

3: Making lessons fun

In her third article on the Suzuki approach, **Jenny Macmillan** discusses motivating children through collaboration, friendship and games.

Young musicians can often feel isolated from their contemporaries. One of the particularly appealing aspects of Suzuki is the emphasis on encouraging children by helping them feel part of a wide musical circle.

At school, pupils may know few children who are also learning musical instruments. Most elementary musicians, and particularly pianists, are unlikely to be involved in orchestral or chamber music. But the Suzuki approach promotes social interaction with other young musicians. In the early years of learning, Suzuki children practise with their parents, avoiding the loneliness of the solitary musician. They observe each other's lessons, thus meeting weekly with other children learning the same instrument. Termly concerts are generally followed by tea parties. Suzuki children join group musicianship classes, and they often attend holiday courses.

Group musicianship classes

Group lessons are an integral part of Suzuki education. Musical games in groups provide ideal conditions in which to support children's individual lessons by developing their musicianship, and particularly their reading

and ensemble skills, in an enjoyable way. Children usually love group lessons. They like being with their friends, and their enthusiasm and enjoyment lead to increased motivation to practise at home.

Parents, too, benefit from the community spirit. There is a sense of bonding as, together, they observe lessons. Groups are one of the reasons why there are few Suzuki drop-outs. Enthusiasm is infectious, and it is inspiring for parents and children to be part of an active and exciting group.

Teachers may run group classes weekly, fortnightly or monthly. There might be between four and eight young pianists in a group; violin or cello groups could be larger. Or the teacher can overlap two adjacent lessons so two children of a similar age and stage spend ten or 20 minutes playing musicianship games together.

Group lessons are carefully structured to complement the work of each child's individual lessons. For pre-schoolers who are not yet reading music, there may be games with flash cards for learning to identify note values and pitches. There may be clapping and singing games, games to encourage listening, and games to encourage co-operation between

the children. In a relaxed environment, pupils develop the skills required to read music.

Groups also offer informal opportunities for children to perform to each other.

With orchestral instruments, it is possible to play in large groups – in unison or in parts. However, many Suzuki piano teachers have two pianos, or a piano and a keyboard, so they can put two (or even three) children at each instrument playing in unison, duets or trios (doubled up – six hands at each instrument!). Four or six children can learn to work together – co-operating, concentrating, listening to each other.

There is much overlap in the function of group lesson activities but, broadly, they can be divided into games to develop co-ordination, aural, reading, performing and ensemble skills. Below are a few examples in each category.

Co-ordination games are especially necessary for very young children to help them learn the basics of right and left, finger numbers, hand shape, independence of finger movement, and feeling the music with their bodies. Pianists need to be able to play strongly with one hand and softly with the other, legato in one and staccato in the other, twos against threes, and so on. These skills can be developed in games away from the instrument.

- **Simon Says:** eg 'Simon says put your right hand on your nose' or 'Put your left hand on your tummy' (don't do it!).
- **Twos against threes:** 'Nice cup of tea' may be chanted while one hand taps thighs on 'nice' and 'of' (duplets) and the other taps on 'nice', 'cup' and 'tea' (triplets).

Ear training games are invaluable to train children to listen.

- **Rainbow/beep:** Each child is given two cards:



- The teacher plays a phrase shaping it either beautifully like a rainbow or with a bump in it, a sudden beep (getting more subtle as the children develop their listening skills). The children show the card they think is appropriate to the performance.
- **Chord aerobics:** The teacher plays a simple piece with tonic and dominant chordal accompaniment, eg *Mary had a little lamb*. When the children hear the home chord (tonic) they stand up, when they hear the



away chord (dominant) they sit down. For a subdominant chord they stand and raise their arms in the air, for a dominant seventh scrunch they sit and wrap their arms around themselves.

Visual reading skills can be developed using games with flash cards to identify note values and pitches, and Italian terms.

