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**The Methods of Writing Piano Method Books:  
An Investigation of Writing Practices for Piano Method Books**

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## ABSTRACT

This report identifies the style, consistencies and inconsistencies, within the writing of Piano Method Books. Elements of this report focus on the tradition of writing instructional materials as it pertains to applied piano education.

The objective of this report is to inform audiences of the necessity for a comprehensive rhetorical guide on how to write method books for piano pedagogy. The Introduction of this report narrows the specific topic of this report on the tradition of piano method books. The body of this text considers the variability of specifics in the written rhetoric of piano method books, their content and their organizational systems. The included method books are those that were available for close reading at the time of this investigation.

This report compares rhetorical practices according to specific relevance to the content of repertoire introduced. This report ends with a diagnostic analysis of the rhetorical practices addressed from the background of technical demands of piano performance at different competencies.

It should be noted that the method books in this report were written by American authors. This means that while this report attempts to identify the writing practices of piano method books, its scope is limited to American piano method books written by American pianists. The current practices of internationally acclaimed publications in this discipline are outside the scope of this investigation and its research.

### **THE TRADITION OF PIANO METHOD BOOKS**

The Discipline of Music uses specialized instructional texts. A specific style of these instructional texts are method books which provide supplementary instruction for students training in either vocal or instrumental performance. These works are commonly used as part of a student's private education in music rather than in music classes at primary schools. These texts include foundational information for any student musician. In personal experience, I have seen these most often utilized in piano pedagogy. The most significant of this style of text are method books. For the purposes of piano pedagogy, a *Method Book* is a style of instructional text in applied piano pedagogy which assists in a student's study.

Keyboard studies has a rich history regarding the use of method books. Johann Sebastian Bach wrote fifteen (15) inventions (two-part polyphonic work which relies on specific structural rules) for his son to practice and study for both compositional and performance purposes. This is an early example from the seventeenth (17<sup>th</sup>) Century. Many piano pedagogues consider Muzio Clementi (1752 – 1832) as the earliest piano teacher of record. He was a composer who wrote repertoire with the specific purpose of musical development. Rather than attempting to compete to be the most popular composer of his time, Clementi focused on providing tutelage to studying pianists by developing music that could be used for improved technique and the development of musicality.

Method books are written by musicians, often music teachers, specializing in a particular instrument or voice type. This report concentrates on piano method books and the writing practices involved in the instruction and structuring of their formatting. Method books include instructional writing directed towards students, selected arrangements and pieces, advice for piano teachers and instruction on reading specific music notation.

Instructional writing in piano method books considers healthy piano technique. This limits the frequency of physical injuries as a result of piano practice. Piano method books are foundational for applied piano. My investigation of the rhetoric of such writings yielded very few sources available on the actual writing and drafting of method books. The materials studied for this investigation were writings by music educators on piano pedagogy and the writings of method books. Texts about piano pedagogy were used as references for understanding the material present in method books.

### **COMMON PRACTICES AND STRUCTURING**

Writing style within a single method book fluctuates frequently. Rather than relying purely on technical writing, these works favor a blend of styles. Certain rhetorical practices of scientific writing remain consistent throughout. Metadiscourse favors the use of short and pointed statements. Traditionally, technical writing is utilized for instruction on the mechanical processes and movements involved in production of sound. The types of technical motions described include proper posture, hand position, various technics and strategies. Shorter sentences and bullet points are frequently used in the earlier passages or chapters. Diagrams and visuals are given to communicate basic musical knowledge prior to learning notational literacy. Exercises are designed to convey the threshold concepts related to the construction of notational literacy. Examples of introductory material in diagrams and beginning technic studies can be found throughout the first chapter of *Piano For Adults* by Jane Bastien, Lisa Bastien, and Lori Bastien.<sup>1</sup>

Metadiscourse in more recent publications addresses piano students in second person. The complex motor functions involved in piano performance require a variety of mental and physical skills. Method books aim to develop these skills. Many method books are written by either an author and composer pair or by a composer that doubles as an author. The reason for this is that the author focuses on the coding and decoding of symbology and the technical writing for instruction. The composer writes or arranges pieces for study that reinforce the technical practices outlined in the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Bastien, *Piano For Adults* (Kjos Music Press, 1999), 4-15.

