

A New Approach to Piano Instruction: *Music Moves for Piano* By Marilyn Lowe



My Experience

Why are piano students reluctant to compose and improvise? Why don't adults who have studied piano for years play by ear or accompany with confidence? These questions and many others were answered for me during a weeklong seminar with Edwin E. Gordon in 1992. Gordon brilliantly set forth his profound and sensible theories of audiation, known as Music Learning Theory (MLT). The experience changed my life.

When I eagerly began to apply Gordon's theories of audiation with piano students, weight was literally lifted from my shoulders. The syllable systems and labels for sequenced, functional tonal and rhythm patterns, within the context of a tonality or a meter, made logical sense and were an apparent missing link in traditional music education. To our delight, my advanced students found that after moving, singing, and chanting patterns from performance pieces, their playing was transformed immediately. Applying MLT worked!

Teaching beginners, however, posed a different kind of challenge. Traditional, reading-centered beginning piano methods could not be used because learning music from notation stifles audiation. Gordon suggested that I write a piano method. I have, and the result is the series *Music Moves for Piano*, a complete piano method with CDs. This program has proved remarkably successful with many students of all ages and abilities during the past 14 years. I'm confident that all teachers can successfully use the program to nurture their piano students as well.

Getting Started: Basic Principles

To begin, I identified and then followed eight, basic principles:

1. **We learn music in the same way that we learn language.** We 1) listen, 2) think and perform, 3) read, and 4) write. This sequential learning process remains the same for a lifetime. The acquisition of an extensive tonal and rhythm music pattern vocabulary is as essential to the reading, writing, and audiation of music as a large word vocabulary is to language expression.

Creating an Audiation Approach

Gordon's encouragement and willingness to answer questions and review my progress through the years strongly influenced the development of *Music Moves for Piano*. Five additional summer seminars with Gordon, including early childhood music seminars and an advanced music learning theory seminar, kept me on target with my goal to develop a piano method that applied Gordon's MLT.

It was a surprise to me how much I began to draw upon more than 30 years of personal education, performance, and teaching to solve problems that continually arose. There was no role model for developing a piano method different from those previously published. The background I drew upon included: study at Knox College and Indiana University with outstanding undergraduate and graduate teachers in piano, organ, music composition, and music theory; summer session study at a variety of universities and in France; extensive performance experiences in piano, organ, and with different ensemble combinations; work as a church organist and choir director; and, finally, years of piano teaching experience with students from birth through adulthood with a variety of music aptitudes.

From the beginning, students and parents accepted my pioneering project and became eager laboratory experiments. My students' parents understood the importance of developing audiation skills and were enthusiastic about their children learning to play by ear, improvise, compose, perform, and read and write music notation. Both students and parents helped with solving problems and creating activities, as well as the sequencing and selection of materials. It was a collabo-

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2. We can only learn one new thing at a time. Using the whole-part-whole concept of learning provides opportunities to do this. The first "whole" is preparation or readiness by listening to the entire piece of music. The "part" includes the study of rhythm patterns, tonal patterns, harmonic progressions, form, and so forth. Finally, a return to the "whole" after a study of the parts provides greater understanding of the music.

3. Movement is fundamental for developing rhythm audiation. Movement activities incorporate both pulsating kinds of body movement and continuous fluid movement activities that emphasize weight and flow. Rhythm itself is multi-dimensional: Macrobeat, microbeats, and melodic rhythm (rhythm patterns) must be layered simultaneously to sustain beat consistency and to perform musically. In addition, body movement releases both physical and emotional tension and provides a pleasant learning atmosphere. The connection is clear: Children learn through body movement and rhythm audiation is developed through body movement.

4. Singing develops tonal audiation. Singing includes functional tonal patterns in many tonalities and songs in many tonalities and meters. Students engage in purposeful, directed movement activities while listening (the "whole") to songs they will learn to play.

5. Rote learning (or learning by imitation) of patterns, songs and pieces is the first step toward learning how to audiate. Students first acquire a tonal and rhythm pattern vocabulary with labels (or names) along with the ability to play by imitation; then they learn how to apply MLT to music study. Teachers must help students to move beyond mindless rote learning to learning through audiation. Rote learning has many advantages. It lets students learn physically how to play the piano without the distraction of music notation. Students also learn to study music efficiently. Poor playing, study, and performance habits often develop when students are expected to learn from notation that they don't understand.

