

# Recent Developments in Teaching Children to Play the Piano

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BY  
MRS. CROSBY ADAMS

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## FOREWORD

This booklet contains two articles now merged into one. *Recent Developments in Teaching Children to Play the Piano*, was given before the Music Teachers' National Association at their forty-third annual meeting held in Detroit, December of 1921. *A Cultivated Musical Taste* was presented at the annual session of the Music Teachers of North Carolina, in Raleigh, November of 1915.

There has been a request for their issuance in this permanent form. By recasting and relating the matter it has been possible to accomplish this.

It is hoped the booklet may be of help to the large body of teachers both in the vocal and instrumental fields, who are eager to avail themselves of any suggestions that will make them broader and better instructors of our young people.

Mrs. Crosby Adams.

## Recent Developments in Teaching Children to Play the Piano

MRS. CROSBY ADAMS

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That we may come more fully in touch with the subject, let us take cognizance of former times in order to determine if the so-called "Newer Ways" have brought a gain or loss to the young people of our day. We, who for many years have studied this subject deeply, can see very many things that are revolutionary. It is my purpose to sketch, briefly though it may be, a few of the changes that have taken place and their value in the scheme of music education.

History reveals the fact that though much of the music of the classical period is charmingly outspoken and musically transparent, it is much too difficult for little children, for there are many troublesome passages for the untrained hand. Bach wrote imperishable things for his own numerous family, who doubtless played them in true traditional Bach style. Mozart came nearer to the child, and is musically refreshing, always. It is said, "Only a child and an artist can play Mozart." Why? Because his music calls for the naivete of childhood and the technical perfection of the artist. Schumann left enduring contributions for the children of all ages. But every experienced teacher knows that Schumann's compositions, avowedly designed for elementary grades, present not only technical but artistic difficulties. It was therefore reserved for

Reinecke to be the first one who really approached not only the child-mind but the child-fingers, in giving forth many a helpful study, piece, or duet of musical worth as far as form and content are concerned. Like Bach, Reinecke needed musical food for his own large family—there were thirteen Reineckes—and the exigencies of the daily musical question doubtless impelled him to compose for home consumption. So the world is richer for his labors in behalf of the children. Since his time, many writers across the sea have voiced a musical message for the childrens' sake—sometimes but a fugitive composition, as in the case of Gounod, Guilmant, Henschel and Caesar Franck. Glazounow, Arensky, Henriques and Debussy are other names that come instantly to mind, also, to quote only a few composers who have given valuable additions to the realm of literature designed exclusively to minister to the childrens' needs. Indeed every country has felt the touch of childhood and responded to it. Some of our moderns, following the lead of Debussy, who caught the public ear with his group of pieces, called the "Children's Corner," have sent forth their message in the very latest and most advanced idioms. Doubtless many a gifted youngster will find these idioms like a veritable "mother-tongue," so easily does childhood adapt itself to passing musical winds.

But it is to America that all countries look, not only for advanced ideas in teaching children, but for methods that shall bring one nearer to a true understanding of the child-heart. And when we



have said this, we pause. For no one has yet understood the child-heart! At most, one has but approached the entrance!

The poets, who are always our leaders, paved the way for an understanding of childhood. Longfellow, Stevenson and Eugene Field were the pioneers, and the list has grown with the years, until Mrs. Alice C. D. Riley and Edith Hope Kinney seem to be upon intimate terms with the child's true expression. Now that we can look through Hilda Conkling's eyes at childhood's vision of things, shall we not catch a new conception of the child mind?

