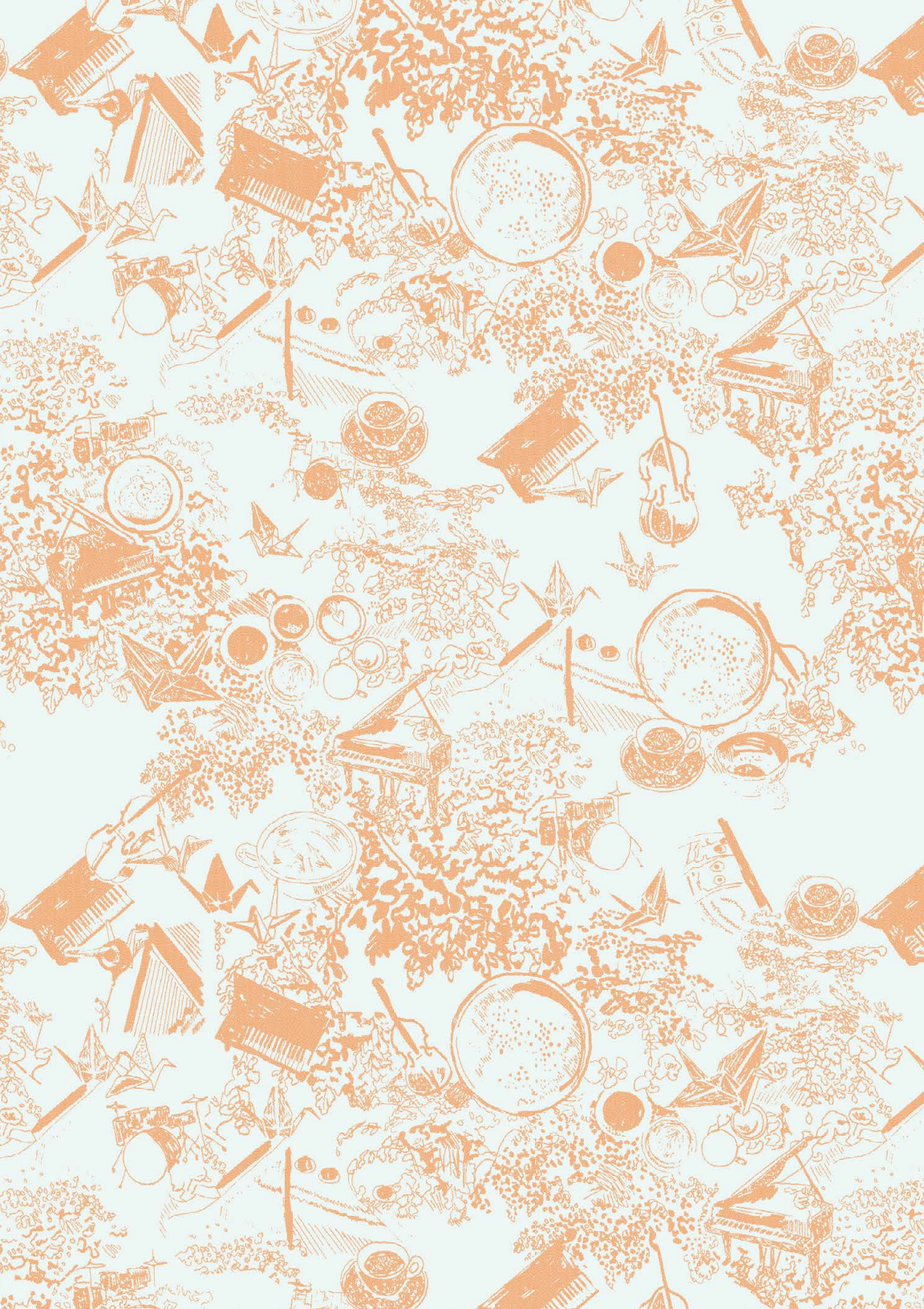


Ben Spooner's

BEGINNER TO COMPOSER IN

14 DAYS

B & H Spooner



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THE AUTHORS

Ben Spooner

Creator of Beginner To Composer In 14 Days

Ben is a multi-instrumentalist, composer and creative. He is a piano and drum kit tutor and examiner for Rock School & Yamaha across seven popular instruments. He previously studied MSc in Music & Sound for Film and Games at Hertfordshire University and performed as a session musician with artists at The Roundhouse, Abbey Road, The Edinburgh Festival and other notable venues.

benspooner.co.uk

Hayley J C Spooner

Co-Writer

Hayley is a writer, singer-songwriter, pianist and violinist. She studied BA English Literature and Language at Oxford University and Songwriting at Pointblank Music School, and works today as a copywriter for brands and creative projects.

