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## BEGINNING PIANO METHODS OF RUSSIAN TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PIANO PLAYING BY A. NIKOLAEV

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BEGINNING PIANO METHODS OF RUSSIAN TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS AND  
EVALUATION OF *THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PIANO PLAYING* BY A. NIKOLAEV

by

Valeriya Kanaeva

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Master of Music

in the field of Music

Approved by:

Dr. James Reifinger, Chair

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Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
November 9, 2021

## **AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF**

Valeriya Kanaeva, for the Master of Music degree in Piano Education Arts, presented on November 9, 2021, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: BEGINNING PIANO METHODS OF RUSSIAN TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF *THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PIANO PLAYING* BY A. NIKOLAEV

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. James Reifinger

With the purpose of helping other piano teachers diversify teaching approaches, this research paper will explore one of the most famous Russian piano methods – *The Russian School of Piano Playing* by Alexander Nikolaev. The findings will cover the structure of the Russian Music Education system and its purpose before discussing the method’s introduction and evolution of pertinent components, such as: proficient musical memory; ability to read music notation fluently; development of solid proper technique; general musicality; and the cultivation of expressive playing based on mindful interpretations. These elements are developed simultaneously and with calculated balance.

This method was first published in 1951, during the era of the USSR, and it serves as an introduction to the Russian music school.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Piano instructors generally prefer to use piano methods that are systematic, effective in their approach, and have great aesthetic musical value. Originally from the Central Asian country of Tajikistan, the author of this document has been teaching piano in the United States for several years at the time of its composition. In Tajikistan, when working with young students, most piano teachers use Russian piano methods due to their remarkable effectiveness and long-standing musical traditions found within. Typically, when instructors from varying international backgrounds begin to teach in the United States, they are likely to happen upon many American method books, some of which are quite effective. Consideration of using Russian piano method book series discussed in this paper may be welcomed by American piano teachers, as most piano teachers agree that no perfect method book exists.

In that spirit of thoughtful consideration, with the purpose of helping other piano teachers diversify teaching approaches, this paper will scope, and sequence the popular Russian piano method book series known as *The Russian School of Piano Playing* by Alexander Nikolaev. This method was first published in 1951 (during the era of the USSR). Perhaps the most immediately noteworthy and salient observation common to the method is that the student's hands explore the entire range of the keyboard from the very beginning, in contrast to the innumerable method books which begin by limiting the hands of the student to a single position. Another factor to consider from the onset of this review is that the pieces found within the method book series will undoubtedly be unfamiliar to American students and audiences. That being said, a brief description of the Russian music education structure will serve as an overview of the context of the chosen method book.

In parallel with the system of basic general education, a system of additional music education successfully operates in Russia. Russian focused music education system with its specialized music schools, which begin with Children's Music Schools and progress to highest musical educational

institutions such as conservatories, academies, and institutes of music, is characterized by a very distinct organizational structure and pedagogical strategy, both of which are specifically designed to give young students an especially solid foundation. One aspect of the organizational structure is that in addition to taking a performance-based course on a specialty instrument, students in Children's Music Schools are generally required to take an array of other music courses. These courses include solfège, music theory, and music literature. Additionally, students participate in concert choir and play in an orchestra.<sup>1</sup> These specialized music schools are known for providing comprehensive music education at a very high level. As a result, many graduates of these schools might choose to continue professional studies in musical colleges.<sup>2</sup> It was the exceptional musicians and performers from these schools who went on to develop and evolve the core of the method that is now known as the “Russian Piano School.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Russian Music Education System**

By the second half of the nineteenth century, fueled by the high popularity of the piano as an educational and cultural emblem, and along with the emergence of the powerful Russian school of composition, Russia became an epicenter of high musical culture, promulgating the rise of prominent Russian pianists and teachers.<sup>4</sup> The modern system of piano education across the world has been influenced by the traditions of the Russian piano school, especially in debt to the pedagogical activity, authority, and enthusiasm of the brothers Nikolai and Anton Rubinstein.<sup>5</sup> They invited the greatest teachers of that time period to work in the first two established conservatories – St. Petersburg

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<sup>1</sup> Schwadron, Abraham. “Music in Soviet Education”. *Music Educators Journal* 53.8 April (1967), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Alexeev, Dmitri. *Russkie Pianisty: Ocherki I Materialy po Istorii Pianizma*, 2 Vols. (Moscow-St. Petersburg: Muzgiz, 1948).

<sup>5</sup> Kofman, Irena. *The History of the Russian Piano School: Individuals and Traditions*. (DMA Dissertation, University of Miami, 2001), 102.



Conservatoire in 1862, which was founded by Anton Rubinstein, and the Moscow Conservatoire in 1866 – founded by Nikolai Rubinstein.<sup>6</sup> The natural skill and technical abilities required of each student were very meticulous, but music education was not limited to enhancing those facilities; students were immediately engaged in additional musical disciplines with the aim of increasing and broadening their musical knowledge. Key features of the Russian piano playing style include highly spiritual approaches to art and expression, deeply informed performances, and thoughtfulness of interpretations; the latter was considered to be paramount for a pianist by Anton Rubinstein, greatly defining his own performing style.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, traditions of Russian musical culture developed from philosophical reflection, self-knowledge, and empathy have been expressly maintained by pianists over the years.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning of the twentieth century music education in Russia, which was strongly influenced by the government, was grounded in the belief that the music education system could ‘solidify the masses in nationalistic and political’ ways.<sup>9</sup> With the establishment of the Central Music School in 1935, Russian education tradition continued under the auspices of music education system serving a role as a reinforcement of nationalistic and political manners in today’s society.

