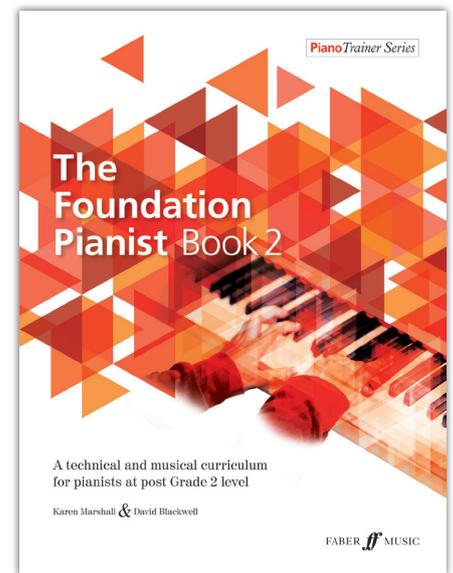


The Foundation Pianist Resources

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921): 'AQUARIUM', FROM CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS (BOOK 2, P. 24)



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Carnival of the Animals has become one of Saint-Saëns' most well-known works, yet the composer only permitted private performances during his lifetime, and specified that the complete work should only be published after his death (except for 'The Swan', which was published in a cello and solo piano arrangement in 1887). The work was written in early 1886 and scored for 2 pianos, strings, flute (and piccolo), clarinet, glass harmonica (usually now replaced by a glockenspiel) and xylophone.

Described as a 'Grand Zoological Fantasy', the work consists of 14 short movements, each depicting different animals in music that instantly and skilfully illustrates the creature concerned. Donkeys bray in 'Persons with Long Ears', an off-stage clarinet sounds the bird-call in 'Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods', while in the famous 'Swan' the solo cello glides gracefully above watery ripples from the pianos. The work is also shot through with wit: slowly plodding 'Tortoises' lumber along in a very leisurely version of Offenbach's riotous can-can from *Orpheus in the Underworld*, while 'Pianists' portrays these strange beings, endlessly practising their scales in different keys. Tuneful, atmospheric and endlessly inventive, it's not surprising the work has become so popular with audiences and a virtuosic showcase for the pianos.

It has also inspired other creative responses. In 1976 Warner Brothers issued their own version, *Bugs and Daffy's Carnival of the Animals*, in which Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck take the role of rival cartoon pianists in combination with a live-action performance directed by Michael Tilson Thomas. Magical cartoon footage brings the piece to life – the lion's mouth opens wide to roar in the opening 'Royal March', which the eyes of the cubs blink in unison with the piano chords. The hilarious send-up is complete with Bugs reciting Ogden Nash's witty verses, written in 1949 to accompany each movement of Saint-Saëns' work. For example, about the elephant Nash wrote:

*Elephants are useful friends,
Equipped with handles at both ends.
They have a wrinkled moth-proof hide.
Their teeth are upside down, outside.
If you think the elephant preposterous,
You've probably never seen a rhinosterous.*

ARRANGING THE MUSIC

'Aquarium' is the 7th movement of the suite. The gentle drifting of the fish is represented by a slowly moving tune while a pianissimo splash of notes from the pianos creates a mysterious underwater world. The challenge in making a playable version for solo piano is to find a way to suggest the rippling water while preserving the tune and also keeping the harmony – the second chord of Saint-Saëns' score, for example, does much to conjure a strange and unfamiliar place. The solution I found was to combine a delicate watery effect with the tune in rocking right-hand semiquavers, a pattern which usefully also happens to practise a rotary wrist movement. A little bit of pedal for the arpeggios – spread between the hands – further helps set the scene, while the left hand can pick out the essential harmony in chords comfortably within a stretch.

The music was a little too brittle high on solo piano in the original key (A minor), and also on the page all the ledger lines ran together, making reading difficult; D minor proved a good alternative. As far as possible, I've tried to re-create the original in ways that are playable and achievable. The triplet semiquavers in bars 13-14 look a little intimidating, but they fit nicely under the hands. The final chromatic flourish may be only a hint of the closing chromatic scales of the original, but it allows the player to fade the music nearly to silence as the fish float calmly away.

LISTENING ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE AURAL & MUSICIANSHIP SKILLS

To begin with, get your student to listen to the orchestral version of 'Aquarium' and complete the following activities.

Listening to the orchestral music:

1. Mark the pulse.
2. Identify the metre – is it in 2, 3 or 4 time? Students may not be familiar with identifying 4 time aurally. You may wish to play an additional piece in 2 to illustrate the difference.
3. Can your student identify whether it is major or minor? Does it change at any point?
4. Give your student a range of dynamics on cards (*p mf pp f mp ff cresc. dim.*). Can they identify those which are applicable to the music?
5. Instruments – talk about which instruments are being played. For a pianist this can be particularly useful as some students may not have come across some of them before. Try to find a YouTube video where an ensemble is performing the music and where you can see the instruments being played. Discuss why the piano is a percussion instrument (because sound is produced by the hammers striking the strings, just as sound is produced on a glockenspiel or celesta by striking (metal bars), both often used in performing this piece).

Activity: play the music and ask the student if they can identify any of the instruments.

Listening to the piano piece:

1. Can they mark the pulse? Can they identify the metre? (**answer: 4 time**)
2. Can your student identify where the melody is played, right hand or left? (**answer: right**).

3. Can they identify what the note values are of the repeated notes in the right hand (*answer: semiquavers*)?
4. Can they hear where the damper pedal is used?
5. Can they identify the dynamics?
6. What tempo mark would they suggest?
7. Is the music major or minor, and does it change?

HINTS & TIPS ON TEACHING THE MUSIC

Teachers should of course assess what is best for their student and shouldn't see this as the only way to teach the music. The ideas below are only starting points.

- Can your student identify and then play the music in the left hand, taking care to hold the sustained notes. This is a good opportunity to talk about part playing.
- Complete all the wrist exercises on page 23 of the book. Explain all the different types of wrist movements and their appropriate use. You may wish to 'window' (just using an envelope) those particular bars for your student to play – this takes away other information on the page and can focus the mind.
- Even semiquavers – demonstrate these being played evenly and unevenly. Train your student to self-assess how even their playing is, perhaps recording this and marking out of 10.
- Pedal – check pedal use. Perhaps record them playing and then play back. Did they release the pedal at the right time?
- Triplets – some time should be taken to explain the timing of playing these triplets. A good way to do this is first for your student to mark the pulse as you play bar 13 to them. Ask them to identify how many notes appear on beats two and three.

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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