

Alfred's The Pedagogy of Premier Piano Course

An Overview of the Basic Teaching Principles by Dr. E. L. Lancaster

Alfred's Premier Piano Course offers today's students a fully integrated and comprehensive approach to piano instruction. This student-, parent- and teacher-friendly method provides an imaginative exploration of the exciting world of music. It was written by a superb team of America's most-respected composers and teachers—Dennis Alexander, Gayle Kowalchyk, E. L. Lancaster, Victoria McArthur and Martha Mier. All of the writers have extensive experience teaching students of all ages. After more than four years of research and testing, they have created a course that perfectly blends music, lyrics, pedagogy, art and fun! There are four books with a correlated set of flash cards at each level.

The **Lesson Book**, the core of the course, introduces all new concepts.

Beautifully presented and intelligently paced, it combines unusually attractive music and lyrics. The book features note reading, rhythm reading, sight-reading and technical workouts. Included with each Lesson Book is a CD recording of the music performed on acoustic piano by Scott Price. To enhance and encourage practice, the music on the CD was recorded at a *performance* tempo and a slower *practice* tempo.

The **Theory Book** is correlated page-for-page with the Lesson Book. Each new musical concept is reinforced through fun-filled writing, listening and playing exercises. With games and puzzles added to compositional and creative activities, students retain concepts more easily and learn more thoroughly.

The **Performance Book** contains appealing repertoire with charming lyrics to reinforce and enhance the learning of new musical concepts introduced in the Lesson Book. Attractive music is included, representing a variety of styles, plus performance tips on how to play each piece more musically. Like the Lesson Book, the CD included with the book contains all of the music performed at a *performance* tempo and a slower *practice* tempo.

The unique **At-Home Book** contributes greatly to a student's success. It includes Assignment Pages, Parent Pages with Practice Suggestions, and an engaging story for students and parents to share. All parents—with or without musical knowledge—will be able to participate. It's like having a second teacher at home.

Flash Cards correlate with the Lesson Book and include two types of cards. The *Music Cards* include symbols, terms, note identification, rhythm patterns and keyboard layout. The *Sight-Reading Cards* contain short examples for the student to play on the keyboard.

General MIDI Disks with fully orchestrated accompaniments are also available for the Lesson and Performance Books.

The **Premier Piano Success Kit** contains each Level 1A component (except GM Disks) in a handy zipper portfolio.



What Makes the Pedagogy Unique?

Note Reading

The ability to read music easily from the beginning is the key to success in piano lessons. *Alfred's Premier Piano Course* offers a comprehensive reading approach that blends intervallic and multi-key reading, while borrowing the best elements from the Middle C approach. In this course, there is much less focus on the uncomfortable Middle C position than some other methods as the frequent use of both thumbs on Middle C is avoided. Students learn to name notes and read them by interval without relating them to a position. The word "position" is never used in the method to avoid finger memory through positions. Highlights of the reading approach are as follows.











- Students learn to recognize, name and play *Landmark Notes* instead of relying on set hand positions or simply changing fingers within a 5-finger position.
- Since many students read treble clef better than bass clef, bass clef is introduced first to give it a stronger emphasis.
- Students begin to read music using the entire range of the keyboard immediately, even while reading from pre-reading (notes not on the staff) notation.
- Students first learn to read by steps and skips. Then, intervals are introduced sequentially and reinforced creatively.
- Students are asked to name the first note in each hand (often writing its name above or below it) and then place the correct fingers on these keys before playing.
- Ample sight-reading material is included in the Lesson Book, the Theory Book and on the *Sight-Reading Flash Cards*.

Rhythm Reading

The groundbreaking approach in this course teaches rhythms in multiple-note patterns rather than as single notes. Pattern reading—not tedious reading of single notes and rests—is the secret to accurate and confident rhythmic performance.

Students first establish the quarter note as a steady pulse. As each new note or rest is introduced, students are taught to identify patterns that incorporate these symbols. Level 1A introduces these 10 basic rhythm patterns:

10 Basic Rhythm Patterns

1. 	6. 
2. 	7. 
3. 	8. 
4. 	9. 
5. 	10. 

Students learn to identify them as a unit as opposed to the individual notes that make up the pattern. Subsequent levels review these basic rhythms and add new rhythm patterns.

At first, students count using a numerical approach.

Numerical Counting



Count: 1 1 1 1 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

As soon as time signatures are introduced, *counting by measure* is introduced.

Counting by Measure



Count: 1 2 3 4 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

Very early in the learning process, this establishes the pattern of counting that students will use for the rest of their lives.

Music

The quality of the music is the ultimate test of any good method. Created by internationally acclaimed composers, the music in *Alfred's Premier Piano Course* was designed to develop musicality and technique from the very beginning. The pianistic writing throughout the course both sounds and feels good. Students will enjoy playing the music; teachers will enjoy teaching it; parents will enjoy hearing it during practice and performance.

The music is a balance of originally composed music in many styles, arrangements of well-known favorites and tastefully chosen classical themes. As levels progress, masterwork repertoire originally written for the piano is gradually included. From the first piece, the music explores the full range of the piano and promotes appropriate technical development at each level. Several pieces at the beginning levels use the damper pedal to expand the sonority of the piano as well as thrill students with a new sound.


Artfully composed duet accompaniments introduce a variety of musical styles. Some accompaniments cleverly include musical excerpts from folk songs, classical music and piano repertoire that the student will eventually study.

