



Building Lifelong Pianists

November 2023 Newsletter



Alek Wasserman, Owner

 **Triad Music Academy**

 **@triadmusicacademy**

[triadmusicacademy.com](https://www.com)

**212 N Broad Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27101**





Table of Contents

Student of the Month

Page 1

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing

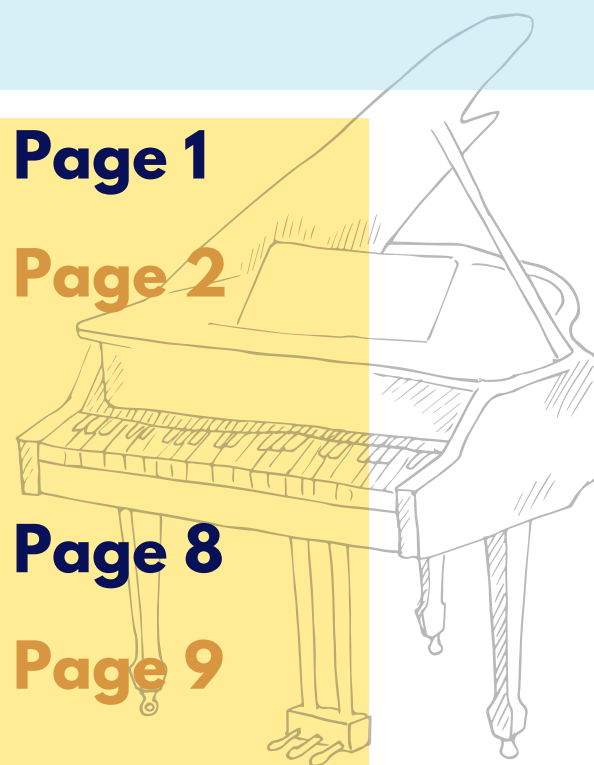
Page 2

Thankful Pianos

Page 8

Upcoming Events!

Page 9



Student of the Month: Miriam R.



Q: What has been your favorite experience with Triad Music Academy?

A: I really like my teacher ([Natalie Barela](#)), and the song “Hungry Herbie Hippo” that she taught me!

Q: What do you like most about playing the piano?

A: It’s fun to learn how to play because when you play, it sounds really nice.

Q: Which musicians do you look up to or like to listen to?

A: I like to listen to pop music and my older brother, who also plays the piano.

Q: Why did you decide to take piano lessons?

A: Because it looked really fun and I see my siblings play and I want to play, too.

Q: What other activities do you do besides playing the piano?

A: I like riding my bike, playing with my siblings, hiking, and exploring.

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing



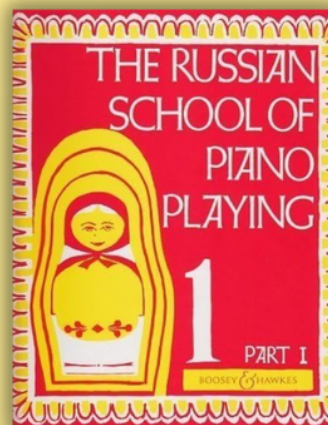
By Alek Wasserman,
Triad Music Academy
Instructor/Founder

"Finding Balance" is a monthly series in the TMA Newsletter based on a simple premise: no one piano learning method is perfect. Every method book has its pros and cons, and every student needs individual adjustments for their own needs. In this opinion series, we will explore what different piano books have to offer, as well as their flaws.

To conclude our "Finding Balance" series, we will be covering "The Russian School of Piano Playing." This unique series of piano books doesn't technically qualify as a method, but it is in many ways similar to the American concept of [multikey method books](#).

To start, let's establish why The Russian School isn't technically a method book series. The Russian School has three books, but its material is sometimes not ordered by difficulty. More importantly, method books contain supplemental materials to teach students how to read music, among other concepts.

The Russian School has very limited music reading instruction. So by my assessment, it is best understood as a supplement book rather than as a method book. Supplement books are collections of piano repertoire without reading instruction which are sometimes ordered by difficulty.

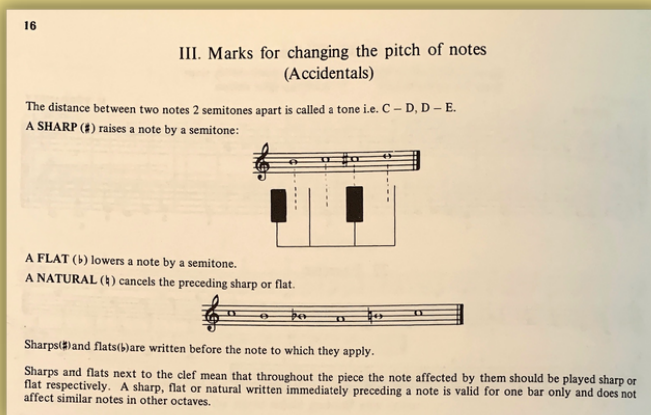


The Russian School of Piano Playing:
Book 1, Part 1

To illustrate my point, the first book only contains three full pages of basic note reading instruction, with 11 partial pages explaining more specific concepts. This is very little compared to American methods, which usually have activity books to accompany their reading instruction.

