

Piano Professional Reviews

by Jenny Macmillan

Improve your teaching! Teaching Beginners

A new approach for instrumental and singing teachers
Paul Harris

Faber Music (2008) ISBN10: 0-571-53175-X £8.95

I am delighted to have been invited to review Paul Harris's book on teaching beginners because I feel this book is essential reading for every instrumental and singing teacher who takes pupils at any level. Whether beginner or postgraduate (as Harris points out at the end of his book), the same guiding principles apply to teaching all pupils. Everything he writes is sensible and wise, and clearly expressed. Much of it is already well known, and will reinforce teachers' own ideas. But the book also includes new combinations of ideas to stimulate further thought. In particular, each chapter ends with some *Points to ponder*, to encourage teachers to consider their own situation and their pupils. We are urged to try out new strategies, to be imaginative as teachers.

Harris's framework for teaching revolves around his Four Ps:

- Posture (essential for technique)
- Pulse (and rhythm)
- Phonology (care about the sound)
- Personality (expression, character) and also the
- Practicalities (of the instrument)

and his Five Principles:

- Positive and enjoyable lessons
- Creativity in how to practise and in making up music
- Regular, fun, thoughtful practice to develop musical understanding
- Self-evaluation (essential for effective practice)
- A love of performing

After a chapter of ideas for the first lesson (and subsequent practices at home), Harris suggests a recipe for the second lesson, summarising it:

- Further establishing the Four Ps
- Working hard
- Being musical
- Being creative
- Using the work prepared in practice and suggesting new ideas for the next practice
- Enjoying some performances
- Giving pupils the opportunity to listen to music
- Getting pupils to evaluate their work
- And, above all, *having fun*

There is enough in this chapter for several lessons – and this is before introducing the tutor book. Having seen Paul Harris

conduct workshops, I have no doubt all this happens in lessons with his pupils.

When a tutor book is eventually introduced (Harris considers creativity and listening to be more important than reading in the early lessons), he recommends deviating from the book, and adding, substituting, moving sideways (or any direction) as appropriate. Several steps are given for the introduction of reading. All are good common sense, though it is very useful to have them clearly laid out, eg setting the pulse, dealing with the rhythm, introducing pitch, singing, and hearing in one's head before actually playing the piece on the instrument. Harris suggests checking that a pupil understands a new concept by swapping positions – asking the pupil to teach the teacher.

Teaching Beginners touches on Harris's concept of Simultaneous Learning which is explained in greater detail in his first *Improve your teaching!* book of 2006. Simultaneous Learning involves setting an agenda with tasks that (on the whole) pupils *can* achieve. In doing so, each lesson generates its own momentum. Using one's imagination, teaching becomes exciting and satisfying; it moves away from simply reacting to pupils' mistakes. Pupils are encouraged to *think* about the work of the lesson and to be creative. Boredom comes from a lack of involvement and imagination. Imaginative teaching can make anything fun – even scales.

Harris discusses working to produce a lovely lyrical legato. Although it is not within the scope of his book to indicate *how* to produce this sound, which obviously involves technique specific to the instrument, we are told that one of the best ways to teach technique is through demonstration, for a pupil's natural instinct is to copy.

Individual chapters give ideas on improvising and composing from scratch with pupils. Another chapter gives advice on inheriting a pupil who may present various musical problems. The suggested initial solution is to work carefully through the four Ps.

Harris is aware of the psychology of teaching. His tone is always positive. When correcting faults, he is kind and imaginative, aware that a negative reaction may be destructive and upsetting, eg "Well that's certainly an interesting way to do it! Why not try it like this instead". After a concert he recommends comments such as "I enjoyed your playing" as much as "You played very well".

I particularly welcome Harris's emphasis on:

- Posture
- Listening to the sound
- Demonstration
- Listening and playing by ear before learning to read
- Devising creative exercises to reinforce new techniques
- Encouraging parents to sit in on lessons sometimes, and discussing with them the home situation regarding practice
- Regular performing opportunities
- Keeping an open mind
- Being creative

Teaching Beginners is a good length – not too long (64 pages slightly larger than A5) – making it manageable and concise enough for busy teachers, yet detailed enough to be genuinely helpful for anyone who wants to improve their teaching by giving serious thought to these ideas. I can

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understand the relevance of the title, although it may be misleading – the book is about much more than teaching only beginners, for these principles apply to all ages and stages.

