

FAMILY TREE

“Knicks” on Technic

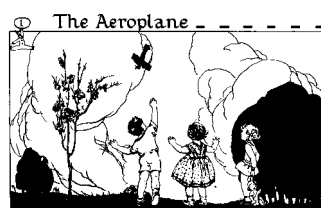
BY MARIENNE USZLER

Pianists and teachers have always written books about technique. Since this is difficult to do—use words to describe how to play the piano—it’s remarkable that so many authors have filled so many pages on this subject. Technical explanations, advice, and exercises constitute the bulk of the written literature on piano playing throughout the nearly three centuries of the piano’s existence.

Authors who wrote about technique generally did so in language that was complicated, if not arcane. Many claimed to be writing for beginners, but such beginners had to be serious, indeed. Technique books written expressly for children, using language, examples, and pacing a child could understand did not appear until the early 20th century, a time when child-centered education—as exemplified in the methods of Maria Montessori, for example—was emerging.

A groundbreaking example of the attempt to translate technical piano-playing habits into child-friendly language was the work done by a Chicago teacher, Louise Robyn. Her most notable achievement—the books known as *Technic Tales*—presented basic technical gestures combined with story-telling and supportive graphics. Book One was published in 1927, Book Two in 1930.

The fingers played the keys from the fingertips, not from the finger pads. The initial touch involved the third finger approaching the keyboard straight down, from above. The wrist was then flexed, producing an arch, after which the wrist floated straight back up, lifting the hand off the keyboard (The Aeroplane).



EXERCISE Nº1
The third finger in attack and release of the key, with attention given to proper relaxed condition of the wrist to rest valve.
R.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.
L.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.

MY FIRST DUET
The teacher will be further aided by pictures of the hands and full explanation of the technical principles involved, by reference to the Teacher's Manual to Technic Tales, Book 1.
R.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.
L.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.

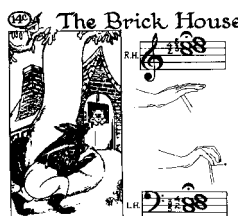
When the hands began in the lap and returned to it after doing The Aeroplane gesture, this was Flying Birds Reach Their Nests. The rests, involved each time the wrist lifted the hand, were known as “knicks” (pronounced with a hard “k”).

Tumble Toys had the third finger anchored on the key with the wrist flexing up and down as the finger arch stayed firm.

Each finger in turn—The Stork (2), the Stork’s Other Leg (4), and Snow on the Mountain (5)—approached and left the

keyboard in the same way as The Aeroplane. Snow on the Mountain was “proved” when you could see “the white spot which appears on the third knuckle joint when the fifth finger makes the proper key attack.” When the thumb played, the other fingers were lifted slightly off the keys, in arched position, sitting in The Balcony.

There is great stress on forming an arch. It’s built from the weak side of the hand, first with 4 and 5 (Straw House), then 3, 4, and 5 (Wooden House), and finally 2, 3, 4, and 5 (Brick House). The thumb (Peter) “guards Wendy’s House” (the arched fingers on the keys) against the wolf who tries to blow it down.



EXERCISE Nº13
Introducing finger staccato, with quick back action of each finger.
R.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.
L.H. 1st finger the key in the lock. 2nd finger the key in the lock. 3rd finger the key in the lock. 4th finger the key in the lock. 5th finger the key in the lock.

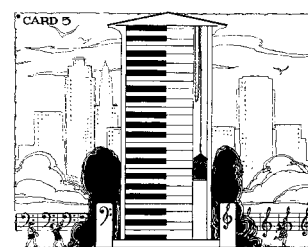
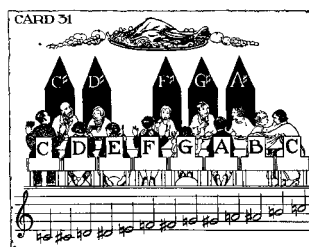
Robyn, who joined the faculty of the American Conservatory of Music in 1901, directed the Children’s Department, taught the teacher-training classes, and eventually became the Associate Director. She also taught advanced students. (Ruth Crawford Seeger studied with Robyn in 1920.)

In addition to *Technic Tales*, she produced a beginner’s book, *Keyboard Town*. Beginning with a Middle C approach, the book ended with 5-C reading. An original touch was the Stop/Go lights. Red indicated where the player could look down at the keyboard. When the green light was on, the eyes were to remain on the music. The student colored the lights for each piece.

Knicks the Pilot
All rests pic - ture Pi - lot Knicks; Swift and sure his route he picks. Knicks

Throughout half the book, rests were called “knicks.” Students went through the book three times: first playing everything in C Major, then with all sharps, and finally, with all flats! Students who worked in this book also used *Technic Tales* and were enrolled in Dalcroze eurhythmics classes.

Robyn was a strong advocate of preschool music lessons. For these classes she created “Rote Cards” contained in *Teaching Musical Notation with Picture Symbols* (1932). The ideas and graphics are instructive, as well as clever.



I know the *Technic Tales* material very well. I was raised on it. Although I no longer agree with this technical approach, I can produce an excellent Snow on the Mountain on request. And the wolf still can’t blow my arch down! ■■■