

The Pedagogy of Piano Adventures

Level 3A: The Role of Review

BY RANDALL FABER

You've likely heard a colleague say, "My goal is to get the student out of a method and into the literature as soon as possible." Have you wondered if you should agree? While I acknowledge that one must take into consideration the individuality of the student and the characteristics of the chosen method, I question the wisdom of leaving the structure and pacing of a good method too soon. More specifically, I would like to discuss the dangers in pushing a student ahead with haste.

We've all seen an occasional precocious student move up the levels with impressive speed. We observe this speedy progress through the method as a reliable predictor of future success. We are thus seduced. The high-numbered level makes the teacher look good and the parent beam with pride. So we tend to push students, hoping to see nine-year old Erin in Level 4, or ten-year-old Jason playing *Für Elise*.

But the actual variable that predicted success with a fast-moving student is the *ease* with which the student moved up the levels—an exceptional capacity in some students that makes it possible to progress quickly. A teacher's push to get there fast does not itself predict success. Indeed, it can backfire. The fast track can leave knowledge gaps, feelings of uncertainty, and may insidiously undermine technical and musical development even when the student is apparently keeping pace with the decoding of notation. It is important to understand that a student's level of advancement and speed of advancement are not the measures of good teaching. A better measure is how much the student knows and how much the student can do at his or her current level—regardless of what level that may be.

Review and Repeat

Consider this. The late-elementary student must absorb and apply knowledge of note reading, rhythmic notation, chord structures, and musical expression—all while grappling with the physical mechanics of hand shape, arm weight, finger coordination, and wrist relaxation. At the same time, the student is expected to be listening—indeed hearing—what he/she is playing, evaluating sounds as they pass in time, and adjusting to the idealized sound envisioned in the mind's ear.

Now, let's get real. This is not going to happen readily and does not happen fast! *Knowledge* needs *review* so that it will endure in long-term memory and be readily accessed. *Skills* need *practice* so that they become *automatized*—played without conscious attention.

Review and repetition, then, become operational basics for the piano teacher. We consolidate knowledge with fastidious review while we steadily move forward. We consolidate skills by practicing what the student can do well instead of practicing incorrect playing. We use repetition to make well-executed skills automatic, freeing attention for new challenges.

Moving Too Fast

What happens if we move the student into difficult repertoire too soon? We lose the opportunity for review and repetition. Familiar concepts are buried in a complex setting and thus overlooked, instead of reviewed. New concepts are encountered that the student does not and cannot yet understand. Old skills do not become automatic. Instead, they are skipped through before they are developed and eventually are buried under an accumulation of hidden physical tensions and habits.

Because this danger becomes acute at the intermediate level, the role of *Piano Adventures*® Level 3A becomes clear:

- to provide *review* that consolidates knowledge
- to provide *repetition* that automatizes skill
- to structure an appropriate pacing for advancement

We tend to think of a method as the means to introduce new material. In light of the above discussion, let's instead reframe the role of *Piano Adventures*®. The method provides a structure that both prevents premature advancement and promotes adequate review and practice. Indeed, this is the antithesis of the opening oft-argued proposition. The goal is not to get out of the method as soon as possible; the goal is to fully employ the method to yield sufficient review for retention and sufficient practice to develop deep-rooted skills. The method is more than a bridge to the literature; the method is an engine for deep learning along the way. At the point when the literature does become the main event, there is understanding because study of the literature can then build on a substantial framework of knowledge and skill.

Spiral Curriculum

In teaching a new concept, ideally one incorporates review. Open the teacher-student dialogue by bringing a relevant concept already learned into discussion. With this information now in "working memory," a new concept will more easily take hold. The I, IV, V7 chord review that opens Level 3A, for example, begins with blocked chords to cue recall. Then the primary chords are drilled with a waltz pattern and broken-chord pattern. At the end of the unit, the student learns the new Alberti Bass, yet applied in the familiar context of I, IV, and V7.

On a macro level, instructional pacing should routinely dip back to review concepts already learned, yet add new context or new depth. Thus we practice cueing the recall of concepts learned as well as adding new knowledge. Instead of an accumulation of poorly related facts, we achieve integration in the knowledge structure. Alberti Bass is not just a left-hand pattern, it is another accompaniment pattern for chords already learned. 6/8 time is the equivalent of two measures of 3/8. The "round-off" of Level 3A is not a new gesture, but the refined

application of the “wrist float off” with special focus on the soft phrase ending.