Of our own American writers who began to touch with no uncertain hand the province of children's music, Stephen Emery was among the first to sense the child's needs, and also his technical limitations. Had Mr. Emery lived longer he undoubtedly would have come even nearer to a comprehension of what might have been accomplished. From the vocal side, Eleanor Smith helped set the standard of musical taste, and hosts of singing children now in mature life rise and call her name blessed. The list of those who have worthily followed these high standards in both vocal and instrumental music is too long even to cite. Suffice it to say that we have at last reached the Children's Age. With a clear recognition that this Children's Age is upon us, those who have written what, for want of a better name, is termed music, have flooded the country with numberless compositions which they fancy are suited to a child's needs. The result is

bewildering to one who is unable to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Old Papa Wieck gave us an aphorism that all teachers of children should treasure. Upon being asked what constituted a good teacher, he enumerated these three fundamentals: "*The finest taste, the deepest feeling, and the most delicate ear.*" The finest taste will help a teacher to reject the inconsequential. It is of the utmost importance that teachers select only the best for the varying needs of each child. The music should be "Something worth saying, said in a way worth remembering." The pity of it all is, as has been said before, that many people who are writing for little folk think they must "write down" to the fancied comprehension of the child! The result is such a babyish, childish output that any normal child resents it without perhaps being able to analyze the reason.

Furthermore, this finest taste presupposes that the teacher has informed himself in so thorough a manner in regard to material that he is well acquainted with the best literature for the various grades. In short, that he has a survey of the field, and is eager to attain by serious study, a "World View," as some one has expressed it. It means, also, that one recognizes the fact that all little people grow into big people. If they are to be big people from the artistic side, the early work must be planned accordingly. Nothing is so valuable as time. And the time of the child should be conserved that the end and aim of his work will not be indefinitely postponed. By way of illustration of this

thought, I have heard teachers say that they wish to confine their work exclusively to the first and second grades. There is no objection to this, providing the teacher in question is informed as to what lies beyond this territory and is so relating this preparatory work to the larger outlook for the future attainment of the pupil. Right here, may I pause to emphasize my appreciation of the rare qualities of mind and heart and the thorough preparation necessary for a truly fine teacher of little children. It is all too true that, as Thorvaldsen says, "The beginnings are the most important."

With the wealth of literature published, the art of selection is one of the questions uppermost, for in order to take advantage of the embarrassment of riches we must choose what belongs to the individual student. Over my desk there is a little motto. No one knows from whence it came, but it is a constant reminder lest I should forget its great teaching. It reads, "It is because today learns wisdom from yesterday that it can teach wisdom to to-morrow."

How are we to use this heritage. First of all, by a recognition that "Nothing in the past is dead to the man who would learn how the present came to be what it is." This gives for our rock foundation, the classics. I am sure you will be interested in this very good definition of classical music: "Classical music may be defined as that in which the thoughts, beautiful in themselves, are also beautifully treated. But this term classical has also two other meanings. It is employed to characterize com-

positions which, after considerable lapse of time, are universally accepted as standard works of art. It is also employed to characterize the period of form, as distinguished from that of romance and feeling." But lest we may be too conservative, too ultra, let us remember Robert Schumann's rule: "Reverence the old, but meet the new also with a warm heart. Cherish no prejudice against names unknown to you."

*Second, The Deepest Feeling.* The interpreter of music who is purely intellectual never satisfies the critical listener, no matter how much one might admire his virtuosity. It was Julie Hamel, the composer, a resident of Hamburg, Germany, who wrote me once, describing her early teachers. Said she, "Dr. Riemann taught me to think. My father taught me to feel." A happy combination of instructors indeed.

The first great artist I ever heard was that musical giant, Anton Rubinstein. He made the piano speak to us. It is quite likely that other artists have excelled him in technique, but I maintain that he was a figure to be met with but once, perhaps, in a lifetime. So elemental, so uncommon was the musical quality of his playing, it has been before me all these years as an ideal. Not long after came Hans Von Bulow. He was an academic player. His pianism was very perfect and very cold. It was well for me to have heard these two artists so close together during those formative years, that I could compare them at that time. No one had taught Von Bulow to feel, and he therefore left his hearers un-



touched. Johann Sebastian Bach said, "Music ought to touch the heart." What was true in the days of this master of Eisenach is true in this day of transcendent technic. Indeed, never truer and never more in need of illustration. Do we not welcome those artists who not only stir the emotions, but who also set a standard for beautiful tone quality and sympathetic interpretation? They are not overplentiful.

*Third, The Most Delicate Ear.* The true apprehension of the office of the ear in relation to music sets back to the days of early childhood.

