

DOGS & BIRDS Book 1

Notes & Lesson Plans for
Parents & Teachers



Including Downloadable MP3s

Elza & Chris Lusher

Piano Method for Young Beginners

How to get the best out of the book

Second Edition

Dogs and Birds Book 1:

Notes and Lesson Plans for Parents and Teachers

Elza and Chris Lusher

Contents

Section 1 – The Basic Elements of the Dogs and Birds Approach	1
Introduction	1
Teaching Dogs and Birds	2
Using These Notes and Lesson Plans	4
Dorian and Miss Bell: Piano Lessons in the Forest	5
Lesson Times	5
The Importance of Daily Practice	6
Recommended Finger Positions for Different Ages	6
Making use of New Technology	7
Section 2 – Details of the use of the Elements in the Seventeen Steps..	8
Rhythm Exercises.....	8
Various Techniques to Help with Rhythm.....	8
Marching, Counting, Clapping, Dancing and Drumming to Develop an Inner Pulse	10
Sung Finger Exercises.....	11
Musical Pieces.....	12
Using the Coloured Staves on the Piano in Place of the Score	13
Helping Children by Pointing out Notes with Your Fingers.....	14
Walking on the Staves.....	15
An Alternative Order for the Pieces in Book 1	15
The Transition from the Animal Notes to the Blank Notes Edition.	16
Dogs’ Tails Go Up and Birds’ Tails Go Down.....	16
Eggs Can Only Dance on the Bottom Red Rope	16
The Ants March on the Blue Path, Just Below the Bird	17
Geese Somersault Between the Two Ropes.....	17
Learning Steps and Skips, and Up and Down.....	17
The Cats are Proud of Their Whiskers.....	17
The Blue Hand Fish Swim Between the Buoys	17
Other Tips to Aid the Transition	18
Ear Training	19
An Echo Game	19
Combining the Echo Game with the Tiles and Staves.....	20
A More Complex Echo Game.....	21
A Copying Game.....	21
Another Variation of the Copy Game	22

Pretending Games	22
Win the Tiles	23
Miming the Animals During Ear Training.....	23
Further Ideas on Ear Training for the Very Young.....	24
Small Animal Tiles and Coloured Staves	24
Stories.....	26
Bringing a Toy Animal or Doll to Visit the Animals.....	26
Dorian and Miss Bell Finger Puppets	27
Improvisation	27
Composition	28
Balancing the Elements.....	28
Section 3 – The Seventeen Steps	30
STEP 1	30
STEP 2	33
STEP 3	35
STEP 4	37
STEP 5	39
STEP 6	41
STEP 7	43
STEP 8	45
STEP 9	47
STEP 10	50
STEP 11	52
STEP 12	54
STEP 13	56
STEP 14	58
STEP 15	60
STEP 16	63
STEP 17	65
Section 4 – Important Notes for Parents	67
Using the Puppet Video Piano Lessons to Help with Practice.....	67
Hand Position and Posture	68
Musical Notation.....	69
The Names of the Notes.....	69
Beats and Note Lengths	70
The Octave	71

The Musical Staves and the Clefs	71
Bar Lines	72
Repeat Marks	72
First and Second Time Bars	72
Da Capo al Fine.....	72
Steps and Skips	73
A Suitable Piano or Keyboard.....	73
Section 5 – Additional Explanatory Notes for Teachers.....	74
Rests and Time Signatures	74
Quavers	74
Finger Numbers.....	74
Parental Help.....	74
Group Teaching.....	75
Use of the Blank Notes Edition.....	75
Using a Manuscript Book.....	76
Using the Animal Stickers	76
Use of the Puppet Videos to Support Your Students’ Practice	76
A Final Comment on the Musical Exercises and Games	78
Section 6 – MP3 Files, Tracks and Credits	79

Section 1 – The Basic Elements of the Dogs and Birds Approach

Introduction

Dogs and Birds is a method which makes it possible to teach the piano/keyboard to children as young as three years old very successfully. It is *not* necessary for the child to know the alphabet. The method is also advantageous for older children since it dramatically speeds up the learning process and builds musicality. It can be used successfully for children up to the age of seven years old. There is a strong emphasis on singing whilst playing the keyboard – the method has its roots in the highly successful approach to teaching children developed by the Hungarian Zoltán Kodály. As well as learning to play the piano/keyboard, the child will be able to sing and have a very solid foundation for further musical study.

