FAMILY TREE

A Method Becomes "Popular"

BY MARIENNE USZLER

Piano methods were needed in the early years of the 20th century. Having a piano in the parlor was a mark of distinction. As Arthur Loesser recounts in *Men, Women, and Pianos*, there "was a prodigious rise in the density of piano distribution." On every working day in 1910, for example, "1,200 persons bought a new piano." That also increased the number of "piano dabblers."

It is not surprising, then, that learning to play the piano became a domestic pastime, especially for girls and women. For them, learning to play did not mean aspiring to anything grandiose. They were content to perform popular songs and "salon" pieces. They had to learn to read music, but they weren't very interested in technique or great piano literature. Being able to accompany the family sing-along or dash off a pretty tune would do nicely, thank you.

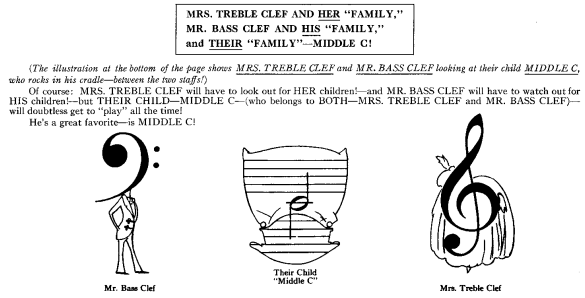
Methods to acquire these modest skills multiplied like rabbits, as did the army of (mostly incompetent) teachers who gave piano lessons for "pin money." I've never been able to locate the exact source of that expression, but it may be more than a curious coincidence that in the last decades of the 19th century and the earliest decade of the 20th, small pianos and sewing machines were sold in the same stores, to the same customers. They were both household commodities.

One of the most successful of these methods (it eventually sold over 10 million copies) was written by John M. Williams, a pianist and teacher who lived a very long life, from 1884 to 1974. Williams had obviously found a winning formula that appealed to the students playing all those parlor pianos. It first appeared in 1925. Williams stressed that it was a preparatory, not a first-grade, book.

A look at the *Very First Piano Book* gives ample evidence that Williams knew something about good teaching, but was also able to present piano instruction in language that meshed with the interests of female players.

The opening posture-at-the-piano page is addressed "To Mothers" and includes photographs of a little girl with her Mary Jane-shod feet properly placed on a box rather than wound around the piano stool. All references are female: "her lesson," "when she looks at the music," "her expression."

By current pedagogical practices, analogies used to teach the clefs and Middle C are embarrassing. "Mr. Bass Clef" and "Mrs. Treble Clef" each have extensive families, but they also have "their" child, Middle C (rocking in a cradle), who is the "great favorite."


MRS. TREBLE CLEF AND HER "FAMILY,"
MR. BASS CLEF AND HIS "FAMILY,"
and THEIR "FAMILY"—MIDDLE C!

(*The illustration at the bottom of the page shows MRS. TREBLE CLEF and MR. BASS CLEF looking at their child MIDDLE C, who rocks in his cradle—between the two staffs!*)

Of course: MRS. TREBLE CLEF will have to look out for HER children!—and MR. BASS CLEF will have to watch out for HIS children!—but THEIR CHILD—MIDDLE C—(who belongs to BOTH—MRS. TREBLE CLEF and MR. BASS CLEF)—will doubtless get to "play" all the time!

He's a great favorite—is MIDDLE C!

Mr. Bass Clef — Their Child "Middle C" — Mrs. Treble Clef

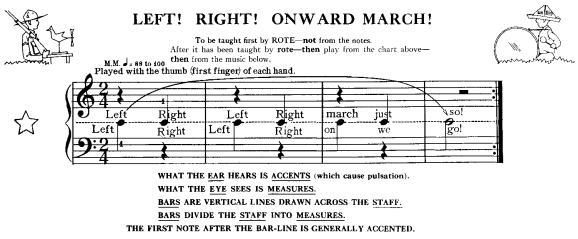
Williams makes some important points in the early pages, once again addressed "to teachers and mothers."

- The aim of all educational training should be self-activity
- A child learns by doing, not by telling
- From the known to the unknown is a good maxim

That said, Williams then proceeds to do the opposite.

The entire grand staff is presented at the outset. A detachable staff notation chart is included in the book designed so that when placed against the fallboard, each key would correlate with its staff look and name. The student is to place this chart behind the black keys "daily as long as necessary."

This is a straightforward Middle C reading and playing approach. Notes develop outward from Middle C, and the reading range in the entire book extends from F below Middle C (used once) to B above Middle C.


LEFT! RIGHT! ONWARD MARCH!

To be taught first by ROTE—not from the notes.
After it has been taught by rote—then play from the chart above—
then from the music below.

M.M. ♩ = 88 to 100
Played with the thumb (first finger) of each hand.

Left Right Left Right Left Right Left Right march just on we so! go!

WHAT THE EAR HEARS IS ACCENTS (which cause pulsation).
WHAT THE EYE SEES IS MEASURES.
BARS ARE VERTICAL LINES DRAWN ACROSS THE STAFF.
BARS DIVIDE THE STAFF INTO MEASURES.
THE FIRST NOTE AFTER THE BAR-LINE IS GENERALLY ACCENTED.

THREE notes UP and three notes DOWN from MIDDLE C


BELLS IN THE STEEPLE

M.M. ♩ = 108

Bells in the steeple so tall and gray, What is the news in the sky to - day?


ON PARADE

M.M. ♩ = 126 to 152

Left! Right! Left! Right! Down the street the band comes to march be - side them, sing - ing, Great drums Flute and roll - ing to their pic - co - lo and live - ly big trom - bone.

The reading range advances quickly. At the end, the location of the five Cs is diagrammed (Middle C, the Line Twins, the Space Twins), but there is no music to correlate with these notes.

Rhythmic note values or rests are never explained. Eighth notes are used on page 30 and several pieces thereafter. Since all the pieces have words and most are from nursery rhymes (like Polly Put the Kettle On, Diddle-Diddle Dumpling, Lazy Mary), rhythms were presumably learned by singing the words.

In its fast pacing, minimal explanations, and lack of reinforcing material, it is like other methods of the time. What set this method apart—and must have accounted for its popularity (many books followed and were revised into the '60s)—was its mass-market appeal. Williams knew his audience … and he certainly paved the way for John Thompson.