

A Let's Play Music eBook

FIRST PIANO LESSONS

Games and exercises for beginners



by Sara Mullett

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Before you get going


Learning to play the piano is such an exciting adventure for a child. The brilliant challenge for any teacher is to encourage and nurture that excitement into a real love of the instrument that will last a life time.

Always take the lead from the child, being especially aware of any limitations and anxieties. This makes sure that he or she feels happy and relaxed in the lessons and not pressured or stressed in any way.

The first and most important thing is that the child themselves actually wants to start piano. This may seem obvious, but it's surprising how many people make this expensive mistake. If you're not sure then it's a good idea to try to get hold of a second hand keyboard for them to try out and just see how much they enjoy playing with it first. Lessons for young beginners should always be short, fun and ideally as

frequent as possible. In this eBook I aim to show you how to introduce a child to the basic principles of playing the piano in a fun and engaging way which hopefully seems more like a game than a lesson. The intention is that the pupil will always be keen to practice and can't wait for next time.

These First Piano Lessons are ideal to start your child off with at home. The exercises included in this book will give them the opportunity to become familiar with the basic principles with plenty of time to practice and learn at their own pace. As the child progresses it will become clear when they are ready for proper one to one piano lessons and the fact that they have had this solid head start provides a good foundation for the future.



I can't wait to
start my piano
lessons

Getting started

Much the same as learning any new language, reading and understanding music takes time and practice. While a child will often find the early stages of learning to play piano much easier than grown ups, there are some practical considerations for a young beginner. Size of hands and fingers, general coordination and motor skills and sitting still and concentrating in a one to one situation can all be a challenge for a young beginner.

If a child's hands are very small, it is probably best for them to wait for a year or so to allow them to grow and strengthen. Co-ordination and strengthening can always be improved with practice games and exercises, and a fidgety pupil should be encouraged to let off a bit steam at regular intervals with some movement and rhythm games. Most hurdles can be overcome with practice and a flexible approach to suit each child.

The following 3 chapters cover learning the note names, basic notation and simple fingering, but take plenty of time to introduce these concepts as they are all so important. It's always best to be flexible and see how each child is coping as they're all different. Little ones always respond better to short, frequent lessons finding longer ones too demanding.

Just like learning to read words, learning to play piano has different elements which need to be taught at the same time. I have always taught rhythm and note recognition alongside the physical practice of listening, finger strengthening and co-ordination. Once you have introduced these first three lessons, these different disciplines should be practised as part of every lesson in the form of exercises and games until the individual skills come together and become one.

The easiest way to learn the notes

To a complete beginner a piano keyboard can look a bit overwhelming, like a sea of notes stretching in both directions. It's really important to break it down and help them to recognise that there are indeed only seven notes which are repeated seven times over.

This animal memory game is an excellent way to teach the names and order of the notes. Children immediately engage with this idea and are so keen to memorise the order of the animals

that they inadvertently learn the keyboard notes without even realising it.

Ask them how many notes do they think there are. Then surprise them with the answer of only 7! Depending on the age and attention span of your child or pupil, this lesson can be broken up into two sections which introduces C-D-E-F first and then G-A-B-C in the next lesson.





1 Sitting in front of the keyboard, explain that the right hand plays high notes and the left hand plays low notes. This is simply because it is more comfortable this way. Encourage them to explore some high and low notes and make sure they can tell the difference and they use the correct hand.

2 Start by asking them to play the groups of 2 black notes and 3 black notes, all the way up and down the keyboard, making sure to use the left hand for low notes and the right for high.

3 Then find middle C by looking for the 2 black notes in the middle of the keyboard. C comes just before these 2 black notes. Introduce

the CAT! Find all the 'cats' up and down the piano, using the right hand for high ones and left hand for low ones with middle C in the middle. Navigate by looking for the 2 black keys, and notice that they are always the same distance of 8 notes apart each time, call this an Octave. Eight notes like an octopus with 8 legs!

4 The next note is D for DOG! It comes after C and is in between the 2 black notes which look like the dog's black ears. Now find all of the Ds.

5 E for ELEPHANT comes next. Find all of the elephants by hopping up and down the



keyboard, noticing that it comes on the other side of the 2 black keys.

6 The next note is F for FROG. Repeat the hopping game in the same way, noticing that it comes before the group of 3 black notes.

7 The next note is G for GIRAFFE. Find all the Gs up and down the keyboard, always making sure that the right hand is used for higher than middle C, and the left hand is used for lower than middle C.

8 A for ANTS comes next, notice that the full piano keyboard starts and finishes on an A.

9 The last one is B for BEAR. Repeat the process. All the notes have now been named, and we have reached C again.

10 Depending on the age of the child this activity can be practised as a warm up game at the beginning of each lesson. Little ones will be happy to just play a note hopping game where they jump up and down the keyboard finding all the CATS or DOGS. Choose a different couple of notes each time. Older children will soon find this too easy and be ready to develop the game further.

Which note am I?



Animal Piano Key Cards

Now try to see if they can remember all of the animals from beginning to end as they play each note from C – B. Although this seems a lot of information for the first or second piano lesson, children really seem to enjoy the challenge of remembering the correct order of the animals. After a little bit of practice they love to demonstrate that they can recognise which note is which.

Using the printable animal key cards at the back of this book, you should play this

game at the start of every lesson. Once your pupil is more confident, jumble the animals up and ask the child to place them on the notes in the correct order, keeping one back so that they have to remember which one is missing. Alternatively you can tell the child to close their eyes while you place all the animal key cards on the notes leaving one or two out so that they have to remember the missing ones. It's a simple game but they love it - and it works!

Introducing the note family

The Note Family works in a similar way to the Note Animals by assigning a character to each note. Children find it much easier to engage and connect with the whole concept when they have a family of characters that they can identify with.

The note names may differ according to where you live in the world, but the same concept of Daddy, Mummy, Big Brother and The Little Twins can be applied to both European and American notation names and there are printable flashcards at the back of this book to suit both versions.

When I first introduce The Note Family, I always tell a little story about

how they all live together in a big musical house where everything sounds like music notes. I make the stories up as I go along, but the basic principle is that everything the characters do in the house such as going up the stairs, brushing their teeth or sipping tea they do in the rhythm that belongs to their note. So Big Brother Crotchet (or Big Brother Quarter Note) marches up the stairs “ta, ta, ta, ta” while the little quaver twins (or Little Eighth Note Twins) brush their teeth quite quickly “ti-ti, ti-ti, ti-ti, ti-ti” and Mummy Minim (Mummy Half Note) sips her tea quite slowly “taa, taa, taa, taa.” You can hold the flashcard for the corresponding note up as you introduce each character.



Nothing very much ever happens in these stories, but the children seem to enjoy them and soon get the idea. You can then invite them to join in by asking them to guess what they did next? and how they sound while they did it? They are always very keen to make up another adventure for the note family!

Once familiar with the note names and time values, there are lots of guessing games that can be played which are lots of fun and great practice.

1 Keep the flashcards in a small cloth bag and ask the child to pick one, identify it and demonstrate the sound it makes on a drum or wooden sticks.

2 Use the cards to play Magic Feet Follow The Beat so that they can march to the rhythm of the notes.

3 Ask a child to pick two cards and demonstrate the rhythm they make next to each other. Then add another, and another, playing the rhythm each time to see how it changes.