The following resources are available from www.dogsandbirds.co.uk:

- Dogs and Birds Books 1 and 2 (in both Animal Notes and Blank Notes Editions)
- Dogs and Birds: Nursery Rhymes and Famous Melodies (in both Animal Notes and Blank Notes Editions)
- Notes to Book 1 for Parents and Teachers (these notes)
- Downloadable MP3 files of the pieces and rhythm exercises in Book 1, included with these notes
- A set of small animal tiles and coloured staves
- Dorian and Miss Bell: Piano Lessons in the Forest – A set of 91 short puppet video piano lessons
- Dorian and Miss Bell Finger Puppets
- A manuscript book (with either 4 staves per page or 6 staves per page)
- A sheet of animal stickers
- A Dogs and Birds Beginners' Set.

This method is suitable for teaching children from three to seven years old, although in some cases even younger children may learn successfully. In general, the animal notes editions of the books are recommended for children starting at age three to six and the blank notes

editions are recommended for those starting at age six to seven. In general all children should ultimately work through the blank notes editions. This can be delayed, but should not be ignored.

Teaching Dogs and Birds

There are a number of ways to teach children using the Dogs and Birds approach and materials. One option is to arrange private piano lessons from a sympathetic teacher from the outset. However many parents might not wish to do this initially, especially if their children are very young. Some of these materials have been prepared in order to allow parents to work with (or teach) their children, even if they have had no previous musical education. The video “The Dogs and Birds Piano Method in Action” gives a good introduction to the basic elements of the approach and can be found on the Dogs and Birds website at www.dogsandbirds.co.uk/video-demos. In addition, a set of puppet videos, “Dorian and Miss Bell: Piano Lessons in the Forest” has been produced to stimulate and inspire your child. See page 5 of these notes for details. These videos provide an excellent example of how to approach the pieces and musical games as you work through Book 1. The content of the videos is similar, but complementary to the 17 steps in this guide. Also, example videos on the Dogs and Birds approach can be found on the Dogs and Birds Piano Method YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/user/elzalusher.

It is possible for parents to teach the material in Book 1 to their children. Studying in this way will provide an enjoyable but strong musical foundation for those wishing to learn any instrument, including the piano. Book 2 is aimed at those wishing to continue their study of the keyboard or piano. The material in Book 2 is more advanced and for this it is really necessary to have lessons from a piano teacher. Of course, if the parent has a solid background in the piano it might be possible to teach the material in Book 2 as well. The repertoire/tutor book, Dogs and Birds: Nursery Rhymes and Famous Melodies, is at a level somewhere between the two other tutor books. Children can start using this towards the end of Book 1 and can continue using it in parallel with Book 2. It acts as a bridge between Books 1 and 2, adding more fun with 23 well-

known melodies, including “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, “Happy Birthday to You”, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Für Elise”. Once children have finished the blank notes editions of all three books they will be ready to start working on preparatory exams, for example the ABRSM Prep Test or the Trinity Initial Exam.

The principle behind the Dogs and Birds method is very simple for children to understand. If they are mature enough they can actually practise unaided between lessons. This makes lessons worthwhile since without daily practice the child might well forget melodies, rhythms and even the notes from one week to the next. However very young children (below the age of five) will probably require parental help when practising. It might be good if you can be disciplined and if possible practise at the same time each day.

The MP3 files, which are included with this guide and contain all the pieces and rhythm exercises in Book 1, are extremely important for parents who are teaching their children – especially those parents without any previous musical background. The appropriate tracks must be listened to before each lesson. The MP3 files can also be used to help children with their practice. You should try to copy the material on the MP3s as closely as possible. It is particularly important for the child always to sing, and not to play too fast. Please use the MP3s as a guide. They can be downloaded from www.dogsandbirds.co.uk/notes-and-lesson-plans-to-book-1-mp3s.

A whole range of musical exercises and games should be used, in addition to playing the musical pieces and “tapping” the rhythm exercises in Dogs and Birds Book 1. Some basic suggestions for these are given in the pages of Book 1. These games are worked through in the Puppet Video Piano Lessons and described in detail in these Notes and Lesson Plans. The games and exercises given in these three sources are not exactly the same, but are complementary. They give you ideas of how you can work with your child and you can also use them as a basis for your own material. Please see page 78 of these notes for more detail.