Fortunate indeed is the child who has been lulled to sleep by the musical voice of mother or nurse, thus receiving early impressions of the highest value. Again and again it has been proven in history that these are the lasting memories. The awakening of the musical sense through the ear, and the response, is often of a surprising nature. Take the case of Jenny Lind, for instance, who was able to give to the world the following theme she had heard as a child of *three*! A band going down the street was playing



At seventy-six years of age, this sweet singer of imperishable memory wrote down this melody



stored away all these years, thus giving another evidence of tangible value of quick ear-perception and retentive memory. Indeed the training of all the five senses is a principle so old as to need renewing throughout the whole educational system!

Several years ago I wrote to the directors in three of our leading Conservatories of Music to ascertain, from their point of view, what was the most serious lack in the hosts of music pupils who annually flock to such schools for advanced work. With one accord the reply was "Superficial preparation." This sets back to the first lessons. But what is back of that! Ah, that is the crux of the whole situation! Those first golden years, when the listening ear should be quickened and refined, perhaps all unconsciously to the child, what has been done with them? As has been pointed out, this development of the listening sense should be begun in the cradle. It is not an accident that every baby in Christendom who has had a conch shell to play with, intuitively places it to the ear and listens. Does not Wordsworth say:

I have seen  
A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract  
Of inland ground applying to his ear  
The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell;  
To which, in silence hushed, his very soul  
Listened intensely; and his countenance soon  
Brightened with joy; for from within were heard  
Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed  
Mysterious union with its native sea.

And later, Thomas Bailey Aldrich voices the same

idea by enjoining us to listen, to a purpose, in the following exquisite verses:

Hold this sea-shell to your ear,  
And you shall hear,  
Not the andante of the sea,  
Not the wild wind's symphony,  
But your own heart's minstrelsy.

You do poets and their song  
A grievous wrong  
If your own heart does not bring  
To their deep imagining  
As much beauty as they sing.

✓ No truer words were ever spoken by Josef Hofmann than these, "America is method-ridden." In former times we were happily limited to but a few. Nowadays there are many claimants for favor. Especially is this so in the province of elementary instruction. When Froebel brought to the attention of the educational world his teaching principles for little children, we can easily imagine he did not realize to what extent his theories would be carried. I hope I will not be misunderstood, nor be considered uncharitable or unfair if I say that methods as "Methods" do not appeal to me.

Too long have we temporized with the child. Those first precious years, when every impression is a *lasting* impression, impressions which stand out more clearly than ever when one reaches the evening of life, those early years must be used wisely, or we, as teachers, fail of our high mission. In the days of our own childhood we went out with expectant hearts to meet music. Perhaps, instead of

the beautiful thing we had dreamed of, we were given something, to us, entirely meaningless as music. But we at least understood from the first lesson that music was a *study*! Years ago, when new devices for making music a play-time experience instead of a study first came to notice, some one aptly said, "Shall we sugar-coat the pill all over or only part way around?" Personally, I do not believe in sugar-coating. (If there is one thing above another the children of this generation need, it is *serious purposeful work*.) A little child can easily be led toward this, and will enjoy the more this beautiful, wonderful language we call music when it is approached in a dignified way.

What then, should be the ultimate end of music study! Should it not be the forming of a Cultivated Musical Taste?

The fostering of such a taste means, that in the home, only worthy writings should find a place. It seems incredible that parents so careful to provide good things for their children should so often miss the *best* things. Good stories, good pictures, good music are fine indeed, but better still are the best stories, the best pictures, the best music. Here is where the teacher's responsibility for the critical selection is imperative, for these early impressions are the lasting ones.

