



# How to Play Popular Piano in 10 Easy Lessons: The Fastest, Easiest Way to Learn to Play from Sheet Music or by Ear

By Norman Monath

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“Anyone who can dial a telephone can learn to play popular piano quickly and easily.”

So says Norman Monath, author of *How to Play Popular Piano in 10 Easy Lessons*. His no-frills, no-drills method will have you playing simple tunes within thirty minutes—even if you don't know one note from another.

The secret? Learning the basic chords and how to adapt them. With lots of clearly illustrated chord examples, keyboard diagrams and practice pieces ranging from “Silent Night” to “Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head,” Monath teaches you:

- the basic structure of music
- how to alter the basic chords for creative accompaniment
- how to read tunes from sheet music
- how to improvise
- how to play by ear
- how to create your own playing style—whether you lean toward pop, blues, jazz or rock

For everyone from rank beginner to experienced virtuoso, this step-by-step, uncomplicated guidebook makes learning to play popular piano the easy and enjoyable experience it should be.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Sammy Cahn President, Songwriter's Hall of Fame I have "High Hopes" this book can teach you to play -- "All the way" -- and you know you can't "Call Me Irresponsible."

#### About the Author

**Norman Monath** has taught piano and has professionally for more than 25 years. He has written numerous songs, some in collaboration with Hal David and Cahn. During his tenure as music editor at Simon and Schuster, he edited the songbooks of Gershwin, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Burt Bacharach/Hal David, Cole Porter and many others.

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### Chapter 1

#### The Piano Keyboard

It would be helpful for you to know something about the construction of the piano keyboard, so I am going to assume you are seated in front of a piano and don't know one note from another. This is what you are looking at:

#### BLACK KEYS AND WHITE KEYS

The keyboard is a combination of black keys and white keys, the black ones forming a pattern of twos and threes, or twins and triplets, we might say. This pattern makes it easy for us to spot the various notes. For example, the white key immediately to the left of the twins is C and, following the sequence of the alphabet, the white one immediately to the left of the triplets is F.

The standard keyboard has eight C's. The one in the middle (fourth one up from the left) is called "middle C." You need only know the first seven letters of the alphabet to name the white keys, as you can see from the example above.

Although the piano keyboard looks quite large, it really consists of a series of duplications. The same notes keep repeating themselves as you go from one end of the piano to the other. The five different black keys and seven different white ones constitute all the twelve tones that have been used for centuries in the music of Western civilization as the basis for all the melodies and harmonies of all the symphonies and songs that you hear. Twelve different tones -- that's all -- and you can play anything by Bach, Beethoven or the Beatles.

Incidentally, none of this technical information about the construction of the piano keyboard is anything you will have to memorize or keep in mind while you are playing. It is only for your background information, but well worth a few paragraphs because it will put a lot of other important information in perspective for you. For example, if you were a foreigner inquiring about how to get from New York to Florida, my telling you about the difference in climate between the two states would not help you get there; but it would be useful to know that you shouldn't bother bringing a fur-lined overcoat with you. Similarly, knowing something about the mechanics of music will help you make subconscious judgments about the options you may have at any given time.

If you are near a piano as you read this, you might try playing the twelve notes beginning with middle C, going from left to right or vice versa. You will notice that there is no difference between the sounds made by the white keys compared to the black keys. By this I mean that if you were to close your eyes and a friend were to play various notes, you would not be able to tell which were the result of black or white keys being struck (unless you had absolute pitch, meaning that you would know exactly which notes were being sounded). Therefore, you might well ask why we need black keys as well as white.

There are basically two reasons. If the piano consisted of all white keys, it would be half-again as wide. That's because the black keys are fitted between the white ones in such a way as not to take up any additional space. Imagine trying to fit a standard eighty-eight-key piano into your living room if it consisted only of the standard-size white keys! And even if your living room could accommodate so wide a piano, imagine yourself trying to play it from one end to the other without a sliding stool!

The second reason for space-saving black keys is that it makes it possible for the average-size hand to stretch an *octave*; that is, from one C to the next one above, or one D to the next above. The interval of an octave is very important, since it enables you to *double* a particular tone. After learning to play melodies using one finger at a time with your right hand, you may find it much richer-sounding in some instances to play the melody in octaves. Also, within the comfortable span of the octave (which you usually play with your thumb and pinky) any of the eleven other tones are playable in between. This allows you to add one or more other tones that may be in keeping with the particular harmony of the tune. In discussing this now, I admit that I'm jumping ahead a bit. Therefore, if you don't quite understand the implications of adding harmonies within octaves, please don't be discouraged. All will become clear to you before you reach the end of this book.