The longstanding and unique hierarchy distinguishing the music education system described above can be categorized into four unique tiers: Children’s Music School, Music College, Specialized Music School, and Conservatory. Each tier has a different function, and the durations of respective curricula differ. Children’s Music Schools represent the first phase in traditional Russian music training and are designed for children ages 7 to 14 who are concurrently engaged in general studies full time at

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Schwadron, Abraham. “Music in Soviet Education”. *Music Educators Journal* 53.8 April (1967), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, Walter. “Piano Study in Soviet-Russian Schools of Music”. *The Journal of Research in Music Education*, Vol. 12 No.3 (1964), 209.

secondary schools. At this age, music education is offered only as an extracurricular activity in the secondary schools. Students are admitted to Children's Music Schools without any audition requirement. Studies at Children's Music Schools are outlined by a common formal musical curriculum, and the full course of study takes seven years.<sup>10</sup> Large cities, small towns, and even rural localities are all home to a dedicated music school employing professional teachers who satisfactorily attend to the musical education of each child. These schools are also equipped with musical instruments that are available to the students. Classes include sight-reading, choir, instrumental ensemble, solfege, fundamentals of music theory, music history, harmonic analysis, dictation, and rhythmic.<sup>11</sup> Applied lessons, the essential part of music education, are provided twice a week. Non-pianists are required to take five years of piano studies in addition to their primary instrument of study. In summary, these schools provide means by which any and every student can establish a firm foundation in music studies.

After seven years of studies at Children's Music Schools, students around the age of 14 can then enroll (subject to a successful audition) at a music college, the second tier in the music education system, which provides an additional four years of music education. Unlike the case in Children's Music Schools, studies at Music Colleges combine general academic studies along with musical training. Upon completion, students are awarded an equivalent of a high school diploma, along with a Music Teaching Diploma (qualification required for teaching music at ordinary schools and Children Music Schools) and a National Diploma of Music Education – a government granted credential. It is not surprising that the entire curriculum is therefore under the government supervision. Teachers are tasked with the responsibility of developing students' love for folk music and, in particular, love for Russian classical

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<sup>10</sup> Sukjanov, Vladimir. Musical Education. (n.d.) *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition*. (1970-1979). Retrieved June 21, 2021, from <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Musical+Education>

<sup>11</sup> Rhythmics – a type of class at Children Music School and Specialist Music School; learning music through movements, similar to the Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

music, inspired by the works of Soviet composers. In most cases, graduates of music colleges go on to work at Children's Music Schools or secondary schools as teachers or accompanists.

The hierarchical system described thus far endows potential educated experts with a pre-professional education allowing the more gifted children to emerge, ultimately preparing them to further advance their musical career, thus, entry into a professional conservatory. As an alternative to the existing Children's Music Schools and Music Colleges, since 1935, conservatories have established their own Specialized Music Schools (connected to the Conservatories).<sup>12</sup> As a rule, Specialized Music Schools were established at the most elite music institutions (first at Moscow Conservatory in 1932 and at Gnessin State Music College in 1946). These schools combine the first and second stages of music education - Children's Music Schools and Music Colleges - under the umbrella of a single educational institution. They also represent the third tier in music education system and are designed to train students, with exceptional musical talent, from early childhood through adolescence. Study at such Specialized Music Schools is entirely interactive and professionally oriented from the onset with the goal of developing career performers. Incidentally, many Children's Music Schools will identify gifted young people, sending them to such Specialized Music Schools (under the auspices of the respective Conservatories) in order to direct their education toward music as a profession. This 'conservatory method' of finding and training the greatest musicians in the country at the elite Conservatories - there are presently only 15 in Russia - represents a crowning achievement in music education. Further delineation is made between students who will become professional teachers and those who will continue on to become professional performers.

Music Education hierarchy and pedagogical practices are held by all Russian music educators in the highest regard, filtering down conceptually to teachers at all levels.<sup>13</sup> Professors employed by

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<sup>12</sup> Kofman, Irena. *The History of the Russian Piano School: Individuals and Traditions*. (DMA Dissertation, University of Miami, 2001), 102.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 112.

Conservatories and affiliated Specialized Music Schools instruct students at every level along the way. Typically, faculty in Conservatories oversee the work in and provide methodological assistance to Specialized Music Colleges while faculty at Music Colleges supervise the work in Children's Music Schools. In the broader view, any larger institutions of higher education could include Conservatories and other departments dedicated exclusively to music pedagogy. Figure 1 provides a summary of the hierarchical structure of music education in Russia (see Figure 1.1).

