

Contemporary Kids

INTRODUCING CONTEMPORARY MUSIC TO THE YOUNG PIANIST

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Contemporary music is the genre that best reflects present culture, current surroundings, and world events. Pieces written in the 21st century can be a channel of artistic expression for students, a reaction to the happenings of life around them, connecting the musician to their current world. Yet so often the contemporary music genre is overlooked at the beginner level due to the lack of accessibility to the music. Through the exploration of contemporary music, a student will learn principles that will strengthen technic, aural skills, reading skills, and expand creativity which will lay a foundation for study of contemporary music in later years.

Contemporary techniques such as chance music, proportional or graphic notation, and prepared piano are traditionally saved for advanced levels of study. This paper will seek to explore creative ways to introduce students to contemporary music and break down the “fear factor” that so often stands in the way of the exploration of the contemporary music genre. The musician will learn about compositions and creative ways to introduce extended techniques such as playing inside the piano, the use of other parts of the piano, auxiliary instruments, prepared piano, and electronic additions to young students. Compositions that use these techniques will be introduced throughout, as well as a variety of technical, aural, and improvisational activities in order to empower the piano teacher with tools to introduce contemporary idioms to their budding pianists. This paper will cover all aspects of laying a foundation for contemporary music through looking at extended techniques, alternative notation, auxiliary instruments and prepared piano, aural training, and 20th and 21st century repertoire and resources. At the end of each section look for “*Let’s Get Creative!*” which summarizes the section with an exploratory game or composition activity that deals with the concept. The exploration of contemporary music aids in developing critical and creative thinking skills and empower students with the tools to begin to develop their own artistic voice from a young age.

Defining Contemporary music

It is important that before introducing Contemporary music, it is defined. Contemporary music can be defined as “music of the day”¹ and the term can be applied to every musical artist alive today. This can be narrowed down further when discussing Contemporary classical music. For the purposes of this paper, Contemporary music will be defined as music written in the last 50

¹ Kari Juusela, “What is Contemporary Music,” *Berkley Today*, Summer 2010, Accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-today/summer-2010/contemporary-music>.

years that employs a contemporary technic such as 12-tone, serialism, minimalism, modernist, electro-acoustic, and similar styles. Traditions such as jazz, blues, and folk music, though both contemporary in style and engaging in form, will not be discussed, as they fall outside the scope of this paper. In contemporary music, the notation may be traditional, graphic, proportional, or any type of non-traditional form of notation. The harmonic sound required of contemporary music contains a form of “chromaticism, dissonance, atonality, bitonality, modality, or some other complexity that breaks out of the traditional norm.”² Contemporary classical music for the piano traditionally makes use of extended techniques such as electronic additions, playing on a prepared piano, the use of voice or additional body parts while playing, the use of the non-keyboard parts of the piano, glissandos, or the use of auxiliary instruments or items. Because this paper is geared toward the youngest of pianists, the music discussed will deal with contemporary ideas in micro form and employs the contemporary technics in very rudimentary way. Throughout this paper Contemporary classical will be interchangeable with “contemporary,” “modern,” or “new music.”

Reading Contemporary Notation: Breaking down the fear factor

Part of the intimidation factory of contemporary music at an advanced level is the notation. Rather than adhering to a strict meter and tempo, modern composers employ alternative notation such as aleatory (chance music), proportional notation, free rhythm notation, and graphic notation. The pianist must think outside the box and make executive decisions about the score while still operating within the guidelines of the composer. A common roadblock to playing contemporary music is learning to overcome the visual aspect of the music so that “it looks too hard” is longer an excuse to avoid learn contemporary music. If contemporary notation is introduced early on, the student develops the sight-reading capabilities as they grow as a musician. When they reach advanced forms of notation, they are equipped with the knowledge on how to decipher any notational complexity that might appear. Pre-teaching notation through flashcards and aural aspects are helpful ways to approach notation. Just like with any new concept, pre-teaching is important to lay the groundwork for what is to come. Through pre-teaching the student is able to get a firm grasp on the concept before it is introduced in a piece of music so that they don’t experience a roadblock when they see it in the music. An example of

² Christine Tithecott, “Canadian contemporary music and its place in 21st Century piano Pedagogy,” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 2015), 17.

