

Sharing the Bench With Animals

By Victoria H. McArthur

King Cat's Flats, by N. Jane Tan. The Willis Music Co., Florence, KY 41022-0548, 1995. 16 pp., \$5.95.

N. JANE TAN, AUTHOR of the exhaustive *The Well-Prepared Pianist*, has found her compositional voice. In *King Cat's Flats*, she has achieved that often illusive balance between aesthetic music and pedagogical necessity. The collection is about a cat who was king and who loved flats.

The charming story, rife with alliteration inspired by key signature names, was written by Regina L. Tan.

The little suite opens with an assertive fanfare in the key of C that contains many patterns featuring harmonic fifths and parallel melodic figures played hands together. The hands generally move in parallel motion as patterns reassert themselves across the keyboard. Easy and repetitive accent pedaling is indicated. Students generally enjoy loud pieces using fifths, so they'll love this more subtle and artistic application of the same principle.

Music in the second piece, "The Flat-Footed Frog," inspires hops from lily pads always a fifth apart. Tan's use of short repeated rhythmic figures built on quarter- and eighth-notes both unifies and simplifies the entire collection. Students with only cursory introductions to eighth-notes will have little trouble performing and understanding these rhythms. In this piece, the hands get to attempt simple antiphony of the rhythmic figure. Tan enjoys using the Picardy third here and elsewhere in the suite, a technique which brightens the mood.

In "The Flat-Tailed Blue Bird," the slurred melodic figures also produce lovely, graceful gestures when played musically. This pretty piece is built predominantly from fifths and fourths and moves all over the keyboard, mostly by octaves. (This kind of writing can be hard to read initially due to clef changes, but students quickly memorize the shifts.)

"The Flat-Finned Electric Eel" features a hypnotic accompanying motive for the right hand. In order to play this evenly, students will need to master the technique of small rotation. This piece also specifies legato pedaling. The overall effect is somewhat "new age," making this one a sure hit with many players.

"The Flat-Nosed Aardvark" (now with four flats) has a comical flair to its ambling, awkward-sounding melody. The left-hand has the most rhythmic interest, with quarter- and eighth-notes appearing in yet another combination. Students will need to learn a useful, curvilinear gesture in order not to bang the repeated eighths played by the thumb.

In "The Flat-Eared Dalmatian," Tan once again recycles the same intervals, articulations, and rhythms, only this time in a light-hearted and bouncy musical context. In the last piece, the King Cat celebrates in six flats. This aura of congratulatory festivity is somewhat contrary to the mood in which most of us received our first piece with six flats! Tan re-employs the "loud harmonic fifths" principle with success. Students will also encounter metric changes from 3/4 to 2/4 which, due to the familiarity of the rhythms, will cause few performance problems for diligent counters. This triumphant piece should be heard at recitals and other public events.

This first-rate collection is beautifully illustrated in two colors. As a bonus, the last page suggests ways to teach and perform the works.

Animal Magic, by Dennis Alexander. Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., PO. Box 10003, 16380 Roscoe Blvd., Van Nuys, CA 91410-0003, 1994. 16 pp., \$4.95.

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE that the composer of this volume also wrote *Simply Sensational* and *Just For You*. Lately it has become clear that Dennis Alexander has

much to say compositionally. He prefaces this collection by saying that "the world of animals can open up so many creative avenues from both composing and performing perspectives."

The first piece, "There's a Hippo In My Tree!," uses eighth-notes but stays in C-position for both hands. The melodic figure is repetitive. Schedule some rehearsal time for the teacher duet which is difficult due to challenging fingering and articulations. "Woodpecker Blues" moves through several different five-finger positions. Many students will struggle to play the difficult articulations up to tempo.

The "Cantankerous Kangaroo" is a delightful, highly-patterned piece. There are no eighth-notes and the crossed-hands gesture will be fun for most players.

"A Hairy Canary Named Fred" "kept singing his song, it was terribly long, and he sang till he finally dropped dead!" The piece is mostly in D-position, with some hand-crossings and moving to other positions. There is an awkward, hands-intertwined passage in measures 8 through 15 that would be simpler had it been divided between the hands as in measures 24 through 28 (identical notes).

In "Slippery, Slimery, Slithery Snake," students will encounter many hand-crossings, clef changes, and accidentals. This piece sounds vaguely whole-tone and contemporary due to the clusters, adeptly fingered 4-3-2 for the left hand. "No Non-Scents" has no lyrics; instead, the player must concentrate on projecting the bitonal melodies. Up-to-tempo crisp articulations will be another challenge. Some students will enjoy this interesting piece. I wonder about the skunk imagery.

In "Gnu Sounds," Alexander again writes difficult articulations at a playful tempo. It was a savvy move to have the hands play in contrary motion when the hands-together chromatic figure occurs at measure 17.

This delightful collection will appeal strongly to young elementary students with well above-average technical skills.

Aquarium, by Papp Lajos. Editio Musica Budapest, H-1370 Budapest, POB 322, 1994. [Distributed by Boosey & Hawkes Ltd., 52 Cooper Square, 10th Fl, New York, NY 10003; Fax: (212) 979-7056.] 20 pp.

On a far-off continent was a curious cat,
 The king of a country, a lover of flats.
 A flat is a jewel that sparkles and shines.
 One day the king said, "All flats must be mine!"
 He commanded a contest to be held for one day
 So that all his subjects could bring flats as they may.



King Cat's Fanfare

With sparkling gaiety

N. Jane Tan

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