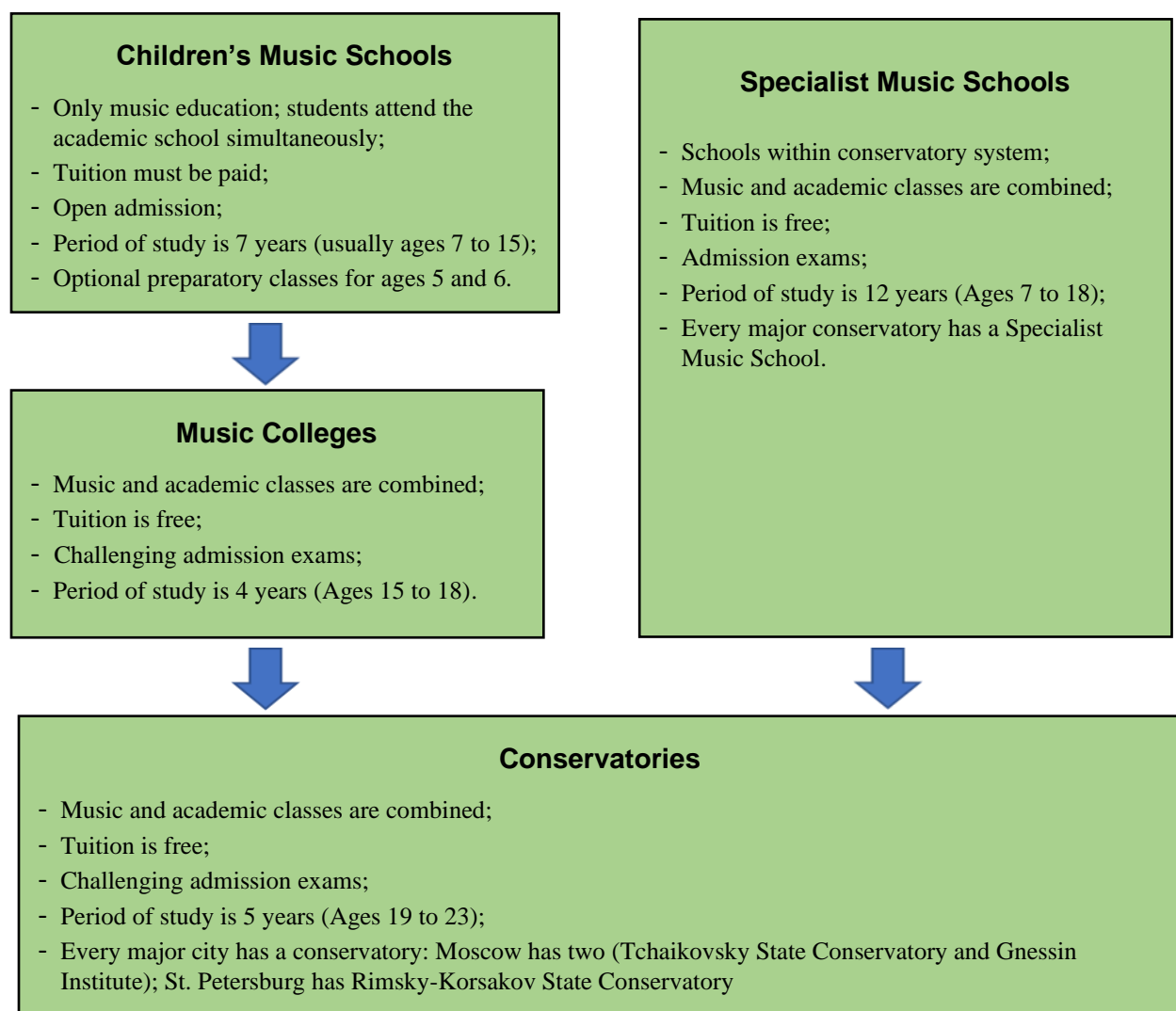


Figure 1.1: Summary of the hierarchical structure of music education in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Adapted and enhanced from Kofman, Irena. *The History of the Russian Piano School: Individuals and Traditions*. (DMA Dissertation, University of Miami, 2001), 102.

The current Russian music education system is undoubtedly a product of music instruction establishment during pre-Soviet and Soviet Union eras and has remained a strong influence on sociocultural development in Russia today. Russian education institutions and their teachers are extraordinarily conscientious about students' development, especially at early ages. They ensure that young students are kept on the right track and moving in the correct direction, stressing the importance of a broad, expansive, and connected music education. The author of the method to be discussed in this paper sought to provide integration of - and connectivity between - the development of the musical ("mind's") ear, memory, and a discrete sense of rhythm, all fused with the notion of thoughtful, creative interpretation. Indeed, the Russian system was engineered to ingrain comprehensive conceptual knowledge insuring connectivity between all music disciplines. Musicianship is never forsaken and remains the focus.

Proficient piano playing is essential for any student of music regardless of which instrument is a primary area of study. When choosing a method, a piano instructor's decision weighs heavily on the quality of the repertoire contained within. It must appeal to students' ears and sensibilities while exposing them to a wide variety of sounds, moods, and reading challenges. The pacing of the method must suit the needs of the student in regard to age, learning style, and previous musical experience. Needless to say, repertoire remains a key motivational element. A method with stimulating repertoire can help "hook" the student by offering engaging and meaningful musical experiences which tap into the student's curiosity and creativity. All of the arguments above were the incentives for me to choose *The Russian School of Piano Playing* by Alexander Nikolaev from among various method books and supplementary materials on the shelves of a Russian local music store in St. Petersburg back in 2015.

While we move forward to surveying and analyzing the piano method (series of books) under examination we will keep the considerations discussed above in mind. The piano methods that will be examined would be used in Russia at a Children's Music School, anchored by a specific pedagogical strategy designed to cultivate what has been deemed essential to Russian music education. The objective

of the method is to lay an early foundation for the mastery of effective piano performance. The method includes the introduction and evolution of pertinent components: proficient musical memory; ability to read music notation fluently; development of solid proper technique; general musicality; and the cultivation of expressive playing based on mindful interpretations. Most importantly, such elements are developed simultaneously and with calculated balance.

