

Why Multi-Key?



By Robert Pace

Many years ago as I was just beginning to formulate the basic concepts of the Robert Pace Method of Piano Instruction, I had to make a decision that profoundly affected everything that was to follow. Would my new approach be limited to the key of C major in the initial stages of instruction that was the case with the most popular and widely used piano methods of that time, or would it embrace a variety of keys? Arguments were just beginning to be heard in college pedagogy courses for more key variety in the early stages of piano lessons, and that relying heavily on the key of C major initially was creating serious problems for students later.

When I began my graduate studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, I became acquainted with the Oxford Piano Course and the Burrows-Ahearn publications, both of which were moving away from the C major restrictions of the most popular beginning keyboard methods of that time. In my own background, although my first instruction book for my piano lessons was all in C major with no sharps or flats, my sister's violin

teacher gave me other materials, in the form of piano accompaniments that employed other keys.

In my own mind, I had no doubts that key diversity should be an essential aspect of every piano student's learning from the very beginning, although that was contrary to the practice of the most widely used and popular piano methods on the market at that time. It was in this context that I decided that any method books I created would be "Multi-key" with no key restrictions.

A basic objective of my approach would be to help students develop their musical independence so that they were the center of their own learning and could be involved in music in any way they chose throughout their lives.

Realistically, most would (and should) become musically literate "non-professionals," as living examples of people who appreciate the importance of being able to have music as part of their daily lives. This is in sharp contrast to the most often-heard remark of adults who lament, "I quit taking lessons after 3 years, since daily practice sessions were getting more contentious with little or nothing to show for the time and effort. Today I really wish I could go



to the piano, open a book and make some music on my own."

Since students in the Robert Pace method are taught to recognize and deal with basic musical structures (concepts) at each level, they are able to function as their own teachers between lessons, and to continue expanding their musical horizons and expertise throughout their lives.

Over the years, the Robert Pace "Multi-key approach" has produced many individuals who have enjoyed music as a vital part of their lives and who participated in musical activities as they chose. Those who elected music as careers were extremely well prepared to study the repertoire and acquire the technical skills of professional musicians.

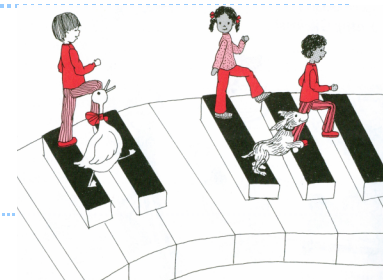
Each day, the Multi-key approach helps people develop their potential to experience

music as a dynamic expression of human life, and to participate in keyboard music in an endless variety of ways. Being able to perform music from the different periods actually affords unequalled opportunities for personal fulfillment and satisfaction.

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SOME UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE MULTI-KEY APPROACH

1. It is **"all- inclusive"** with no key restrictions -- students can use any and all keys from the beginning. Certain keys are not "off-limits" as is the case with the approaches that use only C major in the initial stages. Students are free to use the black keys, white keys, or both black and white keys together.

2. Being able to play in any key has **important psychological benefits**, in that students develop confidence in their ability to deal with the different problems on their own that may arise as they study new and unfamiliar repertoire. They can quickly figure out any key signature simply by applying either the one rule for identifying sharp keys, or the other rule for flat keys. If it is "modal" or some other system, they apply their concept of "key organization" to understand it.

3. By **using the black keys** as "Braille," to develop **tactile sensitivity**, students do not need to look at their hands or the keyboard to find the notes they are going to play. They can keep their eyes on the printed page of music and use their peripheral vision to check where their fingers are on the keyboard. This eliminates "break-downs" and wrong notes that occur when the eyes move their focus from the page of music notation to the hands on the keyboard. Good reading habits are being nurtured from the beginning.

4. Being able to read in keys other than C, F, and G major **opens a much larger and more interesting musical**

literature to students at every level.

