

# RESOURCE GUIDE:

## MY TOP 10 POP SONGS

### FOR BEGINNER PIANO STUDENTS



### **Finding the right pop music to teach can be a challenge.**

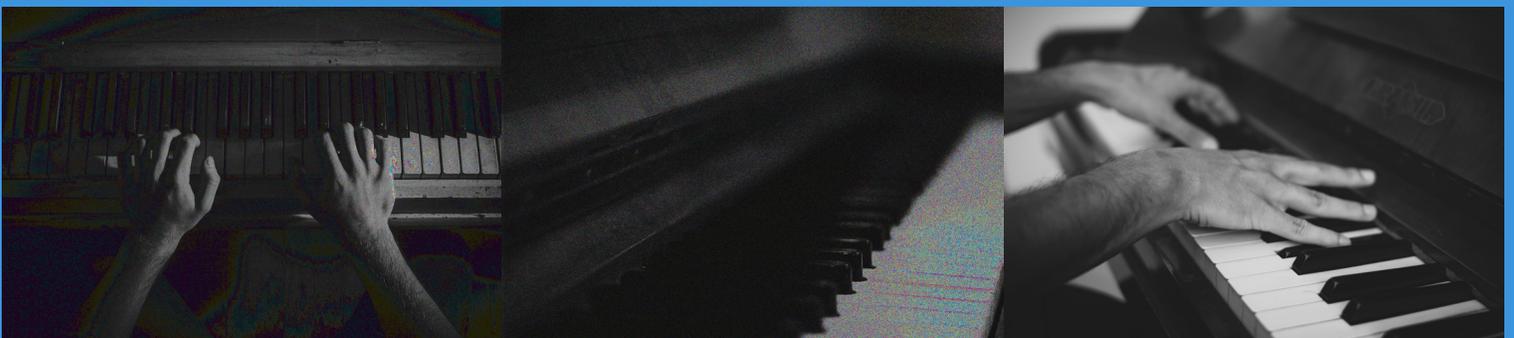
Sometimes students will bring in music that they want to play, or just say "I'd really like to learn this!". But at other times, you may want to explore a specific pop song as a way to practice a skill that the student has been learning about: perhaps chords, progressions, rhythm, pulse or inversions.

While I start teaching my students about naming, forming and playing chords from the very first lesson, unless they put this knowledge into some kind of musical practice, their newly-found knowledge will seem quite useless. In my opinion, the two best ways of putting chord knowledge into action is via improvising/composing or playing pop music. And the latter is what this cheat sheet is all about.

This is a list of my Top 10 easy pop songs that I use to teach students about chords, progressions and music in general. If any of these are unfamiliar to you (I'd be surprised!), then take a listen to them on YouTube before you start teaching. Make sure you're happy with the song and know how it goes. Be certain to decide how you want to teach it too: with the music, from chords, demo and copy, etc.

Stay tuned for more help about how I teach these pop songs coming up in your email inbox soon :)

**Happy teaching!**



# SONGS

## 1. LET IT BE - THE BEATLES (ORIGINAL KEY)

VERSE	C	G	Am	F
	C	G	F	C
CHORUS	Am	G	F	C
	C	G	F	C



## 2. HEY JUDE in C - THE BEATLES (ORIGINAL KEY: F)

VERSE (x2)	C	G	G7	C	
	F	C	G	C	C7 (LAST TIME)
BRIDGE (x2)	F	C/E	Dm	Dm7/C	
	G/B	G	C	C7	G (LAST TIME)
NANANA!	(C	Bb	F	C)	



You might wonder about the relevance of the first two given they were composed around 45 years ago and all my teaching is about being modern and progressive!

The thing is that kids these days still seem to know and like them (which says a lot about the quality of the original song-writing!). They have timeless appeal and can be played with simple, steady rhythms, even by beginners.

You can teach both of these pieces by having the student play rhythmic chords to keep the beat and adding 7ths or slash chords as and when they can (until then, just play the root position triads).

They are also great songs to use with a backing track app like NoteStar for iPad when students have mastered the progressions.

The original key of Hey Jude opens-up another teaching point with students about the idea of transposition, because if they'd like to play this song with the original recording on YouTube, they'll need to play it F Major. What does it mean to transpose to a new key? How do you do it? What sharps/flats are involved?

These are all great questions that you can delve into using this song as a base. My students can't get enough of these two songs: they can learn them quickly and you can go in all sorts of exciting teaching directions (eg. into the Circle of 5ths, keys, melody, etc.) once they know the basics.

### 3. CLOCKS - COLDPLAY

You only ever need to teach the first 4 bars of this song to have a winning experience with any student. It's cool, it's groovy and everyone loves it. Let's face it, it's a riff that all pianists should know!

For beginners, I tend to teach this by rote: ie. Demonstrate and show the position and then your students copy. Watch how quickly your students' faces will light up when they realise what they are playing and how cool it sounds.