To develop this fine appreciation of music, what shall be the first subject claiming our most serious attention! I imagine the answer from thoughtful teachers would be, Rhythm. It is not only an imperative subject but a fundamental one. The wise

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teacher, will, at the outset determine the child's physical response to it, and if the reaction is sluggish will try at once to quicken this response. If those who are naturally apt need special training along rhythmic lines how much more so must be the case with those more or less deficient. For music without the charm of rhythm is crippled indeed. To help establish this sense, the use of rhythmic-action games, drill in marching, and a number of other like activities will suggest themselves for meeting special needs of the individual, and the charming folk-dances now so rapidly being adopted in many sections are all important and definitely helpful. Dance forms, new and old classics of their kind—each have their own appeal. After a feeling for rhythm has been well developed, the matter of time-values is a comparatively simple proposition. Yet how many fail to comprehend this vital element of music. Shakespeare said, "How sour sweet music is when time is broke and no proportion kept." It is no less sour in these days. This true understanding then of time-values, must not be lightly passed over and much disciplinary work in this line must be emphasized as we have already reached the stage in our American hurry, when player and audience alike often fail to give three beats at the end of the first section of "America," when singing this patriotic number!

The various kinds of music to be emphasized in the forming of this cultivated taste should be, first of all, that music containing clear melodic outlines, with or without a simple harmonic background, as



found in the folk songs of all nations—a veritable mine of wealth indeed. No truer words have been spoken than these by August Ambros: “Melody is, and ever will be, the very flower of music. It is melody, even in unison, that combines all the elements of music, for it comprises both rhythm and harmony. It is the gift of heaven, which the savage, the mountain shepherd, the rustic piper alike find spontaneously. It is at once the first and last, the primitive and most advanced stage of music.”

Many years ago, Mrs. John Spencer Curwen of England, voiced a fine teaching idea for beginners' work. She said, “Separate the difficulties.” This has been done in America in our own way. For we long ago discovered that we needed to work out our own musical salvation. To such purpose have we forged ahead, aided at all times by publishers in sympathy with advanced educational ideas, we can consistently claim to be leaders in a new and better way of teaching beginners, the piano. Sometimes five finger or mechanical exercises are given fanciful titles. It would be better to call things by their right names. Finger-exercises should be those alone and nothing else should be expected of them, though they can be made interesting indeed when the child understands *why* they are valuable, and that good tone-quality can be obtained while the fingers are being disciplined. Much has been done to help little hands to become plastic and free and independent in finger action.

What are some other changes that have taken place in the years since the child-heart and life

have come to be recognized? In the matter of keyboard geography we find that the child is able to comprehend the keyboard as a whole instead of the old treble-clef monopoly during the first lessons. That for him no limitations exist, provided the teacher can see with him the vistas that stretch out before them both. So at once, bass and treble clefs are presented and the child proceeds toward making music, without the unevenness in his sight-reading ability that formerly obtained, thus making decided and definite progress from the first. Furthermore, attractive words assist him in gaining a rhythmic concept. These words must be of fine literary value and the themes within his comprehension. Unfortunately much doggerel is extant. All inane material should be ruled out, and teachers should be very watchful to do this.

For the training of the eye, much music-writing is planned for the quickening of this sense.

The five-finger province in its old restricted meaning was limited to mechanical finger exercises. For technical development, this is still an imperative need today, as the hand of every child needs disciplinary training in that direction. But the years have brought a new musical significance to this form, first in surrounding it with harmonic beauty in the duet field, so that the child can readily *make music* from the beginning in his study, with the help of the teacher. Josef Loew, Jacob Schmitt, Johannsen, even the academic Jadassohn, and our own William Mason, gave new content to this form, started years ago by their predecessors. The list

of composers who have done significant things in this five-finger province is a long one, and the extension of this form to two hands gives a range in these days covering *ten notes*, so that while keeping in mind this admirable technical training along natural lines the child can explore further and more wholly to his mind. This makes for musical freedom.

Facility in transposition can easily be required, when begun early and carried from grade to grade. Memory work should also be stressed from the first. Many other improvements upon the old ways may be cited. But there is still much to be accomplished. When one finds an appalling percentage of pupils upon whose musical education much hard-earned money has been expended by sacrificing parents, pupils who cannot sit down and play, in an artistic unpretentious manner, five pieces or sometimes even a single piece, a hymn in the church service or an accompaniment for voice or instrument, one feels that something is radically wrong. Careful, conscientious work on the part of both teacher and pupil, constant review of repertoire, be the pieces ever so simple, an ever-growing appreciation of what true musicianship includes, a constant gain in sight-reading ability, (and by this I do not mean the mere reading of notes, but rather, artistic *interpretation*) the refining of the ear-sense through all the grades, that only beautiful tone-quality may come from the chosen instrument, the consummate use of the pedal, all this, and more, are essential.