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing, cont.

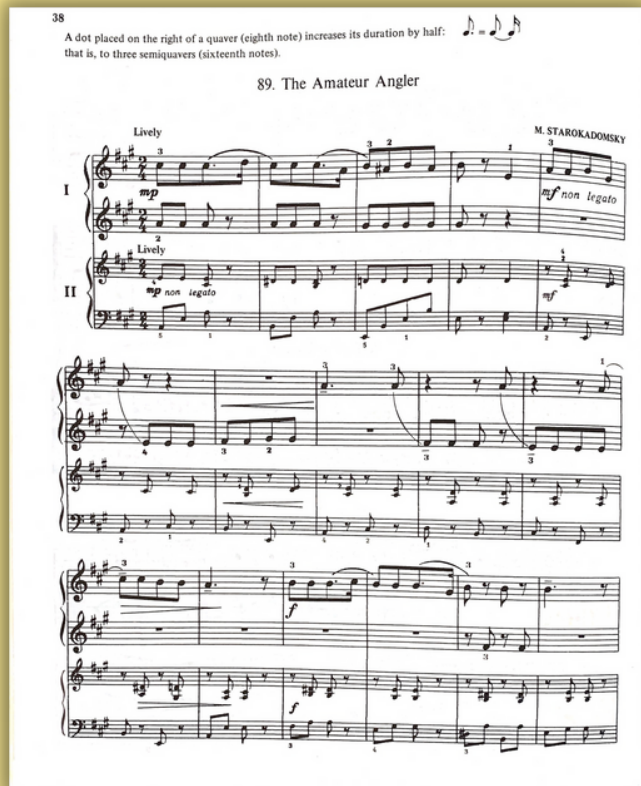
Furthermore, none of the music reading explanations in The Russian School involve student writing. They are essentially short, written lectures with limited graphics.



Images protected under Fair Use (§ 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976).

It's worth noting in the above image that accidentals are taught in seven sentences on Page 16 of the first book of The Russian School. Compare that with [The Music Tree](#), where the same concept is taught more than halfway through the second book in the method, paired with writing activities. Students are missing the hands-on learning experience necessary to label The Russian School as a method book.

The last important point in understanding The Russian School's format is that it has a rapid pacing with pieces in multiple key signatures very early on. It does not strictly follow [pentascales](#) like a multikey method would, but it does avoid the monotony of [Middle C](#) method books.



The first page of the final piece in "The Russian School of Piano Playing: Book 1, Part 1"

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing, cont.

As can be seen in the image on the previous page, The Russian School achieves an intermediate level of piano playing within the first book. This is roughly equivalent to the third or even fourth book of many piano method series.

So the underlying question is, “how do we best use The Russian School for student success?” The answer lies in the book’s application.

I have had students transfer into TMA who only ever received instruction using The Russian School. For the wrong student, this produces disastrous results. Incorrect technical habits and a complete lack of music reading comprehension can result from the book’s fast pacing and its nearly absent music literacy instruction.

These learning deficiencies can be very difficult to fix in a young student. Sometimes students become averse to the idea of note reading because of their negative experience with how difficult it is in The Russian

School. Other times, students develop tense playing habits or excessive wrist motions to compensate for the difficulty of the early repertoire.

All of this relates to my main point about The Russian School: it has to be treated as a supplement to a method book in order to produce lifelong piano playing, and I can only recommend doing so for students with higher piano learning aptitudes. The Russian School, in my experience, will only serve as a turnoff to the piano if used with the wrong student (or if the teacher doesn’t fully understand its material).

Furthermore, in education there is the concept of Culturally Responsive Teaching, defined by [Education Week](#) as, “...using students’ customs, characteristics, experience, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction.”

There are two quotes taken directly from “The Russian School of Piano Playing: Book 1, Part 1” which I would like to discuss.

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing, cont.

Taken from Page 2 in the Preface to the English Edition:

“The Russian School of Piano Playing is the piano method officially recommended for use in Children’s Music Schools throughout the Soviet Union today.”

The copyright of the book is dated to 1978. I bought my copy new in 2017.

The Editorial Foreword on Page 3 takes it even further:

“In preparing The Russian School of Piano Playing the authors have followed the general educational principles observed in the U.S.S.R. for the teaching and training of the young....

