

» a Little Book on »

HOW TO
PLAY
THE
PIANO



JAMES RHODES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *INSTRUMENTAL*

HOW TO
PLAY
THE
PIANO

JAMES RHODES



HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO
Copyright © James Rhodes 2016, 2019

Originally published in the UK by Quercus in 2016.
First published in North America by The Experiment, LLC, in 2019.

The moral right of James Rhodes to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief passages quoted in newspaper, magazine, radio, television, or online reviews, no portion of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The Experiment, LLC, 220 East 23rd Street, Suite 600, New York, NY 10010-4658
theexperimentpublishing.com

Many of the designations used by manufacturers and sellers to distinguish their products are claimed as trademarks. Where those designations appear in this book and The Experiment was aware of a trademark claim, the designations have been capitalized.

The Experiment's books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk for premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising or educational use. For details, contact us at info@theexperimentpublishing.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rhodes, James, 1975- author.

Title: How to play the piano / James Rhodes.

Description: New York, NY : The Experiment, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018056926 (print) | LCCN 2018057188 (ebook) | ISBN 9781615195497 (ebook) | ISBN 9781615195480 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Piano--Instruction and study. | Bach, Johann Sebastian, 1685-1750. Wohltemperierte Klavier, 1. T. Nr. 1.

Classification: LCC MT247.B18 (ebook) | LCC MT247.B18 R56 2019 (print) | DDC 786.2/193--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018056926>

ISBN 978-1-61519-548-0

Ebook ISBN 978-1-61519-549-7

Cover and text design by Beth Bugler

Author photograph by Jan Martí Cervera | Illustrations by Amber Anderson

Manufactured in China

First printing April 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Chapter 1

Why do this?

Learning a musical instrument can unlock the door to a new dimension that many of us have forgotten even exists. If listening to music is soothing for the soul, then playing music is achieving enlightenment. It's going from kicking a ball around in the park with a few pals to playing alongside Ronaldo.

I'm going to make you a promise: This book will give you all the tools necessary to have you playing a piano masterpiece by Johann Sebastian Bach within six weeks. All you need are two hands; one, or preferably two, eyes; this book; and access to a piano or an electric keyboard. If it's a keyboard, then make sure it has at least a four-octave range and a sustain pedal (most of them will have this). You can get one online for under \$60. Or you can buy a \$100,000 Steinway grand. I leave it to you, although if you do have that kind of cash to spare, congratulations. And perhaps you'll invite me around to play with your shiny new piano.

HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

Cooler yet, you only need to find forty-five minutes' practicing time a day. Bearing in mind the average professional musician practices four to six hours a day, you're getting off pretty lightly. Plus you can have one day off a week. Sounds achievable, no?

In the spirit of the world we live in I have made this method as simple, as immediate, as instantly gratifying, and as easy as possible. It's Tinder for aspiring pianists. By the end of this process (or awakening if you want to get all spiritual), you will be able to sit down at a keyboard, electric, or otherwise, and play a piece of music by Bach. You will be able to do this even if you've never touched a piano before; even if you can't read music; even if you claim not to have a musical bone in your body (this one is such a common refrain and yet such rubbish—I'll explain why later). If you used to play an instrument as a child but gave it up, so much the better; you now get to play again without a teacher haranguing you about rhythm worksheets, or parents guiltig you over practicing your scales ad infinitum.

I'll be honest. What this won't do is have you playing Rachmaninov concertos and Chopin sonatas. If you find you want to progress to the next level after this, then you'll need to find a teacher and start to study things in a bit more depth. Part of me is hoping this book will act as a kind of musical springboard for some and get a few more people taking up the piano.

To make things a bit easier, and to help explain some of the more complex parts, I've made some short videos that can be

found at jamesrhodes.tv—feel free to use these in conjunction with the book as they'll help you progress faster. You will find a copy of the sheet music inserted in this book. If you lose it, or want another copy, you can also download it from my website.

The piece I've chosen, Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C major, is only thirty-five bars long. And, rather cleverly, each bar involves only eight notes, most of which are almost always repeated to make sixteen notes per bar. What that means is, allowing for two bars a day, you need only learn SIXTEEN NOTES per day. I'm giving you a week to come to grips with the basics of piano playing and to learn to read music; three weeks to learn your bar a day; and then two weeks to join up those bars into one continuous piece and turn it into a performance.

Of course, if you're feeling inspired, you could easily shorten this considerably by learning three or four bars a day. The important thing, and perhaps the surprising thing, is how much you are going to enjoy the process of practicing. Trust me on this one.