Ciara Connick – Illustrator

Nicole Ellis – Designer

SOMERSET PUNK

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INTRODUCTION

MUSINGS FROM A SOMERSET PUNK

Hello, I'm Ben and I want to open this book by telling you why I wrote it. As a boy I decided I wanted to become a musician. No one else in my family played an instrument and I had no access to music lessons, but for some reason I answered the call. I saved my wages and treated myself to table top drum pads. Then hounded my Mum for another few years, until one very special teenage birthday when a drum kit appeared, glowing in our front room. My idol then was Sid Vicious, naturally for an aspiring high school punk, which gives you an idea what my Mum was letting herself in for. I have fond memories of that time, of the bands I formed with friends, of the garage we'd rehearse in. What we lacked in skill we made up for with passion, and the unbridled creativity that flows from teenage pores. We were rock stars. Somerset's finest, perhaps, known only to each other.

Fast-forward to my twenties, to London, where I found myself slogging away in a factory, in a post room and as a chef in a busy cafe. It was the recession and despite having a degree in music it was hard to find work. In one of those roles I led a strike, ever the anarchist. My colleagues and I wanted minimum wage, not an unreasonable request, but it didn't end well. It's a bit of a blur but I have it on good record the boss held scissors to my neck. Needless to say, change was in the air. I was desperate to escape the grind, to work for someone I looked

up to, or failing that work for myself. I was a drummer, not the greatest, but there was an idea at least. I could get better. I moved in with my sister, commandeered the living room in our one bed flat above The Salisbury pub on Green Lanes. Splitting the rent with her meant I could quit one of my three jobs. No prizes for guessing which one. I used my newly reclaimed time to practice, practice, and practice some more.

It probably looked a bit like obsession, but it was a lifeline. A vehicle for my faith in a bigger, better life. In truth it wasn't just the crap jobs and sticky finances that had got me down. There'd been trauma in my childhood, somewhere between the gigs and good times, and the shockwaves were still reverberating through me. Releasing those tremors through cymbals and skins was catharsis. My kit, my daily conversation with it, gave voice to experiences that had never before found words. Then a neighbour complained. I could hardly blame them, and I took the kit down.

I decided to buy a keyboard (and a set of headphones). I'd been curious to learn the piano for years but overnight it had become essential. Having already taught myself the drums I knew I could teach myself the piano, and yet navigating the sea of information proved tricky. Books for beginners tended to be aimed at kids, meanwhile books for adults

assumed prior knowledge that I didn't have - so many technical and theoretical terms. The thing that kept me going was curiosity. Not so much curiosity in the concepts themselves, but in how I could apply them. I'm a creative person (I believe we all are) and the act of composing my own music has always been what's spurred me on to acquire more theoretical know-how. Just as I'd previously played around on the drums, I would now sit and noodle on the piano, allowing interesting patterns and melodies to unfold, and turning them into pieces.

There's a magic to composing. It's surprising what's inside of you, surprising to hear it transmuted into rhythm and song. It can surprise others too. My partner has both laughed and cried at pieces I've created, at my riotous basslines and haunting musical reportage. It was essential for me that any book I wrote about learning an instrument emphasised the act of tuning inwards, of experimenting intuitively with what you find there, and channelling it through the keys. I want others to experience the thrill of direct contact with their innate creative nature, to become curious about what they could manifest, whether that's a ten second riff, a pop song or a symphony. Since writing this book I've learned that curiosity is in fact scientifically proven to enhance learning. It sounds like common sense and yet it's uncommon to find

educational programmes that put curiosity front and centre where it belongs. In 2001, researchers Alberti and Witryol found a positive correlation between curiosity and intellectual performance among students completing a laboratory task. They also identified a positive relationship between the students' intellectual performance and the curiosity of their teacher. Curiosity is infectious it seems, but I digress...

