

# Chopsticks, Golliwogs And Wigwams

## The Need For Cultural Awareness In Piano Teaching Materials And Repertoire

By *Kiyoshi Tamagawa, NCTM*

An important and long overdue debate has swept across the nation in the past few years, precipitated by a horrific mass shooting at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in the summer of 2015. At the urging of their governor, legislators in that state eventually voted to remove the Confederate battle flag from its post on the state Capitol grounds, where it had flown since the early 1960s—a symbol of resistance to the civil rights movement sweeping the nation at that time. Here in my home-

town of Austin, the flagship campus of the University of Texas removed a statue of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederated States of America, from its prominent location on the academic mall. Recently, Yale University revamped its system of residential colleges. Although the name of Vice President John C. Calhoun, who described slavery as “a positive good,” will remain on one of them, two others will open bearing the names of Pauli Murray and Benjamin Franklin, renowned activists for the common good, and the title of “master,” with its slave-era connotations, will be dropped in favor of “head of college.”<sup>1</sup>

The debate continues to roil. Symbols of past ways of thinking pervade American culture, and this year once more tragically inflamed passions in Charlottesville, Virginia. Flags and statues are obvious flash points, but outmoded attitudes toward other people and cultures also remain in environments and activities not usually regarded as controversial. Music education in general, and private instrumental study in particular, are cases in

point. Many instrumental instructors would probably say that questions of race and diversity play little or no part in their pedagogy or the educational material of their students. How can these issues have anything to do with the study of technique and repertoire, or the rudiments of musical notation and theory? Yet, past the very beginning stages, almost any teacher will find that they can come up in unexpected and disturbing ways. This article will focus on two levels of study on a particular instrument, the piano, where teachers of today need to be especially sensitive to attitudes toward ethnic and cultural groups that do not reflect the progress being made in daily life.

The need for awareness begins at a surprisingly early stage of study. The material of choice for many beginning piano music methods is folk music. Repertoire pieces are frequently either based on or evoke folk music of various cultures. There are obvious reasons this should be the case. Folk songs are often repetitive and limited in range and pitch material, and do not require complex harmonization, or indeed any

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harmonization at all. Since visual elements are plentiful in many early-level piano books, incorporating folk music of unfamiliar lands and cultures gives illustrators opportunities to introduce eye-catching images.

## Exoticism And Pedagogy

How many of us can recall banging away enthusiastically on the repeated empty fifths in the bass in some “Indian war dance” or “Indian drum” piece? Repeated notes or fifths in the left hand in a duple or quadruple meter, with a minor-key or modal (Aeolian or Dorian) melody superimposed over them in the right has been the method of choice for suggesting the sound of Native American drumming and chants for many decades. This texture appears with remarkable uniformity in “Indian” pieces included in many classic piano methods, including John Thompson’s *Teaching Little Fingers to Play*, Alfred’s *Basic Piano Library* and Donald Waxman’s *Pageants for Piano* series. Here is an example similar to what one might find in these methods:

“Indian Drumming Song”

Tamagawa



Example 1: Fragment composed by the author.

So-called “Chinese” or “Oriental” pieces can also employ ostinato basses. They frequently use pentatonic scales, either on the black keys or in the simpler keys generally used in early-grade method books. This example, again composed by the author, is an imaginary composite of these devices.<sup>2</sup>

“Oriental Dance”

Tamagawa



Example 2

These fragments and similar pieces actually found in method books are representatives of a general language of musical exoticism common to Western composers, simplified for the limited technical means of beginning piano students. These may be summarized like so:

1. Drones or ostinato patterns in the left hand, with perfect fifths (usually tonic/dominant) playing a prominent role.
2. Utilization of scales other than conventional major for melodies. These may be so-called gapped scales, most familiar of these being the pentatonic scale created by playing only the black keys on the keyboard. Minor keys are made more exotic by using the lowered seventh scale degree (subtonic) rather than the conventional leading tone.
3. Simple and repetitive melodic construction, with much use of repeated notes.

