

BEYOND THE METHOD BOOK
INTEGRATING MOVEMENT, EXPLORATION, AND IMPROVISATION INTO THE
ELEMENTARY PIANO LESSON

by

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Abstract

Prominent elementary music methods like Orff-Schulwerk, Kodaly, Suzuki, Music Learning Theory, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics share a belief in a sound-before-symbol approach: delaying notation instruction in order to first develop audiation, musical vocabularies, and concrete musical experiences. Unfortunately, piano pedagogy has not taken the same journey, with method books continuing to center on reading from the earliest. While piano pedagogy has made great strides as a professional music community, now it must adopt the same sound-before-symbol approach of its general music colleagues, making room for experiential and creative activities as a core component of instruction. Through the integration of movement, exploration, and improvisation activities like the included examples, teachers can move beyond strict adherence to the method book, and change their focus from notational literacy to authentic musicianship.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction to Sound-Before-Symbol

As an Orff-Schulwerk practitioner who has seen her teaching inspired and transformed by Carl Orff's educational work, I have always felt a disconnect in how I approach elementary general music and private piano. These students are the same age and have similar musical aptitude, yet my general classroom and private piano lessons look very different. In my classroom, I have implemented an Orff-Schulwerk approach, moving my focus away from notation and towards creating meaningful musical experiences for my students. We utilize movement, play, imitation, exploration, improvisation, and composition as vehicles for musical and personal growth. My piano instruction has not taken the same journey, however, as I find myself teaching the same way I was taught: sitting on the bench, methodically focused on reading music and playing it properly. Why the dichotomy? Is there room for an Orff-Schulwerk approach in the private piano setting?

One key factor separating prominent elementary methods like Orff-Schulwerk from traditional piano pedagogy is the belief in a sound-before-symbol approach: delaying notation instruction in order to first develop audiation, and musical vocabularies and understanding (Feldman & Contzuis, 2016). Concrete musical experience must come before abstract theory, and the ears must hear and the body must feel musical concepts before the eyes can read them. This sound-to-symbol philosophy is found in key elementary music methodologies, including Orff-Schulwerk, Kodaly, Suzuki, Music Learning Theory, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

The aim of Orff-Schulwerk is to develop students' inherent musicality through the use of performing, listening, and creating elemental music (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987, p. 7). Imitation, exploration, and improvisation enable students to engage in meaningful, active music making, without the immediate need for notational literacy. In the Kodaly method, authentic, high-

quality folk music and singing games are carefully sequenced through a prepare-present-practice-assess approach (Bowyer, 2015). Students gain musical independence through the use of acapella singing, solfege, rhythmic symbols, and hand signs. With its systematic process, music teachers might perceive Kodaly as opposing Orff-Schulwerk, yet despite these differences, musical experience precedes notational reading in both methodologies.

The Suzuki method follows the compelling parallel between language and music acquisition very closely. In language, children associate words with printed symbols years after spoken language acquisition (Feldman & Contzuis, 2016); they learn to speak without formal training because they are constantly engaged in the language by hearing and imitating. Following this model, the Suzuki method immerses children in music to create a musical ‘mother tongue’ and delays notational reading in favor of playing by ear. Likewise, Music Learning Theory focuses scientifically on how children learn, and stresses the “importance of audiation and comprehension over just reading or decoding” (Feldman & Contzuis, 2016, p. 10). Notation is intended only to assist in recalling what students can already perceive and audiate.

Finally, in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, rhythm is internalized through movement. In contrast to the typical method book approach of teaching rhythm mathematically from day one, students must first connect kinesthetically to rhythm and meter. Dalcroze believed instrumental study should not precede rhythmic study, and that the entire body must become a musical instrument (Feldman & Contzuis, 2016, p. 23). Whether through movement, play, language, or improvisation, all of these methodologies share the unifying belief that children must experience musical sounds before reading musical symbols. Notational literacy is not the first step in a child’s musical education.

