

Lucinda Mackworth-Young

Piano by ear

Learn to play by ear, improvise
and accompany songs
in simple steps

FABER *ff* MUSIC

This book is for everyone who wants to be able to play *without music books*. It's for those who've played the piano for many years in the traditional way, reading notes, and who long to be able to play by ear and improvise. It's also for those who are less experienced, but have some note-reading ability, and for beginners working with a teacher.* There's something for everyone.

- **Think of the ideas as starting points.** Follow them to the letter (they do work!) or adapt them to suit you.
- **Keep it light, easy and fun.** Do not attempt exercises that are too difficult to be enjoyable.
- **If you are working with a teacher,** he or she can play the right-hand tune while you work out the left-hand chords, and vice versa. You can also have fun improvising together.
- **Play the right- and left-hand notes given at the top of each page.** They are the notes, chords and fingering needed for that page.
- **Practise hands separately as well as together.** The more each hand knows what it's doing the easier it is to put both hands together.
- **Use consistent fingering:** finger memory plays an important part in helping you find the right notes and chords.
- **Constantly review.** Playing by ear and improvising are skills that develop and deepen when reviewing *known* material as well as when you learn something new. The more familiar it becomes the easier you will find it to improvise, and the more fun you will have.
- **Reviewing also helps you *remember what you can play*** for those spontaneous moments when you spot a piano somewhere, and don't have your books!

Feel free to try, make mistakes, and try again. Be pleased with every bit of progress. And from time to time stop to look at the view: remind yourself what you *can* do and *have* achieved. If you are new to the piano, your main challenge may be getting the right finger to work at the right time. If you've played for many years reading notes, you may feel frustrated that your eyes remain quicker and more accurate than your ears! Be patient with your developing skills, whatever they are, and aim to make your journey enjoyable. And above all, be guided by your own musical instinct and have fun!



*See also *Notes and accompaniments for teachers* on page 122.

Visit www.lucinda-mackworth-young.co.uk/piano-by-ear for further help and information.

Playing a tune by ear

Beginning with black notes

There are fewer black notes than white, which helps when beginning to play by ear. They form a variety of five-note (**pentatonic**) scales which sound wonderful to improvise with.

Using lyrics

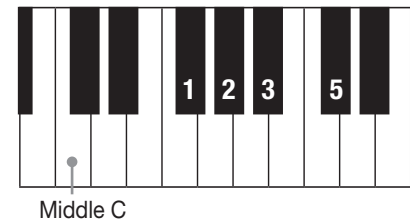
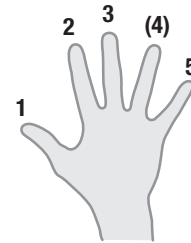
When playing by ear, you need to be able to hear the music *inside your head*. Lyrics can help you remember tunes you already know, and they provide a structure to help you work out the musical building blocks needed. These musical building blocks are:

- **Pulse:** the regular, underlying beat
- **Rhythm:** the length of notes and how they are grouped together in patterns over time
- **Pitch:** the rise and fall of notes in relation to each other
- **Key or tonality:** the group of notes needed (the **scale**), and their 'home' base
- **Melody:** the tune
- **Harmony:** chords and their progressions
- **Form:** the overall architecture.

What if I can't hear the music well enough in my head?

Don't worry! You can find well-known songs online. Listen as often as you need to.

- ### Right-hand position (four notes)



Merrily we roll along

3 2 1 2 *etc* ● — Fingering
Merrily we roll along,

All the live-long day.

Mary had a little lamb

Its fleece was white as snow.

Similar song

Going home (finger 3) from Dvořák's
New World Symphony

Tip

Humming helps: if you're not sure whether the next note is higher or lower than the last, hum the song and notice the feeling inside you: it rises and falls in line with the pitch.

Accompanying a tune by ear

How do I accompany a tune by ear?

The simplest way to accompany tunes is to play **open 5th chords** on the **key-note** (or 'home note'). This is the note that makes the music sound finished. As you may have already discovered when playing these tunes on the black notes, the key-note is F#, so the open 5th chord is F# and C#. The chord is 'open' because there are no notes in between F# and C#.

When do I play chords?

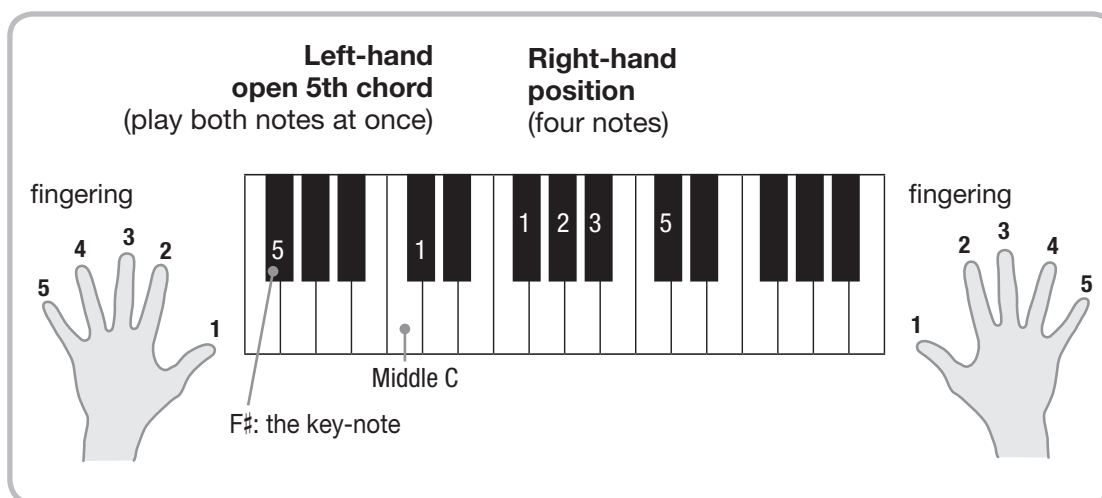
Chords are generally played on the **strong beats**. Strong beats occur regularly, every two, three or four beats, depending on the song. **Typically there are eight strong beats per song**. Longer songs tend to have twelve, sixteen or more, in multiples of four.

Does every phrase begin with a strong beat and chord?

No, sometimes there will be **upbeats** at the beginning of phrases. An upbeat is played (rhythmically) just before the strong beat on which the chord is played. Strong beats are also known as **downbeats** and they are the first beat of the bar in written music.

How to begin

- Sing or say the words of the tune you've worked out by ear in strict rhythm to feel the pulse and the regular **strong beats**. (Tap your foot to help.)
- Underline the syllables which fall on the strong beats.
- Find the left-hand open 5th chord on the keyboard (black notes only).
- Sing the tune while you play this chord on each underlined syllable. Make sure any **upbeats** are fitted in before the **downbeats**, without taking extra time.
- Practise hands together until you can play it confidently and musically, without looking at the book.



Merrily we roll along

(finger 3)

3 2 1 2 etc. — Fingering
Merrily we roll along,

Roll along, roll along,

Merrily we roll along,

All the live-long day.

Mary had a little lamb

(finger 3)

Mary had a little lamb,

Little lamb, little lamb,

Mary had a little lamb,

Its fleece was white as snow.

Upbeat

Downbeat

Similar song

Going home (finger 3) from Dvořák's
 New World Symphony

Tip

*Feel the beat and play as
 rhythmically as possible.*