But you might well want to take it deliberately slowly. We live in a world of distractions. We are working longer hours than ever before, facing immense pressures, and undergoing unheard-of changes in everything from medicine to technology. The society in which we live is moving faster than ever before in myriad ways, and as a species, we are struggling to keep grounded, let alone keep up. It's part of the reason mindfulness has its own

HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

section in bookshops, therapy is becoming one of the biggest growth sectors, and doctors are handing over mood-stabilizing pills out the wazoo.

The thing is, the lovely consequence of pursuing a creative activity is that, by its very definition, it looks inside of us rather than outside—it is a kind of stillness meditation for the soul. When you're sitting there at your keyboard, you're not going to be tweeting or liking Facebook posts, nor are you going to be assaulted by adverts, eating fast food, staring at cat videos online, or watching America's Next Top Model. It'll be you, focused, immersed, losing time in a good way, tapping into that potential we all have to release our inner creativity. Which is exactly what meditation does for us. And you end up not only feeling more chill and zen, but also playing the piano beautifully. A win-win. You might even get that girl or guy to fall in love with you, or engage your teenage children in something new and glorious.

Finding three-quarters of an hour a day to do this will produce profound results, both as far as your piano playing is concerned, but also in regards to your mood. The latest research (from Susan Hallam, professor emeritus of education and music psychology at University College London) shows that learning an instrument improves discipline, self-confidence, focus, problem-solving, language, literacy, math, and personal well-being. It increases the capacity of your memory, improves time management and organizational skills, enhances

coordination, decreases stress, enhances your respiratory system, and promotes happiness in your life and that of those around you. Playing music can be an efficient way to stimulate the brain, establishing and strengthening new and existing connections, cutting across a broad swathe of its regions and cognitive functions, causing ripple effects through the decades (need I go on?). This is even the case “when measures of intelligence are taken into account.” So you can be a complete dunce (waves at the camera) and still benefit from the fact that learning to play the piano makes you a more rounded and fulfilled person.

It can also make you more sociable, contrary to what you might think at first. You can do it with your children, a friend, a partner. It can be an inclusive thing that pushes back in some small way against our increasing isolation and our slightly alarming habit of forgetting to connect with others. There was a period not so long ago when, in the USA, there were more pianos than there were bathtubs. And I’m pretty sure that was a happier albeit smellier, less pressured environment. All of which makes it even more depressing that music education has all but fallen off the edge of a cliff in the last decade. The truth is that this book should not need to exist—every child in the country could and should be learning pieces of music like this as an integral part of their education. But governments have eroded music education and now we are beyond crisis point, and so it’s

HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

something we're going to have to look to ourselves to achieve.

Time, of course, is the great excuse of our age. Forty-five minutes a day is, it will be claimed by many, simply impossible. False! I've gone to the bathroom for longer than forty-five minutes! Let's break things down a little: You get eight hours to sleep (I'm feeling generous), ten hours to work, four hours to feed the kids, get dressed, shower, etc. We have two hours left. A precious, wonderful, spacious two hours, and what do we do? We watch the latest reality TV show, complain about things online, sit on the sofa stupefied, stare at our screens, discuss the butt of the latest Kardashian on Twitter, anything to avoid being alone with our thoughts.

Enough.

Downtime is vital, of course it is, but there is room for all of it, I promise. I quit my job in the City of London aged twenty-eight and decided, having not played the piano for a decade (and being, at best, mediocre as a teenager), to become a concert pianist. Which, admittedly, is a little extreme. But I am convinced there is a middle ground where work and family responsibilities can be met while still finding space for our own creative pursuits.

So let's get cracking.



Chapter 2

The Basics

Go slow on this chapter. It's only fair to warn you that this "go slow" business is going to be something of a constant refrain in this book. You'll likely want to punch me several times, but it will save you so much time in the long term, I promise. You'll often feel like you're back at school with its attendant frustrations and sense of stupidity (it wasn't just me, was it?), but once you've mastered these basic points you'll be in terrific shape.

Here we go.

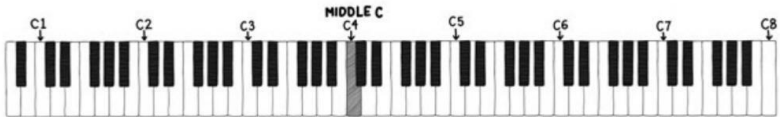
The keyboard

The piano has eighty-eight keys—fifty-two white keys and thirty-six black keys. The white keys represent the musical notes A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. The black keys differ from the white

JAMES RHODES

These keys are the ABCs of the piano. The white ones are named from A to G, and the black ones are known as either x-sharp or x-flat, depending on if it is a half-step higher (sharp) or lower (flat) than the corresponding note name.

