



**Rebecca Grooms Johnson, Ph.D.,** NCTM, is a nationally respected leader in the field of piano pedagogy. She is an independent teacher and has taught extensively at the college and university level. Dr. Johnson is active in the Music Teachers National Association, where she has held the offices of President of the Ohio Music Teachers Association and National Chair of MTNA's Pedagogy Committee. She currently serves as National Certification Chair, and three times a year she publishes a feature in American Music Teacher titled What's New in Pedagogy Research.

## This issue's contributors:

**Stephen Reen**, winner of the 2001 MTNA Group Piano Teachers Award, teaches early childhood music and movement classes and group piano to children and adults. Dr. Reen holds a Doctor of Music from Indiana University, and bachelor's and master's degrees from the State University of New York at Buffalo. His teaching has been featured in American Music Teacher and in a film produced by the National Piano Foundation. He has presented at MTNA and state conventions, NCKP, and World Piano Pedagogy Conferences.

**Gary Barnett** has enjoyed teaching private and group piano for over 20 years. He holds a DMA in piano performance from the University of Kansas. His teachers include Jeff Manookian, Gary Amano, Lev Vlassenko, and Jack Winerock. In 2011 Dr. Barnett will be residing in Lisbon, Portugal, conducting research on the life and works of Carlos Seixas at the National Library of Portugal under a grant from the Luso-American Development Foundation.

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## Issues and Ideas:

# Perspectives in Pedagogy

Rebecca Grooms Johnson, Editor

## A survey of current methods: *American Popular Piano*

This issue continues *Clavier Companion's* survey of piano methods.<sup>1</sup> Each article in this series has three sections—an introductory synopsis by the Associate Editor, two articles written by teachers who have used the method extensively in their studios, and a response from the authors of the method surveyed in the previous issue. We hope that you find these articles to be an interesting and helpful overview of all the most popular methods currently on the market!

*American Popular Piano* – by Christopher Norton and Scott McBride Smith

**Publisher:** Novus Via Music Group  
**Levels:** *Repertoire, Etudes, Technic*, and *Skills*: Prep through Level 2; *Repertoire* and *Etudes* only: Levels 3–8. Soon to be published: *Technic* and *Skills*: Levels 3–5. The authors plan to publish this series through Level 10.

**Alpha:** This series can be used as a supplementary or core method. Intended to begin about six months into lessons with a traditional series, the Prep books assume students are reading notes in several basic hand positions and already understand quarter, half, and whole notes. If the teacher decides to use *American Popular Piano (APP)* as a core series, it can be supplemented with a traditional series. The levels of APP generally correlate with the levels of most popular traditional series. Because of the improvisation in the *Etudes* books, teachers might wish to begin transferring students at a lower level.

**Repertoire:** Each level is divided into three sections; in the introduction, the authors describe these as:

**Lyrical:** pieces with a beautiful singing quality and rich harmonies; usually played at a slow tempo.

**Rhythmic:** more up-tempo pieces, with energetic, catchy rhythms; these often have a driving left-hand part.

**Ensemble:** works meant to be played with other musicians, or with backing tracks (or both); this type of piece requires careful listening and shared energy.

The repertoire does not become sequentially more difficult within each book, so the teacher can choose pieces that particularly address students' weaknesses, or that students like and are highly motivated to play.

The title of the series could be a bit off-putting for some. Teachers who might shy away from the idea of using songs by pop singers such as Beyoncé or Lady Gaga can rest assured that the repertoire is original and composed entirely by Christopher Norton and Scott McBride Smith. The pieces incorporate a wide range of popular styles and sounds while maintaining a high quality of musicality.

**Etudes:** These books are divided into four sections:

**Improvisation Etudes**, Prep through Level 5: Six pieces from the *Repertoire* book are presented, each with four modules. Each module gives an idea for improvising on the pitch-set, rhythm, or harmony of that particular song. The presentations are thorough, well-structured, and non-threatening. Levels 6–8 use three modules.

**Improvisation Performance Etudes**, Prep through Level 5: The six pieces are offered again with a written melodic improvisation in the A and B sections, and student improvised melodies in the A' and B' sections. Levels 6–8 do not include this section.

**Technical Etudes—Classical**, all levels: The etudes in the early levels are composed by the authors and imitate standard classical etudes; later levels include original etudes by composers such as Czerny, Heller, Kohler, etc.

<sup>1</sup> The aim of this series is to review the core materials of piano methods that are either new or substantially changed since a similar series of articles appeared in *Piano Quarterly* in the 1980s. Please see the September/October 2009 issue of *Clavier Companion* for more details on this project. For reviews of methods that are older or have not been revised recently, we invite you to revisit the original *Piano Quarterly* series.

