

## Part 2: “I’ve heard of that before”

### *Linking Theory with Practical Studies*

By Frank Horvat

In my first article of this three-part series linking theory with practical studies, I presented the case for how important a good theoretical base is for students when studying in a practical setting. This comprehensive approach to teaching not only raises a student’s level of understanding of their performance pieces, but also gives them a valuable sneak peek of the theoretical concepts that they will study in a more formal fashion later. My first article focused on a variety of theoretical concepts that could be exposed in repertoire for the beginner student (i.e., preparatory to grade 2). Now we’ll focus on different elements that are contained within intermediate repertoire (grade 3 to 6). Just imagine teaching “little Jimmy” in Grade 4 all about Analysis, History and Harmony.

#### Exploring Sonata Form

A rite of passage for students within the intermediate levels is the study of a sonatina. *Sonatina in C major, Op. 36, No. 1* by Muzio Clementi seems to be a work where many of my piano students first come across the sonata structure. This particular sonatina tends to be a good representative work in introducing the broader scope of the multi-movement tendencies of the sonata cycle since the present Grade 3 Piano Repertoire book contains all the three movements. But also, the first movement very clearly demonstrates the fundamentals of sonata form.

Using the score in the repertoire book as a basis, you might notice that the first system (and phrase) is Theme 1, the 2nd system is the bridge to the Dominant, and the 3rd system is the introduction of the 2nd theme. The opening two systems of the 2nd page is the Development introducing a change in tone colour with the exploration of the tonic minor. Finally the Recapitulation starting on the third system of the 2nd page has a slight octave alteration and some melodic inversion; otherwise it remains in the tonic for the remainder of the movement.

The play-by-play I have just supplied would be obvious to many of you just looking at the score for yourself. But do we all make it a point of outlining this basic information to our students studying this or other movements featuring sonata form? My strong belief is that when teaching this type of piece, making students aware of form is of paramount importance. A student studying this movement by Clementi would instantly understand why practicing C major, G major and C minor are so important. It would greatly assist in putting into frame how the phrases should be shaped. And finally, it would greatly assist in memorization. Have you ever had a student accidentally play the end of the exposition again at the end of the movement? With a strong understanding of sonata form, the chance of this happening in the memorization process is far less.

These are the practical benefits, but what about the theoretical? Well without the student knowing it, that 2-3 minute summary you just gave them was their first lesson in sonata form analysis, something not officially covered in RCM Examinations theory exams until History I or Intermediate Harmony. Not bad for a Grade 3 student!

By the way, if you feel that this type of analysis might bore students, try to make it into a game. I have a “Where’s Waldo?” book in my studio that all my students like looking at when they’re waiting for their lesson to start. Try playing “Where’s Theme 1?” searching for that return in the recap. Try playing “Where’s G major?” in the middle of the first page. Explain how cool structures are in music, making the connection that most of their favourite pop pieces also use formulaic structures. Also, use this as a motivation in the study of future sonatas explaining how this somewhat formulaic first example of sonata form will get much more exciting and unpredictable in future pieces by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

## Discovering Music History

Speaking of the Viennese School, do you feel that it is important for grade 3 students to know a little about these and other important figures of music history? Well, I do. When I begin teaching a new piece, I also make it a point of introducing some facts and concepts to the student that will heighten their appreciation of the composer who composed the piece they are studying. After selecting a new piece I will normally go through a checklist of what to cover with the student:

- **Discuss general compositional style traits normally associated with that composer and link them with the piece that the student is studying.** For example, let’s say you’ve selected *Morning Prayer* by *Tchaikovsky* in the Grade 3 Piano Repertoire book. You might make the student aware of Tchaikovsky’s propensity towards programmatic elements in many of his compositions, the very lyrical nature of his melodies, or the usage of ostinato and other defined rhythmic elements that set a particular mood - all present in *Morning Prayer*.
- **Put the composer into historical context.** We all take for granted that Bach was a Baroque composer and Chopin a composer of the Romantic era, but many students will not know this unless we tell them. I feel that this approach is especially important for teachers of other instruments. Since some RCM Examinations Syllabi feature lists not organized by historical period, it is very important for students to understand historical differences. Violin students should be aware of the stylistic differences between Gluck and Shostakovich even though they both have pieces present in Grade 5 - List C.
- **Encourage exploration of history outside of the lesson by suggesting web sites for your students to browse.** One such web site I’ve discovered is [www.classicsforkids.com](http://www.classicsforkids.com). It has a number of biographies about many composers using a writing style most conducive to children. It has pictures, historical timelines, and radio shows that your student can listen to on their computer at home.
- **Lend your students CDs.** For years, I have compiled a collection of CDs with the specific purpose of introducing my practical students at the grade 1 to 7 levels to the music of important composers in music history. I’ve done this rather inexpensively by rummaging through the discount bins of various CD shops. It’s not hard to find “Best of…” or “Greatest Hits of…” collections that give students a nice starting point to discover great works of the masters.

I feel that some or all of these steps are absolutely essential in a practical setting. It would be a pity to have a Grade 9 practical student begin study at the History I level without knowing the difference between Haydn and Handel - something I encounter regularly!

## Exploring Harmony

That leaves us with Harmony. Talking with many colleagues who do not teach past Advanced Rudiments, the word "Harmony" brings back such frightful memories from their student days that going to the dentist would be considered an enjoyable experience in comparison. But I feel that by introducing harmony in a practical setting, you can give your student a heightened awareness of how their piece was constructed while overcoming your own teaching inhibitions at the same time. One exercise that I assign students is having them label the names of chords in pieces with some type of distinguishable pattern such as arpeggios or an alberti bass. To help them get started, you can map out a palette of chords in that specific key on a separate piece of paper. You can have them use Roman numerals or pop chords as a means of labeling.

A more creative exercise that encourages Keyboard Harmony is taking an existing piece, maintaining the existing chordal pattern, and using the other part (or hand) to play solid chords. The student can attempt this either by sight or by writing it out. This basic type of chording exercise allows your student to appreciate the tone colour generated by the varying qualities of the chords while developing the quickness to figure out the names of notes in individual chords.

As many of you who teach any level and subject of theory can attest to, the RCM Examinations Official Examination Papers are an invaluable tool in preparing for the exams. I'm particularly fond of the analysis questions that end many of the rudiments papers. Often questions around chords will be included in the given paper. But I find they lend themselves well to a further exploration of harmony with similar techniques that I just discussed.

So as you can see, the intermediate practical student can be introduced to many concepts and exercises that are traditionally associated with more advanced theoretical studies without needing to make it that time-consuming endeavor - but what about your advanced students? I feel that your role as theory facilitator doesn't end once your student has already signed up for those harmony and history classes. This is what I'll focus on in my final article in this series. Stay tuned.

*Originally published in the September/October 2009 edition of Music Matters (RCM Examinations)*