Chapter 2 - Progress in Piano Pedagogy

Piano pedagogy, in contrast to many elementary general music methodologies, continues to center on reading from the earliest lesson. To this end, method books have evolved significantly throughout the second half of the 20th century. Tedious exercises expanding from Middle C can still be found in older method books, such as *John Thompson's Easiest Piano Course* (Thompson, 1955), method books designed for the youngest beginners, such as *Music for Little Mozarts* (Barden, Kowalchyk, & Lancaster, 1999), and lesser-known method books, such as *Progressive Piano* (Scott & Turner, 2014). Most method books, however, now make use of child-friendly melodies, including folk songs and new compositions with supporting teacher accompaniments (Arrau-Sturm, James, Jackson, & Brubaker-Burns, 2000).

In the mid-century, Frances Clark pioneered a then revolutionary approach to reading notation: instead of note by note memorization on the full staff, she advocated the use of unstaffed and limited staff notation, and reading by way of melodic direction, intervals, and landmark notes (Lymenstull, 1994). *The Music Tree* (Clark, Goss, & Holland, 2000) is the only method book that continues to use a limited staff of 2, 3, and 4 lines to bridge the gap between unstaffed and grand staff notation. The mainstream method books of today, including *Piano Adventures* (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a), *Hal Leonard Student Piano Library* (Kreader, Kern, Keveren, & Rejino, 1996), and *Alfred's Basic Piano Library* (Palmer, Manus, & Vick-Lethco, 2000), incorporate several reading methodologies in a modified or eclectic approach, making use of pre-reading, unstaffed notation, melodic direction, intervals, landmarks, and note-name memorization (Arrau-Sturm et al., 2000).

In addition to the development of the core lesson book, there is now a wealth of resources available to piano teachers including books for the entire range of student, from preschool to

adult. Supplemental materials with additional repertoire, music games and activities, theory worksheets, technical exercises, teacher guides, and even the latest piano app seem to provide everything a teacher might need. While all of these advancements have given teachers colorful, visually appealing pages, child-friendly songs, and expertly coordinated sequencing, the paradigm of reading-first has not given way to sound-before-symbol. Children still are sitting at the piano, reading abstract symbols before having the corresponding concrete experiences. This reading-focused approach has no kinesthetic base and affords no opportunity to internalize sounds before performing songs. Is this traditional model in which students are trained to read the music and then “perfectly imitate the performances of others” (Andrews, 2011, para. 2) the real way to acquire authentic musicianship? Instead, if we as teachers will harness our own creativity, we can cultivate comprehensive musicianship in our students by adapting a sound-before-symbol approach into our current lessons.

Chapter 3 - Integrating Movement, Exploration, and Improvisation

Integrating movement, exploration and improvisation into our instruction is a key step to embracing a sound-before-symbol philosophy. Movement is a natural starting point with new musical concepts, as most students will learn best when experiencing new ideas using more than one sense (Bailey, 2007). The connection between the intellectual and physical factors in piano came into pedagogical acceptance around mid-century, as method books now frequently call for clapping, tapping, counting aloud, fingering on the piano's fallboard, and singing lyrics (Arrau-Sturm et al., 2000). Nonetheless, all of these 'movement' activities take place seated at the piano bench reading the notation. Rather than limit ourselves to tapping and clapping, whole-body movements can lay the foundation for rhythmic integrity at the piano.

After noticing the vast majority of my students struggling to play "Petite Minuet," a song in $\frac{3}{4}$ time from *Piano Adventures* (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a), I tried using movement activities to help a specific student improve her playing. First we tried a body percussion ostinato (pat-clap-clap) as partners, and then the student performed it individually as I played sample music in triple meter. Next, we stood up and danced the lyrics: "Curtsy and bow, then step to your left. The people are dancing a minuet" (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 47). Finally we combined the body percussion ostinato with singing the lyrics in tempo.

