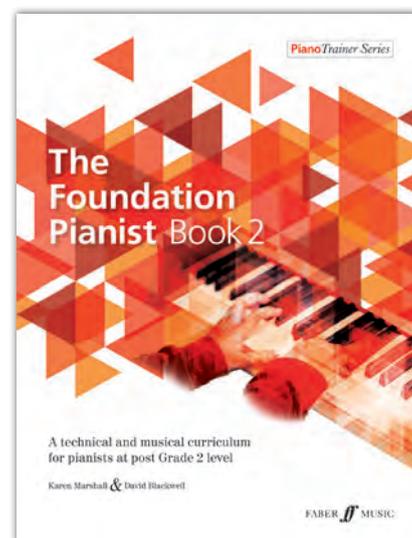


The Foundation Pianist Resources

GAUDETE A MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS CAROL (BOOK 2, P. 9)



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This superb song dates from the late medieval period, and perhaps originated in the 14th or 15th centuries. It was published in 1582 in *Piae Cantiones*, a collection of mostly sacred Latin songs that also included the melody of our carol 'Good King Wenceslas'. It's a Christmas carol, with a verse-refrain structure. The refrain (bars 2-11 of our arrangement) asks us to rejoice, for Christ is born of Mary; the verses (bars 13-20) tell us that 'the world is renewed by Christ the King ... therefore let us sing praises.' Its appeal lies in its strong, gutsy tune, the syncopations of the refrain contrasting with the more regular phrases of the verses, and its modal harmony (no sharpened leading notes). Its vitality is undimmed, despite written over 600 years ago.

The British folk rock group Steeleye Span made No. 14 in the UK singles chart in 1972 with their version of the song (theirs uses a slightly different version of the verse melody). It's sung without instruments and entirely in Latin, making it something of a rarity in the top UK charts. Since then the song has been performed and recorded many times by both classical choirs and pop and rock musicians, as well as in a number of instrumental arrangements, and its popularity shows no sign of diminishing.

by David Blackwell

ARRANGING THE MUSIC

It was important to preserve the medieval flavour of the original in the arrangement, and this is done in several ways. The left-hand rhythm of the first two bars is a typical medieval tabor drum pattern, and this is also used to accompany the verse melody. Harmonically, the leading note is not sharpened and there are lots of bare (open) 5ths, sometimes moving upwards, mimicking the medieval practice of organum. At the same time, this is an arrangement for a modern piano player, so I wanted to explore different registers of the piano and give interest to both hands. The left hand thus takes the second statement of the verse (bars 32-39) and this verse also shifts key, to give a more satisfying overall tonal scheme. It's surprising how these medieval musical characteristics can sound fresh to our ears. Contemporary composers have found inspiration in medieval music – partly perhaps because it avoids the harmonic 'excesses' of the romantic period. If this arrangement has presented a timeless classic to a new generation, it will have done its job.

by David Blackwell

LISTENING ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE AURAL & MUSICIANSHIP SKILLS

There are various versions of this piece of music online from sung ensembles to orchestral arrangements. It can be valuable to get students to compare and contrast these in terms of the instrumentation used, the texture and the tempo. Some students may not be familiar with Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass musical configurations. This is a useful thing to cover, ready for future part-playing on the piano.

Activity

Play the music and ask the student to:

1. Mark the pulse – you can do this in lots of different ways, patting the knees, clapping, using a percussion instrument. Be student-led on what works best for them.
2. Can the student identify the metre? This can be done by clapping the pulse and stressing the first beat, but it can also be interesting to teach hand movements to conduct two time.
3. This rhythm is quite straightforward apart from certain bars that are syncopated. Explaining the syncopation and then getting the student to identify aurally which bars are syncopated can be very valuable.
4. Pick out the syncopated bars, perform them and get the student to clap them back. These are bars 5 and 9-10. Dotted rhythms can also challenge, first seen in bar 8. In bar 5 the syllables 'syn-co-pa' can be helpful along with counting quavers. Other useful tools include using rhythm time names. Teachers need to find what works best for their student.
5. There's some interesting articulation in the music: can the student identify this along with the dynamics?
6. Using the natural minor from G (G A B \flat C D E \flat F G), invite the student to improvise. A good way to start this is for you as the teacher to improvise a melody (a call) and then get the student to improvise a melody in answer (a response). There is a lot of call and response in this piece.
7. This piece is written in the natural minor (or Aeolian mode) from G. Highlight the tone pattern of the natural minor using A to A (all the white keys). Modes are useful to explain in the early stages.
8. Can the student identify the phrase lengths?
9. The melody moves into the left hand – can the student hear where this occurs?
10. The chords of a perfect 5th, perfect 4th and minor 3rd appear, and these are also useful to highlight and identify.

by Karen Marshall

HINTS & TIPS ON TEACHING THE MUSIC

Teachers should of course assess what is best for their student and shouldn't see what follows as the only way to teach the music. These ideas are only starting-points – a 'buffet' of activities where the teacher can select the most relevant to the student.

- This piece is quite quick, so it's important that the student has the technique to manage this. Key skills include the ability to play two-note chords sounding exactly together. Suggest a student records themselves on their mobile and check this. The correct vertical wrist movement on these perfect 5th drones needs attention, as without a flexible wrist tension can occur, resulting in a harsh tone. Demonstrate this to your student. A good analogy is how it feels when jumping without bending the knees – very uncomfortable! We create similar tension in the hand if a loose wrist is not used. This can help a student understand why it's important to do.
- Some separate hand practice is useful here to ensure the articulation of the right hand is accurate and fingering is secure. Light finger-staccato is required (not using the wrist or hand). A useful tool for successful performance of the tenuto markings can be a student thinking about pushing the fingers into sand as they play them. Poor fingering will result in difficulty getting this piece to be successful at speed, so best to get this right the first time
- The syncopated bars can cause co-ordination challenge for some students. It can be helpful to use a window from an address envelope to put over the music so other information is removed. This can help process these tricky bars and co-ordinate the hands successfully. Playing this on the lid of the piano where only the tactile sense is experienced can also be useful.
- Very accurate metre with no rubato is essential for a stylistic performance. Playing the music very slowly stressing the first beat of the bar (with a metronome or drum beat) and gradually speeding up can ensure a constant accurate pulse from the outset.

by Karen Marshall

ABOUT THE FOUNDATION PIANIST

The Foundation Pianist is a curriculum of two books for students beyond the beginner stage, who want to develop a technical and musical foundation to help them progress on to intermediate levels. This series not only develops students' technique, reading, theory and musicianship, but also provides an invaluable insight into the world of classical music, from madrigals to symphonies and operas to concertos.



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