Back at my flat, between shifts at the factory and the cafe, I was gradually getting the hang of the keyboard. With hindsight, this was also the period I learned discipline, how to take responsibility for myself and my prospects. When I listen to how other people talk about their lives I can always tell whether they've had that realisation yet or not, the one that goes 'I'm in charge here', 'I decide the quality of my life'. When I sense that someone has that lesson still to come, I can't help but wax lyrical about the benefits of self-tuition - the act of helping oneself - in any field of study or area of life. I get fanatical imparting pearls of wisdom: the confidence they'll gain, the empowerment they'll feel. No one needs to suffer life and when that penny finally drops, you're free. I tell that to anyone who'll listen.

Writing this today I'm a drum and piano tutor, teaching all styles from classical and jazz to rock and pop. I'm also an examiner for music

boards like RSL and Yamaha, and a composer creating original material across a range of projects. On the performance side, I've had the privilege of touring the UK with a number of bands and artists, immersing myself in a wide range of genres including hip-hop, folk and contemporary jazz. I've come a long way since my days in the factory, but my reason for writing this book is not to lay the foundations for your satisfying musical career. Indeed many of my readers are adults, already invested in work of a very different nature. Instead I want to persuade you that playing an instrument is a life enhancing gift you give to yourself, and that following your own curiosity and creative impulses is the fastest, most enjoyable way to progress. An instrument is a way to meet people, like the dear friend I got to know through playing together in a band, or my partner who I first met at an audition. It's a way to relax, a form of meditation to shake off the day and connect more deeply with yourself. It's also a vehicle for expression, a medium of communication from one heart to another, a dialogue from soul to soul. Music is a metamorphosis of the raw stuff of human experience. Since we're all human, we can all create something beautiful. If you're lucky, you could create something sublime.

So there you have it. The benefits of learning an instrument are just too damn good to be

bestowed exclusively on the young, and despite what you may think it's not too late to start now, whatever age you happen to be. So what are you waiting for? Give yourself the gift of learning the piano, starting today. I also urge you not to wait until you're 'good' to start experimenting with your own musical ideas. In fact this book won't let you, you'll have your own composition in just fourteen days. Adults are terrible perfectionists, painfully aware when we sound bad and comically prone to comparing ourselves with the greats (even on our first go at making music). 'An expert...' says Nobel Prize winner Niels Bohr, '...is a man who has made all the mistakes which can be made in a narrow field'. I wholeheartedly agree. Accidents have led to some of the most original and innovative compositions out there, so first and foremost approach this book with the intention to have a good time. Making good music will naturally follow, I've no doubt.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You better believe it, in fourteen days you'll have your very own composition, even if you've never played the piano before. You will start by learning the fundamentals of music and begin improvising and unlocking your innate creativity. Lessons are sequential, so be sure to work through each one in order, taking notes on your worksheet as directed.

Your **Worksheet** is where you'll gradually build your composition, before translating it to a professional lead sheet.

Your **Lead Sheet** is a clear articulation of your music which can be read and played by other musicians.

As your piece becomes established you will encounter more ways to develop your composition, like techniques to help you refine your melody, and more interesting patterns for your left hand.

Whenever you see the instruction **Time to choose** you'll need to pick the 'ingredients' for the music you're about to make. There are only three kinds of ingredients: notes, chords and rhythms - that's it. **Time to choose** lays bare these underlying elements and structures of music, peeling back the composer's curtain if you will.

Time to choose is also designed to push you, to coax you out of your comfort zone little by little so that progress is inevitable. You might choose something you're not yet familiar with for example, or something you haven't practised for months. Although we typically resist challenge and change, dipping your toe into uncharted waters is the best way to learn.



Throughout this book you'll find exercises that I'll ask you to try for just one minute. It might not seem like a lot, but in my experience bitesize practice is the way to go. Even when a task seems daunting, you can always manage a minute, and more often than not things are never as hard as we think they are going to be. I like to tell my students, the point of exercises is not to succeed every time. Success is simply doing the exercise, getting from beginning to end. I also encourage repetition, multiple passes at each exercise until you feel like you've had a breakthrough. Some aspect of the exercise begins to feel like second nature. Repetition isn't sexy but it sure as hell works.

