

Relevant Repertoire for Today

By E. L. Lancaster, NCTM

Even though the title of this column is “What’s New,” I am choosing to put a new twist on the title and think in terms of “What’s Relevant.” The terms *diversity*, *equity* and *inclusion* have become important in every aspect of today’s world. It is appropriate that they also apply to the repertoire that students are studying and performing. Finding diverse repertoire is often a challenge for teachers, but with the resources that are available on the internet, it is now easier to locate such music.

Who is leading the way in finding this repertoire and making it accessible to teachers? While watching the sessions at the 2021 MTNA Virtual Conference, I found that many of the lecture recitals were based on music by women composers (especially Latin American and black women). Several of the sessions on diverse repertoire were presented by collegiate student chapters. This is logical as many research projects in piano pedagogy classes and for doctoral dissertations focus on such music. Before the internet, it was almost impossible to learn about or obtain such dissertation research. Now, many colleges and universities have repositories of their dissertations that are easily accessible anywhere in the world. The remainder of this column will be devoted to two dissertations that suggest diverse repertoire and make it easy for teachers to choose appropriate music by level. The link to both of the entire papers is given for easy access.

Repertoire by Latin American Composers

Selected music of a few Latin American composers such as Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959) from Brazil and Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983) from Argentina has entered into the standard teaching and performance literature. The music from other composers from those countries as

well as composers from such countries as Chile and Mexico deserve exploration. Teachers who wish to explore such composers can reference *A Practical Guide to Solo Piano Music* by Trevor Barnard with Elizabeth Gutierrez, published by Meredith Music Publications. This book grades the music, and there is a separate list of composers divided by country with entries from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay. Another avenue of exploration is the website of the Sonus International Music Festival (sonusinternationalmusicfestival.org) that explores the music of Carlos Guastavino (1912–2000).

While music of Villa-Lobos such as *Prole do Bebê (The Baby’s Family)*, Series I and II are well-known, other piano works of Villa-Lobos are not as frequently taught. In her dissertation, Verena Benchimol Abufaiad gives teachers a wonderful reference tool related to the 59 piano pieces in *The Guia Pratico, Álbuns Para Piano*. The pieces range from early-intermediate to early-advanced levels. Abufaiad points out that the pieces are the Brazilian equivalent to Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* in that both composers base their works on folk music from their respective countries. However, the Villa-Lobos pieces are not arranged in order of difficulty, and the easiest pieces start at a more advanced level than Bartók. More importantly, Abufaiad grades each piece based on the leveling from Jane Magrath’s *The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature* and correlates it to the appropriate level in the *Celebration Series* of the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Her entry on each individual piece provides important information that will not only help teachers choose the right level of piece for the student, but it gives important information related to compositional elements including its

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length, meter, tempo and key. She analyzes the form and points out features of the melody, rhythm and harmony. Finally, she describes both the style of piece (with several musical examples) and the technical challenges that the student might encounter. While much of this information is contained in the narrative, a succinct chart that synthesizes all of this information conveniently is given for each piece.

Abufaiad, Verena Benchimol (2019). *The Guiá Pratico, Álbuns Para Piano by Heitor Villa-Lobos: A List of Piano Pieces by Level of Difficulty with Stylistic Annotations* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, United States). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5588/>

Repertoire by Black Composers

Music by black composers has not been as easily available as the Villa-Lobos music previously discussed. Helen Walker-Hill's book, *Piano Music by Black Women Composers*

published by Greenwood Press is an excellent source that describes works and tells where it is available (often only in libraries).

In her dissertation titled *Leveling Piano Music by Black Composers*, Leah Claiborne includes similar information to Walker-Hill on the works cited. Like the Abufaiad grading, Claiborne levels each piece according to Jane Magrath's *The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature*, but she does not level according to the Royal Conservatory of Music system. Whereas the Villa-Lobos levels for *The Guiá Pratico, Álbuns Para Piano* start at early-intermediate level, the pieces by black composers begin as early as Magrath's Level 1.

Claiborne's narrative on each piece covers many of the same areas as Abufaiad's narrative, but no chart is provided that synthesizes the elements of each piece. In the descriptions, the pieces are often compared to standard teaching repertoire. This comparison can aid teachers in choosing appropriate pieces for students.

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The composers who are represented include Florence Price (1887–1953), Blanche K. Thomas (1885–1977), Ignatius Sancho (1729–1780), Ulysses Kay (1917–1995), Philippa Schuyler (1931–1967), Noah Ryder (1914–1964), William Grant Still (1895–1978), Henry Thacker Burleigh (1866–1949), Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745–1799), Irene Britton Smith (1907–1999), Arthur Cunningham (1928–1997), Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943), Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1911), Carlos Simon (b. 1986), Thomas Wiggins Bethune (1849–1908), Brittany E. Boykin (b. 1989), Charles Lambert (1828–1896), and Amanda Ira Aldridge (1866–1965). Fortunately, a brief biography of each composer is included as such information is not always readily available in other sources.

Claiborne, Leah N. (2018). *Leveling Piano Music by Black Composers*. (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States). Retrieved from [https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/146040/leahnc_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

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Both of these dissertations provide helpful information to teachers in expanding repertoire choices for students. The biggest challenge in many cases will be having easy access to the music (especially the music described in the Claiborne dissertation). A huge outpouring of “Bravos” is extended to both Verena Abufaiad and Leah Claiborne for their research that is beneficial to both teachers and students.

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