

THE TEACHING METHODS OF ZEZ CONFREY

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Personal copies of the previously mentioned sheet music, published by J. & W. Edwards, have provided the basis for this endeavor. A copy of Ten Lessons, by Zez

Confrey has been located in the Library of Congress. This text is a transcription of his study.

Research in the Captain John Smith Library and scholars of Confrey and third stream jazz will add secondary written and oral information to this primary source.

Proving that Confrey's method existed reveals an overlooked but Confrey's contribution to American music. Defining Confrey's method adds a new dimension to the study of ragtime piano.

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The Teaching Methods of Zez Confrey

Pianist and composer Zez Confrey achieved great fame in the early 1900s for his musical contributions in the field of novelty piano playing. Although Confrey studied to be a concert pianist, he felt most at home with jazz. Confrey began to develop his style of piano jazz during the period in which ragtime was at its peak. Though the word 'novelty' had appeared in the titles of several popular ragtime works by composers such as Scott Joplin and Clarence Wood, it was not until the 1918 release of Confrey's *My Pet* that the novelty genre was fully established. The term, 'novelty' referred to a style of piano music which was based on jazz. Its characteristics were drawn from several sources including folk ragtime and impressionistic music.¹ It is widely known that Confrey's popularity grew in conjunction with novelty piano playing. It was only a matter of three years after the release of *My Pet* that Confrey published what would become his best known work, *Kitten on the Keys*. This widely acclaimed piece would be followed by many more novelty works including *You Tell 'em Ivories* (1921), *Greenwich Witch* (1921), *Coaxing the Piano* (1922), and *Nickel in the Slot* (1923). It is clearly seen that Confrey had a gift for the composition of novelty music. What has been overlooked, however, is his method of teaching this style of piano playing.

Advertisements on sheet music dating from the early 1920s announce: "Another Zez Confrey triumph! Ten lessons for piano by Zez Confrey. His series of ten fascinatingly interesting lessons will develop your technical skill to a wonderful degree."² Further research uncovers information mentioning an instruction book published by Confrey, specifically designed to teach novelty piano playing. This publication, *Zez Confrey's Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing* (1923), "told all the 'tricks of the trade,' and sold 150,000 copies in the first two months of publication."³ In examining Confrey's *Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing*, we find that Confrey did have a definite method for teaching novelty piano. The author identifies the object of his text in the foreword. It reads: "to assist pianists in their embellishment of popular songs and music...and to familiarize the pianist with the systematic series of figures, arpeggios, etc., that harmonize with the various chords most commonly used in popular music."⁴ Confrey accomplishes just that. His 50-page text carries the "student" through a series of exercises from the simplest to the more complex form of novelty

scales, each demonstrated in the keys and meter in which popular music of the time was commonly written.

Confrey begins his exercises appropriately enough in the key of C major. His first illustration is simply the two-octave C major scale for both hands. The progression from the C major scale is to what Confrey calls the "Novelty Scale" of C major.⁴ This scale develops the independence of hands by continuing the scale in either the right or left hand, against tied notes, or notes held for a longer duration in the opposite hand. The hands alternate throughout the eight measure exercise in cut-time. From that point, Confrey introduces what he calls "Figures in the treble that can be used when the chord of C major occurs in the bass."⁵ He illustrates four, separate two-measure figures, which, in the foreword, he advises the student to memorize. These figures show ascending and descending patterns which may be used for embellishment. Confrey notes that the last three figures "are very flexible and can (with slight alteration) be used in various keys."⁶ Confrey then demonstrates how the figures may be used by giving a short example, still in C major. Confrey's next step is to introduce five new figures which may be used when the dominant seventh chord of C major appears in the bass. These figures are much like those previously mentioned in rhythm and harmonic progression. Again, Confrey follows the figures with two demonstrations, matching the bass dominant-seventh root-chord oom-pah with the corresponding figures. Confrey gives much less attention to figures to be used with the relative minor chord of C major in the bass. To this, he only devotes one example, a four-measure series of eighth notes, containing no accidentals, as was common in the previous figures.

