

## FAMILY TREE

## When “Methods” Meant “Rules”

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Most of the time, we don't think in terms of history. We tend to assume that what we experience and know is both universal and ageless. We find it hard, for example, to imagine a world without cars, planes, refrigeration, TV, phones, and computers. Yes, we've heard about horse-and-buggy transportation, home-growing all the food that goes on the table, and waiting weeks for news to travel between cities and countries, but we seldom, if ever, put ourselves into a picture in which these things are true for us.

So it is with piano methods. You may be surprised to learn that the beginners' books used to teach you may now be considered out of date, surpassed by materials with different approaches to teaching reading and technique and complete with supplementary CDs and MIDI disks. If so much change has occurred within your own lifetime, can you imagine what it was like to begin piano lessons 200 years ago, in a book with a cover like this?



The English composer, James Hook, was also an excellent teacher who made a substantial income in that capacity. The cover shows that his book could be used to teach either harpsichord or pianoforte—a “modern” touch since the publication date was 1785. The instrument pictured, however, is clearly a harpsichord.

Forty-one years later, in Benjamin Carr's 1826 “Analytical Instructor,” the female student sits at what appears to be a four-octave square piano. In his Philadelphia store, Carr sold—in addition to sheet music—pianos, stationery, umbrellas, blankets, looking-glasses, and “black beaver hats.”

The first pages of Carr's book provide information and rules (not music), a practice typical of method books during a good part of the 19th century. The music—which appears later in the book—has carry-overs from European, especially English models. Carr uses English fingering (“x” for the thumb and 1-2-3-4



for the long fingers), English names (minims and crotchets) for note values, and places notes without regard to rhythmic synchronicity (half notes, for example, sit in the middle of the measure).

Nathan Richardson was one of the first Americans (the others were European immigrants) to write a piano method used in the United States. His “New Method for the Piano-Forte” appeared in 1859. The first 22 pages contain the usual rules, including some ghastly, tension-producing hand positions!

Exercises with no rhythmic or musical interest were interspersed with “Amusements,” pieces that

were the rewards for doing the hard work that came first. These pieces included arrangements of well-known tunes and truncated versions of pieces by composers such as Mozart, Clementi, and Mendelssohn. The “Amusements” made Richardson's the most popular American method of its day.

In columns to come, we'll continue to trace the piano method from its early days and to profile those who made important contributions to its development. These musicians and educators are all part of your piano teacher “family tree.” ■■■