## CHAPTER 2

### *THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PIANO PLAYING BY ALEXANDR NIKOLAEV*

Alexander Alexandrovich Nikolaev (1903-1980), Soviet pianist, teacher, musicologist, honored art worker, and Doctor of Art History, was born in the city of Kharkov in the western Russia. He held a degree from Gnessin State Music College, where he studied for two and a half years. Nikolaev then graduated from Moscow Conservatory with a bachelor's degree in piano in 1934 and finished graduate school with a degree in History and Theory of Pianism in 1937.<sup>15</sup> From that year forward he taught at Moscow Conservatory, and in 1948 became a professor as well as the head of the Department of History and Theory of Pianism. From 1951 to 1954 he served as a Dean of Piano Faculty. Between 1954 and 1973 he served as a Chief Academic Officer, and from 1974 until his death he served as a professor-consultant. His primary academic interests were history, theory, and aesthetics of musical performance. According to *The Russian School of Piano Playing*, the general educational principle is that “teachers must instill in the pupil a love of music as an art and the ability to portray its different feelings, moods and emotional experiences associated with everyday life.”<sup>16</sup>

Nikolaev's *School of Playing*, first published in 1951, is one of the most famous manuals for a novice pianist in the world.<sup>17</sup> *The Russian School of Piano Playing* method book series, under the general editorship of Nikolaev, was then subsequently published by Muzyka Publishing House for many decades. This method was officially recommended by the government for use in Children's Music Schools throughout the Soviet Union in the late 1970s<sup>18</sup> and is still widely used in Russia today. Nikolaev's piano

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<sup>15</sup> Barnes, Christopher. *The Russian Piano School: Russian Pianists & Moscow Conservatoire Professors on The Art of the Piano*. (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Nikolaev, Alexander. *The Russian School of Piano Playing* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1978), 47. The edition cited here was translated and published by the Boosey & Hawkes in 1978; this edition is almost identical to the Russian edition – with only a small number of modifications.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

method's emphasis is on tone production which is the primary tool for learning to play the piano. The focus on tone production starts from the first piece a child learns.

Nikolaev's method book series is generally considered to be one of the most systematic and successful piano methods ever to be written in the Soviet era.<sup>19</sup> It introduces many salient aspects of technique that a beginner is likely to need within the first few years. Even though the method was designed primarily for teaching children, it is suitable for beginners of all ages, including adults wishing to teach themselves. The method's main value, however, lies in its comprehensive approach, a musical sequential approach propelling the student toward an early grasp of technical demands that permeate much piano music, control of mood and expression, and the ability to appreciate and vary musical color. The author also took into consideration extensive feedback from teachers and articulated it as he broadened the explanatory notes directed at teachers.<sup>20</sup> These explanatory notes, which embody the fundamental methodological ideals of *The Russian School of Piano Playing* are intended for both teachers on the long path of guiding students toward becoming professional pianists and adults wishing to teach themselves. Despite the clear explanations and guided suggestions included throughout the books, students are advised to seek supervision from qualified teachers.

The method series is divided into three sections: Book 1, Part I (42 pages); Book 1, Part II (65 pages); and Book 2 (82 pages). Part I covers the most rudimentary stages of study, such as singing and playing melodies by ear, getting to know the keyboard, and reading the printed score, and then uses very basic exercises to help students master most elementary aspects of piano playing. These stages should be achieved before attempting to move on to more advanced study. In Book I, Part II, more complex

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<sup>18</sup> Kofman, Irena. *The History of the Russian Piano School: Individuals and Traditions* (DMA Dissertation, University of Miami, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Robert, Walter. "Piano Study in Soviet-Russian Schools of Music". *The Journal of Research in Music Education*, Fall XII No.3 (1964), 200.

<sup>20</sup> Nikolaev, Alexander. *The Russian School of Piano Playing* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1978).



pieces, and exercises are used to strengthen and further develop the skills students have already acquired. All the basic theory and piano fundamentals which are foundational for students' growth are given in Book 1, woven wonderfully into carefully selected musical examples. Book 2 elevates students to a more advanced level, introducing them to longer and more elaborate pieces. Within Book 2, the author grouped the works into the following categories: Pieces, Sonatinas & Variations, Studies, and Ensembles. Within each category, the pieces are presented in order of increasing difficulty.

While crystallizing this piano method, the author followed the general educational principles observed in the Soviet Union for the teaching and training of young students. Again, particular attention was paid to inspiring in the student a love of music as an art along with the forging of expressive tools that allow one to portray different feelings, moods, and emotional experiences associated with everyday life. It is worth mentioning here that Nikolaev considered familiarity with folk music a very important aspect of a child's musical education and a considerable aspect in providing a good musical foundation.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, many transcribed folk songs are included at each level of the method, enlightening students about their heritage and galvanizing Russian cultural background.

### ***The Russian School of Piano Playing Book 1, Part I***

The first two years of instruction at the piano are crucial for beginners. From the very first lesson, the formation of a student's understanding of music along with an artistic thought process begins, as does an emotional response to musical impressions. The most basic and direct method of introducing children to music is through simple songs and words. Thus, one of the first musical examples found in Book I of the method series involves singing simple tunes and then transferring them as musical entities to the piano (see Figure 2.1).

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<sup>21</sup> Alexeev, Andrey. *Metodika Obucheniya Igre na Fortepiano [The Methods of Teaching Pianoforte Playing]* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1961), 64.

In tandem with that process, the teacher familiarizes the student with the geography of the keyboard, the names of the notes, rudimentary rules related to written notation, the understanding of beats and counting, the different lengths of notes, the placing of notes on the staff, and the purpose of rests.



Figure 2.1: Folk tune with words (exercise 5, Book 1, Part I).