Using These Notes and Lesson Plans

These notes are written in order to help you get the most from working through *Dogs and Birds Book 1*. The material has been broken up into 17 “Steps”. The term *steps* has been used rather than *lessons* since the amount of time needed for each step depends on the age and application of the child, and the amount of parental help. Each step might take a few lessons or just one.

These steps consist of a set of exercises and games to play with the children to help them develop musically. They are the basic elements of *Dogs and Birds*. These musical exercises and games, which are ordered differently in each step to add variety to the lessons, are:

- carrying out the rhythm exercises in Book 1, and establishing a solid pulse,
- playing and singing the musical pieces from Book 1 (both animal and blank notes editions),
- sung finger exercises, not included with Book 1, but given here in these notes for parents and teachers,
- ear training exercises, involving pitch recognition and singing,
- reading the storylines and talking about the illustrations in the book,
- improvising through painting musical pictures, by using the whole body and moving freely on the piano/keyboard,
- simple composition or copying out melodies from Book 1 using the tiles and staves,
- use of puppets and toys, and drawing images using coloured pens or pencils to express feelings and associations inspired by the musical pieces, improvisations or compositions,
- use of the small animal tiles and large coloured staves for ear training, composition, learning notation, and most of the other elements of the method.

The musical elements in the steps are often similar, and section 2 of these notes and lesson plans describes the appropriate techniques for implementing them. Section 3 contains the steps themselves.

Section 4 contains material written specifically for parents who have no formal musical training. It explains the simple musical notation used in Book 1, shows how you can use animals to help find the notes on the piano keyboard and shows (with reference to Book 1) how these notes can be represented using musical notation. *Those without prior musical experience should read section 4 before working through section 3 with their child.*

Section 5 contains notes for teachers, explaining some of the principles behind this approach and section 6 gives information about the MP3s.

Dorian and Miss Bell: Piano Lessons in the Forest

A set of 91 puppet video piano lessons are available from the Dogs and Birds website at www.dogsandbirds.co.uk. In these videos a Dog puppet (Dorian) learns to play the piano from a Bird puppet (Miss Bell). These videos have been produced in order to appeal to young children, and include animation together with instruction from the puppets. Each of the puppet video lessons includes at least one “insert” where one of 5 small children shows how you can approach the content. These videos can be watched by children with their parents as they work through the material, either if the parent is teaching the child or to support practice for independent or group piano lessons following guidance from a teacher. Most videos last for around 6 to 10 minutes and each covers one particular element of a STEP. They are in some sense a video representation of these notes and give examples of how to implement the various suggestions written here. More detail on how these videos can be used to guide parents in their practice sessions with their children is given on page 67 of these notes, and advice to teachers on how to incorporate the videos into their practice plan is given on page 76. Go to www.dogsandbirds.co.uk/puppet-videos to watch free full length sample puppet videos.

Lesson Times

Typically a session with the child might last 30 minutes. This may seem a long time for a three, four or five year old to concentrate on one thing, however by breaking up each lesson into a series of smaller parts you

will find that this amount of time is necessary – the time will fly by. Each step usually has five or six parts to it. It is recommended that you give the child enough time to master each step before going onto the next. There is no benefit to be gained from rushing the child – learning music should be an enjoyable and fun experience. In some cases, if parents are teaching their children at home, it might be better to split the lessons into shorter sessions (similar to the Dorian and Miss Bell Lessons), especially initially, if the child’s concentration span is short.

The Importance of Daily Practice

At this age short but *daily* practice is much more important than a longer period less frequently. You should find that with 10 minutes every day the child will improve rapidly. You will see that the child’s concentration span will increase noticeably. If the child’s concentration span is very short initially then it is recommended to practise twice a day, for 4 to 5 minutes at a time. Practice should be planned but varied. As a minimum each day the child should sing and play at least 2 pieces twice, and perform 1 other element of the step (for example rhythm exercises, improvisation, ear training, or finger exercises).