Piano performance is often separated into categories called “Grades”. Grades refer to the developmental stage at which a pianist has achievement in skills related to piano performance and are not related to primary schooling. Pieces are often identified as belonging to these developmental stages according to the skill level it takes to play the piece. For selection in method books, the level of theory knowledge present in the instructional material scales relative to these grade levels. Icons are traditionally used to indicate the type of information present on pages with practice repertoire.<sup>2</sup>

Method books clearly define common phrases or ambiguous statements. Ex: “Proper Hand Position” is defined as “1. Your hands are slightly curved. To discover natural position you may relax and drop your arms by your side, raise them slowly and place your hands on the keys.”<sup>3</sup> The concision of the exact definition provides clarity. The elaboration provides more depth for the student to practice on their own.

Writing in Method books values brevity. Most writing in method books are short paragraphs of instruction or explanation separated by diagrams and visuals. The drafting of this type of text therefore demands an intimate knowledge of piano technique and music notation. This limits the audience for which resources for writing these works would be aimed. The writing of method books requires an understanding how to write for music and how to compose music. This style of composition requires a foothold in multiple disciplines to affectively grasp. Firstly, the composer needs to have a comprehension of the technic skill required for each piece. The pieces written for method books tend to brief which reflects

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<sup>2</sup> Bastien, Piano For Adults, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Copeland, Beginning Piano Method For Adolescents, (Florida State University, 1989)

the style of writing of the text. Writing examples favor shorthand notation, especially those established within earlier sections.

Organization of method books include pages with paragraphs above or below a piece for practice. Earlier sections of piano method books have lots of writing; later sections of piano method books appear to taper off in the amount of written text. Written text is replaced by longer pieces. Despite there being clear differences in how adults learn piano than children, the method books of this investigation did not present significant differences in the writing or organization. I discovered a single notable difference between method books for adults and method books for children. Texts intended for children had more words and attempted to tie some sort of story or narrative into the notation. When the texts are directed to adult or teen students, the information is presented as clearly as possible.

All investigated works for beginning piano begin with rudimentary music notation and pitch class association with piano keyboard layout.<sup>4</sup> As part of my investigation, my sister gave permission for me to review the notes written by her piano teacher when she studied in Stuttgart, Germany between the ages of seven (7) and eleven (11). These notes include early mathematic principles involved in music theory. The correlation between math and music is omitted from the method books investigated for this report.

A strange separation of these types of texts is that only some scales, chords, arpeggios and cadences are included within piano method books despite pieces in a wide variety of keys appearing in many method books. Other texts exist which follow similar

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<sup>4</sup> John M. Williams, *Very First*, (Boston Music Co., 1937), 10.

writing style, but concentrate exclusively on these foundational skills.<sup>5</sup> Rather than using a glossary of terms, method books tend to prime students with information followed by a piece of music that requires the application of the new understanding. This pattern was observed throughout many of these works.

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<sup>5</sup> Willard A. Palmer, Morton Manus, Amanda Vick Lethco. The Complete Book of Scales, Chords, Arpeggios & Cadences. (Alfred Publishing Co., 2005).

**METHOD BOOK COMPOSITION AND REPERTOIRE SELECTION**

The writing or developing of new method books requires comprehension of the standard practices of contemporary technique as to ensure that the original compositions or selected pieces fit the skill level of students at the appropriate level. Division of piano levels into the appropriate grades based on technique is a common practice within music pedagogy and standardization of piano assessment. The National Piano Guild of America uses the same grading scale and administers auditions across the United States to assist in standardization of piano assessment. The organization has not yet provided any detailed assessment for technical writing for method books. If there were any institution in a position to publish and compile works suitable for the development of standardization among piano method books in the United States, it would most certainly be the National Piano Guild of America.

