

FAMILY TREE

He Set the “Standard”

BY MARIENNE USZLER

The name itself is impressive—William Smythe Babcock Mathews. So it's not surprising that the ad in an 1891 *Etude* used superlatives to herald Theodore Presser's newest publication. *The Standard Graded Course of Studies for the Pianoforte* was “Original. Successful. Thorough. Complete. Modern. Compact. The model of all others.”

W.S.B. Mathews was no lightweight. He was determined to change the way piano was taught by the multitudes of those who capitalized on the popularity of the instrument that was then the showpiece of every American parlor. It was clear, however, that most piano teachers *were* lightweights, with little training in piano playing or in how to teach it. Mathews was indeed on a mission.


He was not alone. Earlier, in 1876, Presser—together with Eben Tourjée, Galusha M. Cole, and William Henry Dana—called the first meeting of the organization that became the Music Teachers National Association [MTNA]. Mathews attended that meeting as the leading delegate from Illinois. As the organization developed, a sometimes quite acrimonious conflict erupted between groups who were then called the “High Priests” and the “ABC Teachers.” Those with considerable training and performing ability were the “High Priests.” The large number of independent teachers with modest backgrounds and abilities constituted the other group.

There was never any doubt that Presser and Mathews were on the side of the “ABC Teachers.” Presser, through his publishing business and the *Etude* magazine, provided teachers with music, advice columns, and articles, as well as teacher discounts through a mail order business. Mathews wrote many of these articles, notably a regular column, begun in 1887, called “Letters to Teachers.”

Presser had published William Mason's *Touch and Technic* (see *The Piano Adventures Teacher*, “Family Tree,” August, 2003), and it was the popularity of these books that established Presser as the leading publisher of educational music. He had also been collecting exercises and pieces drawn from what he considered the best sources with a view to compiling this material into a systematic curriculum. Mathews became the final editor and author of the ten graded volumes of this series that became another Presser “hit.”

The Standard Graded Course opened with two pages of advice on how to orient the student to the keyboard—finding the black-key groups, naming the keys, and learning the basic elements of notation and rhythm. The first exercises, therefore, needed no explanation.

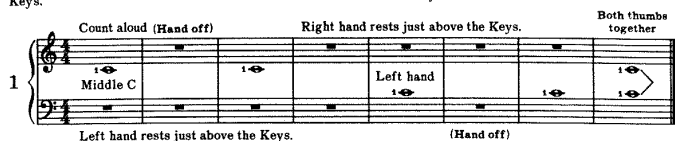
The Start

When a Whole Note is missing, we see this sign . This means continue to count, but lift your hands from the keys. We count a Whole Rest exactly as we would count a Whole Note. Count slowly: One - Two - Three - Four.

Count aloud (Hand off) Right hand rests just above the Keys. Both thumbs together

1 Middle C Left hand (Hand off)

Left hand rests just above the Keys.

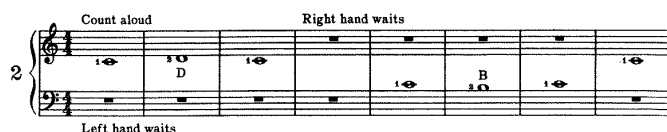


Two new notes! D in the space above Middle C, and B in the space below Middle C. We continue to count: One-Two-Three-Four. Don't start out with lazy hands. Lift your hand when you see a Rest.

Count aloud Right hand waits

2 D B

Left hand waits

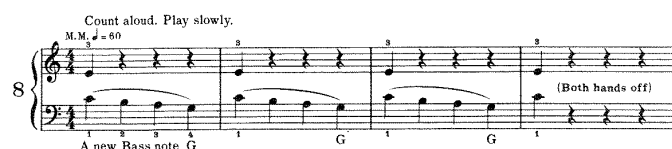


The pacing was rapid. By Exercise 8, the hands were playing together.

Count aloud. Play slowly. M.M. ♩ = 60

8 A new Bass note G

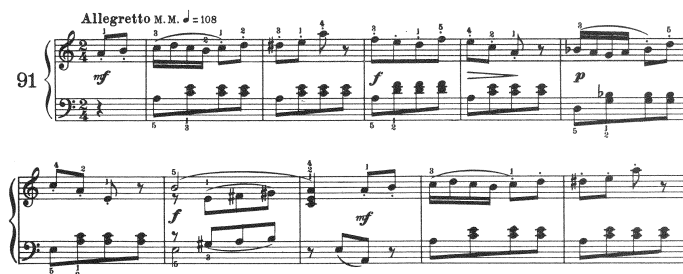
(Both hands off)



Eighth notes (without any explanation) appeared in No. 43, the tie in No. 45. The reading range expanded quickly to include the five Cs by Nos. 40 and 43. The final exercise, No. 91, was a Hungarian Dance in A Minor.

Allegretto M.M. ♩ = 108

91



All major and minor scales and chords were presented on a single page, followed by 18 pieces that were considerably longer and more difficult than the exercises and pieces that preceded them.

Grade II contained a large number of etudes by such composers as Kullak, Bertini, Duvernoy, and Czerny. Grade III pieces, while continuing the succession of etudes, also included fragments of works by Beethoven (opening measures of op. 14/2, Mvt. 2, Andante; first 24 measures of “Rage Over a Lost Penny”); and the complete A Major Chopin Prelude.

The entire series was a no-frills approach intended to interlock with Mason's *Touch and Technic* to form the solidly prepared pianist. Students at the turn of the 20th century were offered the best pedagogical material of the times. Mathews's *Standard Graded Course* was clearly determined to “raise the standard.” The first six books are still available. That's quite a record! ■■■