

Suzuki for Piano

7. Suzuki at home: Establishing good practice habits

In the penultimate instalment of her series on piano and the Suzuki approach, **Jenny Macmillan** examines how parental support helps develop constructive, independent practice

GOOD QUALITY practice is essential for progress on any instrument. In this article I will show how, with support from the teacher, parents are able to assist with their children's practice through the Suzuki approach. Such guidance leads to the formation of good practice habits, which children can maintain as they approach their teens and begin to practise independently.

Musical progress is determined by quantity, but also quality, of practice. Often, a child's natural instinct is to start practising a piece at the beginning, playing until they get stuck, then playing another piece as far as possible before closing the book for the day. Suzuki parents, however,

are instructed by the teacher on how to guide their children at home. They attend their children's lessons and make notes on what the teacher covers, as well as how and why points are dealt with. With this information they can ensure their children benefit the most from the teacher's instruction.

PRACTISING WITH A THREE- OR FOUR-YEAR-OLD CHILD

Practice at home with a young child will closely resemble the previous lesson. The parent will have attended, so will be familiar with what the teacher taught. All early lessons are concerned with establishing good posture, focused listening, attention to

technique and good practice habits; these are developed initially through the study of variations on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Rather than play straight through a variation, parents will encourage their child to play short sections as demonstrated by the teacher, repeated by the child in the lesson. The teaching point of the previous lesson may have been to keep the hand level and balanced when playing fingers 4 and 5 on G and A. So the parent will ask the child to get the right hand ready with finger 4 on G and play the variation 1 rhythm, *Piccadilly Circus* (Example 1), perhaps repeating this once per year of their age, ie four times for a four-year-old. The parent will then ask for the same to be repeated with finger 5 on A. The teacher may then have suggested playing 'seesaws' between fingers 4 and 5 on G and A (Example 2), still focusing on a level hand.

The child may be learning *Lightly Row* (Example 3) in Book 1. The teacher may have been working at listening for legato repeated notes in bar 4, and the child may have imitated the teacher's 'chiming' (Example 4) in lesson. The parent will ask the child to repeat finger 5 on G as shown by the teacher. Once the child is listening well to the legato, the parent may ask the child also to focus on that week's teaching point from the *Twinkle* variations, ie a level, balanced hand for finger 5. The child may now be encouraged to pick out the tune of *Lightly Row* – which will be well known because the parent will be playing the recording regularly at home. To end the practice, the parent may ask the child to play through a well known piece such as the *Twinkle* theme.

PRACTISING WITH A SEVEN- OR EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CHILD

By the time children are seven or eight and have been learning for three or four years, they will be playing scales and reading





KEYBOARDFEATURE

notation, as well as working through the Suzuki repertoire books. Practice will still reiterate the work of the previous lesson. The teacher may start with scales, still based on the *Twinkle* variations. So the parent will ask for the current scale as set by the teacher, eg B major, played with the variation 1 rhythm (Example 1) on each note in one hand, watching for a level, balanced hand that stays well over the black notes and listening for a good quality of sound with each finger.

After warming up the fingers and the ears with scales and variations, many Suzuki teachers will cover reading next while the child is still fresh and will ask parents to do the same at home. Initially children do prepared reading, first examining the new piece for key, time, rhythm, dynamics and so on. They may clap the rhythm and mime or sing the music before playing the piece at the piano. Any errors or problems will be examined and those few tricky notes repeated several times. The piece will be practised hands separately as well as hands together. The parent will reiterate the teacher's comments, such as 'keep your eyes on the music', from the previous lesson. After two or three days, when one piece can be read fluently, the child will be asked to prepare the next one. After practising that, the child is asked to play the previous one again, every day making it more musical, perhaps by shaping the phrases more. By attending the child's lessons and practices, the parent learns alongside the child the theory (if not the actual playing) of music.

The child's review piece for the week may be Lichner's *A Short Story* in Book 2. The teacher will have set an assignment for practice; the parent will ask or remind the child what it was and how it is to be practised. After several repetitions of the assignment, a longer section may have been set for hands-separate work, after which the child may be asked to play through the complete piece – focusing particularly on whatever the teacher has set, which might be listening carefully for a soft left-hand accompaniment, for example.

The child's newest piece may be a Clementi sonatina from the beginning of Book 3. Having listened critically to so much music from an early age, and with technique well established from the first lesson, they will not have a big issue with learning new notes – Suzuki children usually love learning new pieces. The parent will encourage the child to learn a few notes at a time, each hand separately, working them out by ear and from the

music, parent and child reading the correct fingering as written in the score. By repeating short sections – a phrase or a few notes or bars – the music soon becomes securely memorised.

So far during practice there will have been very little 'playing straight through'; however, Suzuki children will review a



selection of pieces from their repertoire each day. Here the parent may offer a suggestion at the beginning or, better, ask their child what they should focus on (eg shaping the phrases or crisp staccato), but must then let the child play through with no interruption.

SUPPORTING AN 11- OR 12-YEAR-OLD-CHILD

As children head towards secondary school, they start to take responsibility for their own practice. Parents will still attend lessons and take notes, but they will supervise perhaps only the first practice after a lesson and the final one before the next lesson, or just for five or ten minutes each day to help interpret the lesson notes. If good practice habits have been instilled, many 11- and 12-year-olds will be able to practise efficiently on their own.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Most children get obstreperous at some stage about practice – most are not always sweet and amenable! To help with this, parents can give their children as much control as possible over their practice. They can involve their children by drawing information out of them – discussing what is to be done, and how and why – questioning them, and guiding the practice accordingly. Parents need to display a positive attitude, showing interest and appreciation and giving plenty of praise and approval. Children concentrate more (and therefore learn more) when they are praised than when they are criticised.

Practice with young children should be kept short but focused. Initially, parents need to make it fun, but soon they will also need to make it interesting, in order to maintain their children's enthusiasm for learning; variety is often the secret.

Teachers will suggest specific games to motivate children to practise certain points. To find the number of repetitions of a short assignment, the child can be asked to choose a number, roll a dice or play the



assignment at every octave of the piano. Lucky dip boxes can be useful – after a lesson, the parent writes each practice point on a separate piece of paper (eg '*Lightly Row*, bar 4 RH four times'); boxes labelled 'do' and 'done' can help with daily reviews of scales and repertoire. Alternatively, the child can discuss and choose the order in which to play the review pieces. Charts with ticks or stickers form a visual reminder of what has been practised.

Focused practice means listening intently, repeating short sections to improve a technical or musical issue, and playing hands separately for clarity, for developing musical shaping and for security so neither hand is dependent on the other. It also means some slow work in order to listen and hear the quality of sound and to reveal any inaccuracies. As well as all this, children should have regular opportunities to play by ear, to improvise, and to mess around at the instrument for instant enjoyment and emotional satisfaction.

Suzuki children benefit greatly from parental involvement in their music-making, with teachers guiding parents to assist their children sensitively at home. A good three-way relationship between teacher, parent and child results in thoughtful practice from the start, which leads to constructive independent practice later in life.

The final article in the series will look at training to become a Suzuki teacher.



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