To an outsider's eye, waltzing about the piano studio may look frivolous, but how can we expect our students to play with fluidity on the piano that which their bodies have yet to internalize? Had I initially prepared my student for triple meter with these movement activities, rather than reacting to her mistakes, the lesson would have been more effective. Hannaford (1995) writes there is a "societal prejudice that tends to downgrade physical achievement and minimizes its importance in 'serious' endeavors like work and school" (p. 97). Movement looks

like play, which unfortunately to some means the opposite of real work and learning. On the contrary, movement is the crucial first step to internalizing rhythm and meter, and it is indispensable to a sound-before-symbol approach.

While movement internalizes new rhythms, exploration facilitates discovery of new sounds. Exploration is a key part of the creative process, and especially important for younger children, who are not yet able to audiate (Kratus, 1990). By manipulating musical ideas in original ways, students can experiment with expressive elements like dynamics, tempo, articulations, and texture (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987, p. 29). *Piano Adventures* (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a) is the only method book containing notable exploration instruction, including suggestions for altering tempos, dynamics, and starting positions. In “Russian Folk Song” (p. 49), students are to play the piece “very low and slow for an old man dancing, as written at a moderate speed for a teenager, and very high and fast for a small boy or girl dancing.” The song introducing skips, “Hey, Hey, Look at Me!” directs students to transpose the piece, moving their thumb onto each white key (p. 52). Unfortunately, none of the explorative activities instruct the students to make their own musical choices.

When I introduce *forte* using the method book, with a symbol, definition, and song to play, my students are so busy decoding notes and rhythms and coordinating their fingers, they often overlook the dynamic markings. Either we continue practicing until they can also process the dynamics, or, feeling their attention span wane, we skip it. Abstract symbols and technical explanations are not the way to develop expressive playing. When student-led exploration takes place away from the printed page, however, it empowers their artistic playing. Linguistic prompts can invite aural imagination (Stauffer, 2013b, p. 95), and harness students’ own inventiveness to discover new sounds. Describing a trip to the zoo and then musically exploring

the weight of an elephant, the speed of a cheetah, or the bounce of a frog provides a concrete framework for dynamics, tempos and articulations. As students begin creating their own sounds through exploration, they take a valuable step towards developing their capacity to improvise.

Improvisation must be a central component of a sound-before-symbol approach because it is here that students invent new musical ideas and demonstrate their musical independence from their teacher (Frazee & Krueter, 1987, p. 31). Since improvisation does not involve notation, it provides a valuable opportunity for students to listen to their own musical ideas without the additional task of decoding printed symbols (Thornton, 2013, p. 15). Teaching improvisation can be daunting, especially for teachers who don't see themselves as improvisers. Some method books offer no instruction for improvisation, while others confine improvisation to supplemental books, perpetuating the idea improvisation must be a separate pedagogical event rather than a seamless part of every lesson (Stauffer, 2013a). Fortunately, examples of improvisation instruction integrated into the lesson can be found in method books including *Hal Leonard Student Piano Library* (Kreader et al., 1996), *The Music Tree* (Clark et al., 2000), and *Piano Adventures* (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a).

The Hal Leonard Student Piano Library (Kreader et al., 1996) presents improvisation opportunities immediately following note identification on the keyboard. Students are instructed to listen to the teacher accompaniment and then make up their own song, given the following pitch-sets: two black keys (p. 10), C-D-E (p. 23), and F-G-A-B (p. 27). The activity fills an entire page, giving it greater prominence, and comes before the corresponding notated songs, a unique example of a sound-before-symbol approach in a method book. Unfortunately, rather than continue this format through the entire book, the improvisation pages stop after the introduction of staff notation. *The Music Tree* (Clark et al., 2000), on the other hand, presents

improvisation after the notated songs, and continues this sequence not only through the primer level, but also through the entire method book series. The parameters are looser, instead of a specific pitch-set, students “make up their own pieces” using the musical concepts presented in the unit: 2 black keys (p. 13), repeated notes (p. 21), slurs (p. 31), white keys using 2nds (p. 38), 3rds (p. 45) etc. Each time, students are reminded, “Your pieces could be about whatever you like!”