The above concepts themselves are pedagogically useful and not intrinsically offensive. Black key groups are easy to locate visually and form a pleasant-sounding pitch set for simple melodies and improvisation exercises. Playing two white-key notes that are a fifth apart with the outside fingers of the hand acquaints a young student with an essential tactile sensation, that of five fingers over five notes. It helps set a good hand position and is easier to play and less stressful for developing fingers than a three-note triad.

## Exotic vs. Insensitive

Problems arise when, as in some of the most famous pedagogical materials from the earlier part of the 20th century, this repertoire is presented from a very Western- and white-centered worldview. Because successful piano methods go through many reprints, illustrations and commentaries that once were acceptable may now strike students and teachers as uncomfortable or offensive.

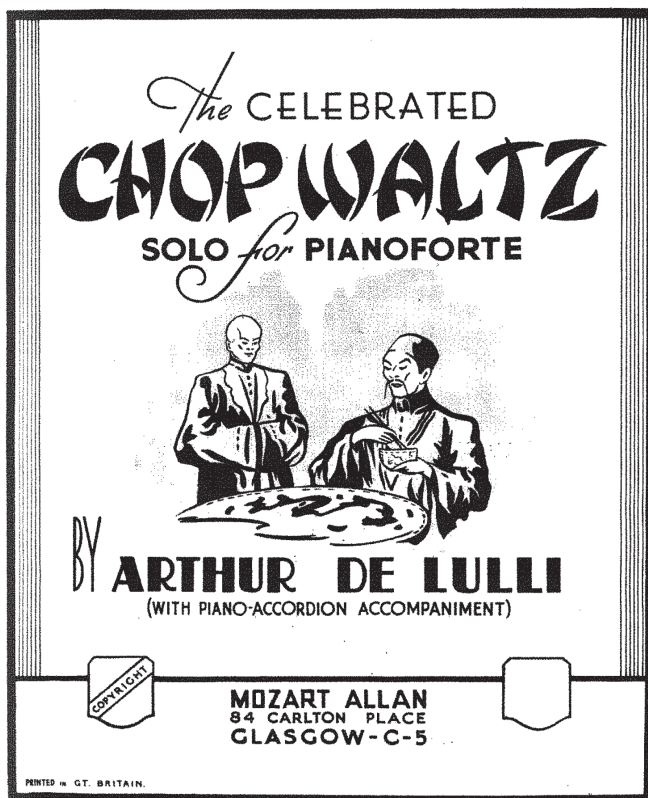
Old method books frequently use outmoded words to describe ethnic groups. “Indian” and “Oriental” have been replaced in conversation by “Native American” and “Asian,” yet the old words continue to be propagated in some texts, as well as simplistic, clichéd portrayals of non-Western people. The prose introduction to Maxwell Eckstein’s “Swinging Lanterns: A Chinese Dance,” still available in the collection *My Favorite Solo Album*<sup>3</sup> describes “little almond-eyed boys and girls...their little feet going pitter-patter ever so lightly.”<sup>4</sup>

Such stereotyped material can turn a piece that itself is not problematic into something that needs to be presented and explained very carefully. Even a universally known and beloved composition can have a history that will not stand up to close scrutiny. Perhaps the most famous example is the agreeably brainless tune known to everyone, even non-pianists, as “Chopsticks.”

Many people know, thanks to free sheet music sites such as IMSLP, that “Chopsticks” is actually a composed piece by a British woman named Euphemia Allen, writing under

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the pseudonym “Arthur de Lulli,” and that its original title was “The Celebrated Chop Waltz.”<sup>5</sup> Not as many people have seen the original sheet music cover, which reveals that this “Chop Waltz” was apparently meant to evoke Chinese dressing and eating customs, if not the sound of actual Chinese music. It is hard for a modern viewer to see this cover illustration as anything but a grotesque promulgation of racist stereotypes.