You can find videos demonstrating the exercises in this book on my YouTube channel:

www.youtube.com/benspooner

DAY

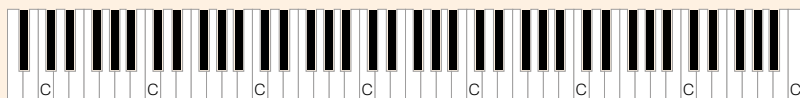


EBONY & IVORY

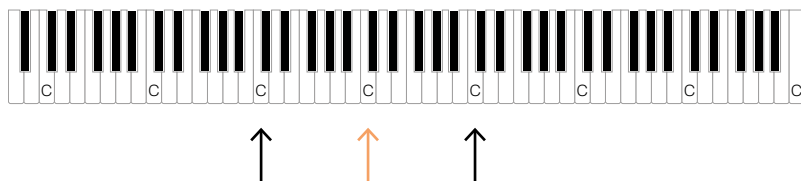
EXPLORING THE NOTES OF THE PIANO

C notes

At first glance the keys of the piano look complex, but chances are you can already see a pattern emerging. Black keys are in groups of twos and threes. You can use these groups as signposts, to navigate your way to any other note with ease. I'll demonstrate with the note C. C's are always located to the left of black key pairs. How many C's are there on your piano? Take a moment to work it out.



What's the difference between all of the notes we call C? The answer is pitch. Some sound high, some sound low. Others sound somewhere in between. The C in the middle of the piano is called middle C. The distance between a C and the next C to its left or right is called an octave (8ve).



You're going to try an exercise now to familiarise yourself with all of the notes of the piano. You can use any finger you like, on your right or left hand. Don't be afraid to try a few or all of your fingers. Each time you play a note say it out loud, to drill the names of notes.

- Play the first C above middle C.
- The first C below middle C.
- All of the C's ascending.
- All of the C's descending.
- All of the C's on the piano in any order.
- Create a short excerpt of music using only these C's.
- Repeat your excerpt.
- Perform it (even if that's just to the cat).

White notes

Next find all of the F's. F's are always to the left of black keys grouped in three. Then find all of the D's, always in between black note pairs. Now all the A's...

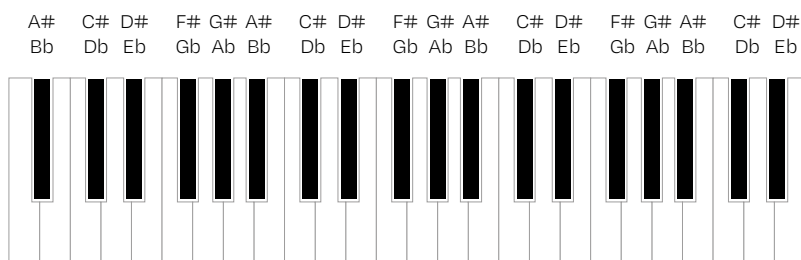


- Repeat the bullet points above, this time with each of the white notes - A, B, D, E, F, G.

Black notes

Time for the black notes. Did you know black notes have two names? When we move from C to the next key up, we call that black note C sharp (C# for short). When we move from D to the next key down, we call that same black note D flat (aka Db). Can you find all the C#'s? All the Db's? (Gotcha, they're the same keys). How about all the F#'s? The Gb's? Now you're getting it.

- Repeat the bullet points above with each of the black notes.

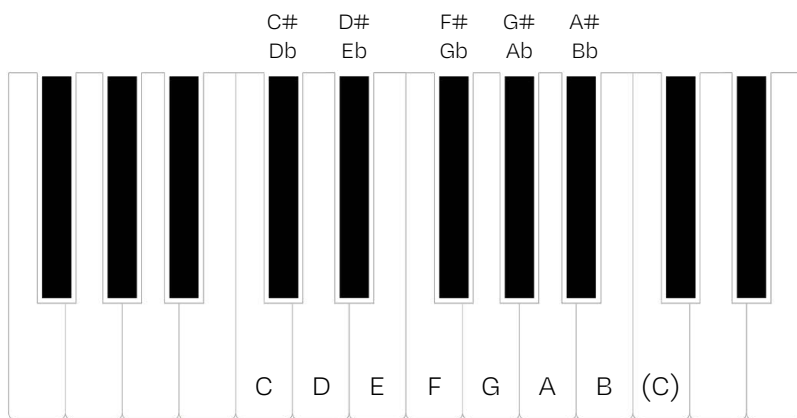


A rose by any other name

C# is the enharmonic equivalent of Db. An enharmonic equivalent is simply a note that shares the same pitch as another note, though it bears a different name. Big words for a deceptively simple concept.

C chromatic scale

Play every note, white and black, from one C up to the next C (one octave). You can use either hand and any of your fingers. Think exploration rather than perfection and say every note you play out loud: sharps on the way up, flats on the way down.



