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Getting Back to Piano Lessons

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING

PEDALING IN MOZART

COMPOSER FEATURES ON BONIS AND SHEFTEL

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Our Commitment to Human Creativity

At *Piano Magazine*, we believe deeply in the power of human creativity. Every article, review, and reflection we publish is 100% human-generated—crafted by writers, musicians, educators, and thinkers. These unique voices bring their experiences, insight, and artistry to the page. We honor the creative process as an essential expression of humanity, and we are committed to upholding the craft of writing as an art form in its own right. In an age of automation, we proudly stand for the thoughtful, intentional, and authentic sharing of human ideas.



Mel Bonis and Her *Album pour les tout-petits*: Engaging Children's Imaginations

by Jeanne Hourez

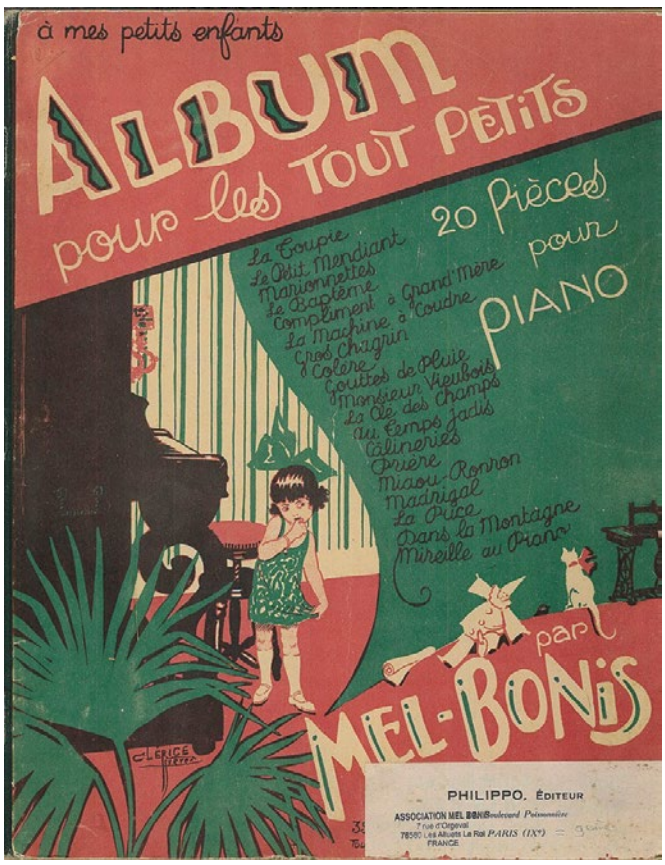
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For a young beginner student, discovering music and the piano opens a whole new world—one that can be very impressive. As piano instructors and accomplished musicians, our mission is to stimulate students' imaginations from the beginning and to lead them into the exploration of sounds, harmonic colors, musical moods, dynamics, rhythmic patterns, and other musical parameters. Educating young musicians means identifying their strengths and weaknesses, picking appropriate pieces, and building healthy techniques while sustaining playfulness and developing their imaginations. This last aspect is immensely important for children to preserve their precious childhood creativity; this will help cultivate a colorful sound right from their first steps. When a piece of music becomes a story, every bit of musical knowledge, including technical considerations, becomes easier to learn and assimilate. Engaging children's imaginations in music brings a piece to life, creating an undoubtedly more stimulating learning experience. It falls to the teacher to select the perfect piece—one that allows the student to develop expressive skills while ensuring a positive and enjoyable experience. The imaginative *Album pour les tout-petits* by Mel Bonis offers an ideal vehicle to develop creativity at a young age while exploring narrative learning.

Mélanie Bonis (1858–1937)

French composer Mélanie Bonis brilliantly balances storytelling, expressive qualities, pedagogical thinking, and mindful piano technique. This is shown through her collections for beginner students. Bonis was born in a lower-middle-class family at the heart of the *Belle Époque*. She taught herself the piano at an early age, and while she left behind about two hundred works, her career was strongly impacted by her gender and her traditional and strict familial education. While studying at the Paris Conservatoire (1876–1881), Bonis decided to change her first name to Mel, because she did not want her first name to create a gender distinction among her fellow composers. In 1881, however, she was regrettably forced by her family to interrupt her musical studies and career to follow a path more appropriate for a nineteenth-century young lady.

