



conservatory
C A N A D A™

Contemporary Idioms™ APP Etudes Tutorial 1

transcript

An Introduction using Level 1 “County Fair”

This tutorial is designed to serve as an introduction to the improvisation requirement for Contemporary Idioms piano. When we put this new syllabus together, we were looking for a way or method of improvising that was more authentic. We chose the American Popular Piano Etudes series as the companion “manual” for several reasons:

- It provides a meaningful way for students to work in ensemble with backing tracks, serving to give them an aural context to work from.
- The series builds improv skill while encouraging smooth voice leading in accompanying LH chords and patterns.
- It assists the Classical teacher in understanding many facets of Contemporary styles of keyboard playing, while keeping it simple for students. By taking a cohort of students from the beginning of the series through to about Level 6, teachers that are not as comfortable with Contemporary Idioms can take the opportunity to learn alongside their students and uncover just how simple it can be. Throughout this tutorial series, I will go over a few simple translations between Classical and Contemporary terminology to help you use your background to your advantage.
- In APP complex terminology and chord symbols are saved for the higher levels, encouraging students to play from their inner ear, thinking less. You may choose to share this with certain students earlier on, as it can help reinforce some of the skills learned in Technique and Background Information and Applied Skills as well as how the Etudes directly relate to how Contemporary keyboard styles are played. Although comforting for the teacher, just keep in mind that at first, using the page with chord symbols may give the student more than they are ready to think about and this could inhibit their listening skills.

Some important things to keep in mind:

- For CI Level 1, a student will use APP Level 1 Etudes
- The APP Series was designed so that students could learn a piece first in the Repertoire album, then improvise on that piece in the Etudes book. This is why some of the pieces share the same titles between Repertoire and Etudes. However, because these are American levels, we have relevelled all repertoire selections such that Level 3 Repertoire is equivalent to about our Level 1 CI. For CI, we only require the use of the APP Etudes books, however you will find all of the Repertoire music listed in our Contemporary Repertoire List.
- Backing tracks for the Etudes books are available for free download on our website. Otherwise you would have to purchase the Repertoire album to obtain a code from the publisher to download tracks for any given level.
- On an exam, the improv requirement dictates that students choose any 3 Etudes to learn, improvising hands together with the backing track. The Examiner chooses one of those Etudes to perform on the exam.
- The examiner will provide one of the module sheets for the student to use as a guide if needed, as well as the backing track.

I'll share a bit about the step by step Method that I like to use with a typical student:

- Etudes are best used as an Aural, “sound before sight” method, incorporating as little or as much of the material from the book depending on the student.
- To encourage musical creativity based on “listening” not reading, at first I try to use the books as little as possible. The more a student has to “read” from the page, the more resources the brain invests in “watching” leaving less brain power to “listen” and create. This can be particularly disabling for younger students, whose brains are already favouring playing aurally.
- Each Etude contains four modules giving the student new rhythmic ideas and riffs to consider in developing their own improvisation.
- Each module consists of a skill building page on the left, and a “chart” page on the right. The chart page, section “E” in each module is the page that will be given to students on an exam.
- At first glance, this seems like a lot of music to “learn”, 3 Etudes each with 4 modules, as it appears that there are 12 modules of music to rehearse. I find that the more I adopt the principle of sound before sight, that is, learning by rote rather than relying on reading from the page, the less time students need to spend working on each module.

The modules and exercises are there to guide the teacher and student to realizations that sound good, but it is not necessary to use them as students are encouraged to create their own RH improv lines.

- It is good to follow the LH as a guide, using a preferred rhythm from one of the modules or your own.
- For RH lines, students may refer to the given material to get started, but the best results will come from their own ears.
- Teachers can decide how much or how little to use the book. I use it much less in Level 1, a little more by Level 3, and much more by Level 6, depending on the student and how much they need to “see”.
- I can’t emphasize enough how quickly students can learn by rote at Level 1 and how much slower this process develops when relying on reading the chart off of the page.
- Don’t be challenged by the fact that the examiner chooses which module to show the student on the exam. If taught as an “ear” based method, students will learn how to use the module chart as a guide only, or to disregard it all together (if learned by ear) on the exam, especially at the younger levels.

County Fair, Level 1 demonstrations

- **Step 1:** Play the backing track to open the student’s aural capacity. The backing track should always be playing when working with the Etudes to provide a context to work from. If it ever feels too fast, consider making it easier: only one hand at a time, go back a level (there is a Pre Level 1 available - not used with CC exams). Figure out how to make the task more manageable for the student at first, to make sure they are not overloaded with tasks beyond their capabilities. You may even decide to learn the LH without the backing track at first (as some students find it difficult to incorporate the sound of the backing track at the same time because it is overstimulating).
- **Step 2:** Teach the student the LH alone by rote, or using the “chart” page. The more adept a student is to reading, the more likely I would use the page as a guide. Weaker readers do very well by rote! I play with the student 2 octaves higher so that they quickly visualize and hear the correct responses to the backing track.
- **Step 3:** Let the student improvise freely, RH alone, without reference to the chart. You can give them the note set in advance, or let them determine which notes sound best. In this case, the note set given is a C pentascale, but any white key is suitable in any octave or using any keyboard “sound” (other than the piano). You can use the RH ideas from any module to stimulate the student as needed, or as a sight reading exercise - with the backing track to force students to keep time. Some students are reluctant to improvise, preferring more scripted outcomes. This is where material in the book can be helpful to draw on (reading) but I would encourage you to work with the student

using your imagination and skill to overcome this resistance. With the backing track playing, you could try improvising 2 bars after which the student answers with a two bar thought of their own. A few times through this will give them an idea of an acceptable outcome.

- **Step 4:** Student focuses on LH (with or without reading off the page) while attempting to improvise freely with the RH, as the brain allows. Do not worry about the given RH rhythms or notes - they are only there to provide suggestions if you need them. Students are not expected to use the rhythms or notes provided on an exam, but to perform their own ideas. The more the student has to read, the less they will be free to create from their ears. Take time with this step and don't fuel any pressure to succeed - it will come over a period of weeks in the teaching studio, aided by practice at home with proper encouragement. If this is perceived as a "fun" exercise, success will come earlier and with better results. It can be helpful to introduce the Improv Etudes **before** Level 1. For MYC teachers, we recommend starting these during the final eight weeks of Sunbeams 3 or Moonbeams 2. I will often space out these steps by a period of weeks with the first Etude, as learning to do this hands together can be a daunting task. On the first try, I usually see students playing the LH faithfully (always with the backing track) but the RH, although ready to play, does not actually play anything. You can almost see the brain wanting to fire to the RH at the same time, but the brain is still "learning". Each successive attempt, over a period of days or weeks will make this easier. Once the first Etude is learned hands together, the brain is now "wired" to use this skill of improvising with both hands and the subsequent Etudes will be learned much more quickly.
- During the learning process, you should consider playing one hand while the student plays the other (always with the backing track). This will give them a stronger aural framework to learn from. You can also consider using a keyboard with different sounds to add fun to the exercise.
- Above all else, try to keep it fun with no pressure or timelines. I usually introduce the Etudes quite early on, well before the student is ready for Level 1 at a time in lessons when they may be practicing less. If a student comes to a lesson not having practiced their pieces, instead of going over the same repertoire I will put on a backing track and spend some time learning an Etude by rote with them. This serves to create fun in lessons where students may be getting bored or tired of the usual methods.