Can you do two octaves? How about four? Notice how every note is the same distance apart, the smallest step possible in western music (things get a little more interesting in the East but that's a story for another day). The distance you've identified is called a semitone (S). Playing semitones in order like you've been doing is called a chromatic scale. Let's break that word down. Chromatic indicates movement in semitones, while scale just means ordered notes.

- Play the C chromatic scale ascending then descending (one octave).
- Two octaves.
- Four octaves. See how fast you can play it accurately.

Time to choose: When you're confident that you know the names of all twelve notes of the piano it's time to choose the starting point of your piece, your 'root' note (R), your anchor. If this is your first time reading this book, you may want to use a white note as your root, or use C like I do in the example below. If you've taken this journey with me before or have some experience with the piano already, choose any note, white or black.

Turn to your worksheet. Write in your root note under R on the Major Key table. If you choose a black note, write its flat (not sharp) name. Here I've used the example C.

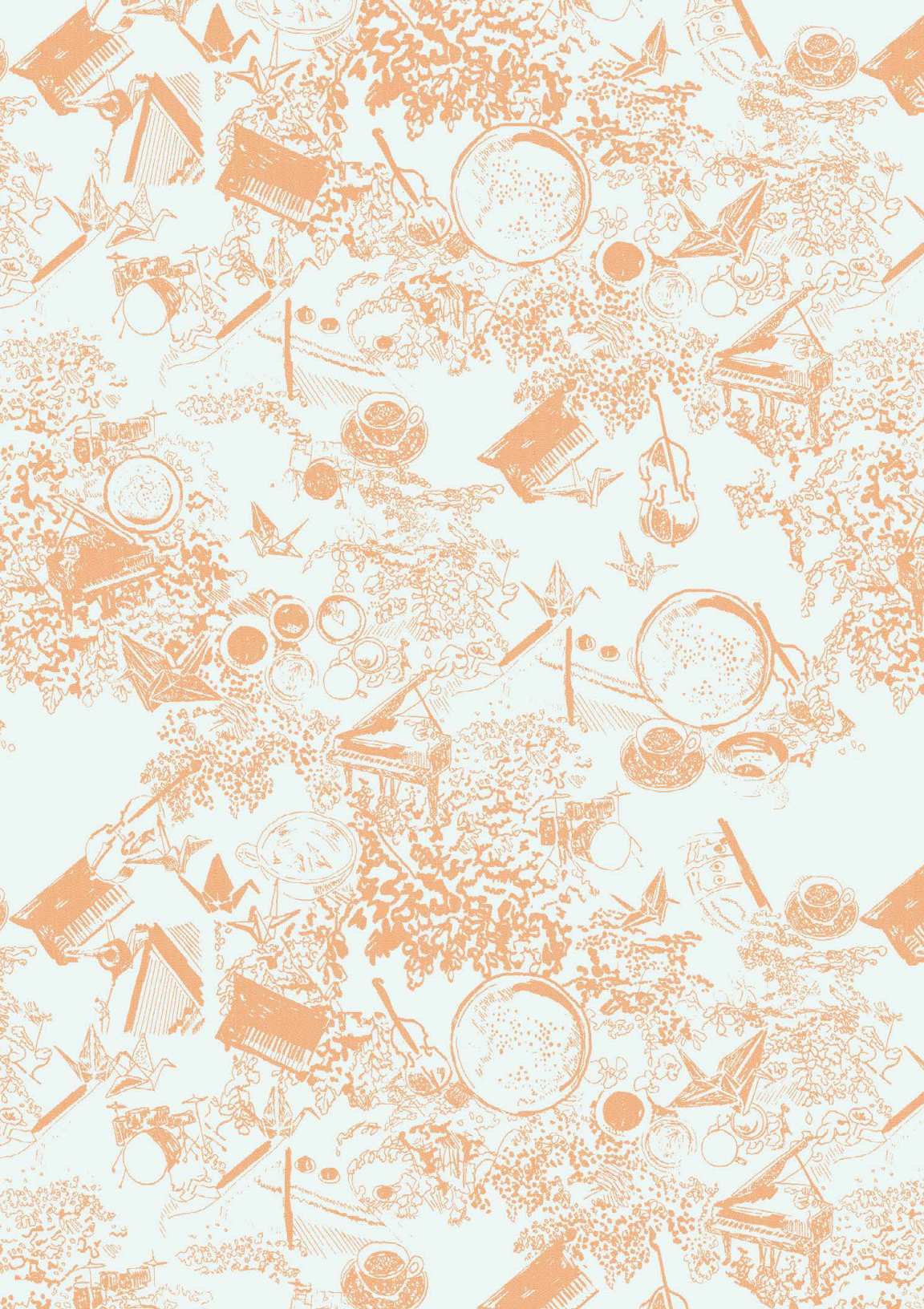
MAJOR KEY							
R	T	T	S	T	T	T	S
C							
I	iim	iiim	IV	V	vim	viio	I