- **Telephone game:** The teacher has a stack of rhythm cards each with a different rhythmic pattern such as:



- Two cards are laid on the floor in front of each child. The teacher claps the rhythm of one of the cards (telephones the child) and the child answers by clapping the rhythm back and turning over the relevant card.
- **Follow the score:** Each child has a copy of a piece of music in front of them. The teacher (or one of the pupils) plays a few bars and the others have to say where the performer stopped. Questions may be asked about key and time signatures, performance markings, identification of a particular rhythm, etc.

Performance skills need to be practised, and successful performances, whether formal or informal, build pupils' confidence.

- **Prepared pieces:** Each child performs a piece. Everyone is asked to say something positive about the performance, and may then make a suggestion for improvement.
- **Lucky dip:** Each child picks a slip of paper from a box containing the names of all the pieces they can play, and performs it to the group.

Ensemble skills may readily be developed in group lessons. The common Suzuki repertoire is a valuable teaching resource.

- **Right and left:** One child plays the right hand of a piece at the piano while another child plays the left hand of the same piece. They work at starting together, listening to make sure that they stay together, and ending together musically. If sitting at two instruments, the children can swap hands every phrase (or every bar).
- **Football game:** One child plays the first phrase (or bar) of a piece at one instrument, a second child plays the second phrase (or bar) at a second instrument. Meanwhile, a third child sits at the first instrument and then plays the third phrase (or bar), and so on. They listen to try to make the music sound as though it has been performed by one person at one instrument.

With older children, activities might cover musical forms, periods and composers, together with discussions on how to practise. They might sight read duets and trios – doubled up at two keyboards. Here is a popular activity to



combine visual, aural and ensemble skills:

- **Canons:** Together the pupils sight sing a short canon, first in unison, then in canon. One at a time they go to the piano and play the music from memory. They then all play it together at the piano in unison, and finally in canon.

Further activities can be found in my article *Ideas for group lessons* in the January 2007 issue of *Piano Professional* and on my website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.

Workshops

Beyond group lessons, Suzuki workshops, lasting anything between half a day and a full week, are hugely motivating for both children and parents. The longer ones are usually residential, so parents (and younger siblings) of primary age pupils also stay. Workshops provide a wealth of activities, not just musical. Organised sport and art stimulate children between their music classes. Workshops frequently take place in beautiful buildings and/or wonderful countryside – camping is sometimes an option. For some, the workshop may form their annual family holiday.

Typically, each day children have an individual lesson, a small group lesson and a larger group class. There may be choir and orchestra (even for very young string players), as well as novelties such as African drumming or handbell ringing. The older children revel in playing chamber music together. Parents develop friendships at parent talks/discussions and optional adult choir practices as well as at meal times.

Every student performs in a concert –

usually both solo and ensemble. There may be a 'fun' concert on the final night; often there is a faculty concert. Students and their families become incredibly supportive of each other. Living, studying and performing together, they develop lasting friendships. They meet annually at workshops; they also meet regularly at other Suzuki events such as national concerts and graduations. Among my own pupils it is certainly the case that those who participate in Suzuki events tend to be more motivated to work at the piano between regular lessons; they make the best progress at the piano. It is debatable whether it is the most committed who participate, or whether participation induces commitment.

This intense social interaction between families is unique in instrumental learning to the Suzuki approach. Practising with parents, observing other pupils' lessons, performing regularly in concerts followed by tea parties, attending group musicianship classes as well as individual lessons and, ideally, joining in workshops, are all vital parts of the Suzuki approach. Collaboration is one of the crucial elements that help children persevere with their musical studies. It also raises their level of musical expertise – they see and hear what other children are able to do and that raises their own expectations. They become drawn along on a roller-coaster of fun and hard work. Young Suzuki musicians are not isolated, but fully involved in a wide social network of other young musicians and their families.

The next article will cover parents' responsibilities: *Inspiring parents with dedication, encouragement and success.*