*Technical Etudes—Pop*, all levels: Lyric and rhythmic etudes in various pop styles by the authors.

**Skills:** Currently available through Level 2: Unlike the Repertoire books, this content is sequential and not, therefore, correlated to specific pieces. Each level contains four units followed by a Midterm and a Final skills test. Each unit consists of four modules, and each module includes:

- Brainthumpers: tricky little playing and rhythmic tapping snippets
- Technic: patterns from the back of the book to be practiced in various keys with different articulations and dynamics
- Prepared Sightreading piece
- Aural Skills—Rhythmic
- Aural Skill—Pitch

**Technic:** Currently available through Level 2: Major and minor pentascales, major and minor triads, and beginning scale drills are given with varying rhythms, articulations, and phrasing in several keys. These books can be used from front to back, or each drill can be studied in all given keys before moving to the next drill. A handy “Technic Tracker” at the back of each book helps the teacher and student keep a record of which exercises and keys have been accomplished.

**Teacher’s Guide:** Although a hard copy Teacher’s Guide is not published, extensive information is available on the Novus Via Music website: [nvmusicgroup.com](http://nvmusicgroup.com). Podcasts with Scott McBride Smith and Christopher Norton cover a wide range of topics, are extremely helpful, and should be viewed before beginning to use this method.

**Compact Discs:** Packaged with the *Repertoire* books, they provide “Backing Tracks” for each of the Ensemble section pieces (practice and performance tempi) and the selections from the *Repertoire* books used in the improvisatory sections of the *Etudes* books. In the early levels, until students have mastered swing and syncopated rhythms, most of the exciting pop sounds in the Lyrical and Rhythmic sections are supplied by teacher duets. Unfortunately, these duet parts are *not* provided on the CDs, therefore the teacher may wish to record these duets for their students to use for home practice.

**Omega:** Level 8 is currently the final book in the series. All repertoire in Level 8 is composed by Christopher Norton, encompasses a variety of styles, and reflects mid-intermediate levels of technical and musical challenges. ▲

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## A core or a complementary method

by Stephen Reen

If you’re looking for a core teaching series that uses contemporary-sounding repertoire for all levels, plus sight-reading material and a step-by-step approach to improvising, the *American Popular Piano* series is a good place to start. Due to my familiarity with the authors’ earlier works, I was excited to begin using *APP* when it was first launched at the MTNA Conference in 2007.

*APP* is not really a traditional method. Although the *APP* series can stand alone as material for a comprehensive program, it can also serve as an excellent supplementary resource for contemporary material and improvisational etudes. It works in traditional one-to-one lessons, as well as in groups—which is a big selling point for me, because I am not a “turn-the-page” kind of teacher. I teach exclusively in groups, and begin all my students with the keyboard component of a popular early childhood music and movement curriculum. *APP* makes a perfect segue for my program. I want my students to become voracious readers, and getting them to the piano is the first step. If they are playing cool pieces that they enjoy, I hope that they will be motivated to learn more pieces each week.

### Outside the box

As the title suggests, the series contains music in the style of American popular music: jazz, pop, twelve-bar blues, rock, and country. Since Bach, Mozart, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, and Kabalevsky gave us so many little gems for teaching advanced beginners and early-intermediate level students, I use an anthology of classic repertoire in addition to *APP*. Whatever your teaching experience, this series will force you to “think outside the box,” because it requires that the teacher already knows how to teach.

Many methods are designed with the teacher rather than the student in mind—if you are a teacher who wants the method book to dictate exactly what you are going to teach next, then *APP* is not for you. If, however, you want a series that gives you a lot of musically rewarding material to work with and the flexibility to tailor it to your own students, then *American Popular Piano* is a great choice.

On the back covers of the books the authors write: “J.S. Bach taught his sons using the music of his time—popular dances, preludes, and exercises by living composers. It would never have occurred to him to seek out pieces in styles and rhythms one hundred years old. He expected his boys to thrive in the musical world of their time.” I find *APP* to be a good repertoire series for today’s American students. Christopher Norton is a wonderful composer who has the ability to create familiar, cool, now-sounding music. From the very earliest levels his compositions have an authentic sound with sophisticated accompaniments. The pieces are all fresh, current, and appealing to all types and ages of students (I use it with my adults.) There are no pictures, so the method doesn’t talk down to students.

### Backing tracks

My students love the backing tracks on the CDs. They are playing along with real bands—rock bands, salsa bands, jazz trios, disco ensembles, etc. The sound is authentic, with acoustic and sampled sounds played in real time. There are two tracks per song, labeled “Practice” tempo and “Performance” tempo. This makes great repertoire for ensemble playing at all levels. I also use the earlier levels for sight-reading with older students.