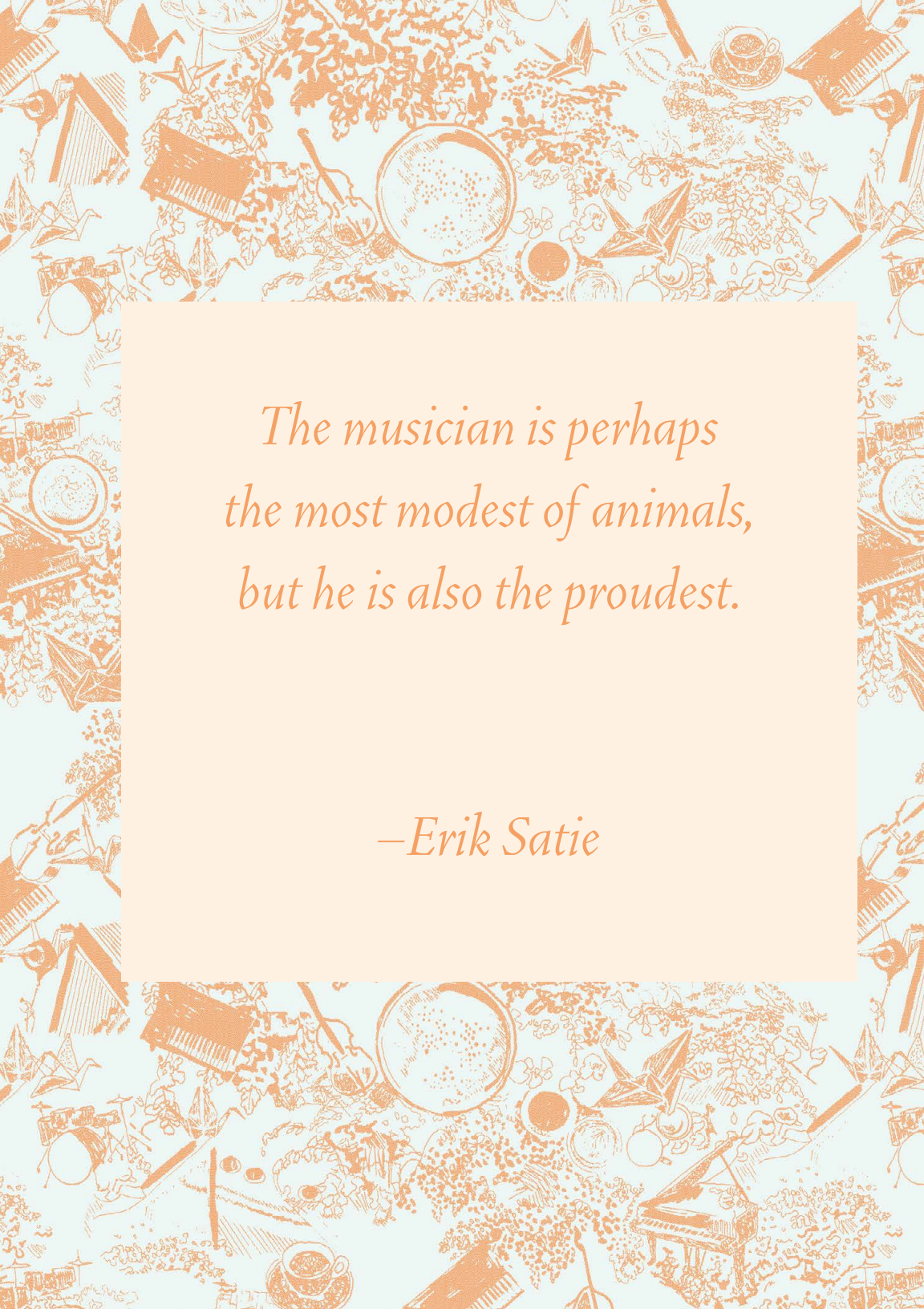


This is where the fun begins. Improvise for one whole minute using your root note. No cutting it short. You'd be surprised how creative you can be with just one ingredient. Allow your imagination to flow, don't worry about what's coming out. Many great songs started with a happy accident. Need a bit of help getting started? Here are some suggestions for you.