Bonis's musical style is deeply rooted in French late-Romanticism and Impressionist trends. A classmate of Debussy at the Paris Conservatoire, she frequently used the word-painting technique in her compositions to support the creation of storytelling, while still delivering lyrical melodies. When she became a grandmother, Bonis became quite involved in the pedagogical field. Besides her wide range of compositions that cover many genres, she also wrote several didactic albums for children, and she would frequently use these in her teaching. Her music carries natural expressivity and unique colors that are rare in compositions for children.



Cover illustration of *Album pour les tout-petits*, 1913, Association Mel Bonis.
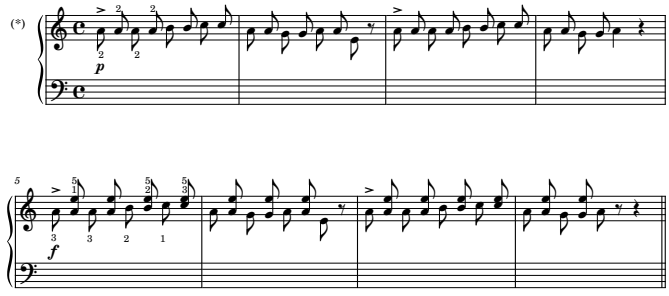
Album pour les tout-petits

The *Album pour les tout-petits*, Op. 103 (1913), is her second set of pieces for piano students and is intended for young children early in their piano experience. The collection presents a total of twenty spontaneous and colorful pieces, evoking memories from a late-nineteenth-century French childhood. Through descriptive titles such as "The Spinning Top," "Puppets," "The Sewing Machine," "The Shepherd in the Mountain," and "Mireille Playing the Piano," *Album pour les tout-petits* offers a touching glimpse into the world of upper-middle-class children during the *Belle Époque*.

Dedicated to her grandchildren, *Album pour les tout-petits* illustrates Bonis's natural tenderness for children through a pedagogical lens. This album includes pieces that can be taught by rote and with the score. Well-suited for small hands, the pieces use both major and minor keys, modal nuances, and dissonances underlining distinct characters. Bonis treats these pieces like any others from her catalog: She uses precise articulations, rich dynamics, and refreshing musical forms.

La Toupie
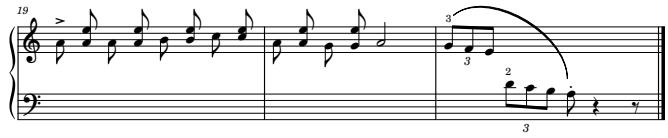
One of the most emblematic pieces of *Album pour les tout-petits* is "La Toupie" ("The Top"), the first piece of the set. Excerpt 1 displays how the composer transcribes the motion of the spinning top.



* The left hand will play the notes with stems pointing down (the same applies to all other pieces).

EXCERPT 1: Mel Bonis, "Spinning Top," mm. 1–8. From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.[1]

Centered around a specific pitch, the alternating hands are evocative of a top rotating on itself, an aspect reinforced by the accumulation of short phrases that could reflect the top rotating and falling. Like a child learning how to play with the toy, the melody tries to find its way on the piano—a little hesitant and never completely conclusive. The rather abrupt ending (Excerpt 2), condensed in two beats of descending triplets, could depict the top falling on the ground and breaking, or rolling away and getting lost.

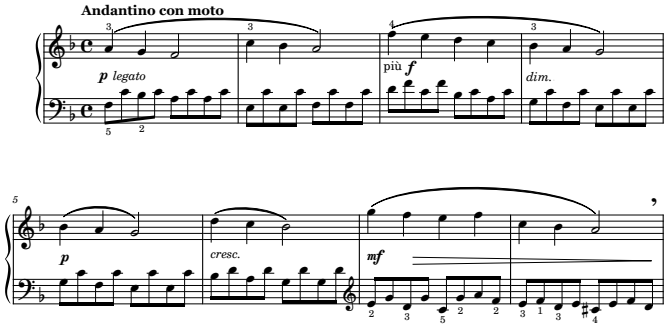


EXCERPT 2: Mel Bonis, "Spinning Top," mm. 19–21. From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

In this opening piece, Bonis varies dynamics and timbres on repetitions, thus enhancing a diversification of colors in the sound. An effective way to help students connect with historic, handmade toys is to display illustrations of the items or pictures of children from the past. Reading stories set during the *Belle Époque* also strengthens the association of text, pictures, and music. In "La Toupie," Bonis also includes accents at the beginning of phrases to exemplify the image of launching the top. She creates a clear textural and rhythmical contrast at the end to announce a change in the top's motion. Precise articulation and dynamic markings support this idea of storytelling throughout the piece. The possibilities of interpretation are endless and an excellent way for modern children to familiarize themselves with older toys and associate them with musical expression.