There is significant debate regarding how much structure is needed in creative activities like improvisation. Some would argue for simple and clearly structured tasks (Beckstead, 2013) while others (Hickey, 2009; Wiggins, 1999) would argue for a freer, student-led approach. Strict musical limits can stifle a student’s creativity (Wiggins, 1999), but without structure beginning improvisations lack coherent musicality. If we want to guide our students without taking control of their music, the solution must be finding the balance between freedom of choice and useful constraints (Beegle, 2010), like a given pitch-set, rhythmic structure, elemental form, or an expressive idea.

Piano Adventures (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a), offers improvisational prompts containing both an expressive, thematic idea and a musical parameter. In “Come See the Parade” students “create a special ending... as the parade disappears” using Middle C and Treble G together (p. 51), and in “My Invention” students extend the piece using Bass F, Middle C, and Treble G until the invention “breaks down” (p. 41). The thematic connection helps students to imagine the sounds they are creating, and the musical parameters enable them to operate confidently and successfully.

While these improvisational activities have merit, what no method book can provide is examples of improvisation for students to imitate. Overwhelming evidence indicates the benefits

of modeling and doing so away from the printed music (Hasten, 2007); we must build a foundation for improvisation by letting our students hear and imitate what we ourselves improvise. Rather than verbally explain the ‘rules’ about ending on a home note, where that home note is, how many measures it should be, and how it should end, students can glean this information aurally through imitation. In preparing improvisations with the lesson “Hey Mr. Half Note Dot!” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 32), I have found greater success for my students when they first internalize the difficult triple-meter rhythms through imitation. Their improvisations are stronger and more confident when they have a plethora of musical motives to choose from in their head and in their fingers. When students can improvise within specific musical parameters, then they will be ready to read and play those concepts in the method book.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Teaching movement, exploration, and improvisation requires a willingness to experiment and relinquish control. Sometimes these lessons flop, sometimes they flourish, and it can be unsettling to begin without knowing the end result. In contrast, a strict adherence to the method book offers an efficient, predictable path to generate competent piano players. The problem, however, is when we rely completely on these method books, instead of our own insight, to provide the totality of the lesson, we lose our autonomy and personal creativity (Jorgensen, 2011). The ability to make relevant decisions for our students is crucial, and if this wealth of resources supersedes our own vision and originality, we are losing our vitality as teachers. Too many times I have taught the next page in the method book simply because it is the next page, without any genuine scrutiny as to what my student needs at that exact moment in time.

The phenomenon of ‘de-skilling’ teachers in favor of adherence to predetermined material can easily be found in today’s educational climate in any subject (Mantie, 2013). Of this trend, Mantie (2013) bemoans, that it is no longer “the teacher’s place to question the rightness or appropriateness of the curriculum for the students she teachers; rather the teacher’s job is merely to ensure that students have sufficiently learned what the authorities dictate” (p. 28). We cannot be confined to reproducing the ideas of others; we have the capacity to independently design and carry out instruction, particularly in response to immediate student needs and interests. It is our creative choices that allow us to adapt our teaching and fulfill the needs of each student (Jorgensen, 2011). Every child is a unique individual, and no method book can replace our ability to build relationships with and identify the best approach for each student.

We have made great strides as a professional music community and now we must make room in our lessons for sound-before-symbol activities. Just as we have moved passed balancing

pennies on the hands of tearful children, I believe we will also move past the “misconception that art is primarily about accomplishing something and gaining skill” (Kinney, 2010, p. 41). When we focus less on relentless forward progress in notational reading, we will open the doors for personal growth, discovery, and creativity, reaching our students as children first, musicians second, and pianists third (Clark, 1992). Taking a cue from our colleagues in elementary general music, we can extend our role as piano teachers beyond merely technicians executing method book curriculum, and instead become creative musical partners with our students.

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Appendix A - Sample Movement Lesson 1: Walk-Walk-Slide

Internalizing Quarter and Half Note Rhythmic Patterns

Objective: The student will move in response to hearing and seeing quarter and half notes.