A musical technic should be sought, and from the beginning the important end should be to build a technic that will *last*. This means that if a teacher and pupil will work together towards well trained fingers, hand, wrist, and arm development in a relaxed condition, yet with a tone-quality pure and sweet and in keeping with the strength of the little child, to grow with his growth until his touch be firm and yet sympathetic, his musical message will soon become vital and his command of technical resources grow apace. Allied to this should be the constant development of the tactile sense. No one has written more intelligently about this than Daniel Gregory Mason, in his little book called "A Neglected Sense in Piano Playing." The value of studies for each hand separately is too little understood. Special emphasis must naturally be given to the left hand, and happily a wealth of material is to be found devoted exclusively to it. These, and octave studies make their own demands, and this is also a day of double thirds. It goes without saying that scales and arpeggios must have had their due not only at an early period in the plan of study but always carried on to a higher point of perfection. There seems to be a general movement in certain directions to eliminate the etude. This delightful form of writing should, however, not be ignored. Schumann placed a high value on the worth of the etude as an indispensable aid in helping towards a graceful style of playing.

As early in the child's study as consistent should come the opportunity to express the dramatic and



the heroic. A pupil instantly responds to this character of writing even though the examples be miniatures.

The pupils should be encouraged to explore all the tonalities set forth in elementary books in order that all keys and key-tracks become familiar, for then only will he feel a certain conscious power resulting from such study.

✓ The world is in need of little artists as well as big artists. The mechanical piano-players excel along purely technical lines. These instruments, however, can never supplant those musical natures from whose fingers flows music itself. Do we not often listen in vain for that charm of touch, an individual possession which is something to always remember in connection with certain amateurs or artists? We need more *musicianly* players. As for that fine word, *musician*, one cannot use this term very freely, so much does it include.

A greatly overlooked province is that of church music, for the growing student. Its fine office is to inspire reverence, a quality sometimes lacking in this day and generation. How defrauded is a pupil who has no playing or singing acquaintance with the grand Old Chorales, the Hymns of our fathers and the newer contributions to hymnology, and who has never become familiar with the vast number of fine anthems and choruses of the church. Think of the really good pianists and singers who do not know a Magnificat from a Nunc Dimittis, a Jubilate from a Te Deum, a Motet from an Oratorio.

A most important element in this musical culti-



vation of which we are speaking is found in polyphonic writing. This polyphony or counterpoint in its simplest form for voice, the "Round," furnishes examples, some of them recently revived after long years of neglect. I have heard an interesting Round from Italy and many from England, where this form of singing is much more common than with us. For the pianist, the Canons and examples of Imitation, Invention, and Fugue from various masters of the old and new schools furnish a sequence making for certain strength, a technical, intellectual, and musical development to be found in no other way.

As an experience wholly unlike this severe training, we find it not only advisable but imperative at the same time to direct the study and interest of the pupil along purely imaginative lines. For this there has been provided a great store of beautiful writing in the fairy realm and nature music. This appeal to the imagination must not be overlooked, for it stimulates the fantasy of the pupil and often helps him to unlock his own gifts as an interpreter, suggesting at the same time his own latent ability as a composer in many instances.

Still another valuable aid to the expanding life of the student is found in the practice of ensemble, an art that should be begun early. The literature in this province, the many combinations of voice and instrument make for the enrichment of the experience and the further cultivation of the art instincts. Soloists are plentiful but good accompanists are rare. One accomplishment should, how-

ever, never be sacrificed to the other. The word "repertoire" is not fully lived up to or wholly understood by pupils for its true benefits. To hold the student through the grades to some of his pieces and lovely Etudes suitable for playing for his friends or in public, that each grade may yield its own quota for the little "Repertoire Book," so that at all times he is ready with selections thoroughly memorized and carefully and artistically played to give pleasure to the listener, this is indeed something to be proud of for both teacher and pupil.