pre-teaching free rhythm notation would be to place a card with only note heads (no stems), or letter names, on the keyboard. Tell the student to play each note as long or as short as they feel. To introduce proportional notation, repeat the exercise but have the student play the series of notes getting faster until the end. Repeat the exercise doing the opposite, start fast, and gradually get slower. Notation can be placed on flashcards and taught one at a time. Once the student has built up a repertory of alternative notation, the flashcards can be arranged at random to create an improvisatory piece. Flashcard examples may include: cluster chords, timed notation, stemless note heads, proportional notation, rhythmic note heads. You can find proportional notation, chance notation, and rhythmic notation in books such as Stephen Chatman's *Away!*³, timed notation in Jean Coulthard's "Grandfather's Clock" in *Pieces for the Present*,⁴ and free rhythm notation in Nancy Telfer's "Sioux Lullaby."⁵ There is a whole world outside of 4/4 time that involves listening, creativity and critical thinking, and through the exploration of contemporary notation, the young musicians musical language is expanded immensely.

Let's Get Creative! Composing a "Box Piece"

Composer, Morton Feldman was a modernist composer from New York, NY. Associated with contemporaries such as John Cage. Feldman composed a set of pieces entitled "Projections" whose score is a grid of boxes⁶. The musician is instructed to choose low, middle, or high ranges and insert them in each box. They then roll a die, and that would determine the number of notes in each chord. Feldman's idea became an international practice among avant-garde musicians⁷. This activity can be recreated and simplified for younger students by using a modified grid, die, and one's own imagination to recreate their own set of "projections." This activity introduces students to aleatory or "chance" music in a game-like fashion.

³ Stephen Chatman, *Away!* (Mississauga, ON: Frederick Harris Music, 2004).

⁴ Jean Coulthard, *Pieces from the Present* (Keswick, ON: Mayfair Music, 1973).

⁵ Nancy Telfer, *My Bark Canoe* (Mississauga, ON: Frederick Harris Music, 1996).

⁶ Alex Ross, "American Sublime: Morton Feldman's mysterious musical landscapes," *The New Yorker*, June 11, 2006, Accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/06/19/american-sublime>.

⁷ Ross, "American Sublime: Morton Feldman's mysterious musical landscapes," 2006.

| | | | | |
|--------|--|--|--|--|
| High | | | | |
| Middle | | | | |
| Low | | | | |

*Tip: Create several different sized grids, laminate them, and use whiteboard markers for a reusable lesson tool.

Instructions:

1. Roll a die. If the number is odd, leave the box blank, it is now a measure of rest. If the number is even, roll the die again and write the second number in a low, middle, or high box.
2. Repeat until all the boxes are filled.
3. Play your composition. The number represents the number of notes in the chord. Play your chord low, middle, or high according to the musical grid. Use both hands if necessary to fit all the notes.
4. Play again! Use new pitches this time and experiment with dynamics⁸.

Listen In: Developing the Ear

Listening is arguably the single most important aspect of being a musician. Ear training is not simply a box to check in each lesson, or the skill to practice before an exam, but the all-encompassing activity of every lesson. All music-making should be centered around ear-training. Professor Patrick Murray of Western University instructs his students to “listen as loud as you sing,”⁹ or in the case of pianists, “listen as loud as you play.” When introducing students to contemporary music, a common response is “it sounds wrong” or “it sounds weird.” This is response may seem natural, even expected, if the only music a student has been introduced to is tonal. This is the music children that children have heard from the womb, they have been acclimatized to tonal music sounding “normal.” Music journalist Alex Ross reminds that “All

⁸ This activity is a modified form of activity created by Nicholas Busch and introduced at “Pedagogy Days” in London, ON, April 5, 2019.

⁹ Murray, Patrick. *Les Choriste* Choir rehearsal. March 2019.

music is an acquired taste.”¹⁰ If students are introduced tone clusters, atonal, polytonal, bitonal sonorities from the beginning of their learning experience they will learn to appreciate non-tonal music.

Considering that most introductory method books include almost exclusively tonal music, out of method book work should be used to familiarize new sonorities. One exercise may include playing musical bingo in a lesson.

| Minor | Diminished (smaller) | Major | Augmented (BIGGER) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Diminished (smaller) | Minor | Augmented (BIGGER) | Major |
| Augmented (BIGGER) | Major | Major | Minor |
| Minor | Diminished (smaller) | Augmented (BIGGER) | Diminished (smaller) |

To play, the teacher simply plays out a series of major, minor, diminished, or augmented chords one at a time. The student must guess out loud the quality of the chord. If the student is correct, they may place a game tile on the bingo card. When they get four in a row, they have BINGO. This game can be altered for younger students by using happy (major), sad (minor), mysterious (diminished), or outer space (augmented) cards. The teacher would play a chord and the student would hold up which card they think is correct.