Keep the LH simple to start with: just single bass notes are fine; it's the RH that holds all the magic.

Moderately ♩ = 130

Chords: Eb, Bbm(4), Fm7

### 4. PIANO MAN - BILLY JOEL

This is another timeless classic that around 80% of kids still know today (and even if they don't, you can play a YouTube and show them how cool it is!). While it's not that easy to read the music, this is easily taught with basic chords: Try a C chord in the RH with a descending bassline in the LH.

With a few more instructions, you can help them understand the slash chords G/B and show them how to change the RH chord each bar while the LH descends. It's not a perfect rendition of the original, but it's enough to get your students fired-up.

Here's a simplified version of the original (the first one is the most basic way to play (just root position) and the second play-through introduces slash chords:

Chords: C, C/B, C/A, C/G, C/F, C/E, D, G, C, G/B, Am, Em/G, F, C/G, D, G, etc!

## 5. SKYFALL - ADELE

There's something about the major/minor combinations of the chords in this song that really appeal. Even if students haven't seen the movie, they'll probably know the song. Easy to teach with chords, particularly when you add inversions. Keep the LH in minims to start as the dotted rhythm can be tricky. Can be incorporated with the NoteStar backing track.

The image shows the piano introduction for 'Skyfall' by Adele. It is written in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The score is divided into two systems. The first system is labeled 'INTRO' and contains measures 1-3. The second system contains measures 4-6. The right hand (RH) plays chords in the treble clef, and the left hand (LH) plays a simple bass line in the bass clef. The dynamics are marked as *mf*. The chords in the first system are C-, A<sup>7</sup>, F, C-, A<sup>b</sup>, and F. The chords in the second system are C-, A<sup>b</sup>, F, C-/E<sup>b</sup>, G<sup>sus</sup>, G, A, C-, and A<sup>b</sup>. The LH rhythm consists of dotted half notes and quarter notes.

## 6. THE SCIENTIST - COLDPLAY

Another winner. Easy to play - even from the music - and lots of students will know it well. The best thing is it's one of the few modern pop songs that has a steady, easy rhythm. Just use single notes or octaves in the LH to start, just in semibreves to begin. Good teaching points around what F2 means (Fsus2) and the use of the 7th in the Dm chord.

The image shows the piano introduction for 'The Scientist' by Coldplay. It is written in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The score consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 1-4. The right hand (RH) plays chords in the treble clef, and the left hand (LH) plays a steady bass line in the bass clef. The dynamics are marked as *mf*. The chords in the first system are Dm7, B<sup>b</sup>, F, and F2. The LH rhythm consists of eighth notes.

## 7. SOMEONE LIKE YOU - ADELE

Musically, this is a bit like learning a modern (and far less complex!) 'Moonlight Sonata' (and we all know how appealing some simple arpeggios can be).

Someone Like You is a simple 4-chord song that uses broken chords to fill out the sound and add interest. Students will quickly realise that this song is actually fairly boring on its own, so again, I'd recommend getting students to play along to the singer using NoteStar once they've got the progression.

Good teaching points with the inversions of the chords in RH and also the use of the R/5/8 (root/5th/octave) in the RH for the F<sup>#</sup>m chord given how ubiquitous this patten is in popular music (albeit normally in the LH).



## 8. GET LUCKY - DAFT PUNK

Everyone loved this song when it came out. It's another 4-chord song that is easy to learn with chords. Great for introducing inversions because of where the hands are placed. Add a backing track and you've got a pupil-winning piece that will teach them all about chords and inversions.

Here are the chords in the original key:

<b>B<sub>M</sub></b>	<b>D</b>	<b>F<sub>#M</sub></b>	<b>E</b>
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## 9. SIMPSON'S THEME

Everyone knows it, everyone loves it and every pianist should be able to pull it off (a bit like happy birthday really...but that's another story!).

Great teaching points regarding Danny Elfman's use of the Lydian Mode. Don't worry about teaching (counting) the rhythm; show the student the notes and let them play it in time.

## 10. JAMES BOND THEME

There's something about chromatic bass lines that kids love. This is a great teaching piece because it's in A minor, which is a key that students generally learn early on and involves recognising a triad in the RH.

It can be taught by demo/copy or music depending on where the students is at in their reading.

**PS. IF YOU'VE GOT MORE ADVANCED STUDENTS, AND WANT SOME REAL CROWD-PLEASERS, CHECK OUT MY FAVOURITE POP RIFFS FOR INTERMEDIATE TO ADVANCED PIANISTS:**

- LOVE SONG - SARAH BARIELLES
- A THOUSAND MILES - VANESSA CARLTON
- VIRTUAL INSANITY - JAMIROQUAI
- YOUR SONG - ELTON JOHN
- WALKING IN MEMPHIS - MARC COHN
- RIVER FLOWS IN YOU - YIRUMA
- DON'T STOP BELIEVING - JOURNEY