When you first start learning the piano, everything starts with Middle C which is, predictably, the note right in the middle of the keyboard and the best place to orient yourself when you first sit at the piano.

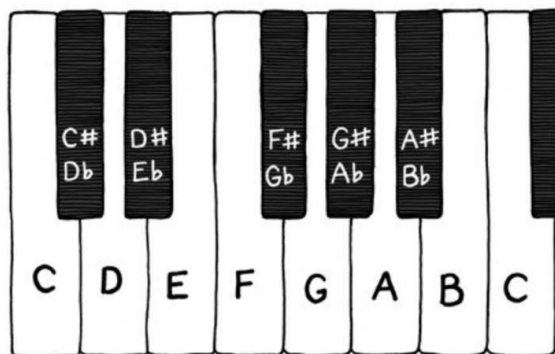


HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

Spend some time now looking at the keyboard and exploring the notes, just to get a feel for what each note is called. Explore things by letting your fingers fall on random notes and see if you can name them. Use the eighty-eight-key image on page 8 to help, if you like.

Try not just the middle octave, but ones higher up and lower down, too, and see how they form the same patterns and groups throughout the entire span of the keyboard. It's no different (in fact it's actually easier) than learning where the letters are on a computer keyboard, which most of you can presumably do quite happily without thinking. Soon it'll be the same with the piano keys. The first step in learning the piano is being able to name all the keys on the keyboard. Please don't move on until you can drop your finger onto any random key and name it without too much hesitation.

Now you've got this, find an E (maybe the one just above middle C) and try playing it three times. Now play the same E three times again. Now play E, the G above it, and then the C and D below it and then the E again (see the following image if you need help with the notes).



Now go and celebrate, because you've played the opening of "Jingle Bells," and because a day or two ago you wouldn't have known where to start had I asked you to do that.

What music looks like

Here comes the really important part and the one that will take the most time: learning to read music. And by that I mean that you are going to be able to translate black dots of ink on a page through your fingers and onto the piano keys, so you can bring to life something composed three hundred years ago that still makes the greatest minds of our world balk in disbelief.

Before you chuck this book away and think this is beyond you, bear in mind that children can learn to do this effortlessly

HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO

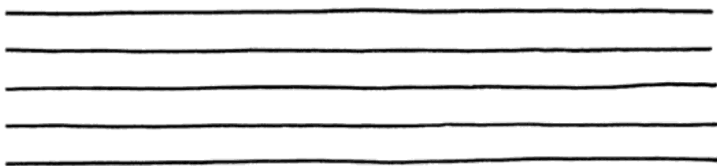
and easily. So don't whine, just knuckle down and get it out of the way. It'll take an hour to get the basics, and a couple more hours of consolidating that info until it becomes natural. All you're going to be doing is learning how to read a new, simple language that only has twelve letters.

Here is how musical notation works:

The three most basic elements that make up music on the page are the notes, the staves, and the clefs. We know about the notes; let's look at the staves and clefs now.

Staves and clefs

With piano music, there are two staves on the printed page. Each of the two staves is made up of five lines and four spaces:



Each of the two staves is usually in a different clef.

Musical notes are set out on paper on two clefs—the treble and the bass clef. Generally speaking, the right hand plays what's on the treble clef in the staff that's on the top, and the left hand plays what's on the bass clef in the staff that's on the bottom.

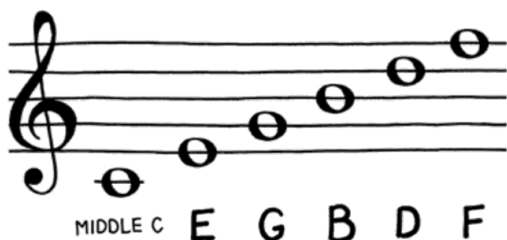


The treble clef (right hand)

Now we're going to learn what each note looks like on the staff, and which note on the keyboard it corresponds to.

The notes on the lines can be remembered by using the mnemonic Every Good Boy Deserves Food (to be honest, all boys deserve food, but we can ignore the moral implications of this). The notes in the spaces spell out FACE:

HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO



Now, you already know where these notes are on the piano keyboard because you learned that at the beginning of this chapter. The notes in the treble clef diagram above start with the E, which is two notes above middle C:

