Many times as piano teachers we feel we must teach the “classics”—that is, the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin—to ensure proper introduction to many musical and pedagogical concepts. These musical concepts include, but are not limited to: proper pedaling, texture, form, voicing, color, style, phrasing, mood, interpretation and articulation. However, many well-known and even lesser-known American composers address all of these concepts and give students the opportunity to be exposed to “new” compositions. As pedagogues, we realize and understand the importance of teaching standard works for a student’s musical development, but it is also important for teachers and students to explore new musical alternatives, many of which may be found in the works of American composers.

American composers offer a wide range of style, compositional techniques and approaches and various technical challenges; making many of the compositions excellent teaching pieces. Every aspect of piano pedagogy may be addressed in the works of such composers as Amy Beach, William Grant Still, Julia Perry, Mary Jeanne Van Appledorn, George Chadwick, Libby Larson, Margarite Bonds, Arthur Foote, Joan Tower, Mary Lou Demer, John Cage, Faustina Hasse Hodges, Jane Torry Sloman, Edward Kennedy Ellington, Florence B. Price, Mary Lou Williams,

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Clara Kathleen Rogers, George Gershwin, Carrie Jacobs-Bond, John Knowles Paine and Adeline Shepherd to name but a few. Therefore, we will look at several pieces by various American composers and discuss the pedagogical significance and teaching strategies of each work.

The first piece we will examine is Prelude for Piano by Julia Perry (1924–1979). Perry, a native of Lexington, Kentucky, studied with a virtual “Who’s Who” in musical circles including Hugh Ross (1949), Luigi Dallapiccola (1951) and Nadia Boulanger (1952). Perry’s early works were mostly comprised of choral music, which is filled with a strong influence of African-American spirituals. Prelude for Piano (1946, rev. 1962) shows this influence as well. Throughout the work, Perry demonstrates many wonderful examples of tone color, timbre, dynamics, mood and pedaling. She utilizes rich 20th-century harmonies by extending the harmonic vocabulary to include major sevenths, ninths, elevenths, blue notes (minor thirds) and chord substitutions, and she utilizes a common blues form, AAB. Perry also includes periodic meter changes throughout the work transitioning from three-four to five-eight, to three-four, and ending with a two-four time signature.

This particular work by Perry also introduces an interesting opportunity for students to learn the how to (what a performer physically does to create sound) of voicing inner parts. If we look at the first three measures of the prelude (Example 1), including the anacrusis, we find a plethora of voicing possibilities.

Notice the unique way Perry writes for the inner voice and her distinctive voice leadings. The inner voice (quarter notes) in measure one (C to B to G) moves in a downward stepwise motion while holding an F at the octave. This allows the student the opportunity to develop voicing skills and to learn balance between the hands. These voicing skills may be easily mastered if the student uses the correct hand gesture or hand choreography. By the term gesture or choreography I am referring to the technique of movement that is required by the fingers, hands, wrists and sometimes the arms, to create a musical phrase or contour. In Perry’s Prelude for Piano the gesture technique can be utilized once the first chord in measure one has been played. The student can then slightly raise and rotate the wrist/hand/arm in a small counterclockwise motion. This provides an excellent gesture for the musical line because the slight rotation follows the downward motion of the inner voice, therefore creating a smooth and correct musical contour. Once the student begins to recognize patterns within the music, the use of gestures and hand choreography becomes instinctive.

This instinctive playing can easily be nurtured in Perry’s prelude because the voice-leading passages found in example one is used in various ways throughout the work, as seen in measures 11–13 (Example 2), and measures 22–23 (Example 3). Also, the tempo is slow enough, even at performance tempo, to give the student the opportunity to truly understand and develop this technique.

Valerie Capers follows the same approach as Perry but places less emphasis on contrapuntal texture. Valerie Gail Capers was born in New York City in 1935, and by age 6 she was completely blind. She received her early education at the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind and continued her education receiving her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the Julliard School, where she studied
classical and jazz piano, composition and arranging. Capers wrote a collection of 12 teaching pieces entitled *Portraits of Jazz*, each one dedicated to a specific jazz musician. *Billie’s Song* was one of the pieces in the collection. This piece, dedicated to the late Billie Holiday, provides a wonderful opportunity for students to expand their harmonic vocabulary while exploring various colors and timbres of the piano. In measures 1–4 (Example 4), Capers utilizes major seventh, ninth, minor seventh and eleventh chords. This harmonic expansion introduces the intermediate student to various chord colors and possibilities, which is essential to broadening each student’s musical aptitude.