Due to the complexity of bi-tonal and polytonal music, musicians are not introduced to it until an advanced level. One way a student can familiarize themselves with the sounds is through musical listening activities. As the teacher, it is important to expose the student to all types and genres of music from Bach, to Beethoven, to Brahms, to Bartok, to Boulez. Consider having a student do an artistic activity in reaction to a piece of music, such as a painting to one of Messian's *Vingt Regards*. Another introductory activity would be to have the student write down five forte sounds they hear in a week.

¹⁰ Alex Ross, "Why do we hate modern classical music?," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. Accessed April 30, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/28/alex-ross-modern-classical-music>.

Responses could resemble:

1. Car horn
2. Knock on door
3. Crow in the morning
4. Thunder
5. Crying baby

This activity engages their ears to listen intently to sound and not just specific tonalities as music.

Of course, student's must develop a strong sense of intervallic awareness as they advance as musician. Berkley graduate, Eric Chuang, developed an App called Atonal Ear, which focuses on recognizing the relationship between two notes rather than the intervals relationship to the key centre. The app features a "drill" and "challenge" mode and features progressive levels. This app is an excellent addition to many other ear training aps and places the focus on developing a student's ear for contemporary music. Ear training is a daily part of being a musician, and these introductory activities are simply jumping off points for developing a well-rounded musician.

Let's Get Creative! Polyrhythm Party

Ear training is a part of everything a musician does, and it does not stop at tonality, but includes rhythm as well. Polyrhythm's exist in almost all advanced contemporary music and are often a stumbling block in the learning of a piece. A great way to improve rhythmic and aural skills is to introduce polyrhythms early in a fun and accessible way. One activity is through a polyrhythm party. Each participant is responsible for one rhythm.

Student A: Ras-ber-ry (triplet)

Student B: Ap-ple Pie (2 eighths, quarter)

Student C: Wa-ter-mel-on (4 sixteenth notes)

Teacher: Cre-a-tiv-i-ty (quintuplet)

Instructions:

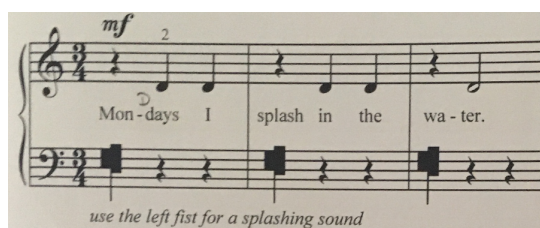
1. Sit in a circle
2. Each participant repeats their rhythm out loud until the teacher rings a bell
3. When you hear the bell ring, switch to the rhythm of the person on your right. Keep the rhythm going!

Grab extra students, siblings, or parents to join and make the party even more complex! This game can be modified using different words or simplified by reducing the number of players.

Extended Techniques: Why? How? Where?

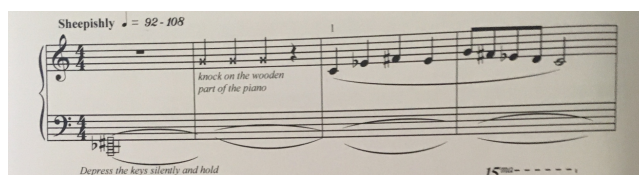
Extended techniques do are not mere party tricks for the professional pianist, they are they are intended for all pianists and utilize the capability of the instrument to its fullest. Some extended techniques may include the use of harmonics, glissandos, tone clusters, string piano, use of non-keyboard parts of the piano, and prepared piano. Extended techniques can be incorporated into lessons from the first year of study. Extended techniques are a useful way to help the student explore the instrument and engage the student from the very first lesson. There are a variety of pieces that use extended techniques when learning at the beginner stage. Alongside introductory activities, pieces using clusters, harmonics, glissandos, and non-keyboard use of the piano will be cited here, and the use of prepared piano will be discussed later.

If a student is asked to play tone clusters with their forearm to create “thunder” they learn the dynamic capabilities of the instruments, as well as begin to familiarize their ear with dissonance. Tone clusters can be found in pieces such as “The Hippo” by Nancy Telfer. This piece uses the fist, as well as a “rolled” chord with the fist. The student can play approximate pitches in the cluster while the right hand plays a simple melody.