Theory—A Comprehensive Approach

The Theory Books of *Alfred's Premier Piano Course* are much more than a series of worksheets. The materials in the books promote comprehensive musicianship that provides the intellectual key to understanding the structure of music. *Fun Zone* sections in the books make theory fun and interesting for the student. Other features of the theory books follow.

- Both Ear Training (**Now Hear This**) and Sight-Reading (**Now Play This**) are included as an integral part of theory instruction.
- The short written exercises can be done quickly at home (or at the lesson if not completed during home practice).
- Total musicianship is enhanced through assignments in analysis and creativity.




Technical Development

Technique is taught from the first lesson as an integral part of the Lesson Book. Short exercises called  **Workouts** are introduced and then applied directly to the music. Following this process, technique becomes a natural part of learning to play and contributes to artistic performance. These workouts provide the first steps in being able to move around the keyboard with assurance and confidence, while playing with a beautiful sound.

Technique is developed equally in both hands. A strong technical foundation begins in the first levels with emphasis on firm fingertips, a natural and rounded hand position, strong hand arch, level wrists, finger coordination, and movement up and down the keyboard. Technical development continues by systematically introducing hands-together playing to encourage fluency as students advance in their studies.


Creative Thinking and Musicality

In all of the books, numerous pages engage the students in expansive, creative activities and encourage the development of *thinking* skills. Performance skills and musical understanding are enhanced through:

-  **Premier Performer** suggestions in both the Lesson and Performance Books. These suggestions focus on developing imagery in performance, listening to specific aspects of performance and playing by ear.
-  **Closer Look** suggestions in the Lesson Books provide helpful hints in the learning process through an examination and analysis of musical elements included in the piece.
-  **Imagination Stations** in both the Lesson Book and the Theory Book encourage structured compositions and improvisation as new concepts are introduced.

Meeting the Needs of Today's Students

It is no secret that children's interests are different than they were 10 years ago. Computer games, TV, sports and other activities vie for their after-school hours. Subjects that used to be covered in school in 4th grade are now taught in 2nd grade; activities that used to interest 8-year-olds now interest 6-year-olds. In creating this course, the authors were very aware of these changes.

Not only does *Alfred's Premier Piano Course* provide a comprehensive piano education, it also strives to fully integrate music study into students' lives. To do this, the lyrics, subject matter and styles of music included in the course relate to subjects that students are studying in school and things that are relevant to their daily lives.  **Learning Links** in the Theory Books provide a special connection to the subject matter of many of the correlating pieces in the Lesson Book and will interest and be informative to students and parents.

Role of Listening

Active listening, as opposed to passive hearing, is encouraged in a variety of ways in the course. Such listening activities, when included as a regular part of lessons and practice, encourage students to become artistic performers. From the first lessons, students are taught various music styles by listening to teacher accompaniments while performing simple melodies and rhythm patterns. By performing with these accompaniments, or playing along with CDs and/or General MIDI disks, students develop the listening skills required for sensitive ensemble playing. Listening skills related to musical concepts and theory are promoted in the Theory Books through the carefully designed ear-training exercises.

During home-practice sessions, students and parents can listen to artistic performances on CDs to establish specific performance goals. Activities, such as those listed below, encourage students to listen carefully, while reinforcing good learning habits.

- Listen to the *performance* version on the CD to provide a performance model for the student.
- Clap or tap the rhythm of the piece as the CD plays the *practice* version.
- Point to the notes on the page as the CD plays the *practice* version.
- Say the note names aloud as the CD plays the *practice* version.
- Sing (or say) the words as the CD plays the *performance* version.
- Play along with either the *practice* version or the *performance* version.

The publisher grants the purchaser of the Lesson and Performance Books permission to download the CDs to an MP3 or digital music player (such as an Apple iPod®) for personal practice and performance. The digital music player provides a convenient practice companion for the student. It can be used with earphones or small portable speakers that sit directly on the piano.

Role of Parents

Parents play a crucial role in the success of piano lessons. The unique At-Home Books in this course offer suggestions as to how parents can support lessons. *Assignment Pages* are included in the book, so that parents know exactly what the teacher expects from the child after each lesson. These assignment pages provide sections to aid with the communication between parents and teacher.

A *story* about two piano students, P. J. and Sara, is a part of the At-Home Book. Students and parents are encouraged to read this story together at home. The

story can promote interest in piano study and will stimulate students' musical imaginations. It should be shared with family and friends.

The *Parent Pages* serve as a guide for explaining the role of parents in piano study. Teachers can highlight important points from this section during the initial interview with students and parents, and ask parents to read it at home. This section also provides a guide for parents to help children organize practice. Specific *Practice Suggestions* are given for each page in Lesson Books 1A and 1B to assist parents in helping the child with musical content at home.

Typical parent questions are answered in detail. Among these questions are:

- What can you expect from the teacher?
- What does the teacher expect from you?
- How does the teacher make your child's lessons successful?
- How can you support your child in piano lessons?
- How can parents help with practice?
- What do you do if your child wants to quit piano lessons?
- How can you help your child prepare for performances?

The Result

Alfred's Premier Piano Course will inspire students, invigorate teachers and involve parents—the perfect combination for today's piano student. Supported by sound pedagogy, appealing music, relevant subject matter and the beautiful design of *Alfred's Premier Piano Course*, every student can become a *Premier Performer*.



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