

FAMILY TREE

A “Class” Act

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Nearly five generations of pianists have been exposed to the idea of group teaching, but the underlying concern—how to do it effectively—is still the focus of most group piano workshops and seminars. We should remember, though, that “class piano” (no longer an acceptable term) did not originate as a method for use in the independent studio. It was exactly what the name suggested—piano instruction in public school classes to provide music education as part of the general curriculum.

The heyday of the class piano movement was in the first quarter of the 20th century. Musicians and educators like Calvin Cady, Thaddeus P. Giddings, Helen Curtis, Otto Miessner, Ella Mason Ahearn, and Raymond Burrows, among others, all produced materials and were involved in teacher training since both were needed if class piano was to flourish.

One method designed for class piano instruction, however, stands apart from the rest. The Oxford Piano Course was the work of a team whose expertise reflected different strengths: Ernest Schelling (concert pianist), Osbourne McConathy (authority in music education), Charles J. Haake, (piano pedagogue), and Gail Martin Haake (expert in child piano instruction). The authors, Schelling excepted, were on the faculty of Northwestern University.

The materials they produced—Singing and Playing, Preparatory: Book A (1928), Teacher's First Manual (1929), A Beginner's Book for Older Pupils (1929), Learning to Play the Piano, Preparatory: Book B (1942), five more instruction books, a second teacher's manual, and a supplementary volume, Play Tunes (with Polly Gibbs, 1971)—teach music as a total experience. Piano performance is not an end in itself.

The pedagogy of the method is clear from the title of the first book—Singing and Playing. Students first learn a song, then play it on the piano. “The ear is the leading factor.” The music is in a child's singing range—the keys of G, F, A, and E Major and A Minor and (further on) C, Eb, Ab, and Bb Major. Breath marks replace slurs and phrases. Each piece has “variations”, the same melody played in different octaves and with alternating hands.

No. 1. ROBIN

Rob-in in the cher-ry tree, Sing a pret-ty song to me.

No. 1a

No. 1b

By page 8 the student is playing (via “variations”) in four different octaves.

No. 6. THE LITTLE CLOCK

Tick - tock tick-tock, Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Hear the lit-tle clock say Tick, tick - tock.

No. 6a

No. 6b

No. 6b

No. 6c

Triads are introduced early, but the chords are divided between the hands. The right hand plays the two upper notes, the left hand the lowest. Chords are fitted to the melody only as a four-hand duet, one player for the melody, one for the chords.

No. 12. DANCING LESSON

A Duet (for four hands)

Left foot for - ward! Give the oth - er foot next a chance;

Right foot for - ward! Soon you'll learn how to dance.

No. 12a

No. 12b

Looking only at the student books, you can't really tell how to use the method. For this you need the Teacher's First Manual, which provides an unusual amount of introductory material and gives specific directions on how to teach each piece. Here you learn that a piece is taught by rote, phrase by phrase. Rhythms and note values are not explained, but absorbed from the words and melodies. Ultimately the student learns to transpose, harmonize, create “variations”, and play duets.

The Manual covers a remarkable variety of subjects. Certain statements pop out. “Hearing is the only source of direct knowledge of music.” “One of the chief aims of the course is to present all the material in such a way that the pupil is required to think his music before he plays it.” “Rhythm is fundamentally a muscular rather than an auditory experience, and must be taught as such.” “Interest and pleasure are essential to learning. In music study, there must be enjoyment, otherwise there can be no progress.”

In the 1930s students used cardboard or mechanical keyboards, with one or two children playing, by turns, on an actual piano in the classroom. Wouldn't the Oxford team be amazed that—70 years later—each student could have an instrument and the teacher could monitor everyone via headphones! Ah, but in those days they had music in the classroom ...