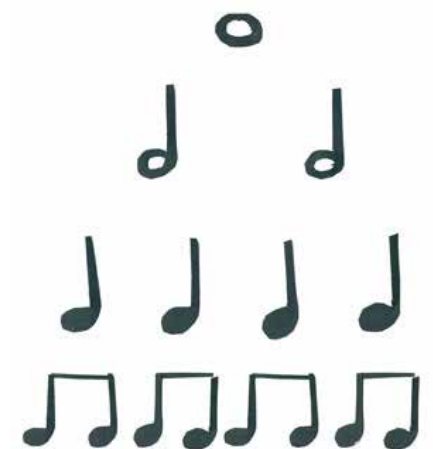
4 Using some props to identify well known nursery rhymes (e.g a star for Twinkle Twinkle and a small plastic sheep for Baa Baa Black sheep) and make simple rhythms from the first line of the song with the note cards. Then ask the child to work out

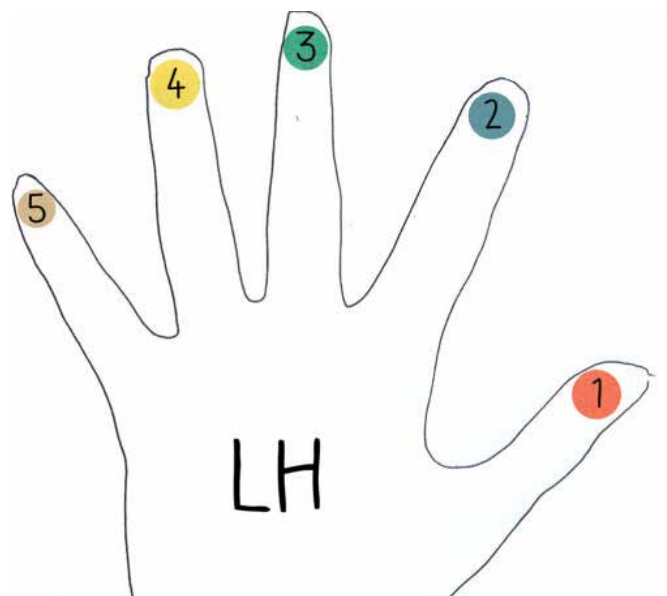
and identify which rhythm belongs to which toy?

5 Show the child a note card in secret, and ask them to tap that beat so that the other children have to guess which note it is.

6 Once you get going there are so many different ways you can use the cards in your music lessons, and depending on the theme of the lesson or the mood of the children it is easy to adapt these ideas to suit every occasion and keep the kids engaged.

7 Certain songs are particularly good for teaching rhythm. Hickory Dickory Dock and the Clock Song are excellent for steady crochet beats with lots of tick-tocks. And songs about the rain also offer plenty of rhythm practice with drip-drops and pitter-patters so do visit the blog for more ideas.





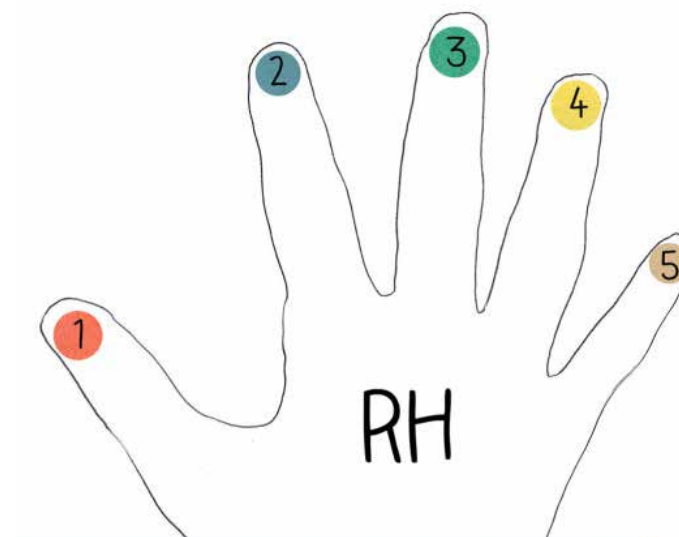
Fingers & Fingering

Children love this lesson because it starts off on the floor drawing around their hands with pencil and paper.

While doing this, explain that when we play piano we call our fingers by number to help us to know which ones to use. Ask the child to fill in the numbers on the fingers of each hand 1-5 starting with the thumbs as 1 to the little fingers as 5. Explain that each

finger has its own note and each one has its own turn at playing.

Then ask the child to place their hands on top of the drawn hands and ask them to wiggle their 1s, 2s, 3s etc. first in order and then at random. This little exercise helps them to connect the numbers with the fingers before actually trying to play the notes.

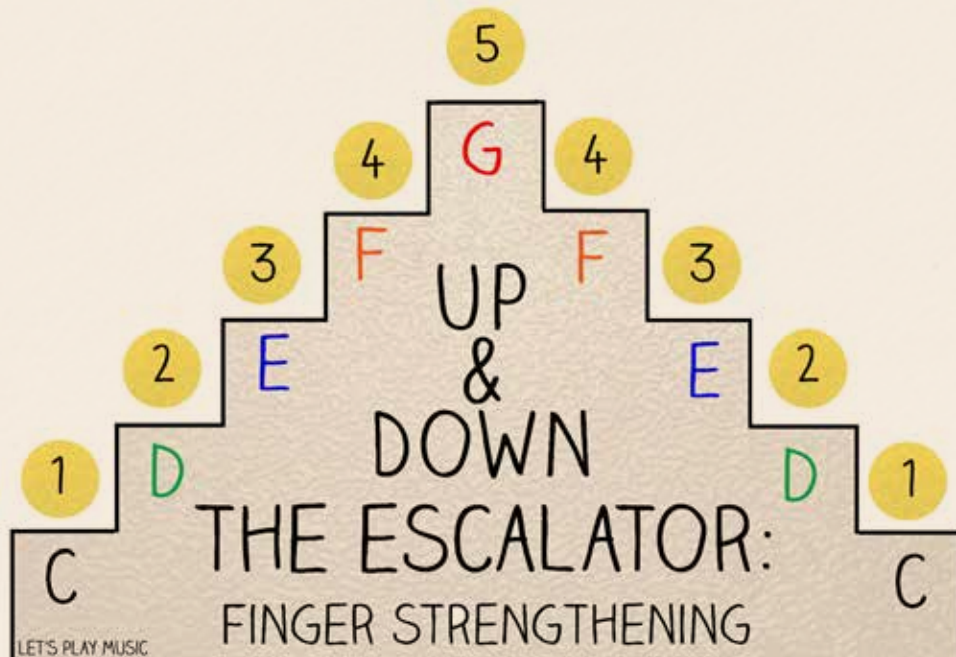


Using the Animal Note Naming Game (see Chapter 1) as a way to find middle C, place the Right Hand on CDEFG with the fingers 1-5. Ask the child to play each note with each finger and repeating it 3 times - call this exercise Up And Down The Escalator.

Explain that 4s and 5s are usually weak because they are normally a bit lazy and never really do anything on their own. This is why it is a bit more difficult at first, but just like riding a bike or learning to write your name, practice will always help!

Repeat this exercise with the Left Hand, with the 1 (thumb) on middle C but with the fingers going downwards in steps the opposite way. This is usually more difficult at first, depending on whether the child is left or right handed. Again, reassure them that it will get easier with practice.

The object of these exercises and games at this stage is to encourage your pupil to play them as frequently as possible in order to strengthen the fingers and consolidate the lessons learnt so far.



Exercise 1

Up and down the escalator

- The fingers should be curved over the notes as if you are holding a small ball or apple. This can be really quite difficult at first as weaker fingers will be harder to control.
- Make sure each note is released as you play the next. Children often tend to hold two or three notes down through lack of control, so point this out as something to be careful of.
- Try not to let the hand collapse downwards and rest on the keys. This needs gentle reminders and reassurance that the more you do it the easier it gets!
- Up And Down The Escalator can be practiced anywhere, you don't need to be at the piano. You can practise on your leg, in the car, or at the table.
- When it is getting easier, try balancing a penny on the back of the hand and play it without it sliding off. A little competition always helps!
- See my post on the blog about LITTLE HAMSTER POM POMS for another popular way to perfect and practice the correct hand position.
- Once they have mastered each hand separately, try both hands together. Both hands should start on middle C together, then play both 2s-3s-4s-5s and back again. This is the first time they play anything hands together, so it is very satisfying!
- Encourage the pupil to practice Up And Down The Escalator as regularly as possible as this exercise really helps with strengthening and finger dexterity and this will make a huge and vital difference to their piano playing progress.

