



A Review by Shirley Kirsten

Irina Gorin's *Tales of a Musical Journey* is refreshingly untraditional. Unlike most method books available on the market today that come with Lesson, Performance, Theory, and Technique companions, this is an all-in-one bundle of rich exposure to tone production and the physical means to the end, note by note. There is no rush to play pieces framed in rigidly assigned places, like middle C position.

While many parents might wonder why junior isn't tapping melodies that can be easily sung back in the first few lessons, the delay built into the material has pedagogical merit. It allows the teacher to work on the very fundamental aspect of playing the piano—creating the basic singing tone that underlies all music-making.

Taking each note, one at a time, learning how to physically produce tonal beauty with graceful “weeping willow” like movements, traveling over octaves with “rainbow” gestures, and learning to play notes in a detached way, with relaxed arms and supple wrists, before legato exposure, is a slow but substantial approach to teaching the art of piano playing.

Through Book One, a child journeys through the “Magical Kingdom of Sounds,” with an appealing cast of royalty that includes King Meter, Fairy Musicalina, Prince

Rhythm, and Wizard the Metronome. They make their charming appearance in sequenced, individual chapters.

Through a series of baby steps, a young student will tap individual notes to prerecorded CD selections by Prokofieff, Rebikov, and other notable Russian composers, absorbing an early appreciation of the Classics that will whet his appetite for more servings of the great piano literature as he moves along the study spectrum.

In early playing experiences, a beginner will hear two measures of introductory “ticks” or beats for each piece that imbue a sense of framing rhythm. Cardboard circles, black for “short” sounds, and white for “long” ones, are included in the materials packet. These can be sorted on the music rack in any order a child desires. Through clapping activities, a variety of rhythms are explored. My pupil, Rina, 4, sorted cardboard circles on the music rack creating her own unique rhythm. (*Editor's note: References to YouTube video performances will be interspersed throughout this article. Teachers are encouraged to access these videos and experience a “live-teaching” demonstration. Kirsten emphasizes singing tone and how to produce it during the lesson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX82PZw-eTw&feature=youtu.be>.)*

Gorin nourishes a steady metronomic beat in her teaching while I tend to go outside the robotic pulse framework

believing that music cannot otherwise “breathe.” Yet, some students at the earliest stages of their musical training need the crutch of a time ticker. In the following YouTube video, Rina taps E’s and then F’s to recorded music that accompanies Gorin’s materials. Rina began her piano studies with me in August, 2011: <http://youtu.be/FxkHmZ5RaWw>.

I have been using Gorin’s instruction with this four-year old for eight months. Numerous videos of her lessons and progress are posted on YouTube. It was clear that she had absorbed a fluid physical approach to the piano and practiced with a supple wrist and relaxed arms. Because *Tales of a Musical Journey* focused on these fundamental physical attributes of piano playing, the child had a firm kinesthetic foundation to build upon.

Gorin also enlists two novel techniques that promote a slower, deeper entry into notes, thereby reinforcing her “singing tone” approach to the piano. In one teaching example, she suspends the wrists of a young student using a hair band, and then releases the hair band, allowing gravity to take its natural course.

In some cases the student will resist relaxation, tightening up wrists, arms, or muscles. Gorin responds by gently

telling the student to “let go” until there is a dead weight drop into the key with a firm, rounded finger.

When the hair band is removed after using it many times, the pupil will have an embedded muscular memory of the experience—recapturing the “feeling” of the relaxed arm/wrist drop without needing external crutches: <http://youtu.be/ta9oxcknvAA>.

In another prized teaching moment, Gorin uses putty found in Dollar stores, to promote a deep-in-the-keys, *molto cantabile*. I have used this technique with Rina and older students. The use of the putty has a far-reaching effect on playing, and supports the strength of Gorin’s pedagogy.

In essence, she teaches a student to think of the piano like a bowl of jello, to avoid a “fingers down, superficial, skimming the surface” approach to the keys. The imagery promotes a “slower” if not denser penetration, preventing a pokey, percussive attack.

In the following video segment, one of Gorin’s students practices a “jello keys” feel as applied to a C Major Scale in detached notes, followed by legato playing: <http://youtu.be/7-bY2aJUaOY>.

Chapter 10

Welcome to the New Houses

The Sounds that lived in the Magical Kingdom were very friendly and musical. They loved the creatures they belonged to and invited their owners to live with them in the keys-rooms of the small and big houses. A Cat, a Deer and an Eagle were thrilled to move into the two black key houses, because it had three white bedrooms; and a Frog, a Giraffe, an Ant and a Bear joyfully moved into the three black key houses with four white bedrooms. The Sounds named the keys, the home notes, after the animals: “C” after Cat, “D” after Deer, “E” after Eagle, “F” after Frog, “G” after Giraffe, “A” after Ant, and “B” after Bear.



Cat



Deer



Eagle



Frog



Giraffe



Ant



Bear



Draw a line from each animal to the house where they live.

Three additional prized teaching moments are previewed in these video segments:

Hand Position

Gorin uses two happy faced soft rubber balls to shape a young child's hand position:
<http://youtu.be/r-LbDp02MYc>.

Swinging the arm from side-to-side

Gorin aces it here, teaching the relaxed arm swing from side to side, using a soft toy monkey that is included in her materials packet. This going-with-the-flow motion nurses beautiful phrasing, and together with the arm drop and supple wrist, produces a gorgeous singing tone:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nOLTzHTYMc&feature=related>.

