

A Piano is for Playing

... the black keys are enough!

by Marjorie Burgess

The piano is a very impressive musical instrument. It sits enthroned in all its majesty, in the living room, a studio, or in the concert hall, as silent as a god. It is waiting to be touched, to be heard, to make music. We mortals have the keys (88 of them).

We will not challenge the artistry of Mozart, Bernstein, Bach, or Art Tatum. All pianists, great and small, begin by touching the keyboard and hearing the sound of its voice. Be not afraid.

You will notice that the keyboard is made up of white keys with the black keys stationed at the rear of the white keys. Look closely and you will observe that the black keys, starting from the left are arranged in groups of two and three, extending from the left side to the right end of the piano. We will use only the black keys.

I will need two students, one to sit on the left side of the piano and another to sit on the right. The instructor can substitute for a student. We will compose several original piano selections using the black keys.

1. A Scottish piece:

I would like the player seated on the left to place the five fingers of his left hand over the five black notes. Place your fifth finger on the lowest key in the set of the three black notes. Skip three black notes. The thumb will be on the top note of the set of five black notes. Play both notes at the same time. Hold both notes down for the count of four beats. Count 1-2-3-4, repeating the count several times to establish the beat for you and your partner. Continue for the duration of the song.

My student on the right hand side will create the melody, using only the black notes. Invent a rhythm, for example, using ta ta tati ta; ta ta ta-a. Clap this rhythm a few times prior to playing the melody. Play the melody in the center section of the keyboard, fairly close to your partner. Use the rhythm suggested, or compose a rhythm of your own. Step from key to key, or skip a note or two. Repeated notes are effective. Use your rhythm. Think of a song you know and like to sing. Listen to the way the song repeats a particular group of notes. These suggestions work when creating almost any melody. At the moment, you are creating a Scottish piece. Finish the Scottish piece by playing softer and softer as if marching off into the Highlands.

2. Western (cowboy) tune:

I would like my student on the left to place his fifth finger on the lowest of the three black notes, skip the next two black notes, and with the second finger play the following black note. The thumb will play the note on the right. The second finger will return to the second finger note. 5-2-1-2, 5-2-

1-2. 5-2-1-2 forms the left hand pattern, which will be played during the entire tune. Play the rhythm as follows: l-o-n-g short, l-o-n-g short, l-o-n-g short, etc. Repeat the rhythm pattern for your introduction. The player on the right will have no trouble finding the tune that fits the rhythm. Slow down and play softer as the song comes to its finish. The horse and rider are getting tired. The song will sound best if the melody and bass parts are played fairly close. For the melody, try stepping up several consecutive keys, and coming back down again. Play the same pattern a step higher. Play this set of notes up another step, and then return to the first position. It may be just the melody you are looking for.

3. Chinese tune 1:

I would like my student on the left to press his hand noiselessly over the cluster of five black notes. It is most important that you keep your hand in this position for the duration of the piece. The right hand will create the melody. Use a simple rhythm of your own choosing. You can double the melody by playing the same pattern of notes with your left hand. (Skip one set of black notes.) Find and play the same melody notes with your left hand. This may necessitate some practice, but the effort is worth it.

Chinese tune 2:

The left hand will play the fifth and first fingers using the same bass as in the Scottish tune. The two bass notes (played together) are held for a count of four beats. The right hand will play the melody. Try using the following rhythm: ta ta tati, ta ta ta-a, tati tati ta tati, ta ta ta-a or your own.

4. Music box:

For this piece, both students will sit just above the center of the piano. My student on the left will play the following pattern: With the third finger of your left hand, play the first note in the set of three black notes. Skip two black notes and play the third note with your thumb. Reach downward with your fifth finger, skipping four black notes. Reach upward, skipping the same four notes and play the top note with your thumb. You have a finger pattern as follows: 3-1-5-1, 3-1-5-1, etc. It is a good idea to play the pattern several times as an introduction, and to cue in the melody. I also want you to depress the pedal on the right. Continue to hold the pedal down for the duration of the piece. The melody will be left to the ingenuity of my pianist on the right. Both of you should play softly, and with a light touch. Let the music box wind down. Play s-l-o-w-e-r and s-l-o-w-e-r and s-l-o-w-e-r until the sound disappears. Wind up the music box with a vocal imitation, or a windup toy, if you happen to have one with you. Then, start again at the original tempo and bring the music box to its happy finish.

Experiment with different rhythms. Practice clapping until your ear catches the rhythm. Experiment with your melody. If a pattern of notes (sometimes called a motif) appeals to your ear, repeat it a few times within your piece. It was pointed out by Leonard Bernstein on TV, that Beethoven, in his 5th Symphony repeated his five note theme one-hundred and four times.

I have chosen the black keys for our experiment in composing because many of the world's most cherished tunes are based on this scale. You can play such songs as "Amazing Grace", "I'd Like to

Teach the World to Sing", "Auld Lang Syne," "Merrily We Roll Along," "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," and Archie Bunker's theme song using only the black keys. It is one of the oldest scales known to man. The scale has no wrong notes.

Let me accompany you with a rock bass, a jazz waltz pattern, a Latin rhythm. Our melody is awesome! I'm impressed!

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