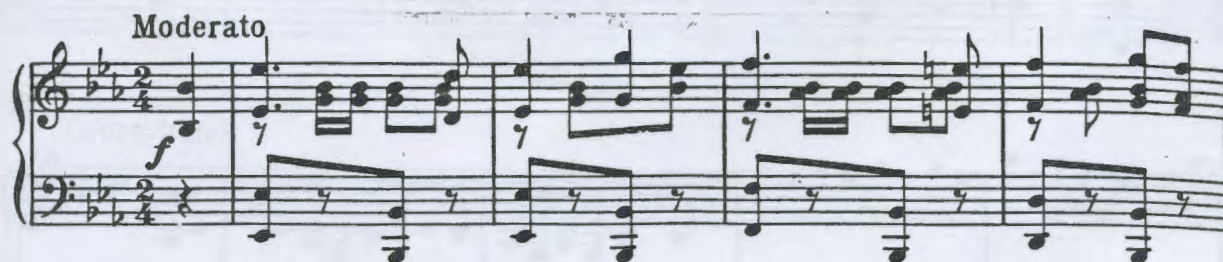
At this point, Confrey introduces "breaks." Confrey writes in his foreword, "The word 'break' is used to indicate the substitution of a piano figure for any part of a given melody." He goes on to explain that "The chorus of a 2/4 or 4/4 popular song is generally thirty-two measures in length and in most instances a 'break' may be used to substitute the fifteenth and sixteenth measures."⁷ Confrey then gives a very simple demonstration of a melody in C major. He follows the guidelines stated in his foreword by creating a 32-measure melody, advising the player to substitute "breaks" in measures 15 and 16. As is characteristic of Confrey at this juncture, he clearly explains his intentions by illustrating that segment of the tune, showing an appropriate figure,

properly used. He also shows two more possible figures which could have been used in this situation. In addition to the "breaks," Confrey suggests a substitute ending for the last two measures of the piece. This ending, in the words of Confrey, is not only for this particular piece, but "may be substituted for the last two measures of this or any similar melody in C major."⁸ For this reason, Confrey earlier suggests that such endings "be memorized, as there are any number of situations occurring in popular music, wherein one or more of these figures might be substituted."⁹

Having mastered the key of C major, the student then progresses to the key of F major. Confrey, by now, has established a pattern of instruction which he uses throughout the rest of his text, with exception of the last four pages. His pattern may be defined as: (1) Illustration of the two-octave scale for both hands, (2) Illustration of the Novelty Scales for that particular key, (3) Introduction of appropriate figures to be used in conjunction with the tonic, dominant and sometimes relative minor chords, (4) a 32-measure melody in which "breaks" may be used, and (5) illustrations of these "breaks," as well as a substitute ending. Confrey follows this pattern in the following major keys, in their respective order: C, F, B^b, E^b, D^b, G, D, A and E. Each new lesson presents a greater challenge to the pianist than its antecedent. While the scales, figures and Novelty Scales appear much the same in each key, the melody given for the use of these elements gradually increases in difficulty.

Confrey's *Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing* ends with five works which make use of the style he has presented.

Example (1)