Example 3: Original cover of “The Celebrated Chop Waltz.” Public domain image. ([http://imslp.org/wiki/The\\_Celebrated\\_Chop\\_Waltz\\_\(Allen,\\_Euphemia\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Celebrated_Chop_Waltz_(Allen,_Euphemia))).

It is remarkable how the racially troubled origins of this apparently innocuous composition persist in later editions, even when the tune is included as part of a collection in a method book. For example, in a small illustration that is printed at the head of “Chopstick Revels,” a variation of the tune in the Michael Aaron method, the “Chinese” features, pointed hats, pigtailed and narrow eyes, are rendered in a minimalist but wholly recognizable fashion.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, editors of some long-running piano methods have lately shown some awareness of the problems of continuing to reprint such literature. A case in point is Michael Aaron’s method, from which the above “Chopstick Revels” is quoted, whose first edition dates from the 1940s. In the

revised edition of 1994 one of the pieces, formerly titled “Indian War Dance” and exhibiting all of the musical characteristics of “Indian” pieces noted above, has been retitled “Rockin’ On,” and is now presented, somewhat unconvincingly, as a piece in pop style.<sup>7</sup>

Music that deals with African-American subjects can present even greater difficulties. Beginning and intermediate piano repertory collections often include the best-known melodies of Stephen Foster, the beloved song composer of the 19th century. It is indisputable that Foster is one of America’s great melodists, yet students and teachers who scrutinize the lyrics of some of his most famous works can be shocked by their overt racism. The rarely sung second verse of one of his most famous songs, “Oh, Susanna,” is just one notorious example.<sup>8</sup> Less inflammatory, yet still by today’s standards unacceptable, usage is also incorporated into the lyrics of some of his most beloved works, notably “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Old Folks at Home.” “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” by James Bland is another song with lyrics that incorporate language not acceptable today. It is notable that, after being the state song of Virginia for more than half a century, it lost this distinction out of concerns that the song was offensive to African-Americans. In the latest edition of *John Thompson’s Modern Course for the Piano, the Second Grade Book*, an arrangement of this song is still included, but the preface now printed with the selection talks about the origins of beloved American songs in minstrel shows and acknowledges the “stereotypical nature” of this entertainment genre, adding that “it is a controversial subject for many.”<sup>9</sup>

## Cultural Awareness And Standard Repertoire: Debussy

When a student advances out of method books and begins to study classical piano literature by the masters, the problem of ethnic stereotyping and denigration of non-Western cultures at first seems less acute. Pieces with static or drone basses are now likely to be “musettes” and other compositions evoking bagpipes, a non-controversial subject. In addition, clashes between cultures and nationalities in the earlier style periods of the standard repertoire have receded into history. An enterprising teacher might challenge a student to discover why Mozart and Beethoven, as well as minor composers of the late-18th and early-19th centuries, were taken with so-called Turkish music. It is worth noting that increasing awareness of social injustices perpetrated on ethnic minorities in Europe as well as America has made the ubiquitous “gypsy dances” and “gypsy rondos” of the classical period suspect—Joseph Haydn’s most famous piece of chamber music notwithstanding.