Exercise 2

I like sticky candy floss

- This catchy little finger strengthening exercise goes down very well as the child is so busy thinking about the their favourite treats that they don't realise how hard it makes their fingers work!
- Ask the child whether they prefer Sticky Candy Floss or Chewy Chocolate Bars? You will find that you can adapt the words quite easily, once I even changed it to Cheese and Onion Crisps!
- First explain that this is quite a tricky little game and challenge them to see if they can do it. Explain that when you do this exercise each finger has to have its own go.
- Before you start you can ask the child to practice with their fingers on their leg or on the table. This helps to make it clear which fingers to play in what order. It also helps if you actually touch the fingers in the correct order, 1 and 2, 2 and 3, 3 and 4, 4 and 5 in pairs, to show the pattern. Again, they should expect 4 and 5 to be hard work, but it will get easier with practice.
- Point out that it's the action of trying that makes the fingers stronger, so even though they can't play it at first, trying to play it will make the fingers learn.
- With a few goes it will soon become clear. After a bit of practice your little pupil will find it great fun to try to play it faster and demonstrate how much easier they find it!
- Once they have mastered this exercise with each hand separately, try playing it hands together. Both hands should start with I (thumb) sharing Middle C. This sounds very impressive and is easier than it sounds as both hands are doing exactly the same thing at the same time. Lots of fun and very satisfying!

DO RE MI FA SO LA TI DO

C D E F G A B C

1 2 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS
C D C D C D C

2 3 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS
D E D E D E D

3 4 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS
E F E F E F E

4 5 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS
F G F G F G F

(AND THEN DO IT IN REVERSE, ALL THE WAY BACK TO C)



Exercise 3

I've got sticky fingers

This simple little rhyme is another effective way to encourage finger strengthening which gives a little break from the keyboard. You start by offering the child a pot of imaginary glue which they can dip their fingers into. They then recite the poem while rubbing their thumb and forefinger together in a circular motion, then repeating the action with every finger in turn. Repeat this for each hand and then hands together.

"I've got sticky fingers
I dipped them in some glue
I don't know why I did it?
What a silly thing to do!"



Exercise 4

Tommy Thumb

Young beginners love singing Tommy Thumb and it doubles up as a great finger exercise. Place both hands palms down on the table and starting with the thumbs tap each finger to the rhythm of the words in turn, as they are referred to in the song.

"Tommy Thumb, Tommy Thumb, where are you?
Here I am, here I am, how do you do?
Peter Pointer, Peter Pointer, where are you?
Here I am, here I am, how do you do?
Toby Tall, Toby Tall, where are you?
Here I am, here I am how do you do?
Ruby Ring, Ruby Ring, where are you?
Here I am, here I am, how do you do?
Baby Small, Baby Small, where are you?
Here I am, here I am, how do you do?"

Looking at the Music

This is an important lesson because it is the first step towards really reading the notes and connecting with the music. Here, the child will start to learn the importance of looking at the music rather than down at their hands and begin to understand the relationship between the keys on the piano and the notes on the page.

Exercise 1

Sliding Snakes

Using the Sliding Snakes printable at the back of the e-book explain that as the snakes slide up or down one step you play the next note up or down.

Now look at the first exercise on the sheet and ask them to touch the first note with their index finger.

Ask them to slide their finger along the line of notes. Then ask them to tell you whether it is moving up or down as it goes.

Tell them to choose any note on the piano to start. Pointing to the first note of exercise number 1 ask if the second note to it steps up or down.

Once they have answered correctly ask them to play the next note up or down one note accordingly.

Continue along the line of notes in the same way. Congratulate them as they go, and help out if they make a mistake.

Follow the line of notes with your finger on the music as they play them. To make it more fun you can sing the ups and downs with a 'slidey' voice as the notes move and if they go wrong it's fun to impersonate a game show 'buzzer' sound.

They soon get the idea and are keen to demonstrate how they can play it correctly without setting off the buzzer!

Don't worry about explaining tones and semitones or that they are not identifying the actual notes because

this is not the point at this stage. The object here is purely to help them make the connection between the notes moving up and down and how that relates to the keys on the piano.

Exercise 2

Spot the frog

In this exercise the child learns to recognise and play the interval of a third and how it sounds.

Look at the first exercise and again ask the child to trace the line of notes with their finger.

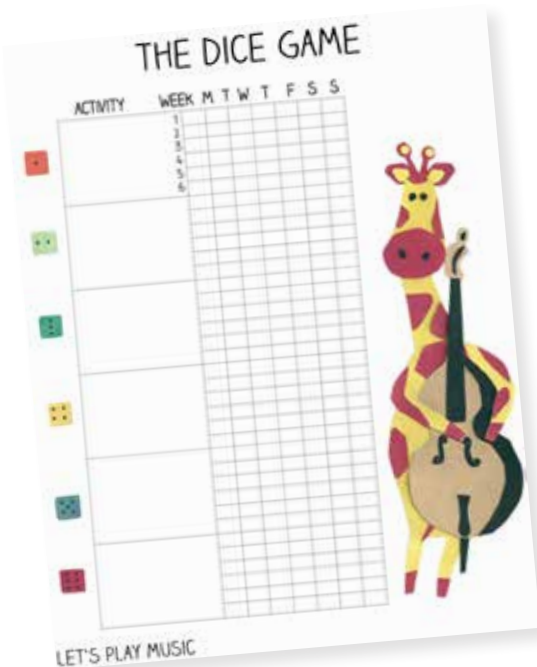
Warn them to watch out for where the frog hops over a note and plays the next one instead.

Ask them how many they can find.

These exercises should not be attempted all at once. Just do one or two occasionally to bring a little

constructive variety to the lesson. For added fun and a break from the keyboard you could play this outside using chalk to draw the lines and notes on the ground. The child can then do real steps and hops to blow off a bit of steam - a really good way to make the lesson memorable.





Motivation - Practice makes perfect!

It seems obvious, but there is no short cut for practice. Everyone knows and understands this but it's not always that easy to execute. Young children will need a certain amount of help and guidance in learning how to practice.

This process will be new to them and no matter how keen they are, it is a lot to expect them to remember on their own.

You can help them get into good practice habits by having a structured and organised approach to their lessons. Use a small note book as practice diary and write down what they need to remember, making a clear practice plan for them to refer too. This will also useful for parents and you can suggest they make a note of any questions or particular difficulties that the child has with their practice. Kids love an achievement sticker chart (see the dice game in the printables section at the back) which always goes down well. Make sure you have a good supply of colourful stickers, the shinier the better!

Exercise 1

The Dice Game

Here's a simple practice game which encourages lots of repetition of pieces without the pupil getting bored. All you need is a dice and a chart (see printables) and they'll be practicing all of their pieces and exercises rather than just choosing their favourites!

1 First make a list of all the piano activities that they are required to practice, next to the numbers 1 - 6 on the chart. This can include finger exercises, note naming and recognition as well as any pieces.

2 The pupil throws the dice, identifies the number and then refers to the list to find out which activity they should do (a handy bit of extra reading and number practice thrown in!)

3 As they complete each activity let the child put a tick in the corresponding box on the chart (they love being the teacher!)

4 When they have completed all 6 activities, reward them with a very well earned sticker which they can place on the chart themselves as proof of all of their hard work.

Exercise 2

Jumping gem stones

Marble jars have always been popular as an incentive and reward scheme for kids, and they are the inspiration behind this Jumping Gem Stones practice game.

To start with you will need to stock up with some pretty coloured glass gems (I actually use sparkly beads collected from junk jewellery) or marbles and keep them on the piano in a large glass jar. Give the child their own jam jar which they can decorate with sharpies or stickers to keep on their piano.