Materials Needed: Hand Drum

“The I Like Song” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 19)

Rationale: Rhythms should be seen as patterns and motives, not individual notes. The method book, however, suggests counting each note individually: the quarter note, quarter note, half note pattern would be read “1- 1- 1-2” Instead, allow students to choose their own movements to discover their own rhythmic patterns, providing a concrete experience to the notation.

Learning Activities

- Play a steady pulse on the hand drum, and students will walk to the beat.
- Alert students to listen for a change in the drum and to move accordingly. Switch to playing half notes, and observe and label the changes in movement.
- Play various patterns including quarter and half notes, finally arriving at the pattern of quarter-quarter-half note, and students will move accordingly.
- Give students manipulatives of quarter and half notes. Students will create rhythmic patterns. Pass out hand drums and students will play and move their rhythms.
- Transition to “The I Like Song” by arranging rhythms and playing them on the 3-black key groups.

Appendix B - Sample Movement Lesson 2: Curtsy and Bow

Movement in triple meter

Objective: Students will play with rhythmic fluidity in triple meter by dancing and performing body percussion.

Materials Needed: Movement space, rhythm sticks

“Petite Minuet” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 47)

Rationale: Internalizing triple meter, and the accompanying rhythms, is essential for fluid playing of this minuet. While it is two-thirds of the way through the method book, it is only the second piece in triple meter. By moving to the downbeats and the subdivisions while simultaneously singing the words, students will have greater success playing this piece at the piano.

Learning Activities:

- Perform various body percussion patterns with 2, 3, and 4 beats. Ask, “How many beats are in my pattern?”
- Invite students to copy each pattern. End with pat-clap-clap.
- Take it for a walk: step to the pulse while continuing the body percussion ostinato. Students find a partner (teacher or fellow student) and perform together, clapping the partner’s hands.
- Add piano accompaniments in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, including Bach minuets and finally “Petite Minuet.”

- Talk through the lyrics of the song, “Curtsy and bow, then step to your left. The people are dancing a minuet.” Following the lyrics, sing the melody and dance: curtsy, bow, step to the left, turn in a circle holding hands, return to original spot.
- Students will sing the melody and dance, then sing the melody and perform the body percussion pattern.
- Transition to “Petite Minuet” at the piano by singing the lyrics while playing the rhythm sticks, and then tapping the fallboard.

Appendix C - Sample Exploration Lesson 1: Animals on Parade

Exploring dynamic contrast

Objective: Students will play with dynamic contrast by portraying animals through musical exploration.

Materials Needed: Pictures of animals, especially ones with distinctive movement/sound traits.

Hand Drum

“I Hear the Echo” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 20)

Rationale: Using an animal guessing game is a fun strategy to motivate and focus students. Concentrating on the animal’s essential features helps guide their musical exploration. The concrete examples of animals connect to a student’s life experience and provide a reference point for concepts like arm-weight.

Learning Activities

- Begin with a guessing game: Display 3 animals, choose one, and depict it musically. Students identify which animal they hear. Repeat the process with new animals.
- Discuss what sounds they heard and why they made their guesses. Highlight elements including tempo, dynamics, and articulations.
- Switch roles: the students choose and play the animal, and the teacher guesses.
- Ask students which animal was the biggest, heaviest, smallest, and quietest. Lead students to the elephant and the mouse.

- Instruct students to speak expressively in rhythm: “Elephant moves heavy, mouse will move on tiptoes” while patting their legs.
- Show the dynamic symbols and change the words to: “Elephant moves forte, mouse will move piano.” Place the symbol for *forte* and *piano* on the animals.
- On a hand drum, play the rhythmic cue, “Elephant moves forte” or “mouse will move piano” at the corresponding dynamic. In response, students will play their animal exploration.
- Transition to “I Hear the Echo” by identifying the dynamics and singing and patting the lyrics.

