

Piano Professional Reviews

by Jenny Macmillan

Just for Starters

Easy dances and miniatures in a range of styles

Philip Ledger and Hilary Tadman-Robins

Encore publications

ISBN 979-0-9002162-0-5

£6.95

Just for Starters contains 24 short pieces, eight at grade 1 level, eight at grade 2 and eight at grade 3. For each grade there is one piece by each of Blow, Arne, Mendelssohn and Chopin and four newly composed by Philip Ledger and by Hilary Tadman-Robins. Most of the pieces are dances, such as courante, sarabande, gavotte, gigue, mazurka, polonaise, waltz, samba, tango, bolero, with a few miniatures including two songs without words. The classical pieces have been very well adapted to make them easy enough for grades 1 to 3. Added dynamics and phrasing are helpful, musical and appropriate. Minimal fingering has been added, the editors noting that other possibilities should be considered depending on the size of hand and musical skill of each pupil. Many children would be unable to reach the pedals at this stage, and no pedal markings have been added until the final piece. The music is well laid out and clearly printed.

Personally I find many of the newly composed pieces rather dull and not particularly inspired or inspiring, but at least they do what they say on the packet – the Solomn Sarabande is solomn, the Lazy Waltz is lazy, the Mournful musette is mournful. However, I rather like Philip Ledger's Tiny Tango which, in twelve bars, seems to capture the essence of a tango. The preface is interesting and helpful, urging young pianists to play with good rhythm and musical phrasing, and to convey a sense of enjoyment to the dancers through their playing.

MicroSwing

20 new pieces based on swing rhythms for the beginner pianist

Christopher Norton

Boosey & Hawkes

ISMN 979-0-060-12049-7

£8.99

Christopher Norton is on great form, as ever, with this book filled with excellent little pieces written by a real master of the genre. The pieces sound good, and actually look and sound more difficult than they are, which shows that they are well written and lie well under the hands. The book is carefully graded so each piece is a little more tricky than the previous

one. However, I would take issue with the (presumably publisher's) idea of indicating "for the beginner pianist" on the front cover and then more accurately "for the beginner to intermediate pianist" on the inside front cover. I make this point because I feel it is extremely discouraging for a young (or even adult) pianist who has been learning for a few years to be presented with a book of music "for beginners" and then find the pieces quite difficult. Doubtless more people will buy a book for beginners (parents and grandparents, as well as teachers) if they understand it to be suitable for beginners. The last two pieces, in particular, are seriously beyond beginner level.

Despite almost all being fast and written with swing rhythm, Norton provides plenty of variety in texture, articulation and form. Township Song is a lovely mix of 3/2 and 5/4 times. There is lots of repetition in the piece, so the left hand chords can easily be mastered and the rhythmic right hand melody added on top. Simple Tale presents the tune briefly in the left hand. This is invaluable. Three other pieces do this, each for only a few bars – I would like to see more use of this switch of hands.

A CD provides both Norton's own performances and also a backing track for students to play along with. The trouble with backing tracks is that they prevent performers from listening to their own sounds – it's just a matter of hacking along. However, listening to a recorded performance is useful for picking up complicated rhythms, and for understanding the phrasing and flow of the melody; playing along with the CD is good for keeping up – extremely good for sight-reading practice.

Clever Cat at the Seaside

Pupil and teacher duets to enhance the early stages of learning

Mike Cornick

Universal Edition

ISBN 978-3-7024-6684-8

£9.95

This is a sequel to Mike Cornick's first *Clever Cat* book, now for slightly more advanced pupils. He continues the principle of learning through imitation – almost everything played by the pupil is played first by the teacher. Whereas the first book aimed to develop specific skills, such as playing scales, arpeggios and thirds, the main emphasis of *Clever Cat at the Seaside* is to provide enjoyable, descriptive pieces for use in lessons and concerts.

Here is some lovely characterful word painting. Rockpool is very watery and limpid – low, deep bass notes and flowing broken chords at a relaxed speed held with the pedal. Boat Trip is a jaunty sea-shanty. Helter Skelter is based on a rising crotchet arpeggio and a falling quaver chromatic scale. Deep Blue Sea is incredibly atmospheric.

Keys are mostly kept very simple. It's good to see the pupil playing the bass (secondo) part in very many of these duets, and not only the top (primo) part. An accompanying CD contains a performance of each duet together with a play-along track for pupils to use at home. Also included with the book is a sheet of attractive "I'm a Clever Cat – I can play the piano" stickers. ■