At the beginning of the lesson you place several gems on the left side of the keyboard and explain how they can be earned. You decide this depending on what you are hoping to achieve in the lesson: one for good concentration, one for making a beautiful sound and one for good effort, for example.

When you feel that the child has accomplished one of the tasks you set out, you make one of the gems jump across the keyboard (the springier and bouncier the better!) either straight into their jam jar, or into their pocket to take home to add to their collection. As the child becomes more proficient you can make it harder to earn the precious gems. They will be so proud to show their parents the proof of all their hard work!



How to plan a beginner's lesson

All the ideas set out so far in chapters 1 to 5 provide the building blocks for a perfectly balanced piano lesson for a young beginner. The most important thing is that the child enjoys their lesson and wants to come back for more, so the activities are all short and playful with the result that the child will often be quite disappointed when the lesson comes to an end.

Choosing a tutor book

Tutor books have various pros and cons. On the plus side they provide motivation and a sense of achievement as the child works through one book and moves up to the next level. They have been carefully put together so each new piece or exercise teaches a

new lesson and they offer an overview of their progress allowing the pupil to pop back and revisit old lessons easily. However, they can also be a bit rigid and restricting so why stick to only one book when there are so many wonderful piano books to choose from?

Over the years I have found one or two particularly effective (check out the useful resources section at the back of this book) and I let each child choose the one that they prefer the look of. It's an exciting and important part of starting the journey and committing to the process. Then as the lessons progress I cherry-pick the best beginner pieces from all sorts of sources and let them build up their own folder of extra pieces to supplement their tutor books. This way the child has more freedom to pick their favourites and can proudly build an impressive and varied repertoire.

A sample beginner's lesson plan



1 It's a good idea to start the lesson with some note hopping where the child has to find notes at random up and down the keyboard, it serves as a warm up for both fingers and brain.

2 Finger exercises should come next, depending on the age and level. Choose an exercise that is appropriate for their needs: one that is

challenging but not too demanding. This part of the lesson will lead to scales as the child progresses.

3 A note reading exercise like Sliding Snakes and Spot the Frog should now be practiced to help the child make the connection between the notes on the music and the keys on the piano. This would also be a good time

to learn and practice a bit of theory. This is a big subject on it's own, but you can see the blog for my post on How To Read Music Made Easy.

4 Next it's time to go to the tutor book or sheet music for the new content part of the lesson. Use this new music for sight reading practice (see blog for my Top 10 Tips for Sight Reading). Help the child to work out the notes and rhythm bar by bar.

5 Establish a clear strategy for tackling the new piece and outline the plan of action in the practice notebook. Insist that they must be able to play each hand separately before they attempt both hands together.

6 After concentrating hard on the new music the child will be ready for a bit of a break from the piano. A rhythm and listening game using some percussion instruments, or interval recognition with chime bars, or an action and rhythmic activity like Magic Feet Follow The Beat would be a good exercise here.

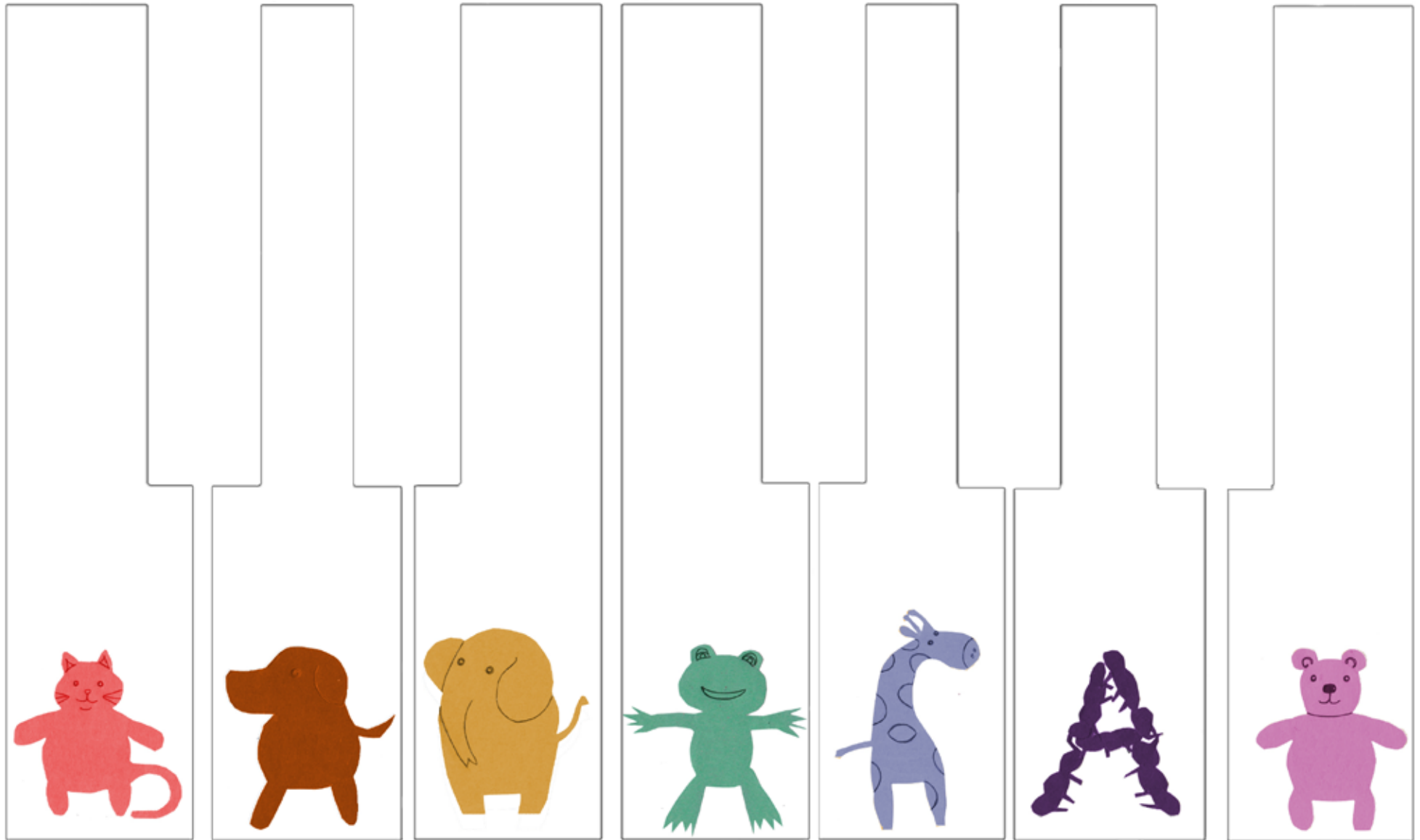
7 Now you could play The Dice Game which is a fun way to squeeze a little more concentration out of them. It's also a good opportunity to consolidate what they have learnt. If you don't have

much time left, just let them choose something that is their favourite so that the lesson ends on a high point with lots of praise and shiny stickers.

