Suzuki piano

Special collection

Jenny Macmillan explains how musical and technical skills can be developed through the Suzuki piano repertoire

There are seven books in the Suzuki piano repertoire, which includes pieces ranging from folk songs, Bach minuets and Clementi sonatinas to Haydn and Mozart sonatas and Bach’s Italian Concerto. In this article, I list many of the techniques addressed. I then take three techniques – scales, Alberti basses, and dynamic control – and examine how these skills are developed systematically through the books.

The Suzuki repertoire is a small miracle of planning. It is carefully constructed to develop technical and musical skills sequentially. Each piece includes one or two new techniques while developing existing skills. Pupils retain their past repertoire and continually return to these pieces to learn to play them more musically. This means that, when learning new repertoire, they can draw on a library of current, maturing skills.

Techniques in Book 1 cover:
- Finger staccato
- Legato
- Dynamic control
- Scale passages
- Broken chord passages
- Block chords
- Alberti basses
- Balance between hands

Example 1: Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Example 2: Lightly Row

Example 5: A Short Story

Alberti basses, and dynamic control – and chart them through five pieces in the piano repertoire:
1. The first piece in Book 1, a set of variations on Twinkle Twinkle Little Star [Tw], is continually used throughout the repertoire to refine techniques.
2. The folk song, Lightly Row [Lr] comes near the beginning of Book 1.
3. Lichner’s A Short Story [SS] is near the beginning of Book 2.
4. Clementi’s Sonatina in C Op36 No1 (we shall examine the 1st movement) [Cl] is at the beginning of Book 3.
5. As a final example, we will look at the 1st movement of Mozart’s Sonata in C K545 [545] in Book 6.

Performances of these pieces may be heard on my website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.

Scales

Before starting to learn pieces, all Suzuki children study the Twinkle variations. These establish many aspects of technique such as posture, hand position and correct finger movement, together with developing control, strength and independence of the fingers. While studying these variations, children learn to concentrate, relax and listen to their sound.

Twinkle Theme includes the notes coming down the scale A A G – F F E D D C in bars 2 to 4 (Example 1). Children learn to play each note with a beautiful tone, the fingertips forming a rainbow shape on the keys (ie the long fingers stretching in), keeping the hand balanced even when the short fifth finger plays, and listening for a smooth legato between repeated notes as well as adjacent notes.

The right hand five-finger scale in bars 3 and 4 Lightly Row (Example 2) requires the same care as in Twinkle Theme, with the addition of relaxing the thumb under the right hand after playing the first note in order to keep the hand balanced. Each note is now played only once. When the right hand melody can be played musically on its own, the left hand accompaniment is carefully learned and added (see Alberti basses below).

Two further pieces in Book 1 strongly feature five-finger scales – each successive piece to be played at a faster speed. So when pupils move on to A Short Story in Book 2 they are ready to play complete scales, putting thumb under or third finger over. The scales in the first movement of the Clementi are much...
faster and include black notes. If well taught, by the time children get to Mozart K545, they generally have no particular problem playing the fast light semiquaver scale passages.

**Alberti basses**

Alberti basses need to give a clear pulse as well as a glow of chordal accompaniment to enhance the melody (Example 2). The sound required with left hand fingers 5 1 3 1 on C G E G is strong-soft-medium-soft. So the fifth finger needs to lift and strike the key strongly, the thumb needs to play from much closer to the key, and the third finger stretches in towards the black notes to keep the hand and arm supple for a flowing sound. Suzuki teachers will devise many exercises and activities for their pupils to master this simple, yet challenging, skill. The rhythm of Twinkle variation 1 (Example 3) may be repeated with finger 5 for developing strong sounds, and Twinkle variation 3 (Example 4) may be practised with the thumb for developing the control required for the soft sounds.

**Example 3**  
**Example 4**

**Lightly Row** uses only tonic and dominant chords, crotchets in both hands. A Short Story adds chords II and V7, a left hand leap in bar 3, and a rhythmically more elaborate right hand melody over the left hand quavers (Example 5).

The first movement of the Clementi has a faster Alberti bass, including black notes, which needs to be played much softer than the right hand in order not to dominate it. And the Alberti bass comes in a wide variety of guises in all movements of K545 – in each case pupils need to listen and judge carefully how to play it musically.

**Dynamic control**

The control of strong and soft sounds commences with Twinkle variation 2 (Example 6). Suzuki teachers use games to ensure that young children listen to their sounds and master the control of soft and strong sounds. When they have learned the notes of pieces such as Twinkle and Lightly Row, they will have the control to shape the phrases, eg to crescendo up scale and arpeggio passages and diminuendo down, to vary the sound through repeated notes, to ease off at the ends of phrases.

A Short Story is one of the first pieces to include written gradual dynamics. At a very early stage of learning the piece, the teacher will encourage attention to the written dynamics. This is done through following the score, listening to recordings, listening to the teacher demonstrate short sections, repeating short passages (eg just one crescendo), and listening carefully to their own sound. As the pupil progresses through Book 2, the teacher will continually return to the earlier pieces to improve dynamic control.

By the time pupils arrive at the Clementi sonatina in Book 3, they should be in command of a wide range of dynamics. The dynamics in this first movement are mainly terraced, forte and piano, and pupils will be encouraged to differentiate clearly between these two extremes. They will also be required to shape the phrases sensitively in both ths and the slow second movement and the lively third movement of the sonatina.

With this experience, and having worked methodically through Books 3, 4 and 5, pupils are in a technically capable and musically informed position to master all movements of K545. No dynamics are marked into the score. However, through listening to recordings of K545 and other works by Mozart, especially his operas and piano concertos, pupils are able to follow their instinct, guided by their teacher, to give a stylish account of their Mozart sonata.

The next article in this series will show how some of these techniques are taught in lessons; the following one will describe how they may be practised at home.