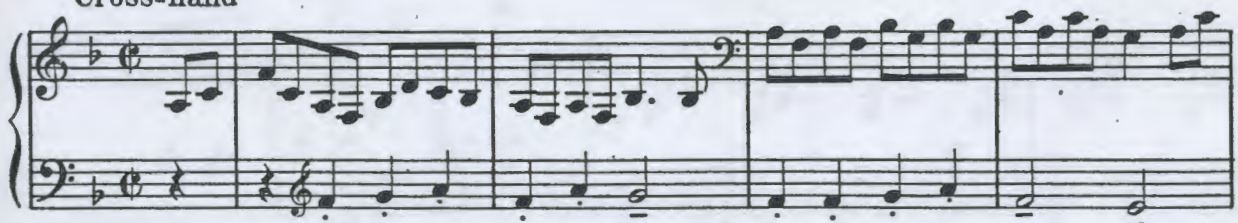


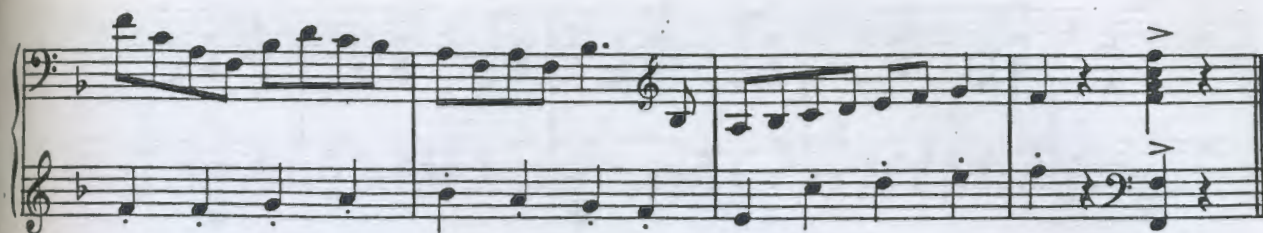
Example (1) shows the first of these: his arrangement of *Auld Lang Syne*, which appears in a syncopated 2/4 meter. This is followed by a variation which shifts the melody to the left hand, while the right hand utilizes sixteenth-note figures such as those studied throughout the text. The tempo marking rises from *moderato* to *allegro moderato* in the variation, and the left hand is designated *marcato*.

Example (2)



Cross-hand





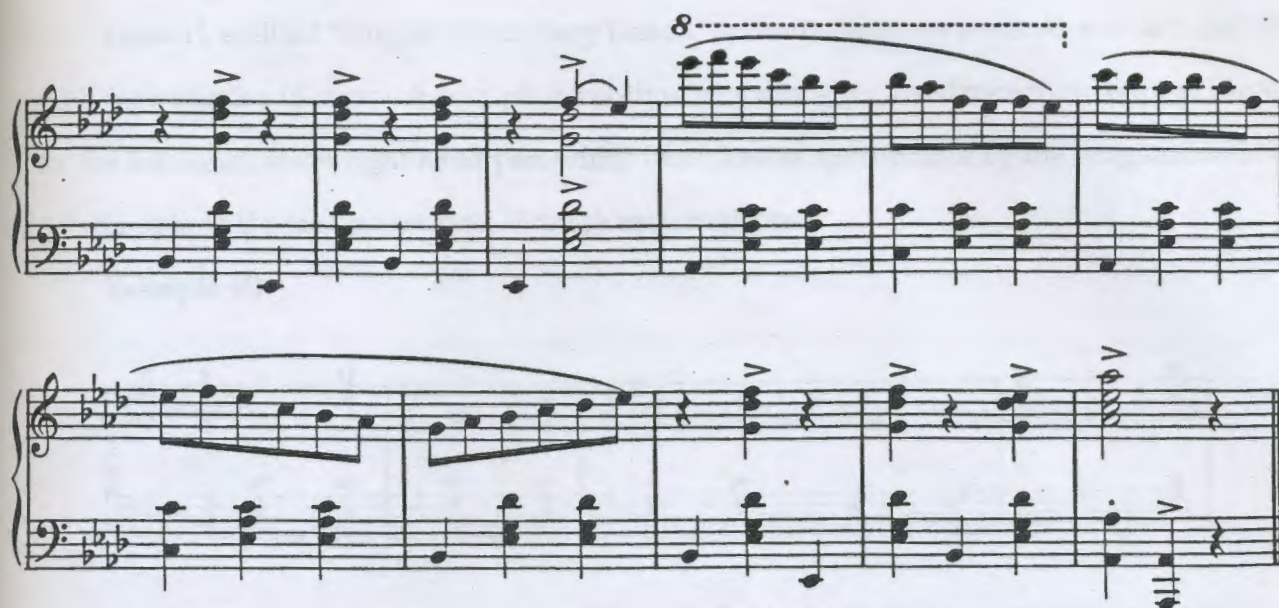
Example (2) shows another interesting selection in which Confrey combines the *Fisherman's Hornpipe*, for the right hand, and *Yankee Doodle*, for the left hand. A variation follows, which has the pianist cross hands. This example clearly calls for independence of hands, a goal stressed throughout the text. The final work of the text is Confrey's *Syncopated Waltz*, a new work at the time of publication.

