

Australian piano music for children

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Stuart Greenbaum is currently Lecturer in Composition at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne and was Australia's first graduate to receive a PhD in Composition, having studied with Brenton Broadstock and Barry Conyngham. His works span all genres, and have been performed by choirs, ensembles, orchestras and opera companies around the world. His principal publisher is Promethean Editions in New Zealand.

Greenbaum's music often reflects his continuing interest in minimalism, and in popular music (of the rock, blues and jazz variety), and is often characterized by continuous motor rhythms. Harmonically, there is a strong rapport with the late Romantic style. He has composed numerous works for piano ranging in difficulty from the popular piece *Innocence* – found in AMEB's Grade 2 syllabus – to the large-scale concert work *Iceman*. It is *Iceman* that I wish to talk briefly about today.

Iceman is a 3-movement, 9-section programmatic work, approximately 35 minutes in duration, depicting the trauma and psychological journey experienced by James Scott, an Australian medical student who was trapped, isolated and freezing, in the Himalayas for 43 days before being rescued. Each of the 9 sections of *Iceman* were inspired by fragments of text from a newspaper article which subsequently detailed Scott's ordeal – and represent Greenbaum's personal response to Scott's plight. The titles of the 9 sections are as follows: Lost, The Moon, Don't Leave Me Here, Picture of an Anorexic, Dignity, The Dream, I Thought They Must Have Seen Me, Faint Voices and Affinity. This last section, Affinity, can be found in the AMEB Grade 6 syllabus. Today I'd like to play The Dream - the 6th section which concludes the central 2nd mvt.

The relevant newspaper extract for The Dream reads as follows:

That night I slept and had the most vivid dream of my life.
All my friends and family were there.
I got up and made a speech and talked for ages.
The colours of the dream were intense.
It absorbed all my senses.

It has an ABABA arch structure and at bar 14 and at its conclusion, it recalls a motif first heard in opening section of this movement, Picture of an Anorexic. The main theme of the Dream can be found in bar 31- an undulating RH triplet figure. The Dream would be suitable for a Grade 7 student.

Peterpaul Raymakers is a Melbourne piano teacher who, like many composers before him, has enjoyed writing for his own piano students. Thus far, he has composed 3 collections of piano works aimed at pre-diploma level pianists. These include 2 volumes entitled Australian Reflections, as well as the collection Six Scene Sketches. The titles often have a distinctly Australian feel e.g. Old Ballarat, Southern Cross, Wild Brumbies, and Bush Sunrise. And while some works have decidedly

urban settings e.g. Spencer Street Station – the principal railway station for country and interstate travel in and out of Melbourne – more often, a rural environment is depicted. Many works have been inspired either by the Yarra Valley region, by the Victorian coastline, or by the Dandenong Ranges, in the shadow of which the composer has lived his entire life. Many of Raymakers' works can be found in the current ANZCA syllabus and one work – Foolin' Around was included in the 2003 Trinity syllabus, making Raymakers one of the few Australian composers represented in an International syllabus.

Happy Tikes – dedicated to the composer's son Brennan - is one of my favourite pieces of Raymakers. Bright and tuneful, it contains many teaching points – LH legato 3rds, scale passages in both hands with varied articulation, and a wide variety of dynamics. Another aspect which I consider to be very important for children's repertoire is consideration of hand-span – *Happy Tikes* does not require hands that stretch an octave, and with minimum re-arrangement, could even be played by a hand that can only span a 6th. Suitable for a Grade 5 student.

Another attractive piece from the same collection is the single-page, energetic *Jump for Life* in C major. Its bold RH melody explores various scale and chord patterns and articulations. A solid LH accompaniment – largely in open fifths, though occasionally mirroring the shape of the RH melody at the interval of a tenth - is straightforward and provides both rhythmic and harmonic stability. Suitable for Grade 4.

Pineapple Juice – C major/minor 4/4 – is a two-page instructive piece designed to facilitate the learning of triplets. Here the up-beat triplet notes represent each of the syllables contained in 'pine-a-pple', and the dotted-minim downbeat represents the 'juice'. Most of the triplets are unaccompanied which assists with rhythmic precision.

Elissa Milne is another composer whose music is gaining more and more widespread popularity. A well-known teacher, editor and clinician, her publications for Hal Leonard are indicative of her pedagogic interests beyond her own compositional oeuvre. Her numerous publications include the Little Peppers series (Faber Music)

A work that I always enjoy talking about is Milne's *Mister Bumble*. In most syllabuses, and indeed in most teaching practices, scales are introduced starting with scales with either no or very few sharps or flats – that is to say, more or less from a theoretical perspective, rather than from a physical perspective. A more pianistic, 'hand-shape-based' approach might be to embrace keys such as B major and F sharp major - keys which place the longer fingers quite naturally on the black keys - at an earlier stage. This was a philosophy adopted by Chopin in his own teaching methodology and which we can see in his projected, but unfinished, piano method *Projet de Méthode*¹. Elissa Milne's *Mister Bumble*, in the key F sharp major, is a work that I included in Series 15, Grade 2, despite the obvious reservation that it is in a key 'foreign' to beginner students. Extremely pianistic as well as fun to play, it is the perfect vehicle for developing a secure hand position as well as strong fingers. I love the initial 'hyperactive' direction. It is to be played *sempre forte* throughout, only that by the end of the work, all the surplus energy has been thoroughly expended and the final bar peters out in an exhausted diminuendo.