Jerome Bruner coined the term “spiral curriculum” to describe this instructional process of review. Each time a concept is revisited, it is clarified for more precise understanding or amplified for broader application. The key point here is the necessity for review—to keep coming back to principal concepts and enriching them with expanded knowledge and application. Let's look at how the idea of a spiral curriculum is designed into the theory, technique, and repertoire of Level 3A.

Theory at Level 3A

- ◆ The primary chords (I, IV, V7) that characterize Level 2B are reviewed in Unit 1, then explored in expanded contexts: with syncopation, with expressive articulations, and using Alberti Bass.
- ◆ The Level 2B Keys of C, G, and F are reviewed and the Key of D major is added, again with emphasis on the primary chords.
- ◆ The interval of a 7th is introduced by highlighting its notational similarity to 3rds and 5ths, all notated as line-to-line or space-to-space.
- ◆ The chromatic scale builds on the half-step presentation at Level 2A, expanding the chromatic fragments to the full octave.
- ◆ The cross-hand arpeggio of Level 2B is refined in the form of a one-octave arpeggio played within the hand, establishing the fingering and hand shape for multi-octave arpeggios at later levels.
- ◆ Simple binary form at the beginning of Level 3A expands to ABA; then, by the end of the level, to ABA with both Introduction and Coda.

Technique & Artistry at Level 3A

The carefully sequenced handling of the wrist in the Technique & Artistry Books reaches a culmination at Level 3A with the Round-Off. The Thumb Perch at the Primer Level established the wrist height. The Wrist Float-Off at Level 1 established the

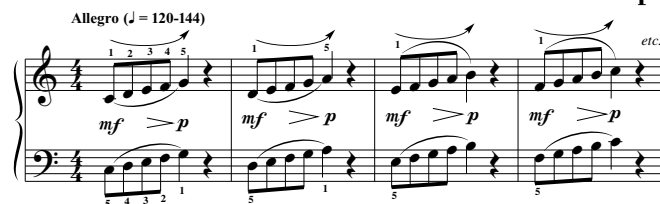
range of wrist motion. Levels 2A and 2B established the slur gesture. The Round-Off at Level 3A refines the phrase ending, adding polish to both sound and gesture.

Rotation incorporates a throwing of arm weight with rebound, thus building on the technique secret Arm Weight taught at both the Primer and 2B Levels.

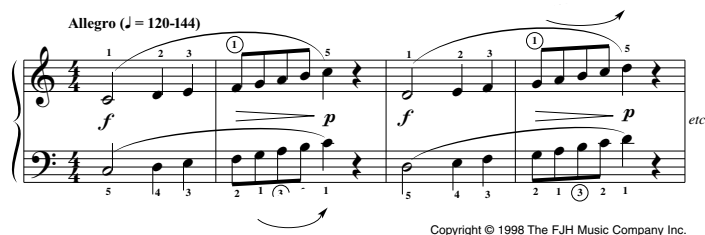
The “pedal by ear” secret, Pedal Rhythms, builds on the connected pedaling technique secret of Level 2B, now requiring the student to depress the damper pedal more quickly—on the “and” of the beat, and asking for more careful listening. Pedaling is approached in stages throughout *Piano Adventures*®: holding the pedal throughout a piece at the Primer and Level 1, up-down pedal notation at Level 2A, connected pedal at Level 2B, and more refined pedaling at Level 3A.

There is a continuing progression toward playing multiple notes in a single gesture. The three-note slur of Painter's Brush Stroke at Level 2B expands to 5-Note Scoops in Level 3A, and even to the playing of a full one-octave scale in a single gesture (8-Note Scoops). Notice how the expressive character is developed through gesture. Expressive scales are repeatedly encouraged in diverse settings such as Portrait of a Scale, Nine Lives of the Cat, Scale Monster, Scale Leader, and Olympic Torch.

5-Note Scoops



8-Note Scoops



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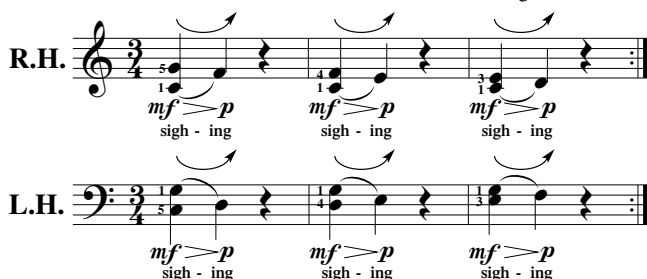
1. The first secret is ROUND-OFF.