Example (3)

Presto

 Musical score for Example (3) in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The piece is marked "Presto". The right hand features a melody with triplets and slurs, while the left hand plays a steady bass line of eighth notes. Dynamics include *f* (forte), *mf* (mezzo-forte), and *cresc.* (crescendo). The score is divided into four systems. The first system includes a repeat sign and first/second endings. The second system features a triplet in the right hand and a crescendo in the left hand. The third system includes a first ending with a 1-2-1 finger pattern. The fourth system includes a first ending with a 1-2-1 finger pattern and a second ending.





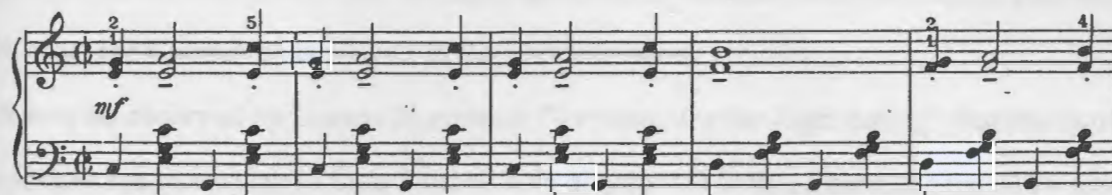
Example (3) shows this composition, a longer and more complex work than previously seen in the text, that begins in the key of E^b major, and ends with an A^b -major trio of 16 measures. Marked presto, the *Syncopated Waltz* serves as a suitable closing, as its contents reflect the features of the exercises. We find that on some occasions in the waltz, the right hand exactly matches the "figures" shown for the key of E^b .

Three years after the publication of *ZeZ Confrey's Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing*, Confrey completed yet another text, entitled *Ten Lessons For Piano* (1926). This publication, "For Pupils, Teachers, Students and Pianists of the Modern School," sold for \$2.50, one dollar more than its predecessor.¹⁰ As with his earlier text, Confrey clearly states his goal for this one, which is actually two-fold: "first to produce a series of lessons that would, with proper application and study, develop the technical ability of the student to a marked degree: and second, to embody in each lesson sufficient musical attraction to eliminate the monotony usually associated with studies that may have been created for a similar purpose."¹¹ While the purpose of this instruction seems to be a bit different from the foregoing one, the "student" will find many of the same elements widely used throughout the text. Among them recur the ever-present oom-pah bass, the continual eighth or sixteenth notes, usually for the right hand, and syncopation. Concerning the latter, Confrey adds: "This series of lessons present something new, a fascinating departure, as it were, from the 'old school,' in that the use of modern syncopation is freely employed."¹² The text is

divided into ten lessons, each with a specific purpose in mind.

Lesson I, entitled "Simple Introductory Lesson" is divided into two parts. As seen in Example (4), it begins with a 16-measure example in cut-time, containing the usual root-chord oom-pah bass for the left hand, and a right-hand part which incorporates syncopation by the progression of a quarter-note-half-note-quarter-note through each measure.

Example (4)



Confrey instructs the student to memorize this particular example. It is also interesting to note that just before his first lesson, Confrey gives the following general advice: "When playing the exercises in this book, be sure that the fingers are curved and the arms and wrists relaxed."¹³ Part One's example is followed by two exercises, incorporating the same theme and basic harmony. Exercise I challenges the right hand with a series of eighth notes to follow, while the second exercise gives the melody to the left hand. Part II is structured the same as Part I, consisting of a short example, followed by two exercises. Confrey gives specific instructions to the student. He advises that the examples for Part I and Part II be memorized, and their respective exercises should be practiced 20 times daily. Parts I and II of Lesson I serve to introduce the player to the different elements of popular music.