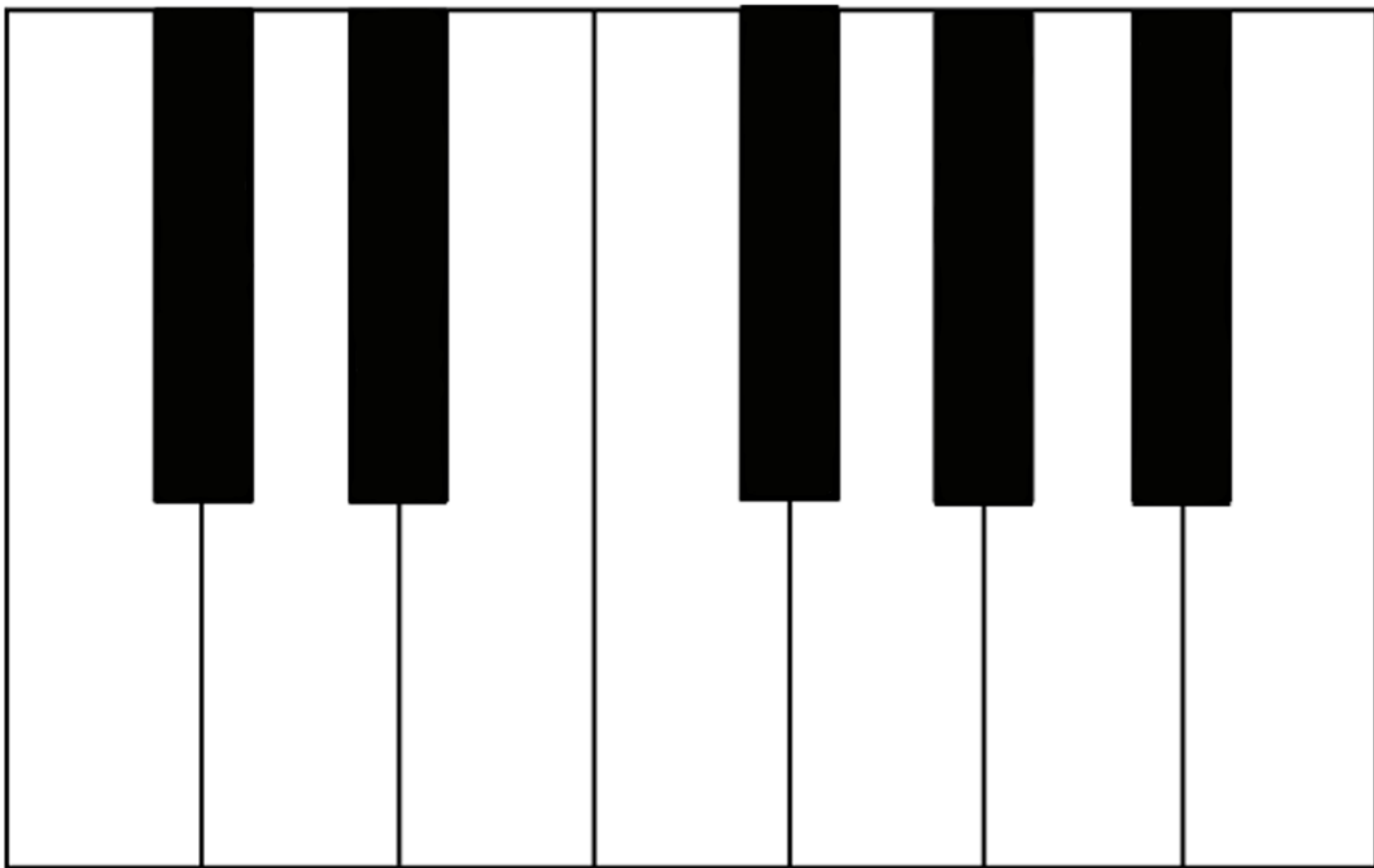
8 Remember that children will need guided practice at first, so before the end of the lesson set a clear practice plan in their piano practice diary and make sure both the parents and child understands what they need to do at home.

It's always important to be flexible, you never know when a child might need more time to grasp a lesson. But it's also important to be consistent and methodical in your approach. Always set out with the aim that in every lesson a pupil should learn something new, review something that they've already learnt and perform something that they can already play comfortably. This makes sure that you stimulate and consolidate their progress while they gain plenty of satisfaction and enjoyment from playing at the same time.

