

Foreword to the *No Kid-ding Notebook* by Gamma Skupinsky  
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In these two volumes, Ukrainian-American composer Gamma Skupinsky presents a charming and innovative collection of pedagogical piano exercises for children. The *No Kid-ding Notebook* follows in the footsteps of and updates the pedagogical tradition begun by Robert Schumann with his *Album for the Young*, Op. 68 (1848) and continued by Pyotr Tchaikovsky with his identically titled *Album for the Young*, Op. 39 (1878). Each of these works, like the current collection, contains 24 short pieces touching on a variety of themes and musical styles, aimed at attracting the interest of young players while training up their fundamental piano skills. In addition to these Romantic sources, Skupinsky also draws on the more modern harmonic language of Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, Sz. 107, BB 105 (1926-1939), an epic collection, the early volumes of which are similarly intended for training of younger students. This adventurous musical language, along with Skupinsky's flair for employing popular musical styles and passion for introducing the art music canon to a new generation of pianists, combine to lend the *No Kid-ding Notebook* an engaging eclecticism that will keep students and piano teachers coming back for more.

Skupinsky begins the *No Kid-ding Notebook* in an evocative vein. "1. Video Games" will be familiar to every student in its imitation of the soundscape of first-generation digital arcade games like Pac-Man and Donkey Kong, right down to the mocking chromatic descent of the standard "Game Over" theme – all while providing an opportunity to build skill in performing rapid arpeggios. Such evocative pieces are scattered throughout the two volumes, including "5. Redwood Forest," which recalls the quiet of the deep woods through pastoral sounds and birdcalls; "8. Math Class," which conjures the boredom and confusion of a geometry lesson in its monotonous, motoric, atonal progression; and "11. Scenic Train," which mimics the sounds of a locomotive picking up speed, chugging along, blowing its whistle, and finally slowing to a stop. In this category, students may particularly enjoy "18. I Hate Broccoli," in which the insistent, calm left hand faces off against the increasingly shrill and frantic right hand, in imitation of a parent-and-child argument over vegetables at dinner time.

Equally important to the *No Kid-ding Notebook* is Skupinsky's masterful use of American popular music styles. "22. Rock Like a Star" takes students on a whirlwind tour of the history of rock music, beginning with the unmistakable first chord of The Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night" (transposed down one step), progressing through a rock ballad melody and a driving anthem to culminate on two power chords. Skupinsky also makes effective use of jazz styles, adopting a joyous ragtime beat in "6. Dad's Vintage Ford" and an introspective bluesy mood in "9. Downtown Blues." In the latter piece, students learn the fundamentals of the blues scale, with the left hand walking solo through the streets, while the right explores the mental curlicues that often accompany such wandering. "21. Jazzy Mood" follows up this line of thought, while introducing more complex jazz harmonies. Skupinsky is at his best in addressing Americana styles, particularly in a trio of pieces in the middle of the collection. "12. Waltzing in Appalachia" and "13. Cowboy Dance," provide a smooth transition from Part 1 to Part 2 with their homage to the homegrown folk music of the American Southeast and Southwest, respectively. "13. Cowboy Dance" also adds an extra layer in referencing American art music composer Aaron Copland, who famously made use of folksongs in many of his works. Close on their heels, "14. Dueling Violins" presents a romping fantasia on the American folksong "Turkey in the Straw," with a central interlude that shifts the melody from right hand to left, encouraging students to practice bringing out the melodic line wherever it may lie, without losing track of important harmonizing chords.

Finally, the *No Kid-ding Notebook* takes on the admirable task of bringing the classics of the Western art music tradition to early-stage piano students. For the most part, Skupinsky works with styles and composers with which his audience is likely to be familiar, from the quasi-impressionist tonality of “3. Climbing a Maple Tree,” which brings Claude Debussy to mind, to the playfully tongue-in-cheek “19. Amadeus’ Pink Wig,” which draws on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Eine kleine nachtmusik*, pulling its musical lines in an almost jazzy direction. Similarly, “20. Nutcracker Dreams” quotes from several parts of Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s ballet *The Nutcracker*, weaving them into a magical fantasy evoking the jumbled dreams a child might have after watching this beloved classic. But Skupinsky also ventures further afield in “23. Classic-Modernist,” introducing a second ballet, likely far less familiar to students: Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Building on the motoric drive that is a near-constant characteristic of the pieces in the *No Kid-ding Notebook*, in this penultimate number Skupinsky highlights the exciting effervescence of Stravinsky’s music, verging on the edge of chaos without ever passing the tipping point, challenging students to imbue its more advanced melody and harmony with the playfulness of “19. Amadeus’ Pink Wig.”

In the *No Kid-ding Notebook*, Skupinsky has created an invaluable resource for teachers and young piano students alike, one which is guaranteed to hold students’ interest through its eclectic musical styles, while introducing them to great composers, and training their ears and fingers with its adventurously modern melodic and harmonic language. Skupinsky has also created accompanying videos, which may guide students and enhance their experience as they learn individual pieces. All in all, the *No Kid-ding Notebook* is a credit to the pedagogical tradition of which it is part.