Another attractive ‘technique-builder’ is *Gold Rush* from ‘Getting to Grade Two’. It focuses on staccato double notes in each hand. The piece is very pattern-based, with symmetrical intervals and fingering facilitating learning and memorizing, allowing the student to observe and improve finger structure and technique. Dynamically interesting also, its tempo is a brisk one – the performance direction is the very apt ‘feverishly’. There are no intervals greater than a perfect fifth.

Mary Marasco has written a volume, *Piano Foglio*, consisting of 20 short works for the beginner pianist. They include a variety of compositional styles, exploring tonal, pentatonic, modal and polytonal writing, as well as exploring a variety of piano techniques. The volume opens with a group of three very short works depicting a child’s early morning, heading off for school. The three miniatures are entitled, *Big Day*, *Late*, and *Back Seat*. The brightly-paced, yet reflective *Back Seat*, with its gently rocking LH, seems to depict the child gazing out the window of the car, daydreaming. All three pieces are suited to Preliminary-level students.

Particularly enjoyable is the D major *Team Song* – to be played in a ‘victorious’ manner. It is a ‘wrong-note’ piece (in the tradition of many ‘Country Musicians’ pieces and the like), meant to depict not only the full-throated lyric enthusiasm of a post-victory group of supporters singing their club song, but also the slightly off-key rendition that is to be expected of a joyous, (and slightly inebriated?) untrained chorus. Suited to Grade 1/2

Of special pedagogic interest, the same volume also contains 3 expressive canonic pieces – *Tag Along*, *Insistence* (both of these at the distance of an octave) and *Far Away* (canon at the fifth). Suited to Preliminary/Grade 1 level students.

Piano Foglio 2 – a collection of 12 pieces of approximately Grade 5 – 8 standard is currently in production.

William James Schmidt is one of the most outstanding of the younger generation of Australian composers. An accomplished pianist and chamber musician, he has won numerous awards both for his compositions and for his piano playing. These include being the youngest-ever winner of the Grainger Composition Prize for his orchestral work *Brigg Dark*, whose premiere I conducted in November 2003 with the Grainger Ensemble. Will has composed numerous works for various instrumental combinations, but has made a feature of writing for piano, including a piano concerto and a set of 24 preludes.

Schmidt’s *Reverie* is a work that received its first performance in a recital of Dream Music that I presented for Camberwell Music Society in June 2005. Harmonically fluid, with a clear-cut phrase structure, and prominent 3’s against 4’s rhythms, it recalls Debussy’s early work *Reverie* (1890). Five-pages in length, delicate tonal control as well as a certain rhythmic flexibility is required. It is suitable for a Grade 7 student.

Two shorter and even more-recent works by Schmidt are two dances commissioned by the American pianist, Elyane Laussade. They will form part of a larger set of variations based on *Waltzing Watilda*, commissioned from various composers, in the manner of Diabelli and his commissioned variations on a Waltz.

The first is a minor key Sarabande which displays Handelian touches, followed by an energetic Gigue, whose Romantic style tenor melody is played by alternating thumbs, in the style of Liszt's *Liebestraum No 3* and Rubinstein's *Melody in F*.

Also of interest is a 5-page *Study in B major*. A study in broken arpeggios, it is in the traditional etude structure ABA, and is decidedly Romantic in style. Its central section sees the broken arpeggio figure transferred to the LH while the RH plays a sustained melodic line in octaves. Suited to AMusA/LMusA.

In conclusion, just as a small personal tribute to a dear friend, I would like to play Miriam Hyde's *Reverie*. Miriam of course was a devoted teacher and mentor and has left us a wonderful legacy both of children's music and of concert music. She has been an inspiration to many young composers – including William Schmidt and Peterpaul Raymakers and, as with many of the great composers of the past, many of her compositions were written for the immediate needs and desires of her own students. I am quite convinced that Miriam's music will continue to be enjoyed by many future generations of Australian musicians.

About the Author

After studies in Vienna and London, Glenn Riddle returned to Australia to complete a Masters degree at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, where he is now a member of the piano staff. He is also Co-ordinator of the Foundation Year program at the Victorian College of the Arts. Glenn has been involved in syllabus development both in Australia (AMEB Series 15) and in Taiwan. He has examined and presented workshops throughout South-East Asia, New Zealand and Australia and continues to concertize, record and broadcast. He has a special interest in the music of Percy Grainger.

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ⁱ Chopin's *Projet de Méthode* can be found in Jean-Jaques Eigeldinger's *Chopin vu par ses élèves*, (A la Baconnière, 1988) and in English translation, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as seen by his Pupils*, (Cambridge University Press). For the same reasons, Chopin had his students do 5-finger exercises on E, F sharp, G sharp, A sharp and B natural, rather than on the more traditional C, D, E, F, G.