I recommend this book very strongly for all music teachers.

The Superhero Piano Book

Written and arranged by Sarah Walker

Faber Music ISBN10-571-52858-9 £6.95

This book includes a strange juxtaposition of themes from films and from the classics together with pieces specially composed by Sarah Walker, all pre grade 1 level. I can believe that some children (especially boys) may be motivated by learning themes from films (eg Elton John The Lion King, John Williams Superman and Star Wars, Monty Norman James Bond) and, from these, may be inspired to play popular classical arrangements such as Handel March from Judas Maccabaeus and Bizet March of the Toreadors from Carmen. But why add rather inconsequential pieces by Sarah Walker, which seem to have no pedagogical, musical or technical reason for their inclusion? The film and classics themes have been nicely arranged by Sarah Walker, a few with simple teacher accompaniments. Non-musical (superhero) quizzes fill spaces on pages.

Really Easy Jazzin' About Studies

Pam Wedgwood

Faber Music ISBN 0-571-52422-2 £7.50

Each of the five units in this book gives a satisfying sense of progression as it takes the early pianist (grade 0-1) through various jazz techniques: swing rhythm, walking bass, blues, syncopation, and intervals of the 4th, 5th and 7th. The final concert piece neatly combines all these techniques.

Traditional Folksongs of Britain and Ireland

Arranged for elementary piano by Jack Dobbs

Sky Press ISNM-M-9002151-0-9 £6.95

This is a useful collection of piano arrangements of 11 folksongs with the words of all the verses on the opposite page. The arrangements are simple and attractive, though they do not lie immediately under the hands, and the fingering is a little awkward. Hence it would not be ideal teaching material for grade 1-2 level, but suitable for slightly more advanced pupils wishing to explore this material.

Jazz Pieces for Twenty Fingers

Emil Hradecky

Barenreiter H7975 ISMN M-2601-0334-4 £10.50

Emil Hradecky was born in 1953 and is a prominent Czech composer whose music is frequently inspired by dance music and jazz. These piano duet jazz pieces are modern popular dances such as waltz, cha-cha-cha, ragtime, samba and tango. They look and sound quite difficult, but actually lie under the four hands rather well. Both primo and secondo parts are interesting. These exciting, fun pieces would suit pianists around grade 5-6 standard. ■

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by Mark Tanner

Steven Kings plays 7 Airs and Fantasias

by John Pitts

cd.tp/imp08

The first three minutes of this recording from pianist Steven Kings, recorded in Bristol six months ago, is a work entitled *Changes*, to which the subtitle *for 20 nifty fingers* is added. In case you are wondering whether Steven Kings took his shoes and socks off for the occasion, or employed the services of a Dohnányi-schooled cephalopod, I hasten to add that Kings is ably assisted by John Pitts here, composer of all sixteen tracks included on the album. I enjoyed listening to the recording, which has a refreshingly transparent character that suits the music. *Changes*, incidentally, comes over most convincingly, its constantly rebuffed rhythmic thrust deftly

negotiated so that the sense of an organic growth is ever apparent. *Toccata*, subtitled *Blue Frenzy* and described as a 'tour de force of driving energy', also lives up to its title, calling for exceptional dexterity and rhythmic commitment to embody the quirkiness of the writing. Insistent chordal shapes elbow their way past passages that demand a even, *leggiero* touch – a jazzy and well envisioned piece that is very tightly caught by Kings. In *7 Airs and Fantasias* Pitts fuses together the lyrical and the minimalistic, a work composed over a period of fifteen years that mostly succeeds in holding the attention. There is a naïve charm to some of the more tuneful pieces, and these can suddenly give way to episodes of a more bittersweet fragrance that catch you by surprise. The titles, such as *On the Westminster Chimes*, *Half-Second Hand* and *Clockwork 5/4* are highly suggestive and appropriate, while the *Fantasias* are often inclined towards a jazz-like impetus. *After Satie* works very nicely indeed, succeeding in squaring the circle between the youthful Pitts and the Honfleur-dwelling Frenchman prone to pared-down vignettes. *Fantasia 2* involves modest preparation to the piano, so that various effects emerge surrounding the carillon itself – a well considered structure to the piece that nevertheless ensures the survival of the fantasia image. One or two of the set, particularly later, seem to lose their way slightly, although the meditative connotation is certainly palpable.