It is a great age to be living in. As educators, we should be most concerned in helping the rank and file toward music. The gifted people will be taken care of, but the *average* pupils, these are our trust and our care. The avenues to their souls must be entered. Someone has well said: "Where eye, ear, mind, will and heart co-operate, there art dwells."

Never were so many earnest, honest people devoting their services to the cause of children's music. No longer do we hear, as often as formerly, this fallacious statement: "Anyone can teach a beginner." I give you my word there is not another field more fascinating for one's highest educational and artistic endeavor. But let no teacher attempt it whose vision is narrow, who fails to reckon upon the passing years of unfoldment and minister to those years, who does not understand that the child has a right to be always climbing upward. His constantly shifting nature through the primary, elementary and teen age must be sympathetically

tically ministered unto. For his all-around musical development the teacher should see that all mechanical exercises should merge into a musical technic along simple lines that will stand the pupil in good stead the rest of his life. As has been said, polyphonic music, beginning with simple Round and Canon, should be carried along until the great Bach treasure-house is entered, because this and other advanced literature of this character will contribute to his finest intellectual attainments, and be like a golden thread all through the musical fabric. His emotional life must be quickened by constant access to the rare classics of the romantic period, his fantasy stirred and deepened by constant association with writers who have lived near to nature and expressed in music her teachings, as well as those who, as Shakespeare says, "Have lived with Queen Mab and the Fairies." And finally he should have at hand a never-failing and ever-growing repertoire memorized and ready at all times. Church music, without reference to his particular creed should enrich his spiritual life. And the finest flower of all should reach a rare development, namely, the ability to read music in a musicianly manner. For thus, quite unconsciously to him, will have happened something very valuable, namely, a *cultivated musical taste*.

In this matter of a truly cultivated taste, do you not agree with me that the highest use of music from the standpoint of the executant is to be able to sit down at the piano or organ, or with voice, violin or other instrument, and read music at sight?

And to interpret the same just as one would read aloud from the printed page? In our desire to attain the so-called large things of music we sometimes overlook what is truly large, and therefore miss that finer culture which makes for real power. Certainly the young artist who is equipped to play prima vista the worth-while literature of the different schools is to be congratulated for his musical and artistic equipment. I place the highest value upon this ability. Right-reading must, therefore, be carried along with each stage of the pupil, and reaches its culmination in those artistic students who are not only expert but finished and satisfying in their interpretations. The pupil must be so instructed, so fortified, so gradually led up the foot-hills, and later to the mountain top, that he comes into possession of conscious power—that power which is the expression of himself artistically and musically.

Never before were the opportunities so wonderful. If the child begs, if he fails to measure up to what is expected of him now that so much has been prepared to make his music fascinatingly interesting, there may be some good reasons for his lack of response. The artist, the scientist, the all-around practitioner should be consulted to determine at the outset that the child starts fair with every sense normal. Then, by making what the Negroians call "a good landing" (that is, an early beginning) that his interest may be quickened and kindled so that he may attain a technical proficiency of a musical nature and the many-sided experiences

touched upon in this booklet, we can then hope to carry him safely through the trying adolescent period when progress is not so noticeable as in the wonderful years of the earlier time. Given this fine preparation he will have developed the courage to attempt well-nigh impossible, and in this progressive age of ours, almost unbelievable things.

Having enumerated just a few of the points we teachers must include and encompass, let me close with one word of warning. It is this: "The modern tendency is to ripen everything before its time." Only by careful, conscientious, patient work on the part of both teacher and pupil can a solid foundation be built that will stand as long as life lasts. When a pupil has had this thorough foundational training, he will, in after years, rise and bless the teacher who has guided him toward true standards, and held the torch to point the way. An unknown poet has voiced this tribute:

The teacher lives forever. On and on  
Through all the generations he shall preach  
The beautiful evangel: On and on  
Till our poor race has passed the tortuous years  
That lie fore-reaching the millennium,  
And far into that broad and open sea  
He shall sail, singing still the songs he taught  
To the world's youth, and shall sing them o'er and o'er  
To lapping waters, till the thousand leagues  
Are over past,—and argosy and crew  
Ride at their port.