![Example 4: Billie’s Song, mm. 1-4. Hildegard Publishing, a subsidiary of Theodore Presser.](Image)

As with *Prelude for Piano*, *Billie’s Song* suggests pedal throughout, but unlike Perry’s work, Capers leaves pedal affects to the discretion of the performer. By leaving the decision to the student (with the help of his or her teacher), the student can begin to develop music discrimination skills—the ability to discern between what is logically and musically correct in the areas of interpretation, articulation, phrasing, voicing and general performance practice. Music discrimination may also be applied to the recognition of specific genres (baroque, classical, romantic and 20th century), ear training, orchestration or tonality. This is extremely important to the musical development of every student because students can begin to understand the process of making musically educated decisions concerning the practice and performance of their pieces.

Capers also utilizes polytonal chords or polytonalities, the simultaneous use of two or more tonalities or keys, as the foundation for creating extended chordal harmonies between the right and left hands throughout the work. Capers uses several different chord combinations for her extended harmonies. For example, in measure 2 illustrated in Example 5, Capers uses major (F major chord, bass clef) and augmented (E-flat augmented, treble clef) chords; in measure 5, shown in Example 6, she utilizes minor (D minor, bass clef) and major (C major, treble clef) chords; in measure 13, labeled Example 7, Capers uses two minor chords, A-minor (bass clef) and E-minor (treble clef) for her polytonal and extended harmonies.

![Example 5 and 6: Billie’s Song, mm. 2, 5 and 13. Hildegard Publishing, a subsidiary of Theodore Presser.](Image)

When the student begins to practice the polytonal sections, it will be beneficial to to practice hands separately to give the student a firm harmonic aural foundation that can be expanded when the hands are played together. If the multi-tonal sections are practiced together in the beginning, the student may find it more difficult developing balance between the hands and be unaware of the tonal significance of each chord.

Valerie Capers includes many musical techniques of expanded harmonies and accompaniment patterns while exposing students to various moods of color and timbre. *Billie’s Song* is also a great introduction to traditional ternary form (ABA) while incorporating various harmonic changes, which makes Capers’s composition an excellent addition to any student’s repertoire.

As one of the leading composers of the postwar avant-garde, John Cage’s (1912–1992) music, writings and personae has influenced composers and compositions all around the world. However, when the name John Cage is mentioned outside contemporary academic circles, the reaction is often one of suspicion or misunderstanding. This is due in part to the popularization of his well-known prepared piano works. Therefore, many piano teachers may not realize that Cage wrote piano pieces outside the prepared piano spectrum that are very pedagogically sound. Among these works is the piece *Dream*. *Dream* is a study in tone, color and pedal control. Originally written in alto clef, Cage utilizes one staff (treble clef) and a time signature of 2/2 for this two-page work. In the first two measures of *Dream* (Example 8), Cage introduces an eighth-note rhythmic idea with various accidental alterations that permeates the entire work. This eighth-note pattern weaves through various five-finger patterns, both chromatically and diatonically, and extends at times beyond the five-finger pattern creating unusual fingering combinations. Therefore, students should possess a working knowledge of five-patterns in every key and all major/minor scales before attempting this work. Students will certainly find the majority of their practice time spent working out fingering possibilities of the intricate diatonic eighth-note figures.

Cage emphasizes that the piece should be performed “Always with resonance; no silence; tones may be freely sustained, manually or with pedal, beyond notated durations.” This work is a great introduction for students who need to
develop control and balance, which can be achieved with slow methodical practice, carefully listening for each of these elements.

Example 8: Dream, mm. 1–2. C.F. Peters Publishing.