Compliment à grand-maman

A direct reference to her relationship with her own grandchildren, "Compliment à grand-maman" ("Kind Words to Grandma") is an ode to tenderness (Excerpt 3). A reminiscence of several pieces from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, "Compliment à grand-maman" highlights Bonis's maternal and instinctive kindness towards children.



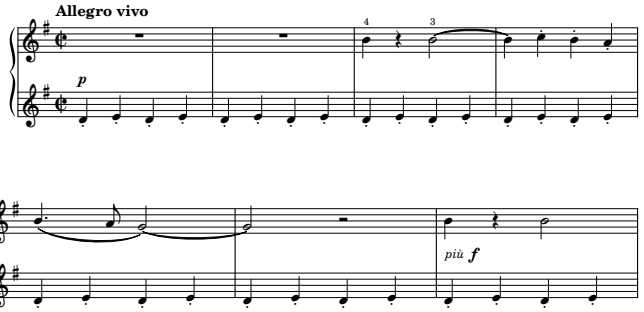
EXCERPT 3: Mel Bonis, "Kind Words to Grandma," mm. 1–8. From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

While listening to the long melodic lines and the rather rich countermelody in the left hand, teachers can encourage students to imagine joyful and loving moments with their own families. With this piece, Bonis offers an excellent alternative to Schumann's "Melody," "A Little Piece," or "A Humming Song."

Indeed, Bonis focuses on expressivity at the service of technical knowledge, even if that means compacting the piece or generating irregular and unconventional melodic lines. In this piece, students can be encouraged to envision tender moments between a grandmother and her grandchildren—perhaps she is brushing or braiding their hair, baking a cake with them, or softly singing a cradle song. It might also depict the grandchildren being extra affectionate with their grandmother: softly running around her, picking flowers, reading quietly, or listening to stories of her past. This lullaby-like song is a unique opportunity to develop a smooth and warm *legato* sound. Encouraging students to write and sing lyrics in relation to their own definition of tenderness can help improve phrasing (the melody is written in a comfortable voice range).

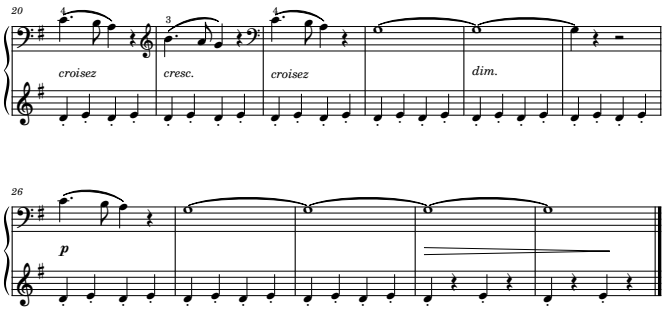
La Machine à coudre

One of the most playful and spirited pieces of the album, "La Machine à coudre" ("The Sewing Machine") utilizes word-painting technique (Excerpt 4). An excellent piece to work on rhythmic precision and independence between the hands, "The Sewing Machine" illustrates the mechanical and perpetual motion of a sewing machine's needle with the left hand, while the right hand evokes the liveliness of a seamstress and the different colored threads she uses in her sewing.



EXCERPT 4: Mel Bonis, "The Sewing Machine," mm. 1–7. From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

Among other features belonging to word-painting technique, the piece introduces hand crossing, dotted rhythms, and dissonances which can be associated with the collective imagery of a sewing machine (Excerpt 5). Students can become creatively engaged through questions like: Are the threads getting mixed up?; Is the needle jumping?; Is the seamstress pricking her fingers?; or, Is the machine broken?
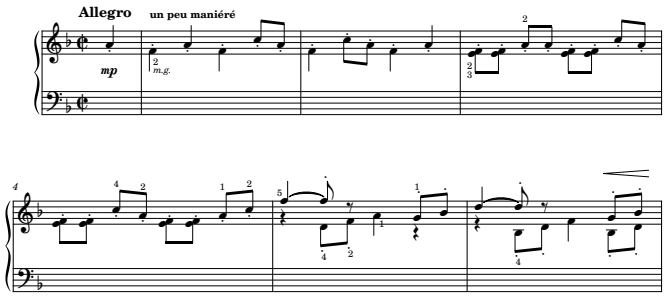