## Skills and Technic

The modular approach of the *Skills* books allows for flexibility in lesson planning, so the pace can be adjusted for each student. These books enhance student progress in the corresponding *Repertoire* and *Etudes* albums, and include small chunks of ear-training, rhythm, and sight-reading drills that can be worked into a thirty-minute lesson as well as a one-hour class (see Excerpt 1).

Pentascala drills, and “Hand-Over-Hand” arpeggio and chord drills in several keys with a variety of rhythms, articulations, and accents are presented in the early level *Technic* books.

## Not a page-by-page book

The pieces in the *Repertoire* books are not in order of graduated difficulty. Students are encouraged to skip around and find pieces that appeal to them, and not all pieces have to be played before moving on to a higher level. Teachers may choose any piece, in any order, to fit a student’s level. There are no boxes dictating the teaching process—each teacher is free to teach. In the first three levels, there are “Detection Questions” at the bottom of the page, to spark a conversation about the building blocks of music through a discovery process (see Excerpt 2).

Those of us who teach in groups do so for a number of reasons. One of the most compelling is to teach sight-reading and improvisational skills more effectively. When sight-reading in a group, each player must look ahead and keep going to stay with the others. Playing your own part in the ensemble along with a band on the CD and/or a jazzy teacher’s accompaniment creates a rich, satisfying sound. What a contrast to sight-reading alone with a metronome!

## A variety of etudes

The *Etudes* books contain traditional technical etudes in both classical and popular styles. Scott McBride Smith’s “classical” studies are modeled after Czerny, Kohler, Gurlitt, and Bartók; while Christopher Norton’s “popular-styled” studies are original, contemporary sounding compositions. Each study is based on musical ideas and technical challenges drawn from the repertoire.

Also included in the *Etudes* albums is a fresh new step-by-step approach to improvisation that guides students into spontaneous creativity. The Improv Etudes are presented in a user-friendly module structure that integrates smoothly into traditional lessons as well as groups. Using pieces from the *Repertoire* albums as a starting point, suggestions are made to vary the rhythm and melody.

First, students are asked to find the pitch set for the melody, and then vary the order in which they are presented, using the same rhythm of the melody. Next, they are given ideas for altering the rhythm of the left hand, then the right, and finally an entire phrase of the piece is left blank for improvisation. Improvising in a group, along with the backing tracks, supports many important skills. The backing track doesn’t stop, so students are forced to keep going. Also, the CD provides the underlying rhythm and harmonic structure of the piece being varied.

When students learn to create their own music, they gain a deep understanding of the structure of all music, and of compositional styles. I suppose that’s why J.S. Bach taught his sons to improvise the music of their own time. ▲

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## Incorporating discovery learning

by Gary Barnett

I fell in love with the *American Popular Piano* series as soon as I came across it, and since that time I have kept it as the staple of my piano studio repertoire. I initially only used this series in my private teaching, but I found that it was highly effective in the group setting as well and quickly adopted it into my college curriculum. Many things make this series rewarding and even captivating, but the genius of Christopher Norton's original compositions truly causes it to stand apart. With the prodigious variety and freshness of compositions in this landmark series, students and teachers certainly get their money's worth when purchasing *American Popular Piano*!

### Experience before reading

*APP* is not a traditional method in its pedagogical approach. It draws on current research that indicates children should experience music first, and then it reinforces their early learning experiences through reading. From the very first *Repertoire* and *Etudes* volumes, students immediately experience the joy of playing the piano without the usual cumbersome outlay of cute pictures and wordy columns of instruction. I find that students are so caught up in the novelty of instantly playing and grooving to this cool sounding music, often with backing tracks, they forget they are learning in a "serious" piano lesson.

Despite all the fun, the core approach of this series integrates often neglected, but important, skills such as improvisation, ensem-

ble playing, and tone production. One of the most harrowing difficulties of any piano method—the test of its longevity, success, and survival—often rests on each level's ability to challenge while staying within the necessary boundaries of difficulty and skill. *American Popular Piano* passes this test with flying colors.

### Consistency throughout

Does *APP* successfully guide the beginner from a preparatory level upwards with appropriately paced skill levels? Does *APP* effectively incorporate "discovery" learning throughout the elements of its core approach? The answer to both of these questions is a resounding "yes"!

"London Waltz," found in the preparatory *Repertoire* and *Etudes* books, provides an excellent example (see Excerpt 3).

The *Repertoire* version goes far beyond the rudiments of rhythm, notes, and hand positions—it requires *legato cantabile* playing in the context of a smooth, flowing motion. The *Etudes* book contains four different versions of "London Waltz" that are devoted to improvisation and skill development, with the goal of being able to play the performance improvisation at the end of the book (see Excerpt 4).