At these earliest of stages, direction to the teachers in *The Russian School of Piano Playing* asserts how essential it is to explain the importance of both posture at the piano and playing accurately with careful attention to pulse. Touch, fingering, and the ability to play without looking at the keys follow quickly after. As the student begins to read notated music, it is advised that the student count out loud as well as working on hands separately. Playing through the part of each hand separately facilitates memorization of the music in a certain context. During lessons, it is useful to have the student either sing the melody on a neutral syllable or play through the melody of the piece while the teacher accompanies with the left-hand part (and vice versa). Typically, in the second half of the first year of children's musical education, students usually start to learn scales, chords, and short tonic-triad arpeggios. The exercises found in Nikolaev's method books set these tasks that help build the technique early. Among other early technical endeavors espoused by Nikolaev's method are: mastery of the single-position five-finger sequence; establishment of different positions by means of passing musical movement from one hand to another; scales (2 two-octave major scales in contrary motion, starting from the same note, and only later in parallel motion); several minor scales (in parallel motion); three-note broken chords with their inversions (emphasis on tonic triad); and wrist staccato in moderate tempo and with fast, light movement of the hand over wide leaps. Notably, from the beginning of musical training, the student is also taught to transpose, tapping into higher development of the ear, memory, and keyboard orientation.

Naturally, in the second year of study students should be challenged with more complicated tasks. Thus, studies in Book 2 are based on the continued development of technical aspects that were presented in Book 1. Great attention in Book 2 is focused on sight-reading. The pieces to be learned progress to two-voice compositions of a polyphonic nature. Some of them are dance-like in character, requiring strict rhythm along with light and graceful playing, while some are pieces that require a delicate touch and control of tone-color. Many of the works also demand faster tempos than pieces learned during the first year. Towards the end of the second year, the students are instructed to work on pieces and exercises independently (apart from the teacher) and encouraged to learn to play some of them from memory. Upon completion of the second year's training, students are expected to be able to play melodies with left-hand accompaniment (or simple inner-voice polyphony) with the piano producing a lyrical tone quality. As students play, they ought to sensitively convey a musical image and express the character of the pieces by observing dynamics and variations in the articulations, such as *legato*, *non-legato* and *staccato*.

As the piano repertoire in Nikolaev's method expands, one can note that the pieces are sequenced according to content and degree of difficulty. The compositions, which up to this point were primarily by composers from the Soviet Union and Russia, begin to include works by composers from other countries. The pieces that are presented in content type between ensemble, technical studies, and exercises (scales, chords, and arpeggios). With a sustained emphasis on singing the melodies, the carefully selected pieces are grouped together with strategic goals in mind while increasing in musical complexity and technical difficulty. Again, it is important to note that every aspect of technique which is likely to be required as the student progresses is covered and developed, as was the case from the very beginning of the method.

Pertaining to fingerings, this system guides teachers to introduce playing with the fingers one at a time, starting with the third finger, followed by second, fourth, and then finally the thumb and fifth together. This refined sequence has yielded time-tested results. The astute introduction of the thumb and fifth finger together helps to avoid technical difficulties in later years. Figure 2.2 presents the first three exercises from Book 1, Part I. Beginners must apply the prescribed fingering pattern to the exercises

below. For example, the author suggested that the student performs melodies detached first with one finger, preferably the third, and then slowly bringing the other fingers, one at a time into use.

### 1. Дин-дон



### 2. Ку-ку!



### 3. Ау!



Figure 2.2: Melodies to perform detached with one finger at a time (exercises 1,2 and 3, Book 1, Part I).

It is not until Exercise 24 that the method book introduces all five fingers to be used in a single excerpt (see Figure 2.3). In this exercise the two-line composition is introduced to teach coordination between two hands and two different techniques. Work on the detached beats between two hands using the same finger is reinforced once again to master the smooth connection between right and left hands.

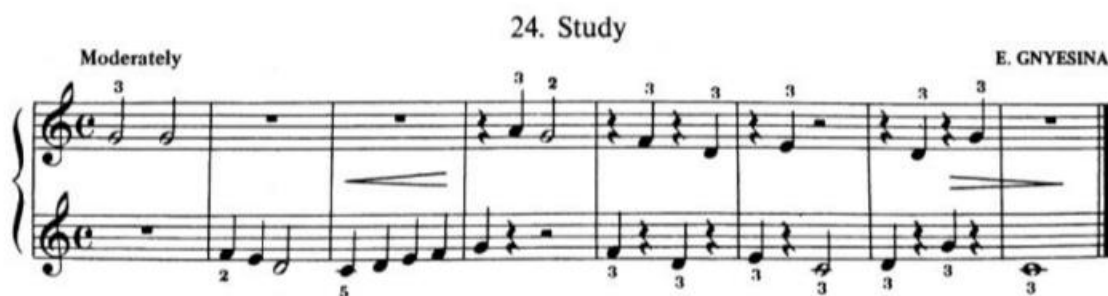


Figure 2.3: Detached beats to master hand coordination (exercise 24, Book 1, Part I).

Special emphasis is placed on students' hand and coordination in the early stages of the method. Such concerns are first addressed in Exercises 13 and 14. In these passages, the very conjunct lines could easily employ familiar fingerings which use different fingers for each note. However, a note below the exercises clearly requires that each hand should only utilize a single finger (2, 3, or 4) of the students

choosing (see Figure 2.4). This provokes the student to focus on one technical task at a time – in this case, coordination between the hands.

Melodies written on two staves are played with two hands – those on the upper staff with the right hand, those on the lower staff with the left hand.

**13. The Green Meadow**  
As I walked through the grass so green  
There my lost wooden pipe, I've seen.



**14. Cockerel**  
Cock'rell bold, Cock'rell bold, with your comb bright as gold,  
Why get up, early bird, making sure we've all heard?



Examples 12, 13 and 14 are played with one finger of each hand (2nd, 3rd or 4th).

Figure 2.4: Hand coordination exercise using a single finger (exercise 13 and 14, Book 1, Part I).