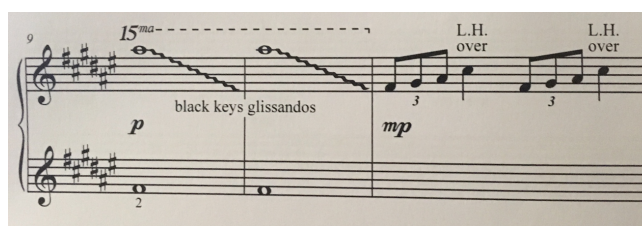
Nancy Telfer, “The Hippo” in *Northern Lights Preparatory Repertoire* (Mount Forest, ON: Canadian National Conservatory of Music, 2006), 9.

When a student silently depresses a group of keys with one hand, and plays “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” with the other, they improve aural skills by listening to the harmonics created. The piece “Sympathetic Sheepdog” utilizes harmonics by silently depressing the keys with one hand and playing the melody with the other.



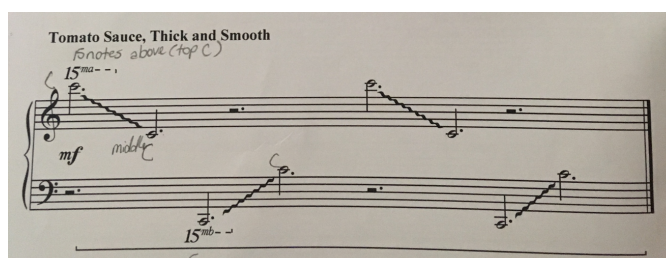
Debra Wanless, “Sympathetic Sheep Dog” in *Northern Lights Preparatory Repertoire* (Mount Forest, ON: Canadian National Conservatory of Music, 2006) 16.

Glissandos can be introduced in a variety of ways. One could teach it as if “dusting the keys” with the back of the nail, or a slide of two fingers to create a stroke of lightning. Glissandos can be found more frequently in elementary repertoire. Some suggestions include “Beautiful Swan” by Lynette Sawatsky which uses a black key glissando.



Lynette Sawatsky, “Beautiful Swan” in *Waddle and Quack* (Holland Centre, ON: Debra Wanless Music, 2013), 7.

The piece “Pizza Toppings” introduces glissandos through the “spreading of tomato sauce,” demonstrating a white key or diatonic glissando.



Debra Wanless, “Pizza Toppings” in *Northern Lights Preparatory Repertoire* (Mount Forest, ON: Canadian National Conservatory of Music, 2006), 26-27.

If the teacher has a grand piano, they can demonstrate the use of string piano by running the nails up and down the strings of the piano. An activity exploring string piano may include “flying airplanes”¹¹ up and down the strings, palming a group of strings creating *forte* or *piano* dynamics, or plucking a single string. The piece “The Grandfather Clock”¹² by Jean Coulthard uses string piano with the plucking of the string at the beginning of each measure to represent the chime of a clock. It is important that each of these activities is introduced in a lesson and in a safe manner. Use demonstrations and emphasize the importance of treating the instrument with respect and having teacher supervision when playing inside the piano.

¹¹ This activity is a modified form of activity created by Nathan Gross and introduced at “Pedagogy Days” in London, ON, April 5, 2019.

¹² Jean Coulthard, *Pieces from the Present* (Keswick, ON: Mayfair Music, 1973).

There are many pieces that can be used to introduce extended techniques. Resources on where to begin looking will be discussed later on. There are countless creative ways introduces these ideas at an elementary level so that the techniques are taught early on engaging the student from the very beginning.

Let's Get Creative! Preparing a Soundscape

“Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we are in or out of concert halls”¹³ – John Cage. According to Murray Schaefer, musicians are “anyone and anything that sounds.”¹⁴ This activity is one that is meant to inspire compositional creativity in youngest of beginners and can be tailored for students past the early stages. The idea of a soundscape activity is to create a series of sounds that reflects sounds they have heard before, such as sounds in nature. For example, to create a thunderstorm, the student needs three elements – thunder, lightning, and rain.¹⁵

Thunder can be recreated through playing bass notes by depressing the keys with the forearm and the use of pedal. Lightning can be a quick glissando in the treble clef, or a swift palming of a set of notes at the top of the piano. Rain can be recreated through playing a series of descending notes with the third-finger of each hand as an introduction to proper technic. The teacher calls out the elements of thunder, lightning, rain, at random or in sequence. The student is encouraged to listen for sound to dissipate before starting the new element or to purposely interrupt the sound. The most important aspect is the engagement of the ear, emphasizing sound before sight. This soundscape activity can be used as a creative first-lesson-activity or turned into a graphic notation score as their first music assignment.