Cage occasionally augments the rhythm in Dream by placing quarter notes on beat one and half notes on beats three and four (Example 9). This augmentation allows the less experienced performer a moment of rest before continuing with the perpetual eighth-note pattern. This shift can also provide great practice of maintaining rhythmic pulse throughout the work, requiring the student to maintain musical continuity within shifts of accentuation and rhythm. Although the rhythms and pitches may not be difficult, developing and maintaining continuity may require additional practice with a metronome.

Example 9: Dream, mm. 9–10. C.F. Peters Publishing.

The next piece is Set of Five for Piano, by Mary Jeanne Van Appledorn (b. 1927). Appledorn received her training in piano and music theory at the Eastman School of Music, from which she received bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees. While at Eastman, she also studied composition with Bernard Rogers and Alan Hovhaness. She accepted a teaching position in 1950 at Texas Technical University and in 1982, Appledorn continued her studies as a postdoctoral fellow at MIT studying computer synthesized sound. Her Set of Five for Piano is a wonderful collection of pieces that may be used to introduce an intermediate to advanced student to multi-movement works and 20th century techniques that utilize thirty-second-note triplet patterns, hemiolas (3:2), modes and improvisatory elements. As the title suggest, Set of Five is a set of five movements, each designed with its own character and sound. The movements consist of “Ostinato,” “Blues,” “Improvisation,” “Elegy” and “Toccata.”

The first movement, Ostinato, focuses on the rhythmic drive and the distinctive pulse of a 7/8 time signature. The foundation for this rhythmic drive is found in the left hand, while the right hand contains repeated ascending pentatonic patterns that may be played easily with the correct gesture (Example 10).


When practicing the right hand, the student should isolate the first four notes (E-A-B-E) and be able to recognize the repeating four-note pentatonic pattern. This can be accomplished by having the student “block” the pentatonic outline. In other words, the student should play the pentatonic pattern as a blocked chord, which will allow the student to recognize the key group patterns of the outline more easily. A consistent fingering (RH: 1-2-3-5) should be established so the student may practice the blocking exercise with the fingering that will be used for the pattern. Once the fingering is established, the pentatonic outline should be blocked slowly at every octave, allowing the student to practice shifting hand positions. Once the pattern has been blocked and can easily be identified, the how to of playing may now be approached by the student.

When practicing the right-hand pentatonic pattern found in Example 10, the student should slightly lift the wrist in a circular motion toward the melodic line, allowing the fingers to follow the ascending line and the wrist to glide up the keyboard in one continuous motion. The fingers, hand and wrist should flow from the bottom E to the top, with as little tension in the hand as possible. The right hand should glide from one pentatonic group to the next utilizing the same gesture and movement as in the first set.

It is important to remember that when performing rhythmically challenging works, the student should not allow excess tension to build up in the hands, arms, shoulders, neck or back. This will cause extreme fatigue and possible physical problems in the future. Excessive tension while playing can easily be avoided by constantly monitoring each student’s hand location and not allowing the student to play with hands “locked” into a specific position and by monitoring each student’s physical posture while playing. If students learn to allow their hands to follow the natural gesture of the musical line, without being “locked” into a position, their playing
becomes more efficient and easier, which allows for good tone, rhythm and overall increased musicality and ease of playing.

The next movement, _Blues_, is a two-page movement that incorporates a chaconne-like eighth-note figure, found in the left hand (Example 11). This eighth-note modal figure (Phrygian mode) is the foundation of the work and continues throughout the piece, while the right hand contains improvisatory elements (Example 12). These improvisatory elements introduce the student to note values not seen in many teaching pieces such as thirty-second note triplet patterns, rhythmic concepts of the hemiola (3:2), and thirty-second notes barred with sixteenth notes.

Example 11: “Blues,” mm. 1–2. From _Set of Five_, Oxford University Press, Inc.


While the left-hand chaconne is easily played, the rhythmic complexity is increased dramatically when the improvisatory right hand enters. Although the rhythmic complexity increases within the right hand, the actual notes and key group patterns are easily recognized as part of the black key pentatonic scale (C-sharp–D-sharp–G-sharp).