Teaching Staccato to a Beginner

This is a riveting approach that imbues a follow-through wrist motion so pivotal to beautiful phrasing. I love how Irina uses the image of a "frog" to capture the spirit of short, crisp, detached notes:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MXzzq-oofQ&playnext=1&list=PL3F80F9DB8A7E4720>.

Learning Note Names

The student learns the the musical alphabet by means of laminated flashcards with note names associated with animals, like A for Ant, B for Bear, C for Cat, etc. A child learns to

locate these inside "Little" and "Big" Houses with two and three black-key roofs that appear along the keyboard

spectrum. Such an imaginative display of these abodes with animals invited in by letter name, is a uniquely creative way to assimilate keyboard geography.

Rina explores the big and small note houses in this video, before she taps a series of A's to pre-recorded music:
<http://youtu.be/IfF2VL3pVE>

Areas of Disagreement

My points of departure with Gorin's pedagogy circumscribes the transition from beat dependent pre-recorded music to pieces that are free of metronomic framing; the timing of legato playing and five-finger positions; inserting accidentals in the music to imbue a consciousness of affect in music (Major/minor duality).

When Rina was 5, I began teaching her short five finger-position pieces after exposing her to legato pentachords

(8th month juncture of piano study). Since she demonstrated a natural affinity for playing smooth and connected notes following months of individual, detached note exposures, I decided to go with the flow and let her take a path that diverged from Gorin's method book course. In the following video, Rina plays a five-finger exercise with both hands: <http://youtu.be/gMvjsSkxGEk>.

As a rule, I have always embraced a tailor-made teaching curriculum that adapts itself to each child. In this teaching situation with Rina, a changed order of instruction produced good results.

The freeing of the beat, as well, in a five-finger sequence, without a ticking timer crutch, also evolved without any rhythmic problems. Rina had already absorbed a good sense of a unifying pulse through clapping activities, and from early CD recorded music/finger tapping experiences in Gorin's instruction.

In this video snippet, Rina is playing a five-finger position in 10ths with a *legato* singing tone:
<http://youtu.be/vwcmXayQwCk>. Five-finger exercises quickly led to repertoire choices in five-note closed positions. (Examples: The Reinagle "Minuet" and "Little March" by Turk)

I taught these pieces to Rina by floating note heads on paper that Rina knew well (black and white circles sorted on the music rack—that I supplemented with eighth notes and whole notes). We sang, clapped, used hand signals, and learned both bass and treble parts. Since she had also

absorbed the musical alphabet back and forth so well, it was an easy leap to learning pieces that I borrowed from Faber's *Developing Artist, Preparatory Piano*

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*Literature*¹: Rina plays "Little March" by Turk
<http://youtu.be/VM8kEUkRvzU>.

As previously mentioned, I chose to insert accidentals in Rina's music sooner than later. Once she had smoothly played five-finger legato positions—i.e. C Major, G Major, and D Major, I introduced the parallel minor. In this connection, we focused on the "sad" version of each warm-up.

Here, Rina plays D Major and Minor pentascales and chords: <http://youtu.be/VbiyuVPJqmQ>. Likewise, I had her transpose the Reinagle "Minuet" from G Major to G minor, and applied the same to Turk's miniature.

¹ Nancy and Randall Faber. *Preparatory Piano Literature: Developing Artist Original Keyboard Classics*, (Fort Lauderdale: FJH Music Company, 1998).

Had I followed Gorin's curriculum past the pre-recorded activities, I feel that Rina would not have progressed as well as she did. *But then again, teachers make individual choices with pedagogical materials, adjusting them to meet the individual needs of a child.* Perhaps, the fact that Rina had a few years of Music Together classes, might have made her an easier candidate for a more flexible type of learning that included leaps of progress earlier than expected.

Despite my minor reservations about the exact course of instruction in *Tales of a Musical Journey*, its basic focus on the physical dimension of piano playing is a vast improvement over materials that are churned out in every variety of lesson, performance, and technique book. If Gorin's focus can influence publishers of popular method books to revise their thinking, and slow things down, promoting an emphasis on tone production and relaxation techniques, then *Tales of a Musical Journey* will have ushered in much needed changes in the whole teaching landscape, particularly as it applies to beginners.

(Editor's note: The following blog offers many more insights into the creativity and teaching expertise of Shirley Kirsten:

<http://arioso7.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/irina-gorins-piano-students-shine-again-videos/>) 🎵



Shirley Kirsten began her 40-year career in piano as a traveling teacher in Manhattan after graduating from the Oberlin Conservatory with a bachelor of music degree in piano performance. She also holds a master's degree in music therapy from New York University. Growing up in New York City, she attended the High School of Performing Arts, known as FAME, for which the movie was based, and studied privately with Lillian Freundlich. In 1979 Shirley moved to Fresno and joined the local branch MTAC. In 2010, she opened a studio in El Cerrito, California and joined the Alameda Branch as a contributory member. She will be relocating to Berkeley in the fall of 2012. Her music related activities include teaching, presenting workshops, writing about the piano, and making CDs of Baroque, Classical, and Romantic keyboard literature. Her published works include an intermediate repertoire album, "Moonbeams and Other Musical Sketches," and "How to Help Children Compose," a collection that features original student compositions and her own creative teacher accompaniments.