As the player progresses to Lesson II, he finds a new source of musical content, the Charleston. Confrey begins Lesson II by explaining the Charleston as "a syncopated rhythm in (cut) time, consisting of two accented beats to a measure; the accents falling on the first beat and on the eighth note just before the second beat." (p. 8) Ten two-measure examples follow, and the player is instructed to "Practice the following ten examples until you are thoroughly familiar with them." (p. 8) Each example successively builds up to the tenth, in which the student is finally playing the Charleston in both hands. A basic 16-measure example follows. From this point, the lesson is structured in the same pattern as Lesson I. The lesson is divided into two parts, each with

two exercises. The exercises are numbered consecutively throughout the text, labeling those included in Lesson II as Exercises 5 through 8. Again, the exercises serve to develop material used in the Part I example. In Exercise 5, the melody is carried in the left hand, while the right hand maintains a Charleston rhythm. Exercise 6 simply reverses the procedure. The example for Part II of the same lesson is written with the Charleston for both hands. Exercises 7 and 8, which follow the example, contain a variation for the right hand and a variation for the left hand, respectively. In each case, the Charleston is played in the opposite hand.

It may be observed by Lesson III, entitled "Variation for the Right hand," that the examples and exercises are increasing in their level of difficulty. (p. 13) In this lesson, the usual 16-measure example which Confrey advises the player to memorize, has been doubled in length. The key signature, which, up until this lesson, has been in C major, now moves to E^b major. The Exercises for Lesson III, this time only one each for Part I and II, are also longer and the student is given new instructions to "Play very slowly at first, gradually increasing in speed." (p. 14)

Lesson IV serves as a companion to Lesson III, as it presents "Variations for the Left hand." (p. 17) Parts I and II begin with an example, each followed by two exercises, this time in the key of F major. Lesson V combines the two previous lessons by incorporating variations for both hands. Exercises 15, 16, 17 and 18 contain a great deal of chromaticism, for which Confrey provides specific fingering. Lesson V concludes with Exercise 18: chromatic scales for each hand, played in contrasting motion.

Another area which Confrey covers is that of crossing hands. This technique is the focus of Lesson VI. Confrey's lesson begins with four, four-measure examples, in the keys of C, F, B^b and E^b major, respectively. Once the player is familiar with these simple hand-crossing examples, he is presented Parts I and II, as seen in preceding lessons, each with one exercise. Both exercises in Lesson VI (Exercises 19 and 20), contain instructions to "Practice legato and staccato." (p. 28)

Having covered the Charleston, variations for both hands and hand-crossing, Confrey introduces "Waltz Rhythms", as well as the new key of A^b major, in Lesson VII. (p. 32) The examples and exercises, all in 3/4 meter, decrease in length compared to those directly preceding Lesson VII. Previous practices, however, are retained in this lesson. Exercise 21 contains "Melody in the Left

hand; Variation in the Right hand," (p. 33), while Exercise 23 is called a "Cross-hand Variation." (p. 34)

Lesson VIII vividly echoes Confrey's *Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing*, his earlier text. Titled "Miscellaneous," this seems to be an appropriate chance for Confrey to display the style for which was so famous. (p. 36) Though the example for Part I contains nothing new, Exercise 24 announces a "Variation with 'Breaks'." (p. 37) As was so common is his previous text, Exercise 24 is the only place in Confrey's *Ten Lessons* in which 'breaks' are mentioned. The 32-measure piece is filled with figures identical to those shown in his "Novelty" instruction book. Part two of Lesson VIII even contains a "Novelette," in the key of A^b major. (p. 38) The piece, containing all the typical musical characteristics of his *Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing* acts as his signature for the text. The oom-pah bass, syncopation and rapid ascension-descension of the right hand are all abundant throughout the work.