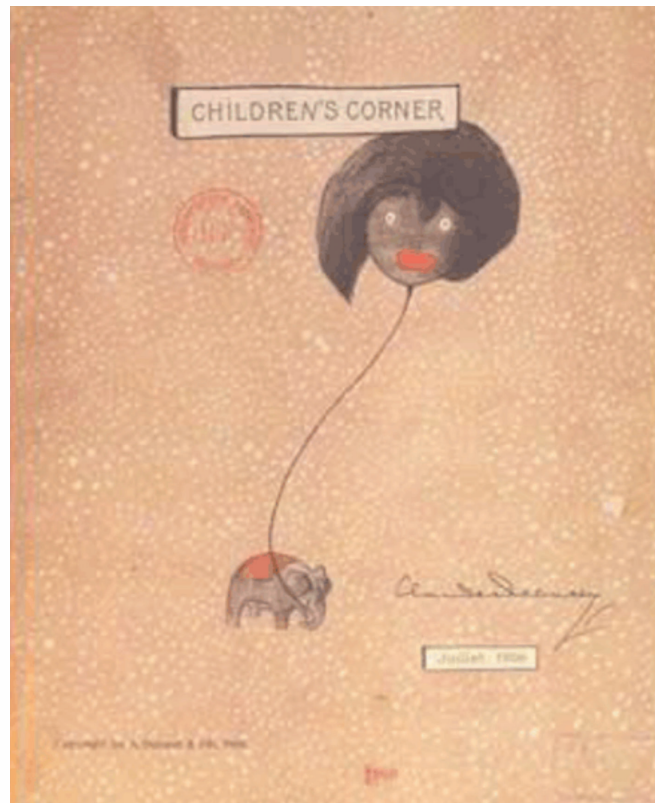


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Moving into the 20th century and closer to the present day, however, the issue once again becomes acute for admirers of one of the greatest French composers of the early 1900s. Claude Debussy is probably the most well-known of classical composers who incorporated the sounds of early jazz and ragtime into his piano music. Several of his compositions that use these idioms are frequently played by early-advanced piano students. His titles reflect the origins of the music and the attitudes toward racial minorities prevalent in his lifetime. One in particular, as shall be seen, has generated controversy.

“Minstrels” from the first volume of the *Préludes* is the most innocuous of the compositions inspired by the sounds of late-19th- and early-20th-century music halls. Using whole-tone, pentatonic and more freely chromatic pitch materials, plus a touch of bitonality to suggest an out-of-tune cornet,<sup>10</sup> it paints a raucous and amusing picture of a typical comedic performance. Nevertheless, students who study this piece should be reminded who minstrels were: white performers who used blackface makeup to propagate stereotypical behaviors of dark-skinned people, often portraying them as silly, drunken and stupid.

His 1908 suite *Children’s Corner* is one of Debussy’s most popular compositions for the piano, beloved for its tunefulness and moderate technical difficulty. Of its six movements, the finale, *Golliwog’s Cakewalk*, is the most animated and brilliant. Like *Minstrels*, it uses syncopated rhythmic patterns against a “stride bass,” a texture familiar to anyone who is acquainted with American ragtime. A student or teacher who is curious about the “golliwog” of the title will discover that the name originates from a children’s book of the late-19th century, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog*. A “golliwog” is a dark-skinned doll first described as a “horrid sight, the blackest gnome,”<sup>11</sup> but who turns out to be friendly and fun-loving. The popularity of this and later titles with the same characters resulted in Golliwog dolls being mass-produced in England, Germany and later America. Somewhere along the way the Golliwog character became associated (researchers blame American children’s author Enid Blyton<sup>12</sup>) with thievery and naughty behavior. As scholars have noted, the racial implications of the final piece of *Children’s Corner* are made vividly apparent by the original cover illustration, which depicts the black doll head of the golliwog at the end of a balloon string held by an elephant (the “Jimbo” of *Jimbo’s Lullaby*, the second piece).



Example 4: Children’s Corner, Claude Debussy, original cover art. Durand, 1908. Public domain image. Reproduced at <https://notesfromapianist.wordpress.com/2012/04/22/g-is-for-gradus-and-golliwogg-childrens-corner-suite-debussy/>.

The abbreviated term “wog” became a racial slur in Britain around World War II, though the connection of this usage to the Golliwog character is disputed. Nevertheless, the association of an originally innocuous children’s book character with racist images and discrimination is very much a part of history. The student who studies and performs this apparently artless and appealing piece by Debussy therefore unwittingly participates in disseminating a discredited image of prejudice.

Worst of all, because its original title incorporates a word that even now generates controversy and inflames passions every bit as much as the sight of the Confederate battle flag in America, is an even simpler piece than those of *Children’s Corner*. In 1909 Debussy contributed a short piece in a jazzy, syncopated style very similar to *Golliwog’s Cakewalk* to Théodore Lack’s *Méthode de piano*.<sup>13</sup> This composition’s original title, bestowed by Debussy himself (or perhaps his publisher) in imperfect English, was *The Little Nigar*. Needless to say, even misspelled no English speaker finds this an acceptable title today, and most editions of what has become one of the composer’s most popular works (judging



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by the number of editions, arrangements and transcriptions available) render the title back into French as *Le petit nègre*, which may or may not be more palatable (altering the title in English to *The Little Negro* or *The Little Black Boy* is not much better).