CUT OUT EACH OF THE KEYS AND PLACE ON YOUR PIANO KEYBOARD



LET'S PLAY MUSIC



LET'S PLAY MUSIC



BIG DADDY
SEMIBREVE

4

BEATS



BIG DADDY
WHOLE NOTE

4

BEATS



MUMMY
MINIM

2

BEATS



MUMMY
HALF NOTE

2

BEATS



BIG BROTHER
CROTCHET

1

BEAT



BIG BROTHER
QUARTER
NOTE

1

BEAT



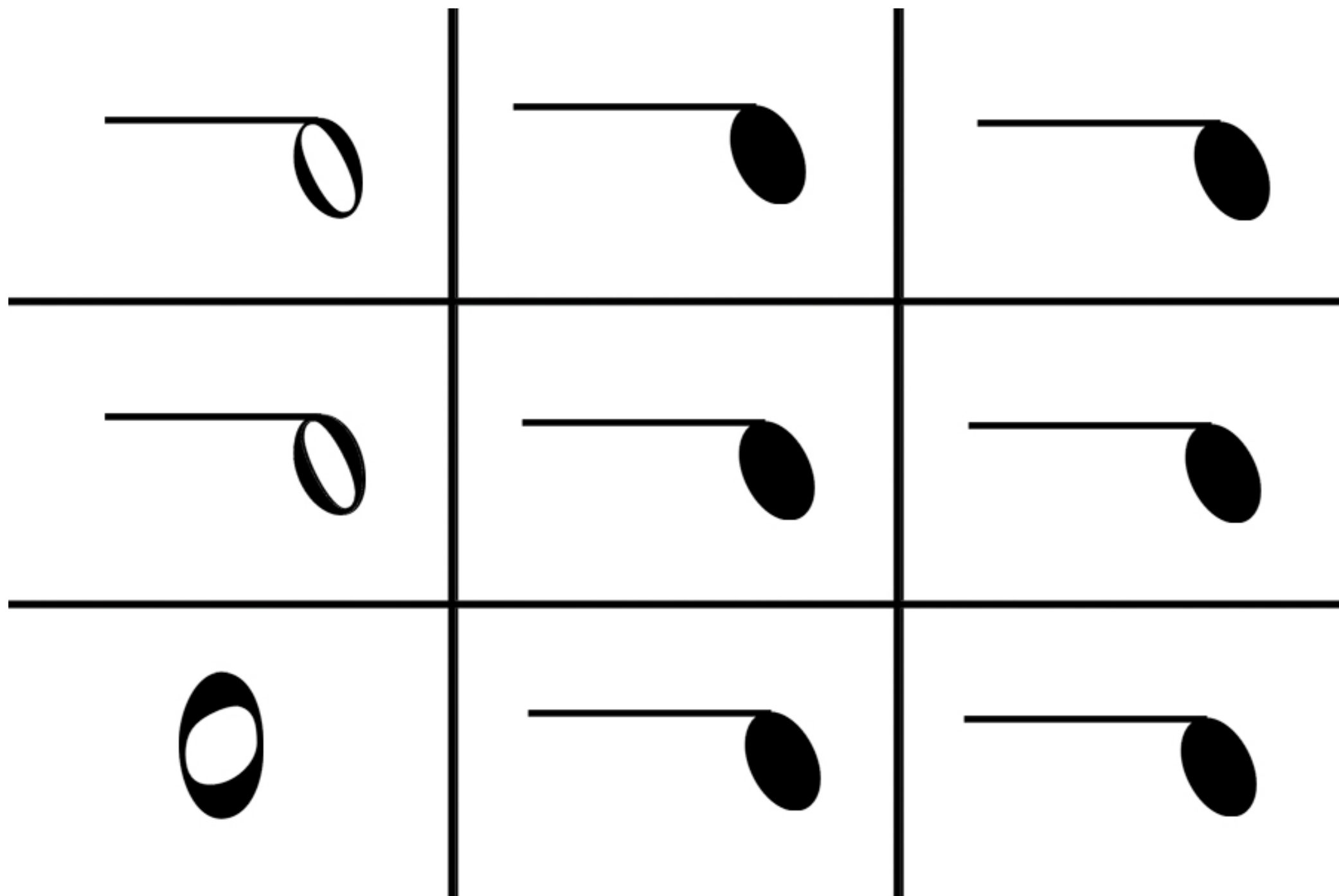
LITTLE
QUAVER
TWINS

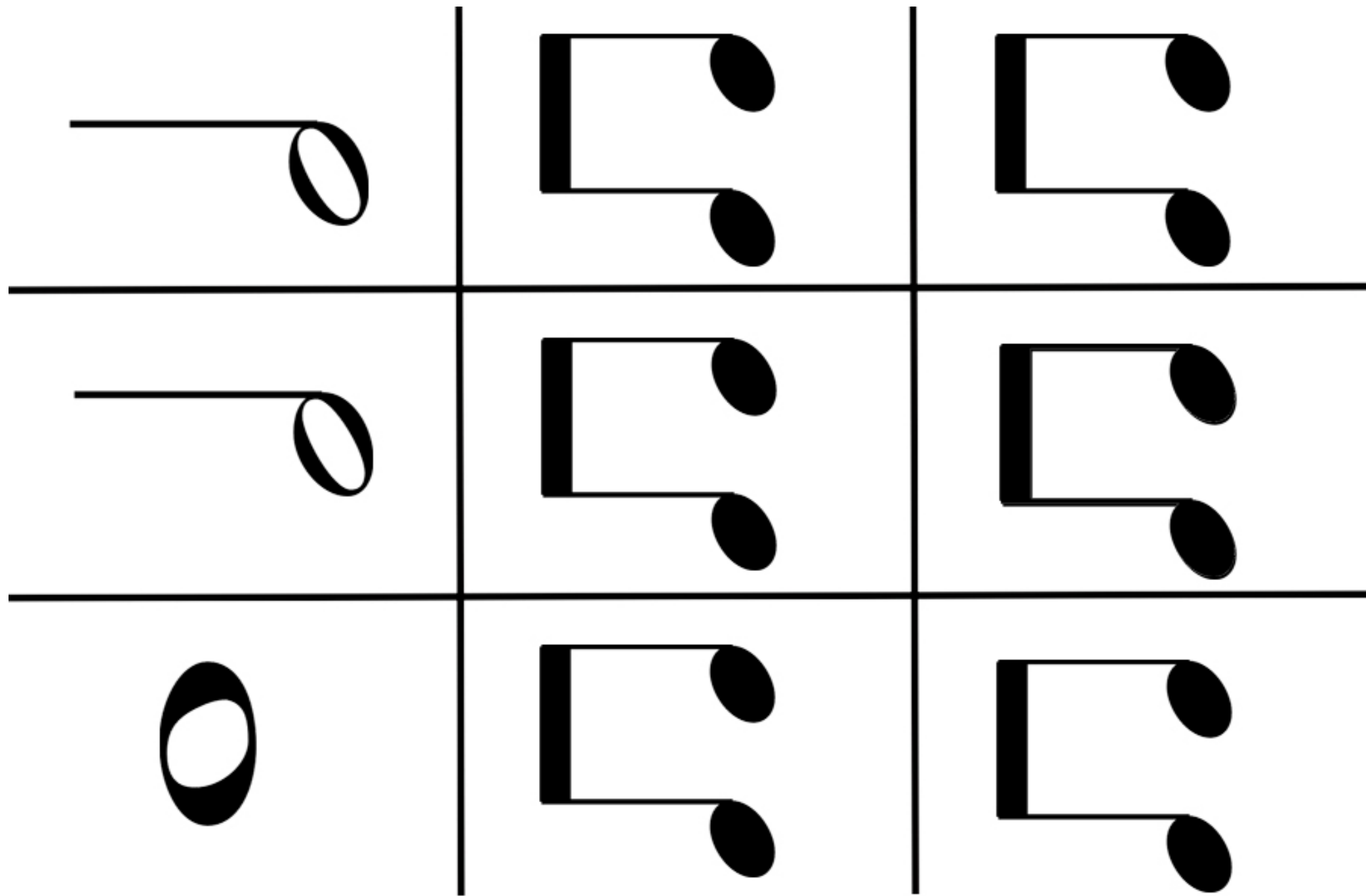
SHARE
A
BEAT



EIGHTH NOTE
LITTLE TWINS

SHARE
A
BEAT







THE CLOCK SONG

BARBARA CASS BEGS
ARR. SARA MULLET

Grand - fa-ther's clock goes Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.

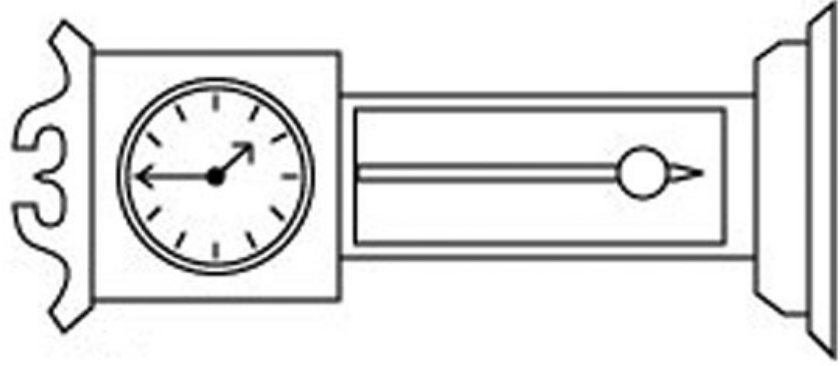
Mu-mmy's ki - tchen clock goes Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock

My lit tle watch goes Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick

tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick STOP!