6. Exploration, creativity, and improvisation activities are fundamental for learning how to audiate. Short, contrasting functional music patterns are ideal for improvisation. Improvisation introduces a playful, game-like tone to learning, since it is somewhat like story-telling. Improvisation, in addition to being a skill of its own, reinforces learning and is integral in developing continuity of performance.

7. Music aptitudes of students are different. Knowing the strength and weakness of each student allows the teacher to individualize instruction so that each student is challenged appropriately and, thus will most likely enjoy learning. Instruction can be individualized within a heterogeneous group.

8. A piano method must provide sequenced learning material for developing efficient, coordinated movement. Appropriate materials from the beginning of study will help students learn how to use their arms, hands, and fingers when playing the piano. They should avoid playing with tight hands and curled fingers and should also learn to avoid twisting, stretching, reaching, pushing, and key bedding.

From Principles to Practice

Challenges continue to arise in every lesson. Teaching sound before notation and teaching music as an aural art requires new skills. Even after using this approach for 14 years, I regularly have those "a-ha!" moments that provide insights about how to refine the learning/teaching process even further. From the beginning, it was obvious that the traditional piano lesson, as I knew it, needed a make-over. But can we ask students to engage in activities away from the keyboard? Will students sing, move, breathe, and chant at a piano lesson? Can students learn effectively how to audiate and play the piano in small groups? What beginning material is needed? Can a piano teacher individualize instruction with the same curriculum? Is it possible for students to learn to play rhythmically without counting, read notation without using flash cards and naming lines and spaces, and perform comfortably without notation?

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Answers came gradually as I transformed my piano lessons. Students enjoyed activities away from the keyboard that included purposeful movement, singing, chanting, and tonal and rhythm pattern instruction. Circle games and line dances were fun and productive. Observation proved that students did listen, think, sing, and play music because they were not expected to learn from notation before they were ready. Students learned rapidly from their peers and benefited from longer lesson times. This approach does work one-on-one, but various groupings seemed to provide more instructional opportunities. Students learned from each other, regardless of age or level. I discovered that it is possible to provide an activity-oriented piano lesson in which students learn how to audiate and play the piano at the same time.

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Students provided suggestions and were a wonderful experiential laboratory for trying out new music and activities. They were most helpful in developing a sequenced curriculum of pieces, activities, and keyboard/technical skills. There is more content to teach in this new kind of piano lesson than in the traditional lesson, during which coaching pieces and teaching students to decode notation is common. The tonal and rhythm pattern vocabulary is used to improvise, read, write, and compose. Beginning piano pieces were written to guide students in learning how to approach the keyboard physically, how the piano keyboard is organized, and how to “play the rhythm.” Students’ progress continued to provide ideas for the development of this method.

With this program, students enjoy a large variety of short, rhythm-driven pieces that are game-like. Pieces use alternating hands, crossing hands, imitation, or hands that play one after the other. Playing the hands together is difficult for many students and is carefully nurtured with simple accompaniments of an open 5th or with single-tone tonic and dominant chord changes.

Contrasting pieces in a variety of styles, tonalities, and meters played on both black and white keys in different keyboard registers keep students’ interest and help to develop audiation skills. Since early pieces are simple

and based on rhythm patterns, the accompaniment or duet part provides acculturation in style and tonality. In addition, ensemble playing fosters beat competency. What a strange relief it was to realize that removing counting, note-reading, and interval study from the creative process made a big difference in the quality of music written and chosen.

Folk songs were the obvious choice for repertoire for *Music Moves for Piano* because they encourage singing, movement, and improvisation. Careful selection of folk songs was needed. Some folk songs are not suited for learning how to play the piano because they have a wide melodic range, large leaps, and catchy rhythms—often the kind that young children love to sing. This series uses a rich, international folk repertoire that appropriately develops the pianist’s hands.

In *Music Moves for Piano*, folk songs are introduced after students become familiar with the keyboard and their fingers/hands/arms are comfortable depressing the right keys at the right time in the right way. Students enjoy the success of playing simple folk songs that use three fingers. Next, students progress to five-tone, or five-finger folk songs that provide a variety of technical and musical patterns. Folk songs with extensions and cross-overs complete the curriculum of more than 80 short folk songs. Variety in rhythm patterns, tonality, and meter are carefully sequenced.