“An important aspect of a child’s musical education is his acquaintance with folk music, which not only develops his musical taste, but also plays a very considerable part in providing a sound musical foundation. Therefore in The Russian School of Piano Playing a great deal

of space is devoted to transcriptions of folk songs.”

I don’t think that much explanation is required; this piano book was simply not written for children in the United States in the year 2023.

Furthermore, while the term “culturally responsive teaching” was coined in 2000, the authors of The Russian School seem to be actively aware of the general principle. You won’t find “Old McDonald” or “Merrily We Roll Along” in The Russian School like you would in many American method books.

Many young students thrive off of being able to play music that they know and can share with their families. Having culturally relevant music in a method book is what creates special moments like playing your grandparents’ favorite tune for them at a holiday gathering.

Let me be clear - there is nothing inherently wrong with the folk music found in The Russian School, but for

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing, cont.

most American students in 2023, its selection will never carry the same cultural weight. The book was appropriate for the environment in which it was written.

So why do I still use this book, and how do I incorporate it into student learning?

For all the negatives of The Russian School, it has one massively positive attribute: its musical selection.

The Russian School is, bar none, the best piano book I've ever used in teaching piano technique, provided the teacher uses a technique system compatible with its goals. I am fortunate to have learned the Russian piano technique style when I was a grad student, so I can more easily infer the book's technical priorities.

I would not recommend the book's use for a teacher who has not learned Russian technique. The fingerings in the book will not make sense if paired with another system of wrist and finger use.

I will also say that many of the pieces in this book are quite beautifully written or arranged. While it is a very nuanced and difficult book to teach, when applied correctly, The Russian School can produce students with fluid technique and advanced musical decision-making skills.

In fact, I used The Russian School (paired with The Music Tree) with the most advanced and accomplished student that I've ever taught. By the time she was 10, she had already performed a Haydn concerto with a local community orchestra.

So here are the key ingredients for finding balance with The Russian School:

1. The teacher must fully understand The Russian School. It will do more harm than good otherwise.
2. The student must have a high piano aptitude. This book moves too fast for most kids.
3. The Russian School must be paired as a supplement to a true method book.

Finding Balance: The Russian School of Piano Playing, cont.

Inherent to pairing The Russian School with a method book is that I do not start students in The Russian School. A typical trajectory for a Russian School student in my studio will look like this:

A young student will start in The Music Tree: Time to Begin. I will notice that the student is flying through the book and that they need a greater challenge. I will then move the student into The Music Tree: Part 1 so that they understand [landmark notes](#) and basic note reading concepts.

If the student is still not challenged enough, I will then introduce The Russian School as a supplement to The Music Tree. The student will skip the introductory section of The Russian School. From there, we will use The Music Tree to learn note reading and music theory, and The Russian School will provide technique challenges and instruction.

It is only through this balanced approach, in my experience, that a student can receive all the benefits of

learning from The Russian School without feeling lost in the holes of its pedagogy and sequencing.

To conclude, “The Russian School of Piano Playing” is a series which is incomplete on its own. It is not right for every student, nor for every teacher. But in the right situation and paired with an appropriate piano method book, The Russian School can produce a lifetime of piano playing.

The "Finding Balance" series only reflects my own opinions. TMA Instructors are encouraged to express their own piano teaching beliefs and use method books of their own choosing so they are free to teach as their best selves. We create uniformity across TMA studios by offering the same recital and masterclass opportunities to all students, as well as Unlimited Lesson Support. Most importantly, all TMA students have exclusive access to the same library of online piano learning supplements. At the time of writing, we have over 30 items written from a method book-neutral perspective.

We are Thankful for You

TO SHOW OUR APPRECIATION FOR ALL THE TMA
STUDENTS AND FAMILIES WE WOULD LIKE TO
EXTEND THESE SPECIAL NOVEMBER SAVINGS.

SPECIAL PRICING AVAILABLE ON ALL NEW AND
PRE-LOVED PIANOS TO GIVE TMA STUDENTS THE
QUALITY THEY DESERVE.



November 2023

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8

Upcoming Events!

Myron Brown Masterclass

Saturday, Nov 4th @ 4:00 PM

[Piedmont Music Center](#)

Myron Brown
Associate Professor of Music,
Winston-Salem State University



Select Triad Music Academy students will be chosen to perform. Email alek@triadmusicacademy.com if you would like to watch!

UPDATED: Wasserman Studio Fall Recital

Saturday, Dec 9th @ 4:00 PM

[Piedmont Music Center](#)

Recitals open to all Triad Music Academy students. Email alek@triadmusicacademy.com with any questions!

Upcoming Events!

UPDATED: Barela, Hazard & Lindegren Studios Fall Recital

Saturday, Dec 9th @ 5:30 PM

[Piedmont Music Center](#)

**Recitals open to all Triad Music Academy students. Email
alek@triadmusicacademy.com with any questions!**