Resources (such as *Piano Literature For Teaching And Performance*<sup>6</sup>) exist as guides for selecting appropriate repertoire for performance and education. These guides allow for the selection of repertoire from a variety of time periods and styles. There tends to be a division between piano method books of popular styles from classic piano method books. There is a tendency for group piano books and piano method books that focus on classical styles or those that exclude popular styles to not specify the style of piano playing. The opposite comparison has been observed. Piano method books for popular styles specify that they are for popular styles.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Magrath, *Piano Literature For Teaching And Performance*, (Piano Education Press, 2021).

Piano method books published in the past decade attempt to include Jazz repertoire or reference jazz standards. This practice does not appear to extend to most popular styles. Popular folk songs are often included in piano method books for earlier students.

Original composition for piano method books are consistent in the meters, hand positions, fingerings and keys that are best suited for specific grade levels. Beginning piano method books begin with C Major as the Key Signature. The elimination of any sharps or flats allows for ease of comprehension and presents students with making line and space associations to the correlating letters on the staves. This is an appropriate foundational skill for relating music notation to the alternating white and black keys of a piano keyboard.

Technical writing is supported by the use of music notation that reflects the desired practical approach. Lower technical demands are paired with lower restrictions are reading comprehension and simpler music for theoretical studies. This pairing suggests that authors of piano method books assume a correlation between the difficulty of a piece and its complexity. The examples within method books support this as scaling up to higher difficulties is accompanied with a greater amount of music theory.

**DISCIPLINARY CONCERNS AS A RESULT OF THIS RESEARCH**

Difficulty in learning and performance stem from poor habits that began during a pianist's early studies.<sup>7</sup> Many pedagogues appear to agree that the piano technics described in method books lay a healthy foundation for piano technique to avoid injury. Much of the text and repertoire studied during this report neglects to mention the purpose of specific technics nor their value to the student. More recently literature has been published aimed to improving piano instruction for students with neurological conditions.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder have been common interests of these texts. Without closer examination, this report cannot determine the effectiveness these texts in their approach to teaching autistic or ADHD students. This draws additional attention to the omission of addressing medical conditions and potential injuries in piano method books. In my experience, excessive practice can lead to cases of tenosynovitis which can have lasting effects on the wrist and finger joints.

The amount of healthy piano practice does not appear to be addressed. Additionally, the amount of prolonged practice was not addressed in the piano method books I studied. Technical writings did not address the dangers of inaccuracy in technique or appropriate response to injuries related to a student's piano practice. While the community appears to have a strong concern about healthy application of piano technique, there is very little written scholarship dedicated to this.

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<sup>7</sup> Max W. Camp, *Developing Piano Performance* (Hinshaw Music, Inc., 1981), 53.

### **INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS**

The evidence suggests the lack of interdisciplinary studies between English Studies and Piano Performance focused on the development of conventional writing practices.

Piano pedagogy relies heavily on piano method books. Piano method books are commonly written by authors and composers. Authors of piano method books tend to be pianists, piano teachers, musicians and composers rather than technical writers. Piano pedagogues value of proper technique avoiding injuries is not directly supported by the technical writing in piano method books. Piano method books are useful tools used at all stages of a pianist's early education. Piano method books are available for older students but may or may not be implemented depending on the instructor. Piano method books vary significantly in their selection of repertoire but maintain consistency of which repertoire is suitable to particular skill levels. Piano method books emphasize technical skill and musicality. The content of piano method books support the education of piano students and their development of skills outside of their lessons.

Piano method books lack standardization within piano pedagogy. Piano method books have been a long lasting tradition of piano pedagogy and maintained a place in piano study for centuries. Piano method books are valued within piano pedagogy. The limitations on the type of writers capable of writing piano method books has limited the advancements in the field of writing for piano method books. The standardization of piano method books has not yet occurred due to a lack of writers in the discipline.

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