### Articulation and Technique

There are 89 musical compositions in Book 1, Part I, and over 18 of them are created for technical purposes and each is presented either as an exercise or etude. No. 17 is the first piece in the book that is named 'study', and its purpose is to familiarize students with various note lengths (see Figure 2.5).

**17. Study\*** E. GNYESINA




Figure 2.5: Study to practice different lengths of notes (exercise 17, Book 1, Part I).

In the early stages, the author does not introduce any articulation indications to the music (from Exercises 1 to 33, in fact). However, *legato*, and *non-legato* (*portamento*) playing should be understood and applied to early exercises<sup>22</sup> as such concepts are rudimentary, essential, and not too difficult for the beginners to acquire control of. While *legato* is formally introduced in Exercise 33, *staccato* only appears from Exercise 54 onwards. As *staccato* playing tends to create tension in the forearm, young students and beginners struggle early on to release the tension in almost all cases. Again, in the delayed introduction to this potentially detrimental technique one can note the careful and forward-thinking foundational planning which informs Nikolaev's method.

The expectations placed on a student in the exercises in Book 1 are quite demanding. As mentioned earlier, there are 18 studies in total. If one compares the first and the last studies of Book 1 (Figures 1.1 and 2.6, respectively), the expected level of progress becomes quite apparent.



Figure 2.6: Last of the 88 studies (exercise 88, Book 1, Part I).

Certainly, it is noticeable that this method book series is rather fast paced. Exercise 87 is the last solo composition (see Figure 2.7). Although it is only a four-bar exercise, the finger technique in the right hand and syncopated rhythm in the left hand require profound facility by a young student. It is significant

<sup>22</sup> Nikolaev, Alexander. *The Russian School of Piano Playing* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1978).

to recall that this exercise is supposed to be performed by students who have been learning the piano for less than a year.

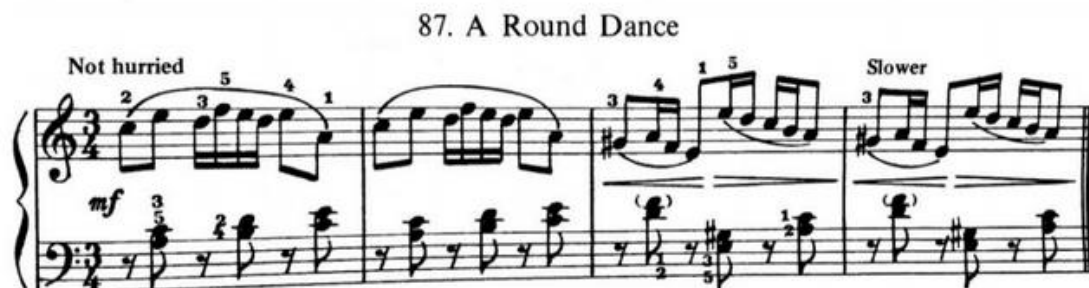


Figure 2.7: Right hand elaborate technique with syncopated rhythm in the left hand (exercise 87, Book 1, Part I).

### Scales

Scales are nearly universally recognized as a fundamental exercise for acquiring and maintaining piano technique. At the end of Book 1, detailed instructions describe how student should study scales:

During the first stage of learning scales (approximately from the second half of the first year of study), the pupil can learn several major scales in two octaves (direct and contrary motion) and one or two minor scales (melodic and harmonic) in keys he knows from pieces. Scales should be studied in an order of ascending fifths, starting with C. All scales should be played initially with hands separately; first one octave, then two. When starting to play scales hands together, the first scales are best played in contrary motion (starting from the same note) as the fingers are then symmetrically disposed on the keyboard, and only later in parallel motion.<sup>23</sup>

Scales are to be played in contrary motion first, according to *The Russian School of Piano Playing* before execution in parallel movement. Seven scales that resolve in triads and its inversions are introduced in Book 1 in the following order: C major, A minor (melodic and harmonic), G major, D major, A major, F major, and D minor (melodic and harmonic). Those same seven scales and triads are revisited throughout the book as the articulations of general scale patterns become more elaborate; in this fashion a student's understanding of scales as musical entities becomes more elaborate conceptually throughout the course of a year.

<sup>23</sup> Nikolaev, Alexander. *The Russian School of Piano Playing* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1978), 40.





*crescendo* is used in bar 5, but “*slowing down*” is used in bar 10 instead of *rallentando* or *ritardando*. Further, it is interesting to notice the extremely wide dynamic range indicated in this 12-bar exercise – from *ppp* to *f*. It is clear that expression and gestural shaping are the primary aims of this exercise.

The image shows a musical score for exercise 90, "The Shepherd Plays" by T. Salyutrinskaya. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of 12 bars. The first system (bars 1-4) is marked "Calm, singing" and "p". The second system (bars 5-8) is marked "cresc.". The third system (bars 9-12) is marked "f", "p", "pp", and "ppp". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Figure 2.9: Expression and gestural shaping (exercise 90, Book 1, Part II).

While Part II of Book 1 is of course more challenging than Part I, Nikolaev’s method book maintains a gradual increase in difficulty by inserting intermittent ensemble pieces requiring the student to play along with the teacher; these interactive pieces reinforce progress in specific technical areas while strengthening listening skills. The proportion of ensemble compositions to solo pieces increases dramatically during the second year of study (Book 1, Part II). Most of these ensemble pieces are slightly easier than their solo counterparts, often employing both hands in unison, an octave apart (Exercises 118, 126, 156). In other cases, the ensemble pieces consist of simple melodies with accompaniment which feature repeated material (Exercises 102, 152, 160).