To conclude his text, Confrey strays from his structural pattern observed in Lessons I through VIII. "Lessons nine and ten", he says, "constitute a fantasy for the piano, and are designed to illustrate the contrast between the classical form of music and the so-called 'jazz'."¹⁴ For Lesson IX, he composed what he titles "Fantasy (Classical)," shown in Example (5). (p. 40)

Example (5) .

ZEZ CONFREY

The musical score for Example (5) is a short piece in G major, common time. It features a right-hand melody with a 'quasi cadenza' section marked with a fermata and a piano (p) dynamic. The bass line provides a simple accompaniment with oom-pah rhythms. The score is written for piano and includes a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand.

In this rather lengthy work, Confrey presents his version of a fantasy in the style of the Romantic era. The work is in a minor key, an instance which, up until this point, had not occurred in either of the texts discussed. The main difference between the works lies in the very beginning. The 'classical' piece begins with a section which appears freer in nature, as if almost an introduction. (p. 40) The music is depicted in smaller notation, perhaps suggesting the notes are of lesser importance than those to follow. It appears as though the piece does not actually begin until the fifth measure, where the tempo is marked *Andante con moto*. The first four measures of the "classical" fantasy, which occupy three staves, are in common time. The meter then changes to 2/4.

Lesson X provides a striking contrast to Lesson IX. This last lesson is illustrated in Example (6).

Example (6)

Allegro moderato

ZEZ CONFREY

5 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 1 5 2 1 3 5 3 3

ff *mf marcato*

mf *simile*

The tempo indication, *Allegro moderato*, appears at the very beginning, giving the impression that the first notes are just as important as the rest of the work. Furthermore, what Confrey stretches through two long measures in the "classical" example, he divides into eight, precise measures in the "jazz" arrangement. The meter remains in cut-time throughout the entire work. What may be observed in both pieces is Confrey's use of a descending line for the right hand. As seen in the first score of each piece, this closely resembles Confrey's "figures" from his *Novelty Piano Playing* text.

ZeZ Confrey's Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing, and his *Ten Lessons for Piano* may have different aims, but the basic content found in each is very similar. There runs through each text a strong current of syncopation, and the need to develop independence of hands as well as improvisational skills. For years, Confrey's name has been synonymous with Novelty piano and his many works are mentioned in numerous articles, corroborating not only his fame but his genuine talent for composing works of this genre. We now know, however, that Confrey's talents lay not only in performing and composing. To those outstanding accomplishments, we can add a new dimension: ZeZ Confrey as teacher.

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END NOTES

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²J.L. Molloy, *Love's Old Sweet Song* (New York: Jack Mills, Inc., 1924) All located compositions and texts by Zez Confrey were published by Jack Mills, Inc.

³Amy Howard Cluthe and Joan Howard Kutscher, *Our American Music: A Comprehensive History from 1620 to the Present*, Fourth Edition, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), 752.

⁴Zez Confrey, *Zez Confrey's Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing*, (New York: Jack Mills, Inc., 1923), 6.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, Foreword.

⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

⁹*Ibid.*, Foreword.

¹⁰Zez Confrey, *Ten Lessons For Piano*, (New York: Jack Mills, Inc. 1926), title page.

¹¹*Ibid.*, Foreword.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, 4. Subsequent page references will be inserted parenthetically into the text wherever appropriate.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Foreword.

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Example (1)

Moderato

Example (1) is a piano accompaniment in 2/4 time, marked Moderato. It consists of three systems of music. The first system begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The music is written for piano, with a mix of chords and moving lines in both hands. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The second system continues the piece with similar textures, including some slurs and grace notes. The third system concludes the example with a final cadence.

Example (2)

Example (2) is a piano accompaniment in 2/4 time, marked mezzo-forte (mf). It consists of two systems of music. The first system begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The music is written for piano, with a mix of chords and moving lines in both hands. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The second system continues the piece with similar textures, including some slurs and grace notes.