At this point all you need to know are the designations of the white keys -- C, D, E, etc. An exercise you might try is to strike white keys at random and see how quickly you can name them. You will be surprised at how soon recognition of the notes will become second nature to you.

Now we are ready to name the black keys. These actually take their names from their neighboring white ones. For example, let's look at the "twins."

The first black key with the arrow pointing to it is between C and D. Therefore, it will take its name from the C or D on either side. Since it is higher in pitch than the white C (sharper, you might say), it can be called "C sharp." The symbol for a sharp is #, and so instead of spelling out the word, we simply write C#. On the other hand, that same black key in the example above is lower in pitch than its neighboring D (flatter, you might say) and so it may be called "D flat," which is written as Db.

The second arrow in the illustration above points to a further example of how a black note derives its designation from its surrounding neighbors. In this case we are looking at the black key between D and E, which therefore may be called D# or Eb. The reason why we might choose one designation instead of the other is explained in Lesson Five.

For the time being, learn to call black keys by either name, so that if I were to ask you to play C# or Db or Eb, you would have no hesitation in finding the key. Similarly, the black key between the white F and white G may be called F# or Gb. The black keys, therefore, are:

The principle behind the above designations is this: To sharp *any* note simply play the note immediately to its right; to flat *any* note, play the note immediately to its left. Therefore, if you were asked to play E#, what would you play? Answer: the white F. What would Cb be? Answer: the white B. In popular music for the piano, however, you will probably never encounter a Cb or a B#. Instead you will see a B for Cb or a C for

B# because it's much more direct. However, you should understand the principle involved in creating sharps and flats.

While on the subject of sharps and flats, you should know there is such a thing as a *double* sharp and a *double* flat. The symbol for the first is #, not ##, although bb is the symbol for the latter. An F double sharp (F##) is simply the note G. The rationale is that you are taking F# (a single sharp) and sharpening it once again by moving up another half-step. Similarly, E double flat (Ebb) is the note D. Now that you know this, file and forget it. The double sharp and double flat are almost never used in popular music, but at least you won't be shocked if you do see either of these symbols.

Once again I suggest that you try a simple exercise at the piano. Hit the black keys at random and see if you can name them quickly. At first, try thinking of them as sharps; then refer to them by their flat names. If it takes time for you to figure out the designations, don't be discouraged. When you start to play melodies, you will find that you have ample time to figure out the name of one note before playing another. Most melodies are very slow. For example, hum the first four notes of Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," which is a fast song, relatively speaking. With your fingers, tap the four beats of those notes and you'll observe how surprisingly slow they seem to be in relation to how fast they sound when played by a band. That's because a band might include a drummer whose rat-tat-tat creates an illusion of speed that the melody alone doesn't actually have. Further, if the band included violins playing tremolos, and clarinets playing high the melody would appear to be going a hundred miles an hour. Now, here's the beautiful part: When you sit down at the piano and play the melody at two miles an hour, it will not be that way by you or anyone listening to you. Your ears will hear all the fast orchestrations that have become associated with that song and it will sound like you are playing the notes much more quickly. (I resisted saying that you are playing at the speed of sound!)

The reason I've pointed out that tempo or speed is an illusion is that so much more of music performance is illusory. Too many people have been frightened away from trying to play because of the illusion rather than the reality. Piano playing can look and sound so much harder than it really is, just as a magic trick can appear to be impossible until you learn the surprisingly simple explanation.

## INTERVALS

You now know the names of all the keys on the piano. But here is one more thing you should know about the intervals, or distances, between the keys: All adjacent keys are considered to be one half-step (or semitone or half-tone) apart. In other words, the interval between C and C# is a half-step, just as the interval between E and F is a half-step. The fact that C and C# are a white and a black key while E and F are both white has no relevance in measuring intervals: Adjacent keys of any color are a half-step apart.

Similarly, the interval between C and D is a *whole* step (or whole tone), as is the interval between E and F#. From D to F is an interval of a tone and a half; the keys D and F# are *two* tones apart as are the keys C and E, and so on.

The concept of intervals is something you should know about but not something you will have to keep in the forefront of your consciousness. By understanding intervals, you will understand the logic of how the various chords are formed. But in order to play chords, you won't need to count intervals -- you'll play them by sight.

Just as quickly as you can find middle C you will be able to strike a C chord, for example. That will become clear to you within a very few pages.

In closing this lesson, I would like to point out an interesting fact. If for some reason you were to stop

reading this book right now and didn't see a piano for the next ten years, I would be willing to bet anything that you would be able to name every note on the keyboard. All that you have learned up to now would be fresh in your mind.

So you see, learning to play the piano is not difficult. It is made up of many simple bits of information, once learned never forgotten.

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