



# AMY BEACH

## Minuet, No 1 from *Children's Album* op 36

Good fingering, careful chord voicing and the right tempo will bring charm to this elegant, quintessential dance movement, explains teacher and author **Melanie Spanswick**

### Ability rating Beginner

#### Info

**Key:** F major  
**Tempo:** Allegro  
**Style:** Late Romantic

#### Will improve your

- ✓ Articulation
- ✓ Rhythmic pulse
- ✓ Interpretative skill

### This elegant Minuet by Amy Beach is a quintessential dance movement.

It acts as a prelude to Beach's suite *Children's Album*, a set of five beautifully crafted works influenced by JS Bach's traditional dance movement idea.

**Aim for a fairly brusque tempo, akin to an Allegro.** Crotchet (quarter note) equals 184 beats per minute seems an appropriate speed, and that is what I have marked in the score. This should imbue any performance with plenty of energy, drive and purpose. It's best to start with slow steady practice, building up momentum and technical control carefully, in order to accommodate all the necessary detail.

**An interesting feature of this piece is the use of the upper part of the keyboard only.** Notice how both lines are written out in the treble clef. Resist the urge to adjust your piano stool, as it's important to become accustomed to moving the torso, swivelling the body comfortably to the right, in order to negotiate the left hand (LH) notes.

**Without the bass clef, there's a metaphorical hole in piano's sound.** That means you'll need to try extra hard to produce a sweet yet full and clear timbre. When using the top half of the keyboard, a firm finger touch with plenty of arm weight will ensure a good sound. This is also true of playing softly or *piano*; even quiet passages need a solid touch as opposed to wispy, flaky fingerwork, which only leads to insecurities in both clarity and rhythm.

**It's essential to really get to grips with the fingering in this piece.** I have added some fingering in the score to help you. Try to keep finger changes as close knit as possible, avoiding any unnecessary or awkward leaps. This is especially true of the opening phrase, particularly the melody in the right hand (RH) in bars 1-12, where it is possible to use fingerings that encourage quick movements and jumping. But



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while quick movement may assist the clarity of articulation, it can also cause errors. Keep fingers close to the keyboard when playing in a fast tempo.

**Practise hands separately to begin with.** Ensure that the chord passages (e.g. LH bars 6-8) and passages of thirds (e.g. RH bars 17-20) are correctly voiced, with the notes depressed together, sounding in complete unison. This requires careful balancing of the hands, keeping a flexible wrist, but with the fingers always ready in the appropriate position with more weight towards the top of the hand – i.e., in the RH extra weight over the fourth and fifth fingers. Depress the notes in each chord together at the same time, slowly at first, checking for the 'biting point' – rather like the clutch in a car – searching for the point where the action will allow minimum sound. Once you've grasped the position you need to play two or three notes perfectly at the same time, you'll find it easier to find this 'point' every time the same passage is played. Most students find this technique can be easily mastered blind – that is, not looking – so listening and touch become paramount. The top note of a chord usually needs more depth, as it is the melody note; the hand must fully support the finger playing that note, dispatching greater weight and therefore a richer tone.

**A confident sense of pulse is vital in dance music.** The three beats in a bar, and four-bar phrases can be greatly enhanced by precise articulation. Beach has included copious articulation marks, which should be closely followed. Phrase marks and slurs abound in virtually every bar, alongside staccato and extensive dynamic markings.

**The dance flavour comes from specific phrasing that is apparent from the first two bars.** The decisive staccato crotchet

at the end of bar 1 guarantees a quick lift, significant in the characterisation of this dance. Think of the first beat in the bar as the downbeat with slightly more emphasis. The second beat needs to linger a little, coming off to prepare for the short staccato crotchet at the end of

### Learning Tip

The third beat of the bar essentially provides the dance character, so place it carefully, resisting the urge to rush.

bar 1. Bar 2 is the end of the short first phrase (within the four-bar phrase structure); the minim requires more weight and the crotchet on the third beat must, again, be light, hence phrasing off. This phrasing works for the whole piece.

**The middle section (bars 49-64) comprises different material.** It feels more like a waltz, with a waltz accompaniment in the LH (which should ideally be light on beats two and three), and longer phrases in the melody (RH), benefitting from a fluid cantabile voice and softer dynamics.

**Colour the little melodic moments in the LH from bars 17-32 to provide the RH material with support and a 'conversation'.** The climax at bar 32, along with the ending at bar 48, are the only sections calling for *fortissimo* – take a little time here, employing firm fingers and a rich sound. The harmonic language is predominately diatonic, but the intensity of some chromatic passages will be increased substantially if you subtly pronounce certain LH chords a bit more; e.g. bars 6-8, 38-40 and 45-47. 'Sliding' from chord to chord with a secure legato fingering will help. A dab of pedal in a few choice spots will add warmth and grandeur to this simple yet effective minuet. ■