Recommended Finger Positions for Different Ages

Very young children (those below about five years of age) will probably have relatively weak fingers. In this case it is recommended for them to play notes with the side of the thumb, which supports the index finger (or later on the middle finger, the 4th finger and the 5th finger). To produce this hand position, ask them to form “Owl’s Eyes” with their hands. The thumb and index fingers should form circles (which the child can look through like spectacles), with the 3rd, 4th and 5th fingers held higher up, in a relaxed way, forming the owl’s eyelashes. They can then play notes with the sides of the thumbs keeping the same hand position. Initially they should use this finger position to play Dog and Egg with the right (red) hand and Bird and Ant with the left (blue) hand when they meet these notes in both the musical pieces and the sung finger exercises. The short video “The Dogs and Birds Piano Method in Action” (at www.dogsandbirds.co.uk/video-demos) shows an example of this finger position at 1 minute 7 seconds. Young children should also use the

“Owl’s Glasses” finger position. This is similar to the “Owl’s Eyes”, but has the thumb and middle fingers forming circles. Again play the keys with the sides of the thumbs. This finger position should first be used when playing Goose with the blue hand. Young children should also use the “Owl’s Goggles” and “Owl’s Binoculars” finger positions. When they learn Cat (Book 1 pages 34 to 38) they should play every note using the “Owl’s Goggles” finger position (with the thumb and 4th fingers forming circles), in both the left (red) hand and the right (blue) hand. This will give a strong foundation for playing 4th fingers independently in Book 2. When children learn Fish then you should introduce the “Owl’s Binoculars” finger position (with the thumb and 5th fingers forming circles). Try to use “Owl’s Binoculars” fingers on pages 40 and 41. After that try to use all 4 finger positions (and the thumb on its own) from page 41 onwards. Remember to keep the fingers forming circles nicely rounded and try to keep the other fingers held higher up and as relaxed as possible. These finger positions will (a) ensure that the thumbs are supported whilst playing, (b) help develop a good hand position with curved fingers and (c) evolve naturally into the use of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th fingers at a later stage. Of course older children, with stronger fingers should be able to use their 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th or 5th fingers, as appropriate, from the start.

Making use of New Technology

If the children’s parents have a smartphone or tablet then it is good to download a mini-piano. The children can then do ear training or practise the echo game in the park, in the car, when waiting for something, or even when they are away on holiday. There are many options, for example “Pianist” for the iPhone or “Pianist Pro” for the iPad.

Section 3 – The Seventeen Steps

STEP 1

Improvisation – Before you open Dogs and Birds Book 1 you should explain to the child that music is wonderful for expressing feelings and moods, and it can describe many different pictures and stories. In order to demonstrate this you should do the following improvisation exercises on the piano and get the child to repeat them.

First play LOW, heavy, long notes – these represent an *elephant*, walking around the BOTTOM of a tree. Do this with your hands, playing many notes simultaneously – first one hand and then the other, a bit like a see-saw, as if you are walking side to side on the bass notes. The BOTTOM of the tree symbolizes the LOW notes.

You can describe happy *birdsong* by playing HIGH, fast, short notes. Do this by turning your hands with a rotary motion from the wrists. Play with the backs of your hands – both hands simultaneously, using a rocking movement. The bird is singing HIGH notes at the TOP of the tree.

Now walk all the way up the keyboard softly. These SOFT, LONG notes increasing in pitch represent a *cat* walking. At the very end hit your hand hard on LOW BASS notes to illustrate the cat jumping down from the fence it has been creeping along. You can then do a similar thing on the black keys as well, representing a *black cat*.

Listen to track 1 of the MP3s for examples of these first three improvisation exercises.

Finding the First Note – When the student is ready, turn to page 1 of the book ask him or her to find all the Dogs on the keyboard. [We note that unless otherwise stated page numbers in these notes refer to the tutor book, Dogs and Birds Book 1]. Put a Dog tile (or pencil) on top of each of these Dogs – you need one pencil/tile for each of the Ds on the keyboard. Get the child to play the notes with the thumbs, and sing

“Dog”. Make sure that all the fingers are above the keyboard, and curved if the child is ready for that. If children are under five years old, then it is recommended that they use the “Owl’s Eyes” finger position, holding the index fingers and thumbs together like spectacles whilst playing with the sides of the thumbs (as described on page 6 of these notes, and can be seen 1 minute 11 seconds into the video “The Dogs and Birds Piano Method in Action” at www.dogsandbirds.co.uk/video-demos).