Cross-hand

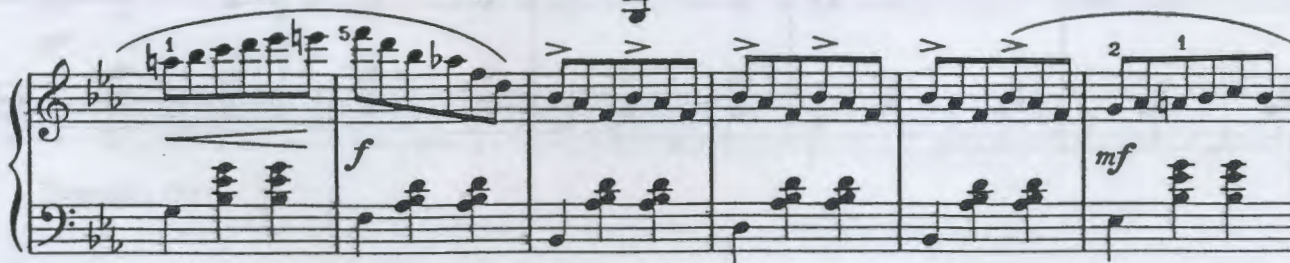
Cross-hand is a piano accompaniment in 2/4 time. It consists of one system of music. The music is written for piano, with a mix of chords and moving lines in both hands. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat).

Ex. (2) continued

Musical notation for Ex. (2) continued. The system consists of two staves: a piano (left) and a violin (right). The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a melody in the right hand. The violin part has a melody in the right hand and rests in the left hand. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4.

Example (3)

Musical notation for Example (3), marked **Presto**. The system consists of two staves: a piano (left) and a violin (right). The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a melody in the right hand. The violin part has a melody in the right hand and rests in the left hand. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The notation includes various dynamics (*f*, *mf*, *cresc.*) and articulation marks (accents, slurs). The piece concludes with a double bar line.



Ex. (3) continued

Handwritten musical score for piano, showing two systems of music. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The notation includes chords, single notes, and melodic lines with slurs and accents.

Example (4)

Handwritten musical score for 'The Rose Tree'. The score is written on two staves, Treble and Bass clef, in common time (C). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The tempo/mood is marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The melody is in the Treble staff, and the accompaniment is in the Bass staff. The score consists of 16 measures, grouped into four measures per system. The melody features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing triplets. The accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note bass line. The score ends with a double bar line.

Example (5)

Ex. (5) continued

The image displays a musical score for 'The Swan' by Camille Saint-Saëns, specifically the section from measure 10 to 24. The score is written for piano and includes two distinct tempo markings: *Pomposo* and *Andante con moto* (marked with a quarter note equal to 92 beats per minute).

The *Pomposo* section (measures 10-14) is characterized by a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The right hand features a complex, rapid melodic line with many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes, while the left hand provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *Pomposo* and the dynamics range from *ff* (fortissimo) to *f* (forte).

The *Andante con moto* section (measures 15-24) begins with a tempo change. The right hand continues with a melodic line, now featuring a prominent descending scale in measures 15-16, followed by a series of chords and arpeggiated figures. The left hand plays a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *Andante con moto* (♩ = 92) and the dynamics range from *p* (piano) to *f* (forte).

Example (6)

Allegro moderato

Ex. (6) continued

The musical score is divided into four systems, each consisting of a piano (p) part and an organ (o) part. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

System 1: The piano part features a melodic line with slurs and accents. The organ part provides a harmonic accompaniment. A trill is marked in the piano part.

System 2: The piano part continues with a melodic line. The organ part is marked *ff* (fortissimo) and *mf marcato* (mezzo-forte, marked). The organ part features a series of chords.

System 3: The piano part features a melodic line with slurs and accents. The organ part is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The organ part features a series of chords. The word *simile* is written below the organ part.

System 4: The piano part features a melodic line with slurs and accents. The organ part continues with a series of chords. The word *simile* is written below the organ part.