Appendix D - Sample Exploration Lesson 2: A Trip to the Sea

Exploration through a linguistic/narrative prompt (Stauffer, 2013b)

Objective: The student will explore new sounds on the piano by responding to a story about the ocean.

Materials Needed:

“Sea Story” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 31)

Rationale: Narrative prompts, like a story of the ocean, function as sound starters and creative jumping off points for aural imagination. The story of the ocean connects their music to an image, not a theoretical parameter.

Learning Activities:

- Begin by talking about the ocean and a boat, and imagining the sonic environment: What would you hear? How would it feel? Students share their experiences.
- Students will brainstorm things a person would hear at the ocean or on a boat, and explore those sounds together on the piano.
- Create a story about a day at the ocean with at least three different sounds: For example, birds chirping, waves crashing, wind blowing.
- Transition to “Sea Story” by moving to thumbs on Cs. Students will play little waves and big waves expanding from C. Draw a picture of a medium wave and a large wave, and then compare the shape to the printed music. Perform the explorations as the B section in an ABA form with the written song.

Appendix E - Sample Improvisation Lesson 1: Humpty Dumpty

Had a Great Song

Improvisation within a rhythmic structure

Objective: The student will improvise in the F# pentatonic scale by using the rhythmic building blocks of “Humpty Dumpty.”

Materials Needed: Nursery rhyme: Humpty Dumpty

“Hey, Mr. Half Note Dot!” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 32)

Rationale: Performing in triple meter is a challenging new concept for students, especially the uneven rhythm of Half Note-Quarter Note found in this song. By using familiar nursery rhymes, students connect these rhythms to authentic speech patterns. Word rhythms not only prepare the upcoming method book selection, but also provide a secure framework in which students can improvise.

Learning Activities:

- Students recite the nursery rhyme: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again. Repeat while patting the downbeat.
- Improvise a melody in F# pentatonic using the rhythm of Humpty Dumpty while the students play F#/C# on the downbeats.
- Create Rhythmic Building Blocks required for “Hey, Mr. Half Note Dot!” by choosing words from Humpty Dumpty: 3 Quarter Notes-Dotted Half Note (“all the king’s men”), 3

Quarter Notes- 3 Quarter Notes (“couldn’t put couldn’t put), and Half Note-Quarter Note- Dotted Half Note (“Humpty Back”).

- Using these rhythmic building blocks and word cues, students will echo-play the teacher’s improvisations, each building in length or complexity.
- Switch roles: the students improvise and the teacher repeats back. As the students are ready, they improvise without imitation while the teacher provides accompaniment.
- Transition to “Hey, Mr. Half Note Dot!” by moving the improvisations to Middle C position, with the thumbs sharing C and hands mirroring each other.

Appendix F - Sample Improvisation Lesson 2: Interpreting Sketches

Improvising Melodies with visual prompts (Scott, 2007, p. 9-10)

Objective: The student will improvise melodies by drawing sketches and responding to their vertical contour.

Materials Needed: Drawing Supplies

“Mister Bluebird” (N. Faber & R. Faber, 2011a, p. 43)

Rationale: Unlike improvisational activities that begin with specific parameters, interpreting sketches begins broad and explorative. Directional reading is reinforced away from the staff, and the improvisations gain structure through the addition of carefully chosen parameters.

Learning Activities:

- Draw various sketches of lines moving up and down, and students will vocalize these examples and move their hand to show melodic contour.
- Improvise the examples and students select which one they heard.
- Invite the students to draw new sketches, and then play the students’ ideas. Ask if they were played ‘correctly’ and let the student explain/play any discrepancies.
- Students will draw and play their own sketches
- In response to the drawings and improvisations, set helpful parameters for students to improvise within: white keys, specific pitch-set, starting note, octave range, pulse, or meter. Students will play sketches within the given parameters.
- Ask students to play their sketches within the C 5-finger scale.

- Transition to “Mister Bluebird” by drawing a sketch of the melodic contour of the song. Students will play within the C 5-finger scale, and then compare the result to the song in the lesson book.