- Use just your right hand, just your left or alternate between the two.
- Play hands together.
- Switch fingers each time you play a new note. Don't forget the little finger!
- Try playing one note at a time. Now two together, now three.
- Explore every inch of your instrument. The higher end, or register as it is formally known. Now the lower register.
- Use your right hand to play high notes and your left to play low notes. Or the reverse.
- Vary the tempo at which you play. Tempo means speed: fast, moderate or slow.
- Add dynamics: how softly you play, how loudly.
- Try expressing different emotions, like anger or sleepiness.
- Try touching the sustain pedal below your right foot. How does this alter the mood? Does it enhance it or take something away?

Time to choose: When your time is up choose another note to improvise with for one minute. You can repeat this as many times as you like.



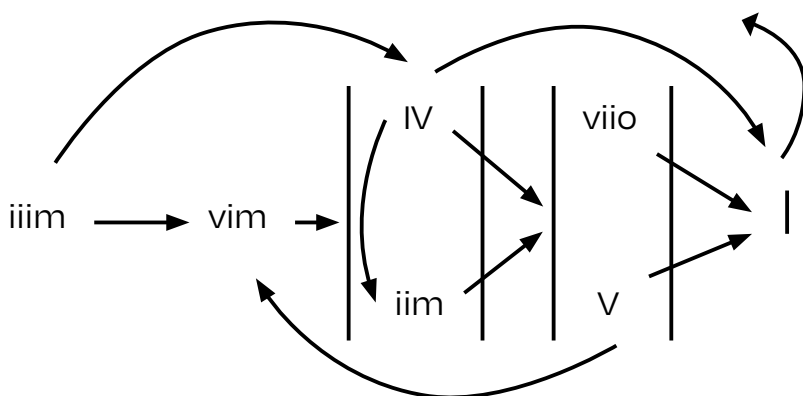
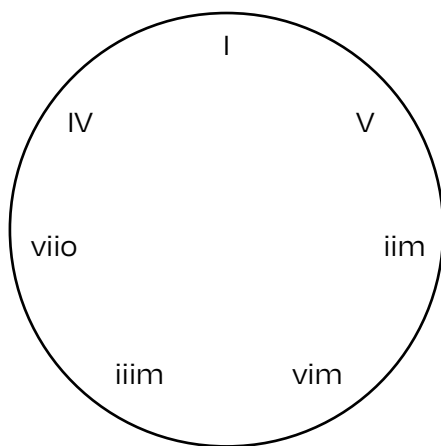


*The musician is perhaps
the most modest of animals,
but he is also the proudest.*