Exploring New Sounds: Auxiliary Instruments and Prepared Piano

Just like with extended techniques, exploring the piano through prepared piano and adding extra-musical elements through auxiliary instruments can open up a whole new world of sound exploration to the young beginner. These ideas are not ones that need to be reserved for advanced study but can be introduced through elementary teaching pieces and introductory level games. When approaching prepared piano, it is important to do it cautiously and with cleaned

¹³ Schafer, pg. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ This activity is a modified version of “Thunderstorm” by Dianne - Goolkasian Rahbee in the series Celebrations, Book Prep A, by Frederick Harris Music, 2015.

hands. A good introductory exercise¹⁶, if you have a grand piano, is to place a piece of letter paper on the middle range strings of the piano, away from the dampers. Choose a piece from the method book, or a rote piece to play in the middle range of the piano. Experiment with different types and weights of paper such as loose leaf, cardboard, tissue, origami, or even cloth such as felt or light-weight cotton. After the student has played their piece with the multiple types of paper, have them describe how each paper made the piano sound different from the next.

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star with Prepared Piano

1. Normal

2. Letter paper sounds like

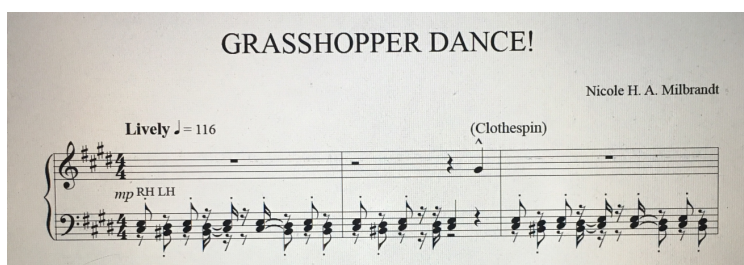
3. Tissue Paper sounds like

4. Origami paper sounds like

5. Cardboard sounds like

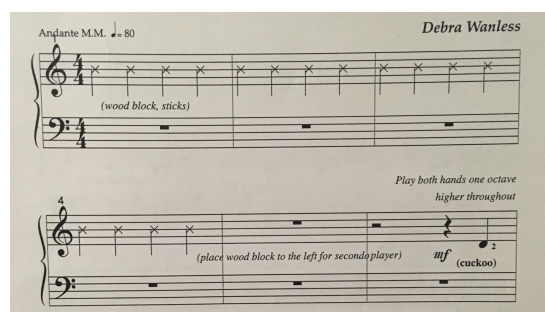
Not every studio has access to a grand piano, but that shouldn't stop prepared piano experimentation. "Grasshopper Dance" by Saskatchewan student Nicole H. A. Milbrandt explores prepared piano through the use of clothespins. In this piece, typically taught by rote, the student is instructed to clip clothespins to specific black keys. Throughout the piece, as the student plays each black key, the clothespins leap off like grasshoppers. This is an excellent piece to explore prepared piano in an accessible and age-appropriate level for the student.

¹⁶ This exercise is a modified version of an exercise by Alan Shockley, "Beyond the 88: A No-Fear Beginner's Guide to Preparing the Piano," nmbx.newmusicusa.org/beyond-the-88-a-no-fear-beginners-guide/. Accessed April 28, 2019.



Milbrandt, Nicole H.A., “Grasshopper Dance,” student composition, performed at SRMTA Conference, Yorkton, SK, October 2017.

The use of auxiliary rhythm instruments can be a fun way to improve rhythm and create an impressive performance. Debra Wanless introduces the use of auxiliary instruments through the use of claves in her duet “The Cuckoo Clock.” This elementary level duet can be given to two beginner students. Claves can be substituted for castanets, woodblocks, or even knocking on the piano.



Wanless, Debra. *The Cuckoo Clock*. Ontario: Julyn Music Publications, 1994.

In Stephen Chatman’s series “Amusements” he also explores the use of percussion in music, such as “Monkey Business”¹⁷ in Book 1 of the series. If no percussion instruments are available, clapping, stomping, or knocking on the piano are suitable alternatives. In addition, the Primer level duets in the Northern Lights CNCM series explore the use of percussion instruments within the duets. A whole new world of sound opens up when a student begins to use percussion and prepared piano techniques in their music. Techniques such as these will challenge their aural, rhythmic, and creative skills, helping them to develop into a well-rounded musician.