Folk songs allow students to develop the left hand technically because they learn to play the melodies with each hand alone. Simple single-line accompaniments familiarize students with the concept of melody and accompaniment and help them hear, or audiate, harmonic changes. This style of accompaniment helps students with hands together playing and avoids the pitfall of tight hands created by introducing block chords too early.

Folk songs provide a common studio curriculum for building improvisation skills over many years. As students advance, they use this folk song repertoire for a variety of activities, such as transposition to all keyalities, changing to many tonalities and meters, making rhythmic and melodic variations, creating arrangements and medleys, making various kinds of accompaniments, and so forth.

Every year students should learn several longer rote solos from published repertoire. These solos are motivating and add interest to the study. Students learn them very quickly.

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Student Books for Home Study

Students need books to guide their progress and communicate lesson assignments. Parents suggested that I include a summary of lesson plans on the first page of each unit. This "Lesson Time Objectives" is for home assignments and communication about what was studied at the lesson. Student activities and a "Song to Sing" are also on the same unit page. The "Song to Sing" and student performance pieces with their essential rhythm, tonal, and melodic patterns are on a home study CD that complements each book.

No precedent existed for putting beginning piano pieces in print that were learned by rote and by applying audiation skills. After trial and error, I decided to use tonal syllables and dots on pictures of keyboards and hands. The letter name for the tonic is also printed below the piano keys. Then students know which piano keys to play with which fingers/hands for each piece. It is interesting to watch students develop a strong visual and kinesthetic feel for the keyboard from these pictures. Students learn all the pieces at the lesson and can listen to them at home on the accompanying CDs.

A music information box for students gives the meter, tonality, and starting tone for each piece. A checklist provides a place for the teacher to note what was studied at each lesson. I also included necessary music notation in small print for the teacher and parent. I was surprised and delighted to watch students relate the tonal solfège to the music notation. The size of the notation does not deter students from reading when they are prepared. Arpeggios, cadences, and scales in all keyalities and tonalities are sequenced throughout the series of five books.

After deciding the format of the material, I made an outline of keyboard essentials for learning how to audiate. Students should acquire a large folk song repertory, develop improvisation skills, and learn to play in all keyalities, tonalities, and meters. Five method books were needed to fully instruct students in the method. However, when five-year-olds asked to play the piano, I wrote a new book because *Student Book 1* was too difficult for them. Then, four-year-old children wanted to play the piano. A need existed for another, earlier level book. Several children eagerly provided experience for writing these two music books for four- and five-year-olds.

To provide more music for improvisation and ensemble playing, supplementary material, including a book of boogies, two books of duets for improvisation, and two books of Christmas music, was added to the series. In addition, a book called *Keyalities and Tonalities: The Complete Book of Arpeggios, Cadences and Scales* provides tonal solfège written on the keyboard and hand pictures. A reading and repertoire series, with traditional music notation, concludes the piano method.

For teachers, lessons plans accompany each book. Teaching rhythm and tonal patterns, organizing group activities, sequenced instruction, teaching pieces by rote, and encouraging creativity and improvisation are new skills for many teachers. The *Teacher's Lesson Plans* books provide "how to" instructions and weekly lesson plans that ensure sequential instruction and student preparation, readiness, repetition, and reinforcement. They offer teachers practical ideas for activities and include printed tonal and rhythm patterns with syllables. Students readily

A New Beginning for the 21st Century

After teaching this method for 14 years, students continuously demonstrate the success of MLT. They retain what they learn. They are functional musicians and strong music advocates in their communities. Some have even become professional musicians. But nearly all of them enjoy music as a result of this approach. As musicians and teachers, we know that music has a profound effect on the soul and spirit. It is heartwarming to know that we contribute to students' welfare when they internalize the healing power of music through learning how to audiate.

Marilyn Lowe holds degrees from Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois and Indiana University in Bloomington, where she studied piano with Menahem Pressler. She completed additional graduate study at Indiana University in organ and music theory. Lowe has taught piano and music theory at the college level and at present is an independent piano teacher in Springfield, Missouri.

Our November workshop will feature Ms. Lowe as presenter! See page 8 for details.

Purchase *Music Moves for Piano* at www.giamusic.com or by calling 1-800-GIA-1358.