

Sheet music review: Piano methods

Dogs and Birds on the Keyboard Books 1 and 2



Dogs and Birds No 1: Supplementary Notes and Lesson Plans for Parents and Teachers

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Kingsley Print and Design, www.dogsandbirds.co.uk, Books £7.95 each, Notes £5.95, Wooden animals £6.95

It is a real treat to discover a new and imaginative approach to teaching the piano which really works and is completely accessible and user-friendly. *Dogs and Birds on the Keyboard* is based on the Kodály approach to learning music, which uses singing as a vital part of the learning process. The system is aimed at the younger child, perhaps starting as early as four, up to around age 6-7. Even children who don't quite know their alphabet can use it. Pictures of various animals and birds encapsulated inside the shapes of notes on the staff are used to represent the different pitches. Most four-year-olds can manage to say 'cat' and 'dog' without being able to read or spell them!

There are two versions of Book 1: an 'Animal Notes Edition', in which the body of each note contains a picture of the appropriate animal: D= Dog, A= Ant and so on, and a 'Blank Note Edition', which is identical in every respect except that the animal pictures are omitted.

From the outset, 'Three Golden Rules' are highlighted:

1. Always sing the melody as you play, using the animal names (dog, cat, egg etc.)
2. Count aloud during the rhythm exercises, clapping or playing notes chosen by the teacher
3. Never play faster than one beat a second

Comprising two tutor books and a selection of supplementary material, an accompanying booklet of notes and lesson plans for teachers and parents provides a comprehensive guide to getting the best out of the book. It should be possible for parents without any prior musical experience to use this approach, if they follow the guide carefully.

A set of wooden animals which can be placed either on the keyboard, or on the large set of staves provided, also comes with the package.

Book 1 combines both rhythm and pitch exercises with notation on the staff. Material is broken up into a number of steps comprising exercises and games to help learn the different concepts. Exercises are ordered differently in each step so as to add variety and include using the wooden animals, making up stories about

the illustrations on the page, improvising, playing echo games, simple compositions (towards the end of the book), and much more. The tunes and exercises are laid out attractively with black and white drawings of the various animals and other images relating to the titles of pieces. There are also numerous rhythm exercises to count and clap. An accompanying CD contains all the pieces and rhythm exercises in Book 1.

The attractive illustrations are bound to make reading and remembering the pitch of notes enjoyable; and the rhythmic exercises interspersed throughout the book help to develop a sense of beat, as well as independence between the hands.

Book 2 continues in similar fashion, but with a gentle progression in terms of standard. The opening page introduces finger numbers for each hand to play while singing, for example 'Ant, Bird, Cat, Dog, Egg'. The child therefore learns to associate notes with animal symbols, and not with finger numbers, thus avoiding the problems which can arise in other approaches when more than ten notes are introduced. I'm sure we have all come across a pupil who thinks that if the note is to be played with the RH thumb, 'it must be middle C'! This is much less likely to happen with the *Dogs and Birds* method.

An emphasis on singing is paramount, and the teacher or parent is encouraged to stick with it, even if some pupils are reluctant at first. In time, pupils should be able to sing one part of a melody while accompanying themselves on the piano with the other hand. Children are encouraged to associate the animal names with notes and to sing them, particularly when learning with separate hands.

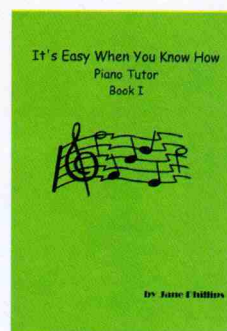
A number of basic rudiments are covered including note lengths and notation, repeat marks, and first- and second-time bars. Good posture and hand position are also encouraged, with helpful suggestions on how to get the best out of children in this regard.

This unusual but attractive approach makes it fairly straightforward for children to practise between lessons unaided. The emphasis on singing, with the use of games, exercises, and other materials all add up to make this a most interesting and attractive method, especially for the younger beginner. The spiral bound books are easy to use, and the illustrations are quite charming.

reviewed by **Faye Caley**

It's Easy When You Know How: Books 1, 2 and 3

Jane Phillips
Sempre Music,
www.sempremusic.co.uk,
£6



Next out of the bag is something more traditional. Comprising three gradually progressive books, the first in the series opens with a note to the teacher explaining that 'minimal explanations and instructions' are used in the books – it is up to the teacher to choose words 'suited to each pupil'. The first essential is to establish a good hand position, and on the opening page a photograph of left and right hands with appropriate 1-5 fingering provides a model to copy.

Page one begins with a treble and bass clef staff upon which a span of five notes from C-G is written for R and LH. Middle C is described in treble clef and written as both a crotchet (one count) and a minim (two counts). Proper names of notes appear soon afterwards, as the semibreve and dotted minim are added to the range. There are plenty of simple separate-hand tunes using first one then two notes to play.

Each new note is introduced on the staff with its name written underneath – for example: 'G, G, left-hand G'. – more melodies follow without the letter-names. This process of introducing notes one by one should help pupils familiarise themselves with each note's position on the staff. As the book progresses, more ideas are introduced, including tied notes, two-note chords, rests, accents, and so on.

Towards the end of Book 1, the five-note range is extended to an octave for both hands, with a good range of short, simple tunes to play. Letter names are used sparingly, but with repetition and practice, pupils should learn to recognise notes quickly.

Book 2 progresses steadily, with the range of notes for both hands extending to an octave. New ideas are introduced piece by piece, with examples using slurs and staccato, chords, sharps and flats, simple dynamics, quavers, and new key signatures of F and G major. Pieces are mostly for both hands together, with titles

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'We often say that it is possible to have 30 years' teaching experience which is actually one year recycled 29 times' See page 26