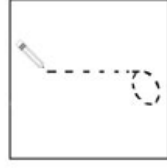
LET'S PLAY MUSIC

THE CLOCK SONG



t-i-i-ck t-o-ck

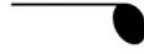
GRANDFATHER CLOCK



tick

tock

MUMMY'S KITCHEN CLOCK

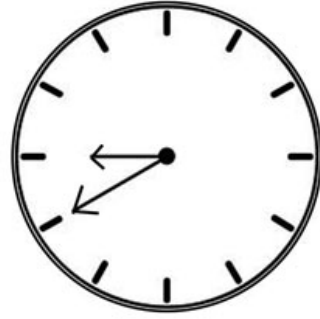


tick

tock

tick

tock

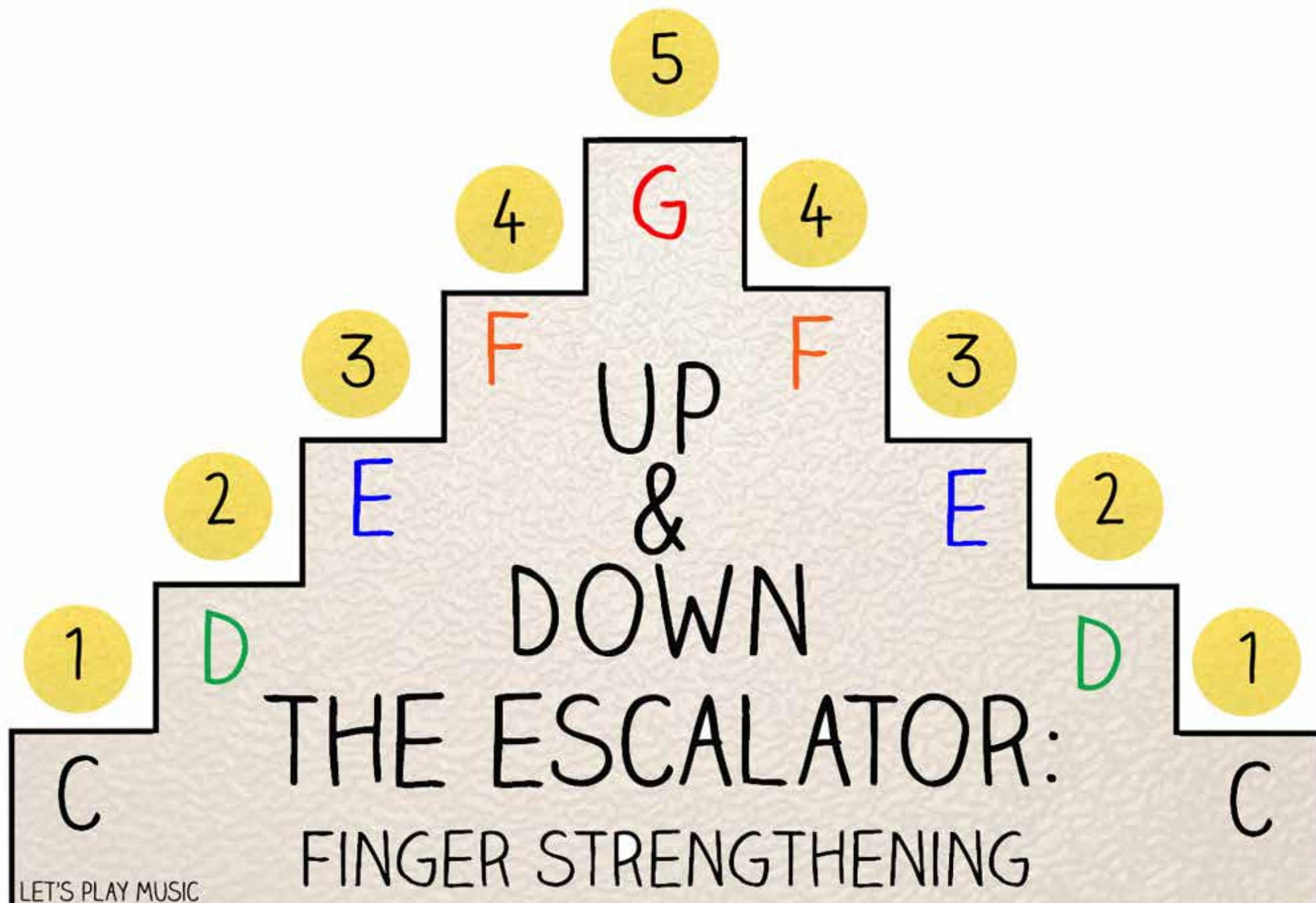


MY LITTLE WATCH



tick-tock tick-tock

tick-tock tick-tock



LET'S PLAY MUSIC

DO	RE	MI	FA	SO	LA	TI	DO
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

1 2 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS

C D C D C D C

2 3 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS

D E D E D E D

3 4 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS

E F E F E F E

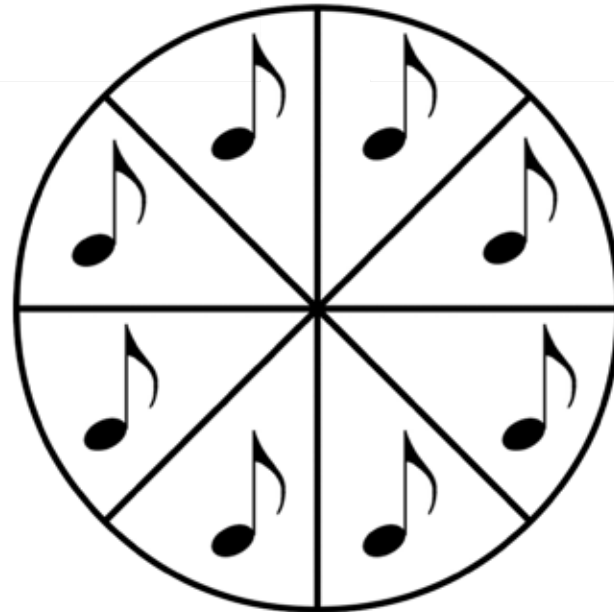
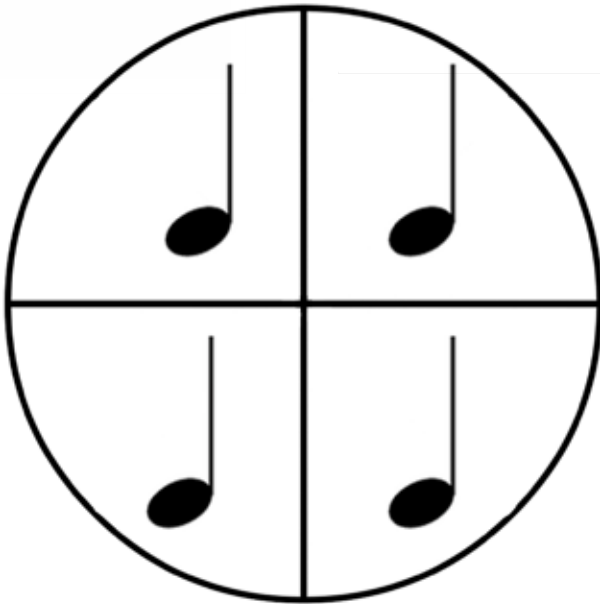
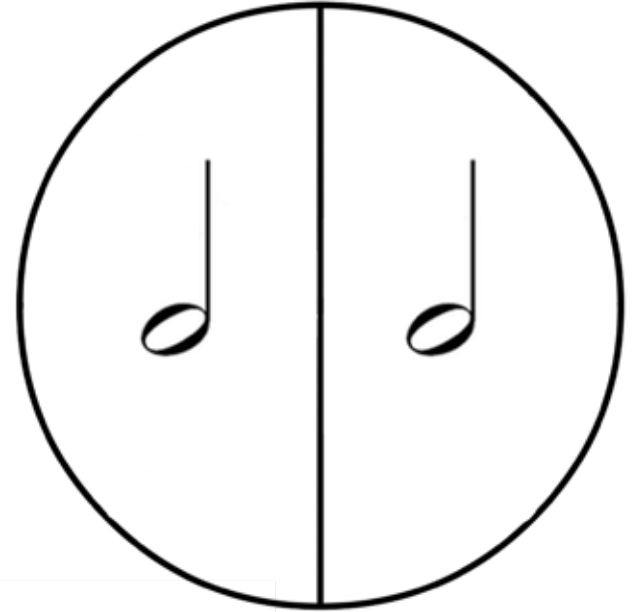
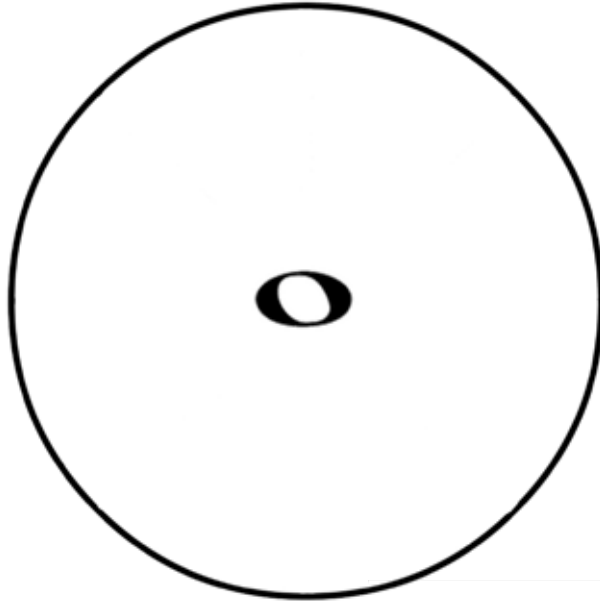
4 5 I LIKE STI-CKY CAN-DY FLOSS