Over the years it has been my observation that students whose early piano instruction was limited to white keys only tend to play with less curved fingers and mostly on the front edge of the piano keys. This causes problems for these students as they try to play repertoire with chromatic passages that require using the thumb on the black keys and their fingers between the black keys. In contrast, students in the multi-key approach have been playing

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"on and around" the black keys from the outset, and can use that part of the keyboard easily with fingers that are curved.

5. **Much of the piano literature from the Baroque period to the present has sharps or flats that may require the use of the thumbs on the black keys.** This is an important reason why using the Multi-key approach from the beginning is crucial. The Opus 10 and Opus 25 Chopin Etudes are some of the best examples of "Multi-key" materials. Equally good

are the 48 Preludes and Fugues of J. S. Bach that present all major and minor keys up the keyboard chromatically.

6. Students in the Multi-key approach transpose easily and naturally to any key, since they are introduced to that at their very first lesson. Transposition as such is a valuable skill that will be used on many occasions, and as an extra "bonus" can enhance sight-reading skills.

WHY SOME TEACHERS HESITATE TO TRY THE MULTI-KEY APPROACH

On numerous occasions I have heard teachers comment that they liked the "Multi-key Concept," but that they were concerned about the complications of trying to teach "all of those key signatures" so early.

Actually, that is not a problem, since students only need two simple rules--one for naming all sharp key signatures, and one for naming all flat key signatures. Give them a deck of "Key Signature" flash cards plus Gloria Scott's "Musical Games and Activities," and in no time they will be naming any key signature with lightning speed—and loving it!!

SOME SIGNIFICANT ADVANTAGES OF THE MULTI-KEY APPROACH

1. Since students in this approach use the five black keys from the very beginning, they develop a strong tactile sensitivity that enables them to locate the keys without looking at the keyboard. This helps them develop **strong reading skills**, since they don't need to look down at their hands (like "touch typing") to locate the notes they want to play.

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2. In addition to the tactile sensitivity, **students learn to use their peripheral vision** to monitor the movement of the hands without looking at the keyboard. This “looking out of the corner of your eye” enables students to sight-read difficult new materials and get most of the correct notes without actually looking at their hands.

3. Students in the “white key” approaches tend to play toward the front edge of the keys with less curved fingers.

Because students in the Multi-key approach play “in and around” the black keys from the outset, they usually develop a more routine habit of curving their fingers, since a rounded hand more readily accommodates both black and white keys.

This is an important factor since **eventually students must play both black and white keys in order to perform much of the piano literature.**

4. **Students in the Multi-key approach have no fear of playing pieces that have sharps and flats.**

This greatly expands the scope of the potential repertoire that they may wish

to study in the future. It also means that they can cover more literature in less time, since sharps and flats pose no problems.

SOME ADDED BENEFITS AHEAD

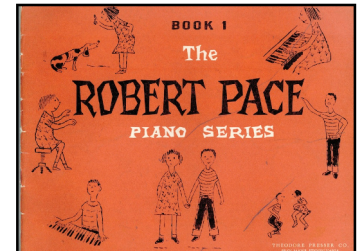
As teachers use the Multi-key Approach, they continue to discover additional benefits for everyone. For example, as students get more expertise in this approach, they make fewer mistakes as they work on new pieces,

therefore learning new repertoire is much more enjoyable. All of this translates into students who enjoy what they are doing and most likely will be active participants in some form of music throughout their lives. As teachers, we are making it possible for our students to go on their own

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A Brief History of Pace Multi-Key Publications:



1954

*Robert Pace Piano Series
Emphasis on key variety and
the ability to read easily in all keys.*



1961

*Music for Piano & Skill and Drills
2-Book Series Playing in any key
from the beginning simplifies
rather than complicates piano study.*



1979

*Music for Piano – 4-Book Series
Students learn best by learning to be
“their own teachers” between lessons*



2008/9

Newly Revised – 4-Book Series