## Possible Approaches For Teachers

How can teachers help make their students aware of the problematic implications of the titles, lyrics and musical materials of the repertoire they might study? Or should they use this material at all? Discussions in piano teaching groups on Facebook reveal diverse opinions. There are some who simply refuse to teach anything that might be sensitive or offensive. They may carefully comb through method books to make sure no pieces of the type described above are included. Jodi Stewart-Moore uses the occasion of not assigning a piece as teaching moment about why:

On the occasion that a method book has included something objectionable, we draw an entire X through the page and have a discussion on why they won't learn it. It takes about a few minutes and kids today—at least in our community—are quite keen on understanding why we don't perpetuate discrimination. They have even written letters to the publishers.

Another, anonymous teacher tries to guide students to watch and listen to performances of authentic Native American music, examples of which are plentiful on YouTube, and learn more about their history.

I ask them if they've ever attended a pow-wow. I describe the drum circle, chanting, and dancers. The kids usually love the songs, learn them quickly, and we move on. There's one in the Alfred *Prep Course* that lists a bunch of tribes in the lyrics so I give them the assignment of looking up where each of those tribes live.

There is general agreement among teachers in online discussions that the compositions of Claude Debussy are of such musical merit that completely omitting them from a student's course of study out of principle seems unnecessarily severe. Moreover, the compositions have pedagogical value without reference to their racial implications, insofar as they show students how the apparently separate musical idioms of classical and early jazz and ragtime can be bridged. Perhaps a good principle to keep in mind when approaching this literature is one expressed by Arlene Steffen in a Facebook discussion:

We cannot ignore history. [Coming across a piece with a questionable title or lyrics] could be a teachable moment to observe how various peoples have been treated throughout history and the importance of culture, growth and awareness.

In an era of renewed discussion about racial and diversity issues, the negative implications inherent in the music and illustrations of older method books cannot simply be ignored. If teachers choose to continue to use this material, they must be sensitive to its possible offensiveness to students and parents. Compositions and images can be used in a positive manner, to raise consciousness about outmoded attitudes and stereotypes. With older students who are advancing to the standard literature, learning about the historical context of compositions by masters such as Mozart and Debussy will enrich their understanding of the music and its relationship not only to its time, but our own. ♪

## Notes

1. <http://news.yale.edu/2016/04/27/yale-retains-calhoun-college-s-name-selects-names-two-new-residential-colleges-and-change> (YaleNews online, April 27, 2016).
2. I am compelled to note that these composed examples are being used because the publishers currently controlling the copyright to excerpts I originally planned to quote either did not respond to a request for copyright clearance, or refused permission to reproduce.
3. Eckstein, Maxwell, ed. *My Favorite Solo Album: 54 Pieces in the Earlier Grades for Piano* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1944).
4. Eckstein, 16.
5. <http://www.westmusic.com/blogs/the-origin-of-chopsticks.aspx>.
6. Michael Aaron, *Piano Course: Lessons Grade One (revised edition)* (Van Nuys: CPP/Belwin Music, 1994), 58.
7. Michael Aaron, *Piano Course*, 42.
8. The verse is reproduced at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oh!\\_Susanna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oh!_Susanna).
9. *John Thompson's Modern Course for the Piano: The Second Grade Book* (Florence: Willis Music, 1937), 20.
10. Frank Dawes, *Debussy Piano Music* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 44.
11. Florence K. and Bertha Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog* (UK reprint, Dodo Press), 14.
12. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1136016/How-golliwog-went-innocent-childrens-hero-symbol-bitter-controversy.html> (February 4, 2009).
13. Dawes, 35.