Sung Finger Exercises – Ask the child to play:



Use the right hand thumb or the “Owl’s Eyes” finger position to play the Dog and the left hand thumb or “Owl’s Eyes” to play the Bird. Remember that the children should play from their shoulders, moving their whole arm – they should not just play from the elbow or wrist. It is important that they sing “Dog Bird Dog” whilst playing the notes. You should perform this exercise at each octave on the keyboard, but always sing around middle C i.e. the pitch that is most comfortable for the child. There is an example of this on track 1 of the MP3s and in the “Dogs and Birds Piano Method in Action” video at 1:53.

Musical Pieces (Page 3) – First sing “Playground” together with the child, using the animal names i.e. Dog Dog Bird Bird Dog Dog Bird etc. If necessary listen to the MP3 first and then play the melody on the keyboard whilst singing it. Parents without previous musical experience should see “Important Notes for Parents” (section 4 of these notes) for advice and instruction. If the child is very young and has no experience of reading from left to right then hold a pencil together and point out the notes as you sing. This will teach the child to read and helps with concentration. You can see this in the “Dogs and Birds Piano Method in Action” video at 2:34.

After singing the line then get the child to play and sing. Repeat the same procedure with “By the Lake”. Children should possibly use their thumbs

to play these notes – the right-hand thumb for the Dog and the left-hand thumb for the Bird, or use the “Owl’s Eyes” finger position. They should play from the shoulders – moving the whole arm. Advice on a proper hand position is given in on page 68 of these notes.

If the child is very young and finds it difficult to read and point and sing the pieces on page 3 then copy out the pieces from the Book to the Large Coloured Staves using the Tiles and try to play and sing the pieces from there. Or make up your own piece using the Dog and Bird Tiles and the Large Coloured Staves. This larger notation helps the child to READ initially.

Rhythm Exercises (Page 2) – These are the first rhythm exercises. Rhythm exercises are dispersed throughout the book and they are very very important for the child in order to develop a strong sense of the beat. The child and teacher/parent should march, clap and count the rhythms. Marching helps the student to feel an even beat. Please count and march SLOWLY. Gradually add clapping. Most of the rhythm exercises have four beats in a bar, so the child and teacher/parent should count “1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | ...”. As you clap try to emphasize the first beat of each bar. More advice on marching, counting and clapping, is given in section 2, on page 10 of these notes.

Using Cars to Explain the Lengths of Notes – If children have difficulty understanding the lengths of the notes then use the chart on the back cover of Book 1 in order to aid understanding. A car takes up less space in a car park than a bus. The black notes (crotchets/quarter notes) have a length of one beat, the white notes with stems (minims/half notes) last for two beats, and the white notes without stems (semibreves/whole notes) last for four beats. The same applies to notes when they are written on a musical stave. If children are unable to count then ask them to clap or tap the rhythm on the back of the book, whilst saying aloud the words: “Car Car Car Car | Big-Car Big-Car | Car Car Big-Car | Very-Very-Big-Bus |”. You should use these words with the children in the rhythm exercises (especially with extremely young children), until they are ready to count using numbers.

STEP 2

Rhythm Exercises (Page 4) – In these and the remaining rhythm exercises the child should “tap” the rhythms and count the beat using numbers (or Cars, Big-Cars or Very-Very-Big-Buses if necessary). This should be done by striking the keys with open palms as described before, in section 2 (on page 8 of these notes). If the child is very young then please read “Various Techniques to Help with Rhythm” (on page 8 of these notes). Hand symbols indicate which hand should be used. When a note is written directly above another note then the notes should be played (or tapped) at the same time. If the beat is not yet even the child and teacher/parent should march as in step 1 until the beat becomes strong.

Sung Finger Exercises – Sing and play:



If the child is under 5 then it is better to use “Owl’s Eyes”. Play this at each octave on the keyboard as described earlier, always singing (at a comfortable pitch). If possible once children have played this ask them to play it again with their eyes closed.