EXCERPT 5: Mel Bonis, "The Sewing Machine," mm. 20–30. From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

These ideas should be easy for students to understand and realize, as numerous children's stories and movies commonly use the object of a sewing machine, such as Charles Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* stories. Bonis may have had some of these well-known children's stories in mind when composing this piece.
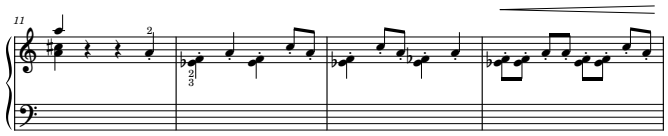
Marionnettes

A lively and amusing piece, "Marionnettes" ("Puppets"), evokes Guignol, a legendary French character created around 1808 in Lyon. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, French puppet companies would travel across France and present their itinerant street shows everywhere to entertain children and families. French puppet shows were still extremely popular in the late-twentieth century, especially in villages and smaller towns. For instance, the famous TV broadcast *Les Guignols de l'info* ("The French Spitting Image") lasted until 2018. An ambiguous character, Guignol is sometimes friendly and naive, sometimes mischievous and a prankster. He engages in spirited camaraderie with several other puppet characters such as Gnafron, Flageolet, or The Constable. Bonis's "Marionnettes" opens with a rhythmic and spirited melody, repeated three times throughout the piece, each time shortened (Excerpt 6). Students can imagine the puppets interacting with each other in places such as measure 5, when a clear division appears between the hands.
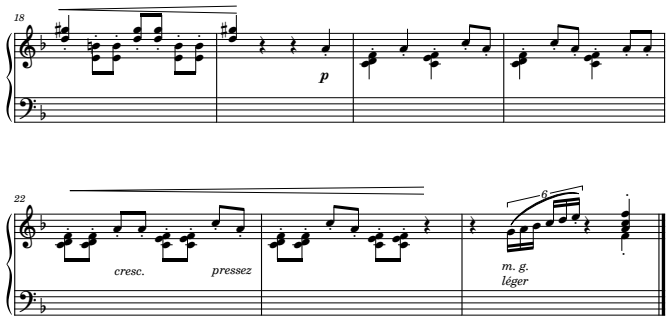


EXCERPT 6: Mel Bonis, "Puppets," mm. 1–6.
From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

The variations of the theme take unexpected turns (Excerpt 7), bringing some dissonances and abrupt modulations or tonal ambiguities—features that illustrate the various facets of Guignol's personality and the character of the different puppets. It also sustains an idea of dramatic turns in the puppets' adventures.



EXCERPT 7: Mel Bonis, "Puppets," mm. 11–14.
From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

The consistent rhythm and the repetitive material create a comedic effect and suggest the idea of sudden changes in Guignol's temperament (Excerpt 8). With the distribution of notes across both hands, it seems that Bonis seeks a sort of friendly rivalry between hands, just like Guignol and his partners in crime. The increasing dissonance could reflect their constant playful disagreement.



EXCERPT 8: Mel Bonis, "Puppets," mm.18–24.
From *Album pour les tout-petits*, Association Mel Bonis.

Among other word-painting elements that can be found in the album, "Le Pâtre dans la montagne" ("The Shepherd in the Mountain") uses intervals of fourths and fifths as well as canon-like entrances to depict horn calls across the mountains; "Au temps jadis" ("Old Times") evokes ancient times by utilizing the Dorian mode and polyphony; the poetic "Gouttes de pluie" ("Rain Drops") paints a picture of a light drizzle through the choice of *staccato* articulation, soft dynamic, and the high to medium register.

Bonis's *Album pour les tout-petits* is a refreshing and remarkable pedagogical tool for younger students. The composer's mastery resides in her willingness to prioritize expressivity and storytelling. This aspect is linked to a profound didactic consideration drawn from her own experience first as a self-taught pianist and second as a piano teacher. This collection introduces some advanced musical and theory concepts gradually to avoid overwhelming students. Bonis also composed several other albums better suited for more advanced students that are worth studying, and a large part of her work is dedicated to accomplished pianists. Using *Album pour les tout-petits* miniatures to supplement more common repertoire also serves a bigger cause: opening children's minds about diversity in music and highlighting a composer from a historically marginalized gender.

NOTES

1. All excerpts for this article are published in *Piano Magazine* with permission of Association Mel Bonis.



An active performer, JEANNE HOUREZ is Assistant Professor of Music at Southwestern University. She earned her DMA at UT Austin and has presented her research at many national and international festivals and conferences.