Piano Library*.

Piano Adventures has a wide variety of music in its performance book: famous tunes, compositions from different periods, folk songs from different countries, classic themes, boogie and jazz, plus Fabers' own compositions. *Jack and the Beanstalk* is one of my favorite songs in level one of *Piano Adventures*. The story of Jack and the beanstalk, which most students know, is clearly reflected in the composition. The music requires that the student shift to higher and higher positions on the keyboard as Jack climbs, followed by a glissando—just like Jack falling down to the ground at full speed. In the 2nd edition (2011), the glissando is replaced by tone clusters played with the palms of the hands moving down the keyboard. (My experience is that students especially enjoyed the glissando.)

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Experienced piano teachers recognize the importance of evaluating method books and making the best choice for each student. In this document, three well-known method series were discussed under these categories: note learning, technique, and rhythm. Supplementary material in each series was also considered.

Each of the three methods presented has different strengths in these areas. *The Music Tree* is the pioneer of intervallic reading, which is an excellent way to teach music reading. The approach to rhythm is stronger than in the other two method books because *The Music Tree* moves at a slower pace, includes more reinforcement material, and also encourages using larger muscle groups in feeling the pulse. *Hal Leonard* provides the largest supplementary collection, allowing the teacher to find a certain type of music at a particular level easily. *Piano Adventures* presents an outstanding approach to teaching technique by giving clear suggestions and useful practice drills. A wide variety of music in the lesson and performance books allows students to try different styles providing a greater number of selections for pianists with different interests and abilities. The arrangements are very well written and students enjoy them. The art work in the 2nd edition is very attractive. The imaginative titles engage students, and the pictures are colorful and fun.

A series must be examined carefully to find the most appealing music, step-by-step introduction of concepts that are appropriately reinforced, and good pacing as the difficulty of

the music increases. *Piano Adventures*, which is the best seller of piano methods on the market, is the one that I recommend beginning teachers consider first.

Even when method books are used, many areas of instruction are left to the teacher: organization of lessons, practice instruction, memorization techniques, stage presence, tone quality, etc. The teacher should assign method books according to each student's age, maturity, and ability. There are too many available choices to continue to select the same method simply because it has been in use for thirty years or to reject a new one because it is unfamiliar. There is something to be learned for teachers in using or examining a variety of method books in the search for superior materials. I hope this study will help other teachers, experienced and beginning, to evaluate both new and older methods in making the best choice for their students

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APPENDIX A

<i>The Music Tree</i>		
Level	Books	Price
Elementary	Time to Begin (Lesson book)	\$7.95
	Time to Begin Activities	\$8.95
	Part 1 (Lesson Book)	\$7.95
	Part 1 Activities	\$7.95
	Part 2 (Lesson Book)	\$7.95
	Part 2A Activities	\$7.95
	Part 2B (Lesson Book)	\$8.95
	Part 2B Activities	\$8.99
Early Intermediate	Part 3 (Lesson Book)	\$7.95
	Part 3 Activities	\$7.95
	Part 3 Keyboard Literature	\$5.95
	Part 3 Technic	
	Part 3 Students' Choice	\$4.99
CD and MIDI disks are available		
Intermediate	Part 4 (Lesson Book)	\$7.95
	Part 4 Activities	\$7.95
	Part 4 Keyboard Literature	\$5.95
	Part 4 Technic	
	Part 4 Students' Choice	\$5.95
Teacher Guide	A Handbook for Teachers:	
	1. For Time to Begin and Part 1 2. For Part 2 A and Part 2B	\$2.95 \$2.95

APPENDIX B

<i>Hal Leonard</i>					
Book 1	Lesson	\$ 6.99	Book 3	Lesson	\$ 6.99
	Solo	\$ 6.99		Solo	\$ 6.99
	Theory	\$ 6.99		Theory	\$ 6.99
	Technique	\$ 6.99		Technique	\$ 6.99
	Notespeller	\$ 6.99		Notespeller	\$ 6.99
	Practice Games	\$ 6.99		Practice Games	\$ 6.99
	Teacher's Guide	\$ 6.95			
Book 2	Lesson	\$ 6.99	Book 4	Lesson	\$ 6.99
	Solo	\$ 6.99		Solo	\$ 6.99
	Theory	\$ 6.99		Theory	\$ 6.99
	Technique	\$ 6.99		Technique	\$ 6.99
	Notespeller	\$ 6.99		Practice Games	\$ 6.99
	Practice Games	\$ 6.99			
Teacher's Guide	\$ 6.95	Book 5	Lesson	\$ 6.99	
			Solo	\$ 6.99	
CD and GM disks are available				Theory	\$ 6.99
				Technique	\$ 6.99

APPENDIX C

<i>Piano Adventures</i>					
Primer	Lesson (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.95	Level 3A	Lesson	\$ 6.95
	Theory (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.50		Theory	\$ 6.50
	Technique & Artistry	\$ 6.50		Technique & Artistry	\$ 6.50
	Performance	\$ 6.50		Performance	\$ 6.50
	*Teacher's Guide	\$39.95			
Level 1	Lesson (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.95	Level 3B	Lesson	\$ 6.95
	Theory (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.50		Theory	\$ 6.50
	Technique & Artistry	\$ 6.50		Technique & Artistry	\$ 6.50
	Performance (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.50		Performance	\$ 6.50
	Level 2A	Lesson (2 nd ed)	\$ 6.95	Level 4	Lesson (2 nd ed)
Theory (2 nd ed)		\$ 6.50	Theory		\$ 6.50
Technique & Artistry (2 nd ed)		\$ 6.50	Technique & Artistry		\$ 6.50
Performance (2 nd ed)		\$ 6.50	Performance (2 nd ed)		\$ 6.50
Level 2B		Lesson	\$ 6.95		Level 5
	Theory	\$ 6.50	Theory	\$ 6.50	
	Technique & Artistry	\$ 6.50	Performance	\$ 6.50	
	Performance	\$ 6.50	CD and MIDI disks are available		