In this version, two written melodic fragments are given along with bars of blank space in which students improvise on a given set of notes with a backing track. In this way, students have combined interpretive and improvisational skills through a discovery learning approach.

### Sequencing rhythmic experiences

Consistent with the series' pedagogical philosophy, "London Waltz" does not contain any explanatory paragraphs about chord progressions or the modality of the improvised melody. Students



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Denyce Graves



Warren Jones



Bill Moore



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Excerpt 4: Page 35 from Etudes Preparatory Book.

simply experience the rhythmic quality of the piece by clapping quarter notes to the backing track to achieve a solid rhythmic foundation. After maintaining a steady beat they move forward to the next step—clapping the actual rhythm of the melody. Building upon this rhythmic proficiency, students are prepared to play with confidence and accuracy the notes of the melody, first without and then with the backing track. The module culminates with an improvisation using a limited number of notes for the melody along with the rhythm given in non-pitched percussion notation. In this way, students discover the possibilities of improvisation with a minimal amount of written material. With the backing track to this lyrical jazz waltz, even the most rhythmically challenged students excel because they have been amply prepared.

### Solo repertoire

"Soccer Mania"—a delightfully rhythmic "cha-cha"—is in a syncoated Latin dance style, ending with the customary accented rhythm, *cha-cha-cha* (see Excerpt 5).

Appearing in Level 2, this piece presents an appropriate level of difficulty: the accompaniment in the left hand is limited to the G major pentascale, and most of its right hand melodic material falls within the D major pentascale. It is a challenge, to be sure, with a metronome marking of half note = 100, syncoated accents, frequent dynamic shifts, and that infamous right hand *cha-cha-cha* cross-over at the end; but, as always, the witty style of Christopher

Norton motivates students to practice it obsessively until the piece is perfectly mastered.

### Ensemble pieces

Approximately two-thirds of the pieces in the *Repertoire* books are solos, and the remaining pages are ensemble pieces (see Excerpt 6 on p. 38).

"Celtic Caper" is a Level 3 ensemble piece that is also used in the improvisational *Etudes*. It is an Irish jig, with swung eighth notes leading to a final raucous accelerando. As is typical in the ensemble pieces, it is arranged as a duet for one or two pianos with a backing track. This feature makes these books particularly successful in group piano settings—the popular musical styles are just as appropriate for college class piano students as they are for young children in private studio lessons.

### Not supplementary

The *Skills* and *Technic* books are just as integral to the series as *Repertoire* and *Etudes*. The modular approach in the *Skills* books builds upon successive foundations before moving on to more complex units. For example, in Level 1, Module One begins with a "braintumper," an introductory skill leading to a section on technic, followed by a sight-reading exercise, a rhythmic exercise, and finally an aural skills exercise requiring students to sing while holding specific notes. The pentascale and triad exercises used in these modules are published in the *Technic* books. There are unit skills tests, a midterm, and a final that are administered and recorded by the teacher during the lesson.

The authors' introduction cites aural skills as perhaps the most important of all technical skills, and I particularly like these sections of the books. Beginning with the first module, audiation is a critical element that is practiced and tested. From my experience

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RHYTHM SECTION

**Celtic Caper** IRISH JIG

When played on one piano,  
Piano Solo plays one octave higher.

Christopher Norton

Extrovertly ♩ = 132  
*swung 8ths*

PIANO SOLO

**Celtic Caper** IRISH JIG

Christopher Norton

Extrovertly ♩ = 132  
*swung 8ths*

with memorized student recitals, I know just how critical these audiation skills are. It is a great boon to have this as an integral feature from the very first stages of piano instruction.

### Teacher education

I feel that I have grown as a piano teacher by using *American Popular Piano*. From cover-to-cover, its elegant simplicity—as seen in the introductions, glossaries, Technic Trackers, CD-track listings, and countless other features—demonstrates extraordinary pedagogical expertise and world-class compositional prowess. I have found myself having just as much fun with these pieces as the students, and the teacher duets help make even the longest day in the studio a pleasant time.

Until I began using this series I was always a bit squeamish about teaching improvisation to students. The preparatory level is so perfectly paced for the beginner that even a strictly-classical piano teacher like me can quickly absorb and polish these fundamental skills. After teaching various levels of the series, I am comfortable not only with improvisational skills, but also with popular music styles I never even knew existed. Without this series I would never have dreamed of teaching a jazz waltz, a rock-inspired composition, or a *cha cha*; yet they are so perfectly laid out from beginner to advanced, any traditional classical teacher can learn these unique pedagogical skills and have just as much fun in the lesson as the students. Most importantly, my students are responding to these styles as they never have before! ▲



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