Sighing

In music, the last note of a slur is usually played softly. This can be called a *round-off*.

To softly “round-off” slurred notes, use an upward wrist motion. **Roll your hand forward** (toward the piano) for the end of the slur.

- Practice round-offs for the slurs below. *Listen* for a “soft sigh.”



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In similar fashion, the accompanying left hand takes on increased expression with a down-up gesture that carries through the full measure. The accompaniment is also enhanced by the use of a light thumb, developed sequentially in Levels 2A and 2B (Light as a Feather and Weightless Thumb) and applicable here on the weak beats of the accompaniment pattern.

Repertoire at Level 3A

Do you see why we divided Levels 2 and 3 into A and B? We want our students to develop a depth of skill ... and this takes time. So, we've stretched these levels into two parts each. The student still feels a sense of achievement by graduating from one book to the next, but doesn't encounter too much difficulty too soon.

The Waltz Bass
(for L.H.)

Allegretto (♩ = 144)

MOTION: Down - up bounce, Down - up bounce,

L.H. *mf*

SOUND: STRONG gen - tle, STRONG gen - tle,

Canyon Echo
(for L.H. alone)

Andante

Count: 1 2 3 4 5 6

mf (echo) (echo) (echo) etc.

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Many are familiar with the *FunTime Piano* series, which designates Level 3 in the *PreTime to BigTime Supplementary Library*. As the name *FunTime* suggests, these books offer a diversion from the rigors of the method by exploring familiar tunes in a variety of musical styles. Though fun to play, the books are wonderfully effective for consolidating skill. A teacher should harness this series to adjust the method pacing. We frequently put a student through several *FunTime* books, one at a time, before moving up to Level 4 or *BigTime Piano*. In so doing, the student often discovers a favorite musical style while becoming increasingly comfortable with the process of reading music.

Deeper Understanding and Broader Application

I'm advocating here for deeper understanding and broader application at each level. This is significantly more valuable than a superficial flight up the levels. A premature leap in difficulty invites physical tension, reading frustration, incoherent musicality, and insufficient comprehension to find the simplicities that often permeate an apparently difficult score. Level-appropriate repertoire allows for expressive playing. It invites solid reading skills, strong pattern recognition in music theory, and a natural, coordinate technique. Analysis of theory concepts in the method repertoire and synthesis of theory concepts in composition and improvisation build a solid foundation of musicianship that can be applied to any genre or instrument.

Yes, we maintain high aspirations for our students. We expect diligent and significant practice. But instead of being concerned about speedy progress *up* the levels, we focus our teaching on developing depth and breadth at the student's current level.

The payoff is not just in the student's future success, with the ease in which repertoire will be mastered. There is payoff here and now. Theory comprehension isn't deferred until advanced study. Theory comprehension occurs with each piece in the current method repertoire. And significantly, artistry is not postponed for later piano literature. Artistic playing can be heard now—in the next piece your student plays. ■■■

PIANO

Adventures®

by Nancy and Randall Faber

Level 3A Piano Adventures®



Lesson Book FF1087

The Level 3A Lesson Book offers sufficient review to consolidate early-level skills while continuing to add new knowledge: 3/4 and 6/8 time, Key of D major, swing rhythm, and one-octave arpeggios.



Theory Book FF1088

Along with essential writing activities, the Theory Book presents sight-reading and ear-training instruction for each unit.



Performance Book FF1089

This engaging and expressive collection of pieces offers a varied repertoire while reinforcing the Lesson Book concepts.



Technique & Artistry FF1100

The "Technique Secrets" lay a foundation of physical gesture with an ear toward expressive playing. Each unit culminates in an "Artistry Magic" page with tips for artistic performance.



Christmas Book FF1141

"Sightreading Stocking Stuffers" follow each Christmas selection. These melodic variations build on the aural familiarity of the tune to promote recognition of musical patterns, and thus reading skill.



Popular Repertoire FF1260

Appealing popular standards are arranged to reinforce the concepts of the level. Each selection is paired with an Activity Page that addresses harmony, rhythm, ear-training, or other important musical skill.

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