—Erik Satie

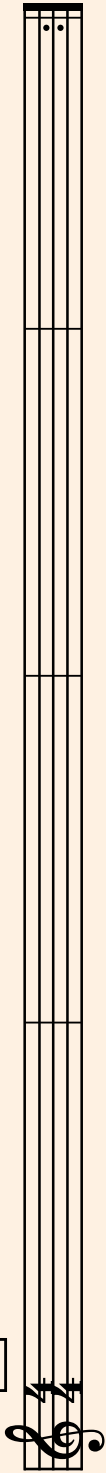
YOUR WORKSHEET

MAJOR KEY							
R	T	T	S	T	T	T	S
I	iim	iiim	IV	V	vim	viio	I



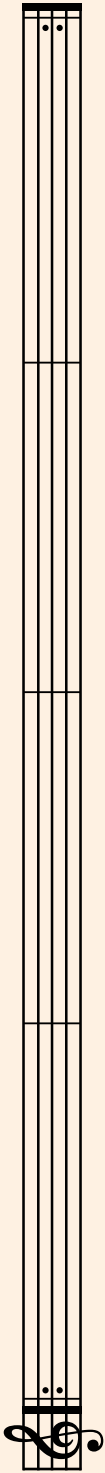
**your
LEAD
sheet**

A

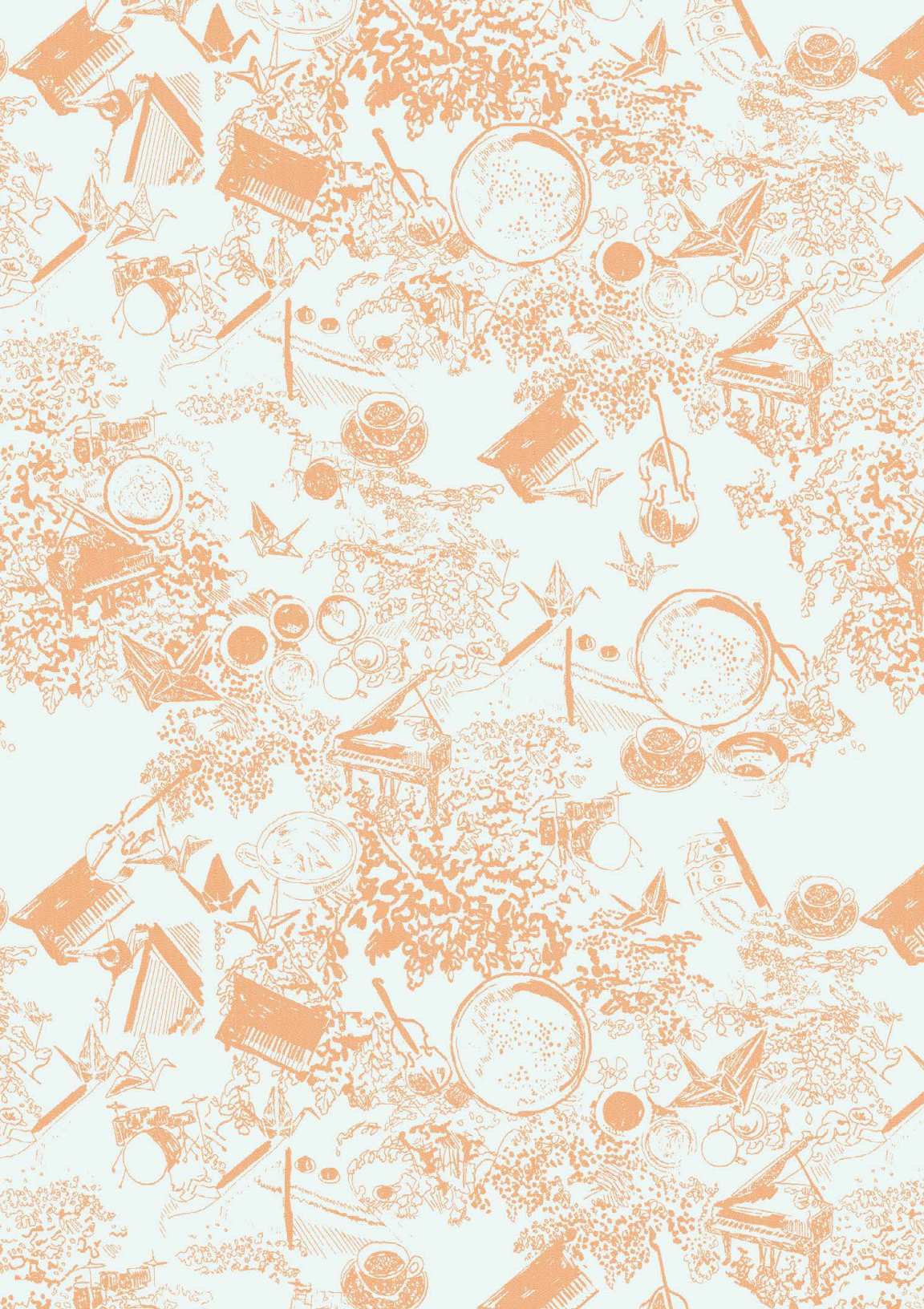


Fine

B



D.C.



Beginner To Composer In 14 Days is delightfully different. Moving swiftly from theory to action, Ben emerges as the teacher you always wished you'd had, championing radical creative freedom, improvisation and composition - even for beginners. Especially for beginners in fact. *"Students need freedom to truly fall in love with their instrument"* he writes, *"frameworks that pique their curiosity over and over again so that practice becomes play"*. Whether you're a complete beginner or have a little knowledge up your sleeve, you'll adore this dynamic and intimate guide to learning the piano, peppered with evocative vignettes of a life lived with music at its heart. Best of all, you'll come away with a method you can use time and time again to create your very own music, captured on professional quality lead sheets you can share with other musicians, to bring your work to life. Suitable for adults and a useful resource for teachers. Complements graded and traditional approaches to learning.