### Etudes

For a second-year piano student, accomplishing the more advanced tasks is naturally daunting and may seem rather complex. In order to make such challenges more approachable, the studies in *The Russian School of Piano Playing* often introduce a single additional new concept of technical challenge, helping to ensure that success for the student is attainable. Exercise 131 (Figure 2.10) focuses on finger



142. Study E. GNYESINA

Not fast

The musical score for exercise 142, Study, is presented in four systems. The first system begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/8 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Not fast'. The right hand starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a melodic line with fingerings 5, 4, 2 1 3, 4, 1 2, 1, 4-5, 2, 5, 3, 2 1 3, 4, 1 2. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The second system features a piano (*P*) dynamic in the right hand and a forte (*f*) dynamic in the left hand. The third system continues the melodic and harmonic development. The fourth system concludes with a 'slower' marking and a final cadence.

Figure 2.12: Smooth melodic playing using finger technique for the right hand (exercise 142, Book 1, Part II).

The excerpt from Figure 2.12 also deals with the finger substitution while maintaining the key in the depressed position on the keyboard (bars 3 and 19) a common technique found in piano polyphonic music. This objective is stated clearly: “In order to develop this aspect of the pupil’s technique, he should at this stage be given the following exercise, which should be played with fingerings: (2–1, 4–3, 5–4).”<sup>26</sup> Next exercise in Figure 2.13 is designed to target lucid finger substitution, allowing the student to produce a smoother legato tone when exercising substitution passages.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Book 1 Part 2, 35.



Figure 2.13: ‘Silent substitution’ exercise (Book 1, Part II).

### Scales

Along with the scales cultivated in Part I, Part II introduces five additional scales:

B-flat major, E minor, G minor, B minor, F-sharp minor. So, in sum, all of the scales explored at this point in the method are C, D, F, G, A, and Bb in Major and d, e, g, a, b, and f# in minor. All minor scales are presented in both melodic and harmonic forms. Indeed, in the second year of study, the requirements are more vigorous and the expectations higher in regard to scale execution. Additionally, the integration of other musical attributes with scale practice begins to intensify; students are directed at this point to play scales with varied dynamics and different articulations.

Paralleling the evolution of scale technique, broken chords also increase in difficulty by means of accents placed on various notes in the passages (see Figure 2.14).



Figure 2.14: Added accents in broken chords exercise (Book 1, Part II).

The broken-chords-with-added-accents exercise is particularly challenging for a young student, as the fingers sounding accented notes change, requiring additional weight from particular fingers only, one at a time.

### *The Russian School of Piano Playing Book 2*

Book 2 of *The Russian School of Piano Playing* is designed for the third year of study and is teeming with yet more complicated tasks. Book 2 explores different genres and styles, and compositions are grouped into four different categories: Pieces, Sonatinas & Variations, Studies, and Ensembles. In the following sections, each category will be examined in order and discussed separately to determine how each of them refines students' technical abilities and in which ways.

#### **Pieces**

Most of the compositions in the Pieces section are two-voice exercises, polyphonic in nature. Polyphonic compositions require advanced technical feats, such as sustaining voices while other voices are in motion, and remarkable finger independence. The right hand in the two-voice exercise shown in Figure 2.15 serves as a fine example.



Figure 2.15: Two-voice polyphony (exercise 8, Book 2).

*Primrose* exercise is a preparatory step for impending two-voice polyphonic compositions. Also included are pieces in which a specific melodic voice must be made more prominent in a multi-voice setting or within a harmonic progression. Such pedagogical compositions require a very refined touch control along with careful control of tone color as the primary voice is shaped.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Book 2, 6.

In addition to polyphonic works, pieces with dance-like character are abundant in Book 2 and include folk dances, polkas, and minuets. Similar to the dance-form pieces in Book 1, performance of these compositions requires very strict rhythm along with a light and graceful touch (see Figure 2.16).



Figure 2.16: Opening bars of Haydn's Minuet (exercise 30, Book 2).

The opening bars of Haydn's Minuet is the final composition in the Pieces category. In addition to demanding rhythm, it requires a very even expression of the staccato eighth-note motif. Independent thirds over a D pedal in measures 4 and 5 create a challenge for the left hand.

### Sonatinas & Variations

The second category, Sonatinas & Variations, continues to introduce more advanced compositions. Even the easiest pieces in this category can be assigned only to students who have already mastered fluent fingerings at fast tempos. The challenges are not only technical but necessitate an understanding the form of a given composition. These compositions, particularly sonatinas, formally unfold on a much larger scale in comparison to all previous material introduced in the method book thus far. Unlike many Western method books, in which one usually finds only a single movement of a sonatina, *The Russian School of Piano Playing* method book typically includes all movements of each work. This allows the student to understand the overall structure of sonatinas at an early stage and become

familiar with the function of the various sections within a movement (exposition, development, recapitulation, slow movement, rondo, etc.).

Within the Sonatina & Variations category, compositions vary greatly in style and character. It is apparent that the works of Soviet and Russian composers were favored, such as Goedike, Zhilinskis, Kabalevsky and Berkovick. According to the explanatory notes, the absence of more sonatinas by Beethoven, Clementi and other Western composers is due to the fact that their compositions were of greater technical difficulty, not having the student in mind, and intended for more advanced if not professional players.<sup>28</sup>

Clementi's Sonatina is the second composition found in this category. The opening measures present immediate technical difficulties. In measure 4, the end of the phrase in the right hand must be passed gracefully to the initiation of the phrase in the right hand. The most challenging, however, is the legato playing in the left hand while playing staccato in the right-hand during measures 6-7 (see Figure 2.17).