Students should follow the practice suggestions from “Ostinato,” blocking the right-hand pentatonic patterns throughout the piece. Once the pattern has been established and can be recognized by the student, “Blues” should be practiced hands together, initially removing the thirty-second note triplet notations. This exercise will help the student establish the “big beat” or overall pulse of the work, which will allow the student to better grasp where the improvisatory thirty-second-note triplet patterns work rhythmically within the measure. This can be accomplished by having the student play sections, for example measures 7–8, of the piece slowly while counting and dividing the beat (that is, 1-and, 2-and). This will also help you determine if the student truly understands the rhythmic division of the beat and the overall pulse, while ensuring a 100 percent success rate for the student. Once the “big beat” or overall pulse is understood and can be internalized by the student, the thirty-second note triplet figures may be included.

Improvisation is an up-tempo, two-page, two-voiced work that begins with a four-measure modal introduction (Dorian in the key of G major) (Example 13). This movement allows the student to utilize wide ranges of the keyboard while incorporating several hemiolas (2:3) as seen in measures 16–17 (Example 14).


Although the wide skips and rhythmic complexity of Example 14 appears rather daunting at first glance, a closer examination of the work alludes to a more idiomatic piece. The often intimidating inclusion of the two-against-three rhythm is somewhat eased due to the stepwise motion of the left hand. Therefore, it will benefit students more if they practice the two-against-three rhythmic sections slowly and hands together. Students may achieve quick rhythmic understanding of the movement by using several methods:

1. Visual Cues: Students may draw lines from the treble clef to the bass clef, visually showing where the beats occur within the measure and showing how the right and left hand sections form a cohesive rhythmic structure
2. Muscle Memory: By practicing slowly students begin to develop muscle awareness of the intervallic and rhythmic relationship of each hand and each individual part
3. Developing Aural Aptitude: Students begin to increase their aural rhythmic perception skills by deciphering the rhythm and gradually developing a sense of internal rhythm and pulse. Once the student has mastered the rhythmic placement of the two against three grouping, the tempo may be increased gradually to performance tempo making this movement one of the most exciting of the set.
Movement four, “Elegy,” is an exercise in tone, color, timbre, pedaling and voicing. With the inclusion of three staves periodically throughout this two-page movement, Appledorn provides a rich harmonic basis for color and voicing opportunities. We can also find direct influences of harmony, color, and phrasing from several composers’ works including Claude Debussy’s *Preludes* and Federico Mompou’s *Impresiones Intimas* (Example 15, Example 16).

The top two staves of Example 15 should be practiced separately from the bottom, adding the bottom staff after the student becomes more familiar with the notes, rhythm, phrasing and gestures of the top staves. It may also benefit the student to practice hands separately on the top two staves to help reinforce voicing skills. Although “Elegy” features a chord-based melody, the use of the gesture can be of great benefit to students performing this movement. Students can build on the previous practice suggestions by allowing the hand to follow the natural gesture of the melody and chords.

“Toccata” is a perpetual motion work that is a study in dynamics, control and articulation. Once the piece begins with its driving 2/2 meter and prestissimo tempo, it is maintained throughout the entire work until it reaches its climatic allargando in the last three measures. Accents and dynamic changes help add color and inflection to what, at first glance, appears to be a purely rhythmic movement. Students should practice slowly and hands separately at first, this will help the student to develop proper fingering (Example 17: Right Hand—1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 1-5; Left Hand—5-3, 4-2, 3-1, 4-2) and give the student the opportunity to recognize various patterns. For example, the left hand, with only a few exceptions, stays within a five-finger pattern giving the student more opportunity to concentrate on the varying right hand. Once familiarity is established and the key group pattern can easily be recognized, the student should practice the piece hands together. Slow practice with hands together will help the student to better understand how the hands work together rhythmically and within the contour of the phrase. “Toccata” is a dramatic and whimsical display of technique that provides an excellent ending to a wonderful set of pieces for piano.

From the musical examples and pedagogical analysis that have been provided, one can see the vast teaching opportunities that are readily available in the music of American composers. These works cover a wide range of style, compositional techniques and interpretation, which would benefit a student on every level of artistic development. The works of American composers not only offers an opportunity to study new works, but it also allows each student the opportunity to understand the influences other cultures have had on America. This enables students to see the wonderful amalgamation of customs that have simply become known as American music.