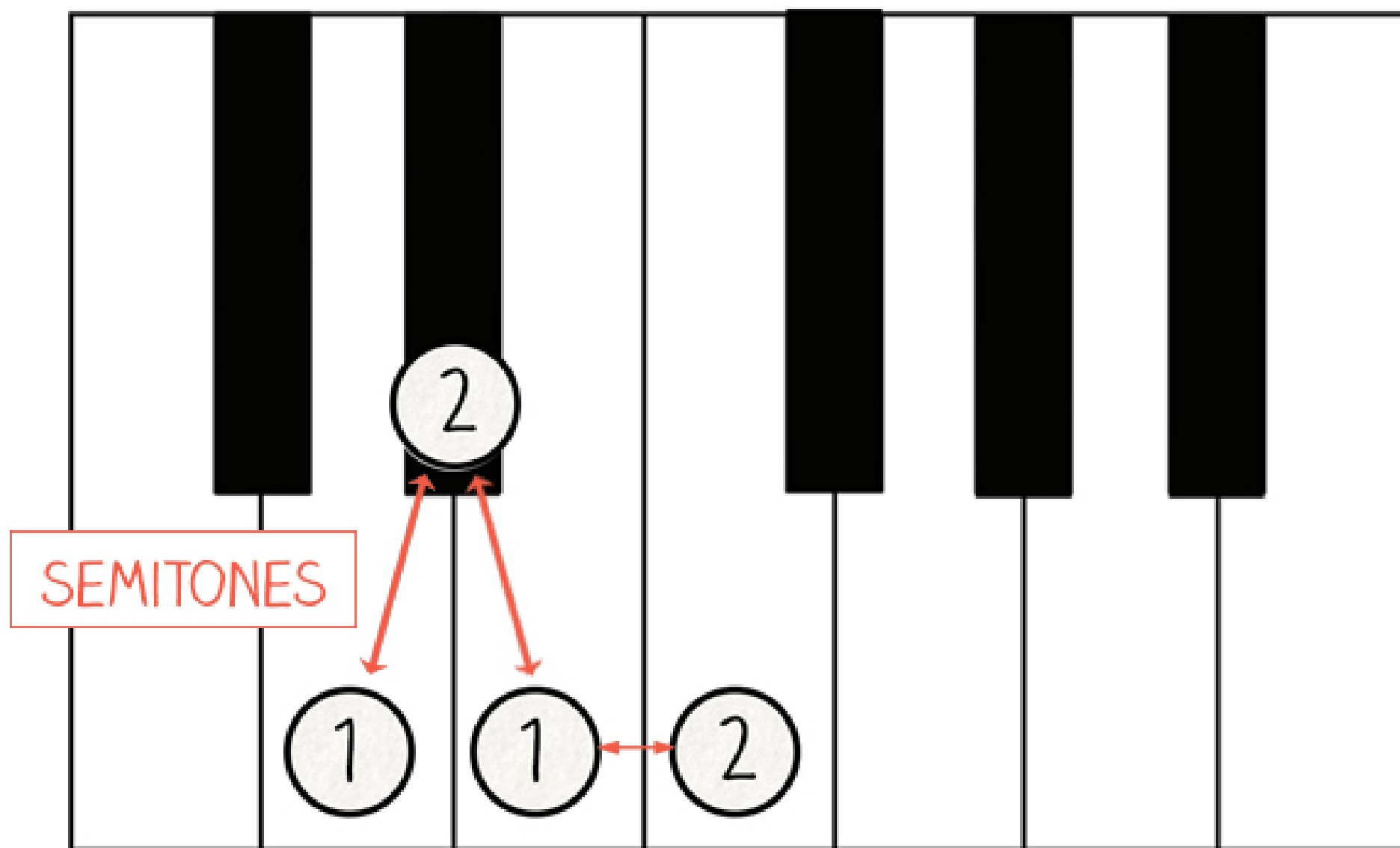
F G F G F G F

(AND THEN DO IT IN REVERSE, ALL THE WAY BACK TO C)



Piano Fingering Strengthening Exercises

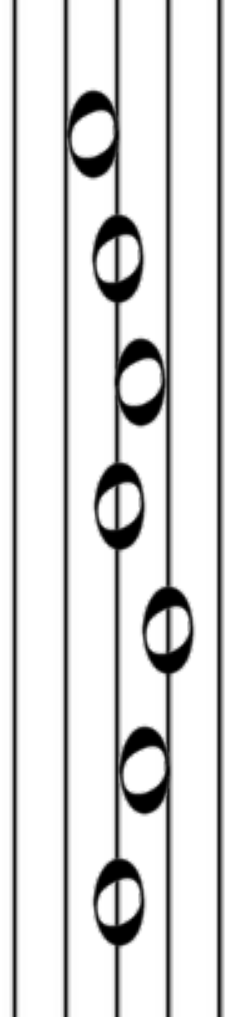




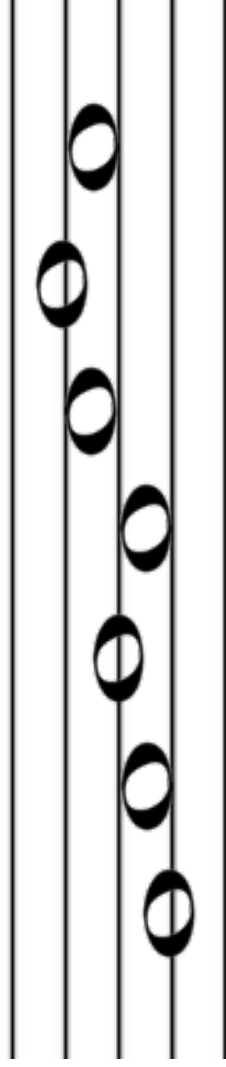
SPOT THE FROG!

LET'S PLAY MUSIC

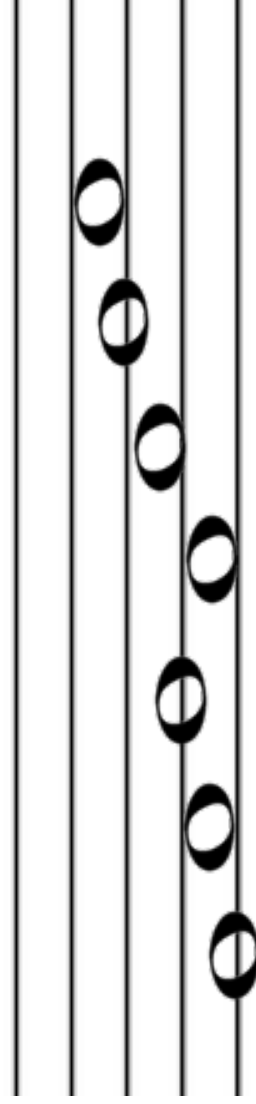
A



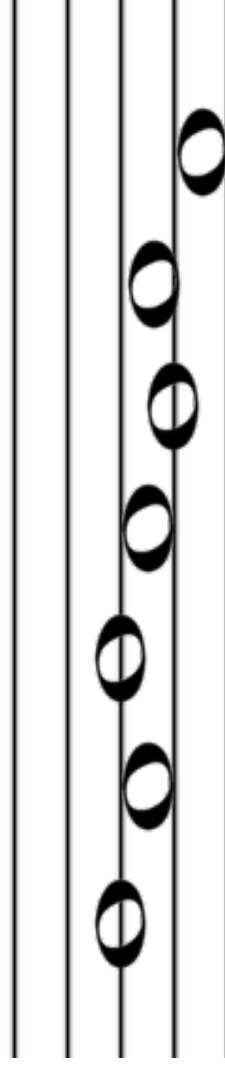
B



C



D



1. ON THE PAGE, PLACE YOUR FINGER ON THE FIRST NOTE AND SLIDE IT ALONG THE SNAKE, SAY IF IT GOES UP OR DOWN AND CAN YOU SPOT WHERE THE FROG HOPS?
2. ON THE PIANO, START ON ANY KEY, WITH ANY FINGER AND PLAY THE NOTES, LOOK CAREFULLY TO SEE IF THEY SLIDE UP OR DOWN OR IF THE FROG HOPS!

THE DICE GAME

[illegible]

LET'S PLAY MUSIC

Appendix: Useful reSources

There are many wonderful beginners piano books available to choose from and everyone has their favourites, but these are some of the ones I have found most useful over the years:

- Chester's Easiest Piano Books 1, 2 & 3
- John Thompson Easiest Piano Course 1, 2 & 3
- Chester's Easiest Blues & Chester's Easiest First Solos
 - Roundabout - Alan Houghton
(16 very pieces written for 5 finger position)
 - Upgrade - Pamela Wedgewood
(21 contrasting pieces for young beginners)
 - The Classic Piano Course
(complete piano course for older beginners with lots of simple arrangements of well known classics)