Let’s Get Creative! Adding Auxiliary Instruments and Prepared Piano

Playing with percussion instruments is a great way to improve rhythmic accuracy in a fun and new way. An inexpensive set of children’s auxiliary percussion instruments can be purchased online. The student may add percussion note heads to one of

¹⁷ Stephen Chatman, “Monkey Business” in *Amusements Book 1* (Mississauga, ON: Frederick Harris Music, 1989).

their scores or compose a rhythmic interlude between two sections of their piece. If there is a short piece with repeats, have them play one of the verses on woodblocks, claves, or clapping.

Prepared Piano: Using the technic from “Grasshopper dance,” choose a piece of music containing frogs, jumping beans, grasshoppers, or birds, prepare the piano by clipping a clothespin or two on the black keys of the piano. At the decided moment, play the clothes pinned-black key and watch the frog/insect/jumping bean leap off the keys! Examples of music could be “Frogs on Logs”¹⁸ in Faber and Faber Piano Adventures, “Freddie the Frog”¹⁹ by Anne Crosby-Gaudet, or “Bunny Hip-Hop”²⁰ by Lynette Sawatsky.

Exploring music contemporary music is a fun and engaging way for a student to become more connected to the music of their time. Alternative notation such as aleatory (chance music), proportional notation, free rhythm notation, and graphic notation can be taught through composition and improvisation games. Student’s aural skills can be expanded through the introduction of tone clusters, atonal, and polytonal sonorities, and online Apps. Creativity and critical thinking skills are challenged and expanded as a student learns to engage with contemporary music. They learn to become co-creators and participants in the musical canon of the 21st century. The study of contemporary music should not be left to the advanced musician but should be an integrated part of the music education of any budding pianist.

¹⁸ Faber, Nancy and Randall. “Frogs on Logs” in *Piano Adventures Primer Level Lesson Book 2nd Edition* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publishing, 1996), 45.

¹⁹ Anne Crosby-Gaudet, *Freddie the Frog* (Bedford, NS: Musical Discoveries Shop, 1997).

²⁰ Lynette Sawatsky, “Bunny Hip-Hop” in *Flutter and Blink* (Holland Centre, ON: Debra Wanless Music, 2017).

Appendix: Helpful Sources and Composer Suggestions

Syllabi

- Alliance for Canadian New Music Project: http://www.acnmp.ca/syllabus_files/piano.pdf
- Conservatory Canada Contemporary Repertoire List: <https://conservatorycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CI-piano-repertoire-list-2017Dec-2.pdf>
- RCMP Popular Selections List:
https://files.rcmusic.com/sites/default/files/files/S45_PopSelList_2017_RCM-Online_F.pdf

Music Series

- *Northern Lights* (Canadian National Conservatory of Music)
- *Making Tracks* (CNCM)
- *Amusements*, books 1-3 by Stephen Chatman (Frederick Harris Music)
- *Music of Our Time* by J. Coulthard, D. Duke, J. Hansen (Mayfair Music)
- *Waddle and Quack*, books 1-3 by Lynette Sawatsky (Debra Wanless Music)

Favourite Composers

- Lynette Sawatsky – *Once Upon A Time* (Debra Wanless Music);
<https://www.lynettesawatsky.com/solo-singles.html>
- Alexina Louie - *Small, Beautiful Things* (coming soon!), *Star Light, Star Bright* (FHM)
- Jean Coulthard - *Pieces for the Present* (Mayfair Music)
- Stephen Chatman - *Away!* (FHM)
- Debra Wanless Music - <https://www.debrawanless.com/our-composers/debra-wanless/>
- Susan Greisdale - <https://www.susangriesdale.com/>
- Sarah Knosecni - *Morris the Mouse Explores Spain, Morris the Mouse Attends a Concert of the Classics, Morris the Mouse Goes Rollerblading, Morris the Mouse Explores the Haunted Attic*
- Anne Crosby - *Freddie the Frog, In My Dreams*;
<https://musicdiscoveries.shop/collections/piano-sheet-music>

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Wanless, Debra. "Sympathetic Sheep Dog" in *Northern Lights Preparatory Repertoire*. Mount Forest, ON: Canadian National Conservatory of Music, 2006.

Wanless, Debra. *The Cuckoo Clock*. Ontario: Julyn Music Publications, 1994.