

Introduction

If you've ever had piano lessons, you'll know most piano education is based on playing lots of classical music and lots of scales. There's nothing wrong with that, especially if it's your ambition to become a competent classical musician.

But the chances are your piano teacher never taught you a lot of the stuff you really wanted to learn. I was lucky: as well as having an outstanding classical teacher, I learned to improvise, play jazz and blues, pick up pop songs, play from chord charts, accompany singers and play in bands. I learned to play like Jools Holland, Elton John, Ben Folds and Jamie Cullum (though I wouldn't claim to be as good as them). My friends, many of whom played the piano themselves, used to ask me how I did it. This book is an attempt to answer that question.

How to get started

Over the following pages you'll find lots of examples and quite a few suggested learning techniques, but very few must-play exercises. Neither does the book have a rigid structure: if you're uncertain about the basics, you're probably best off taking the sections in order. But if you're a more confident player, you'll get the most benefit if you skip around and focus on the material that interests you, dipping in and out as necessary. To get you started, here are five suggestions:

- 1.** Read the technical sections when you're actually seated at your piano or keyboard. That way, you'll be able to park your fingers on the notes and start playing around with ideas as soon as you come across them.

How To Really Play The Piano

2. When you're improvising, remember there's no such thing as a 'wrong' note. Some notes sound better than others at some times, but that's all. Whatever you do, don't get hung up on making everything sound 'right'.
3. You should play to please yourself more than anyone else. If it sounds good to you and you enjoy it, that's the most important thing.
4. You might find it useful to have one or two songbooks handy: perhaps a couple of compilations of film songs, Broadway show tunes or pop classics. Anything that has a piano-vocal score (see p.70) and chord markings will do the job, helping you to try out many principles and ideas – especially the ones in Parts 1 and 3 – as you go along.
5. Once you start playing around with musical ideas, *really* play around. Fiddle, mess about, play chords and riffs and other bits and pieces over and over again. As we will see in Part 4, effective practice is all about exploration, testing your limits and enjoying yourself.

An open-minded approach is essential. Learning specific techniques will take you a long way, but the secret of success lies in your willingness to spend long periods of time sitting at the piano, making discoveries, getting frustrated and pushing the boundaries of what you can do.

A note on terms

Throughout the book I use *pop piano* as shorthand for the collection of skills we're dealing with, using 'pop' in a broad sense. 'Popular music' means 'the music of the people', and includes what we conventionally describe as pop music along with rock, jazz, folk, country, bluegrass, newgrass, roots music, Motown, soul, the blues and much more. The skills we're going to look at are common to nearly all popular music.

Another shorthand is the word *song*. Most popular music takes the form of song, but not all. However, terms like 'piece' and 'piece of music' are a bit clumsy. 'Song' is nice and clear, and when I use it you should take it to refer to any piece of popular music, whether that piece has words or not.

Watching and listening

When you're working on skills like improvisation you'll get a lot of benefit from listening to and watching other pianists. In fact, watching can be more useful than listening. It's difficult to pick up specific techniques by ear, even if you're a good player.

If you have web access there are hundreds of useful videos on YouTube.com. Search for terms like 'piano improvisation', 'jazz piano', and 'rock piano', and you'll find hours of material to watch, entirely free. If you turn to Appendix 3 you'll also find a list of DVDs of famous pianists in action. At various points I'll suggest specific videos to watch, including video tutorials I've created to tie in with the material in the book. I appreciate not everybody has fast web access, but take a look if you can. You'll find a list of the tie-in tutorials at:

www.jamcast.co.uk/book

And finally...

Nothing worthwhile is easy, and mastering what follows will take time and effort. You'll make mistakes, you'll find some bits difficult, and every now and then you'll probably get frustrated because your fingers won't do what your brain is telling them to. Don't worry: that's just a sign that you're doing it right. Making mistakes is an essential part of the learning process. The single best piece of advice I can give you is 'stick at it'. If you do, you *will* see results.

I started learning these skills in my school jazz band, when I was twelve. I'd been having classical piano lessons for a few years, but learning improvisation and comping was hard. Other band members helped me, scribbling down chords and left hand ideas during lunchtime rehearsals.

Most of it I just worked out for myself. I'd have made much quicker progress if I'd had a book that gave me the knowledge I needed to take my beginner's ability at classical piano and turn it in the direction of jazz, blues and pop. Not a book that held my hand and set out a formula for piano success – that would be impossible – but one that gave me a foundation of knowledge, some suggestions about how I might apply it, and the freedom to learn in my own way. That's the book I've tried to write.

How To Really Play The Piano