Stories – Never miss an opportunity to read the stories and talk about the illustrations. For example in “In the Bush” and “Cotton Flower” (page 6) you can talk about the nest, which is being prepared for the next new note (the Egg). Please go through the story with your child. A story always enables the child to find links that help the learning process.

Musical Pieces (Pages 5 and 6) – Play and sing “Sparklers”, “Wait until it is Dark”, “In the Bush” and “Cotton Flower”. Do this in a similar manner to earlier, that is singing first and then playing and singing.

Ear Training – Now play an echo game. This involves playing Dogs and Birds at random on the keyboard and asking the child to identify which is which and sing them back using the animal names. Remember to play

these notes in a number of different octaves. See page 19 in section 2 of these notes for more detail.

Small Animal Tiles – Get the child to put the animals in their correct places on the keyboard and then place them on the appropriate places on the staves. It is often easier for the child if you call the stave a ladder or stairs. The Dog lives on the top (or red) ladder and the Bird lives on the bottom (or blue) ladder – or the Dog lives in a red mountain home and the Bird lives in a house in the blue valley.

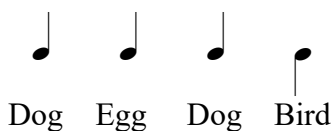
The animal tiles and staves can be linked with the echo game to provide an excellent opportunity for ear training. Get the child to place the Dog and the Bird tiles on the staves. You should first “Tune” yourselves, so play and sing “Dog”, then play and sing “Bird” many times and get the child to sing with you. After that play just one of them and ask the child to identify it by removing the appropriate note from the staves. Then play a note again. Ask the child to identify it, either by removing a note from the staves or putting it back on the staves in its appropriate place. With practice the child will soon be able to distinguish notes with ease. This game will be extended to more notes later.

Improvisation – Here you should ask the children whether they can think of a story to describe by playing on the keyboard. If not, suggest a theme for them to improvise. You could try to express different moods, for example being happy, sad, sleepy, angry, lively etc. It is important to discuss the different moods with the children. Ask them to tell you which situations make them happy, and which make them sad, for example. Remember that you can stimulate the children’s imaginations by asking them to draw pictures about these moods with coloured pencils and paper.

Composition – If you have the animal tiles and coloured staves make up a simple melody using the notes you already know and then sing it as you play it on the piano. This can be the child’s first composition. You can give it a title and then link it to a picture drawn with coloured pencils.

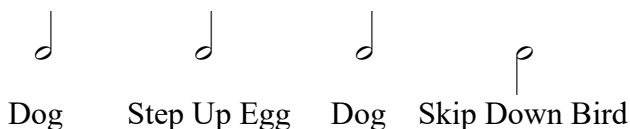
STEP 3

Sung Finger Exercises – Sing and play (using “Owl’s Eyes” for the under fives):



Do this at all octaves on the piano, singing at the most comfortable pitch.

If the child can do this then modify this exercise and sing



Improvisation – Make up a new story and play it on the keyboard. Allow the child to free up the arms, the body and the imagination. The child should use both hands whilst playing or should play together with the parent or teacher. Play LOUD and SOFT notes, and LONG and SHORT notes. Together with the child think of situations when you need to be LOUD or QUIET and describe them using the piano.

Musical Pieces (Page 7) – Sing and play “Promise to Behave”. First try to sing and point at the notes on the music before singing and playing. Now please teach the child to play all pieces from pages 3, 5, 6 and 7 from the Blank Book (the Green Book), without the pictures of the animals. An excellent trick to help with this is to point out the directions of the Dog’s tail and the Bird’s tail on the see-saw, on page 2 (as explained on page 16 of these notes). Here the Dog’s tail is pointing up and all notes on pages 3, 5, 6 and 7 with upward stems are Dogs. Now check the Bird’s tail on page 2. In this case it is pointing down and all notes with downward stems represent Birds. Children understand this easily and they can play these pages from the Blank Book without any difficulty.

Stories – Look at the picture on pages 8 and 9, and discuss it with the child. Explain that the Eggs must all be on the bottom line of the staves. Where is the Dog sitting?

Small Animal Tiles – Use the animals Dog, Bird and Egg to teach the child their positions on the keyboard and the staves. Maybe link this with the echo game as described in the previous step, or with the sung finger exercise below.

