



Piano Star: ask the editors

This new series offers three books of specially commissioned pieces to put young pianists on the path to success. Find out more from our *Piano Star* editors and compilers [David Blackwell](#) and [Aisling Grealley](#).

How can Piano Star help young pianists develop their technique and musicianship?

David Blackwell (DB): The books are carefully written to progress step-by-step while introducing new technical features and aspects of musicianship.

So *Piano Star 1* gradually adds more notes and dynamics, moves from pieces with separate hands to simple hands-together, and introduces staccato, legato, simple hand shifts and other techniques. In this way, young pianists naturally develop their technique as they move through the books.

Aisling Grealley (AG): Technical elements are cleverly built into pieces right from the start. Incidental learning will take place and children may not even be aware that they are developing their technique.

The duets, to be played with the teacher, help children develop a sense of performance. They realise how important it is to play in time and keep going despite the odd mishap.

Moving through the series provides tangible evidence for teacher, pupil and parent of the learning journey from the early stages to Grade 1 level. And the more pieces a beginner learns to play well before taking a Grade 1 exam, the better!

What makes a good beginner piano piece?

DB: It needs to be written with a very clear understanding of the technical level of players at different stages, so that pianists recognise the notes and features of the piece and find them achievable.

A piece might also focus on and practise a particular point of technique (such as staccato or hand-crossing) or an aspect of music notation (such as a compound time signature or new notes). Finally, and most importantly, it needs to be appealing to young players and 'hook' them in, so they want to learn to play the piece! So it might have an attractive tune or rhythm or a strong image a child can identify with or words that appeal to them.

AG: A good piece builds on something the child already knows, so it feels familiar. At the same time, it needs to introduce something new, giving the child a sense of achievement.

What makes a piece popular with young learners?

DB: It needs to be catchy in some way – pieces with a good tune or a jazzy rhythm are always popular. Also, pieces that maybe sound harder than they actually are! We were fortunate in having some 20 leading educational composers to write pieces for us and as a consequence the books have a great



range of styles and a wonderful variety of pieces – there’s something for everybody.

Do your pupils have any favourite pieces from the books?

AG: *Piano Star* offers moods and styles to suit all tastes, so children have no difficulty in picking favourites. Some of my pupils like the scary pieces best (*Hiding in the Wardrobe*, *Haunted House*). Others like pieces that make them laugh (*My Best Sandwich*, *Wonkey Donkey*, *Squirmy Worms*). Familiar tunes with a twist are very popular (*Old MacDonald Had a Drum*, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Bat*). And *Scarlet Lanterns* is a beautiful and easy duet placed very near the beginning of *Piano Star 1* – the teacher holds the pedal down throughout and children love the resulting impressive sound.

Do you have any tips on how to get the most out of Piano Star?

DB: The series offers a well-paced, structured programme and working through the books will give an excellent scheme of work. Equally, the books can be used alongside any tutor book, providing imaginative additional repertoire – both solos and duets – to enjoy.

For pupils who have progressed a little further, the books provide valuable sight-reading practice. There’s also an opportunity to sing the pieces that have words – you could teach these pieces in this way – and the singing will build confidence for aural tests.

“Piano Star is colourful, appealing, child-friendly and full of imaginative titles, words and illustrations, and a wide variety of sound worlds.” AISLING GREALLY

The activities attached to some of the pieces can help young pianists develop musical understanding and skills. There are opportunities to be creative and suggestions for developing technique or understanding theory. Finally, Tim Budgen’s wonderful illustrations will fire the imagination and inspire players to learn the pieces!

AG: I like to use *Piano Star 1* in a similar way to a tutor book, so we start from the beginning and work through the pieces in order. Then I like students to dip into *Piano Star 2* and *3* and choose pieces. Sometimes they do this at home by reading the titles and looking at the pictures, so they are already enthusiastic about a particular piece which has captured their imagination.

My pupils have written lovely stories in response to the activity suggested for *A Sad Story*. This helps them understand that music can express emotions. For *Scarlet Lanterns*, they are invited to compose their own music using the notes of the pentatonic scale, used in the piece. To their surprise and delight they invariably produce a convincing piece of music themselves.

What happened behind the scenes to make sure is Piano Star is a really useful tool?

DB: The series developed from discussions at ABRSM between the syllabus and publishing teams. The structure of the three-book series – a book at the very early stages, one at Prep Test level and one working up to Grade 1 – was set from the beginning, giving a strong, clear pathway for teachers and pupils.

As editors, Aisling and I then brought our combined skills and experience to the project. Along the way ABRSM staff gave feedback on pieces, and the contents were reviewed by experienced piano teachers, a process which included trying out the pieces with young players. All this has resulted in a thoroughly tested and well-thought through collection. 

David Blackwell is a widely experienced editor, publisher and composer of educational, choral and church music. He was compiler of ABRSM’s Piano Mix books and co-writer of Fiddle, Viola and Cello Time with his wife, Kathy.

Aisling Greally is an ABRSM theory consultant and examiner. She has an MA in Child Development and is a highly experienced piano teacher who has guided many pianists from age five to diploma.

The three Piano Star books are available from music shops worldwide and from www.abrsm.org/pianostar.