Figure 2.17: Opening bars of the Clementi's Sonatina (Book 2).

<sup>28</sup> Nikolaev, Alexander. *The Russian School of Piano Playing, Book 2* (London: Boosey & Hawkes. Book 2, 1978). 33.

Although interpreting of musical markings such as staccato, legato, and other similar indications may seem appropriate to a more mature musician, it is interesting to note the early emphasis placed upon a correct execution of these articulations in this method book series. The explanatory notes state the following: “During the first stages of learning, it is essential to see that the pupil follows exactly any markings or interpretative indications, so that at a later stage he is not obliged to alter and relearn any incorrect movements.”<sup>29</sup>

## Studies

Flowing forward into the Studies section of Book 2, one would observe that the section is centrally designed to develop finger agility, and with this purpose the selected studies lead to mastery of techniques found in pieces, sonatinas, and variations from the repertoire for second to third year.<sup>30</sup>

The image shows a musical score for a piano study. At the top, it is labeled '2. Study' and 'C. CZERNY'. The tempo is 'Allegro (Fast)'. The score is in 3/4 time. The left hand plays a continuous eighth-note scale pattern with fingerings 5, 3, 4, 2, 4, 2, 5, 1, 5. The right hand plays chords and single notes with fingerings 5, 2, 1, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1, 4. The piece ends with a double bar line and a fermata.

Figure 2.18: Short scale passage in the left hand to develop finger agility (Study 2, Book 2).

The short scale passage study in Figure 2.18 is the second study in the book and focuses on musically executing scalar passages with particular vigilance in regard to sustaining energy in the left hand.

Another short scale passage, Figure 2.19, similarly focuses on short scalar passages, but this time in the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Book 2, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Book 2, 47.



right hand. Training a student in the domain of scale passages under Nikolaev's method entails targeting each hand separately, the material first addresses left hand technique, as in Figure 2.18 before moving to the right-hand line, as in Figure 2.19.

The image shows a musical score for a piano study titled "4. Study" by C. Czerny. The tempo is marked "Allegro (Fast)". The score is written for piano and consists of three systems. The right hand plays a series of short scale passages, while the left hand provides harmonic support with chords. The first system (measures 1-4) features a right-hand scale starting on G4 with a dynamic of *mf*. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the scale. The third system (measures 9-12) includes a trill exercise in the right hand, marked *p*, and concludes with a final scale passage. The composer's name "C. CZERNY" is written in the upper right corner.

Figure 2.19: Short scale passages in the right hand (Study 4, Book 2).

When it comes to addressing the trill exercises, it is critical to note that Nikolaev trills are written-out at this stage in the method book. The trill study in the Figure 2.20 is important to examine as it requires trills for both hands. While the trills in the right-hand focus on the strongest fingers (1-2 in measures 1 and 3; 2-3 in measures 2 and 4), the trills in the left-hand concentrate on different finger patterns, 2-1 in measure 6, and the weakest fingers (5-4) in measure 5.

10. Study

Moderato (Moderately) A. GOEDIKE

Figure 2.20: Written out trills for both hands with different finger patterns (study 10, Book 2).

All pieces in the Studies section are to be practiced first at a slow tempo before attempting them at the assigned tempo markings. As the explanatory note states, “Excessive speed should be avoided as this leads to an inaccurate rendering of the music and stiffness of movement.”<sup>31</sup> In addition to initially playing at slower tempos, further directions are provided that allow students to perfect each study. For example, it is suggested that the student vary the dynamic level, performing the excerpts pianissimo (though not marked so), or with a brighter sound than usual, but without excessive force. The majority of the studies in this book are in simple keys (e.g., C major or G major) but students are encouraged to transpose the studies and retaining the original fingering while performing them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

### **Ensembles (Duets)**

Great attention is paid to student becoming more skilled at sight-reading, and ensembles can be a suitable material for this. In comparison with the previous two parts in Book 1, Book 2 certainly places more weight on ensemble pieces, specifically duets, which are found in the final section. The student is deliberately given simpler parts (often reasonable to sight-read) so that the attention can be directed towards listening and contributing to the overall ensemble. While there is equal distribution of the repertoire from Book 2 across Pieces, Sonatinas & Variations, Studies, and Ensemble, the Studies section appear to be at the heart of the pedagogy accounted for one third of the book.

### **Conclusion**

Book 2 represents the final guidance of *The Russian School of Piano* method series. By the time dedicated students reach the last phase, they will have acquired the necessary skill to continue a musical journey with increasingly demanding pieces from the repertoire. An imperative aim of The Russian School of Piano is that upon completion of Book 2, aspiring pianists are prepared to continue their musical growth independently.

Since its original publication, *The Russian School of Piano Playing* underwent many revisions, changes, and additions. The motive behind regular updates to the method was to add different high-quality repertoire to the series.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, a large amount of additional folk tunes, Classical pieces, and pieces by Soviet composers found their way into later editions. Newer editions were designed to be used for first and second grade students at the Children's Music Schools. They included more difficult repertoire, allowing for the method to be used at the beginning of the third year of study.

Overall, the method series by Nikolaev is a comprehensive, streamlined, and efficient approach to piano instruction from the beginning to intermediate levels. A product of Russian culture, both generally and musically, Nikolaev's method was meticulously crafted, intelligently refined, and is masterfully

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<sup>33</sup> Schwadron, Abraham. "Music in Soviet Education". *Music Educators Journal*, 53.8 (1967).

systematic. For aspiring pianists, it will forever remain a superior passageway to achieving the skills necessary to interpret and express the greatest and most virtuosic piano works in history.

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