Rhythm Exercises (Page 8) – Tap these rhythms with alternate hands counting aloud as you do so. Please do not forget to march! If the child can march SLOWLY and EVENLY then clap the “Very Very Big Bus” on every 1, or clap on the 1 and 3 saying, “Clap-Hold, Clap-Hold”. For older students maybe Counting is easier, in which case you can introduce different rhythm patterns to clap, BUT make sure that the marching is always EVEN and SLOW.

Musical Pieces – In “Tightrope” (page 9) you can ask the child to count “1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | ...” rather than singing the animal names whilst playing this piece. Sing and play the pieces on page 10. If the child is ready then use the second (index) finger for Egg, otherwise play Dog and Egg with the “Owl’s Eyes” finger position. When playing “Far-off Hills” and “Egg Rock” just use the right hand. It is a good opportunity to use the Blank Book here. Refer back to the illustration on pages 8 and 9. Do not play anything smoothly (legato) – play separated notes using the whole arm (tenuto). Please make sure that the 2nd fingers are curved, or that the “Owl’s Eyes” are forming a nice round circle and that the eyelashes (the other fingers) are relaxed and open.

Ear Training – Recognize Eggs and Birds as they are played on the piano. To make this more interesting children can use arm movements to mimic a flying Bird or form the nest for the Eggs with their hands above their heads and palms facing upwards. Make sure that the children always sing as they mimic the animals. Also it is more fun to stand up and step/run/move fast, like a flying Bird, and stop/freeze when you hold your hands above your head, like a Nest.

Dogs and Birds Book 1

Notes and Lesson Plans for Parents and Teachers

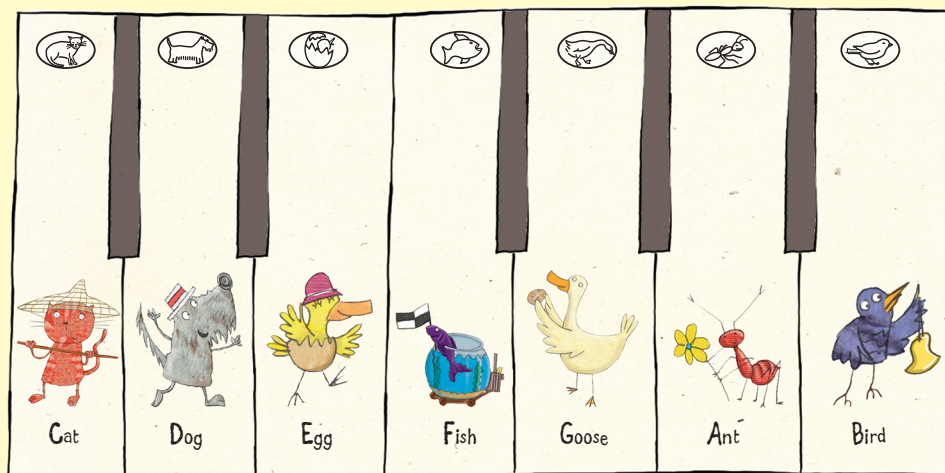
"I find Elza Lusher's invention extraordinary – unique in the world. I am proud that I can support such a creation." **Prof. Cecilia Vajda – Student of Kodály and Director of the Kodály Institute of Britain**

"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." **Faye Galey, Music Teacher magazine**

"This fascinating set of materials from Elza and Chris Lusher is based on the principles of Kodály teaching, enabling very young children to start their musical education before they can read notated music or understand the alphabet." **Maggie Williams, International Piano magazine**

"A great pedagogical idea ... definitely an important contribution in an area not over-endowed with good things." **John York, Piano magazine**

"This fabulous little guide ... makes the whole method user-friendly." **Fiona Lau, Music Teacher Magazine**



Also Available:

Dogs and Birds: Books 1 and 2 (Animal Notes and Blank Notes Editions)

Dogs and Birds: Nursery Rhymes and Famous Melodies (Animal Notes and Blank Notes Editions)

Dogs and Birds Beginners' Set, Small Animal Tiles and Coloured Staves, Sheet of Animal Stickers

Dorian and Miss Bell Finger Puppets, Dorian and Miss Bell Puppet Videos

Music Manuscript Book (4 Staves per Page and 6 Staves per Page), Simply Sol-fa



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