

Rapt pupil

Contemporary music is hardly ever used in piano teaching because it is perceived as abstruse and impenetrable. Jessica Duchen meets a woman who is trying to change that

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For musical children or amateur pianists raised on Mozart, Chopin and perhaps a little Bartók, contemporary music can seem both daunting and baffling. Composers today are writing in a wider range of styles than ever before, from fearsome New Complexity to increasingly popular minimalism; jazz and pop influences too are now more acceptable in classical circles. Yet if you want to play something new but not too difficult, where do you begin to look for it? And how can piano teachers persuade reluctant pupils and their parents that "contemporary music" does not have to consist of nasty noises but can be enjoyable and rewarding?

This week sees the launch of a new anthology from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music addressing precisely these issues. Spectrum 2 is a volume of short piano pieces commissioned from 30 UK-based composers, written to reflect those composers' concert styles but with a technical difficulty accessible to pianists from grades 1 to 6.

It follows Spectrum 1, a collection of 20 pieces commissioned for pianists of around grade 7-8 level. Spectrum is the brainchild of pianist and teacher Thalia Myers. Its manifesto is "to encourage the emerging generation of players to explore new music as fearlessly as young people would have done 200 years ago".

"I've been involved in performing and commissioning contemporary music throughout my professional life," Myers explains, "and I'd long been aware that there was a real dearth of this sort of contemporary work - short pieces of entirely serious music that were accessible to good amateurs and to intelligent students whose technique was not fully formed.

"In earlier generations there were comparable pieces like Beethoven's bagatelles, but it seems absolutely absurd that there is very, very little contemporary music available to these people. It was a very important condition of Spectrum that the pieces should be recognisable as the concert music style of each composer - I didn't want a specifically educational collection."

The results delight her. "Michael Finnissy, for instance, is not a composer one associates with easier music, but his contribution is very identifiably his own."

Spectrum lives up to its name: the pieces in the new book range from Stephen Montague's tremendously dramatic Tsunami, picturing a tidal wave, to Laurence Crane's Chorale For Howard Skempton, a series of wide-spaced, quiet, slow chords. Edward McGuire's Foglio d'Autunno is delicate and nostalgically expressive, while John Tavener's Zodiacs sounds distinctly New Age. Roger Redgate's "arc" requires some very complex counting, yet - Myers emphasises - is so well written for the piano that it lies easily under the hand.

But how effective is Spectrum in raising enthusiasm for new music in its target market? We sent Spectrum 2 to two pianists who work with a range of students from beginner to advanced and who have already used Spectrum 1 in their teaching.

John York is a concert pianist and teaches at the Guildhall School of Music and St Paul's Girls' School. He welcomes Spectrum with open arms. "It's only in the last 50 years that people have stopped using the music of their own day to learn and teach," he points out.

"That's largely because in the sixties and seventies, composers increasingly wrote overintellectual music that didn't pay enough attention to the actual sounds. There was a lot of music around 20 years ago that sounded like ploughing through pigswill. Audiences couldn't cope and it's left a legacy of fright. Slowly we're starting to get audiences listening to today's music again with composers like Arvo Pärt, John Tavener and Steve Reich. I like the way that at the end of the century we can accept various paths; it no longer has to be harsh and impossibly difficult.

"Spectrum is a useful teaching tool. At the end of a very intense lesson, you can browse through it and perhaps choose two pieces that contrast; they're cool and fresh and written last week! The mix is so interesting that if a kid doesn't like one, you can just try the next. It makes it very easy to find good, practical new pieces and it's excellent as source material for competitive music festivals with contemporary classes."

But York adds: "I haven't found students coming back with great enthusiasm saying that they want to play lots of contemporary music - I wouldn't expect that. They want to play Spectrum pieces as part of a mixed bag. And they're always going to prefer the Moonlight Sonata."

Alexandra Andrievsky, who teaches piano at the Yehudi Menuhin School, Eton and the junior department of the Royal College of Music, agrees that it will take more than a couple of volumes such as this to create a real and ongoing enthusiasm for contemporary music. "But you have to start somewhere, and this is a very good place to start.

"Children who have played pieces like this will be much more open to doing something similar again - they're not so scared of it, and if it's a good piece then they'll relate to it as music and not just label it '20th century'. The longer students are kept in a narrow repertoire, the harder it becomes to introduce less middle-of-the-road stuff." As for the pieces themselves, "Many of them are fun, cheeky and witty - it's very stimulating."

She singles out as particularly appealing Richard Rodney Bennett's Taking A Line For A Walk, Timothy Salter's very pictorial Cat Being Bold At First and Brian Elias's atmospheric Plaint. But what of those target young musicians?

Jason Anderson, 13, is a pupil at the Purcell School, the specialist music school in north London. Besides playing the piano, he has been composing music since the age of five. He has been featured on BBC Radio 3's Music Matters and his pieces have been played on local radio. Studying some of Spectrum 1 made a great impression on him, he says, especially when he had the opportunity to meet and play to one of the composers, Michael Zev Gordon. "It did change the way I write. I used to write just simple melody and harmony, but now it's encouraged me to write in modern styles, using more counterpoint, harmonic clashes and stranger sounds. I used to hate modern music - now I understand it much better."

Currently, Jason says, he is writing in a variety of styles: "I've just finished a fugue for orchestra, but I like to write pop music and jazz as well and I'm writing a musical with a friend." The main impact of Spectrum has been on Jason's composition, rather than on his piano playing. "I've played some 20th-century music since then, but I'm still playing classical music too. I prefer writing modern music."

Last but not least, Spectrum gives a fascinating snapshot of the broad compositional world of the UK at the end of the century, although you will not find in its pages Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies, James MacMillan, Judith Weir, Thomas Ades or Michael Nyman.

For the younger composers whose works are included, like Neil Kaczor, Gabriel Jackson and Michael Zev Gordon, it represents valuable exposure alongside better-known names such as Tavener, Bennett, Colin Matthews and Anthony Payne. And potentially it could become a blueprint for further volumes, which may one day include an inter-national range of composers. Spectrum may not make contemporary music instantly popular, but it is certainly helping to make its huge variety of idioms more user-friendly. Gradually, it may begin to banish that "legacy of fright".