

The Importance of Twinkle Variations

By Jenny Macmillan

The Twinkle variations are tools. They are the tools of a musician. Like a carpenter, we need to study how to sharpen our tools, and then ensure we keep them sharp. Blunt tools will never create beautiful work – the end product will always be unpolished.

The Twinkle variations are also like warm-ups in sport. A sportsperson would never go straight into playing a game. They always do some warm-up exercises first to prepare physically, and also mentally. Similarly with musicians, it is necessary to prepare the fingers, arms, body and breathing for a practice session to remind the body how to work effectively in order to produce beautiful tone.

The Twinkle variations also prepare us mentally for the practice ahead. Instead of thinking of what we've just been doing, or what we'll do later, we start to listen to the sound we are producing, aware of the rhythm, of the feeling in our bodies, also (depending on our instrument) watching our movements. The Twinkles help us tune all our senses into our music-making.

Ideas for practising Twinkle variations

I am writing as a piano teacher, but most of these ideas apply also to other instruments. Otherwise, they may be adapted. My suggestions are:

- Work on one note only of a Twinkle variation – tonalisation for advanced musicians as well as those in the early stages, to perfect the movements, breathing, tonguing, sounds and rhythms – learning to listen carefully.
- Practise with stops between each note of a Twinkle variation – to relax between each note, to prepare mentally and physically for the next note, to have time to find the ideal position (eg a pianist's Twinkle hand-shape) before playing the next note.

- Play a Piccadilly Cocktail (so-called because some of us call the first Twinkle variation 'Piccadilly Circus') – playing once through Twinkle theme with a different variation for each phrase, or for each note.
- Encourage pupils to invent their own rhythms on Twinkle theme.
- Play a Twinkle variation on each note of a scale or arpeggio – initially with stops between each note, getting ready quickly for the next note, waiting for the "ready and" to be sure the next note and finger are correct; then with no stops.
- Play in different keys – spend a week in each key, working round the circle of 5ths (eg C, G, D, A, etc, then in minor keys).

Have a target. When the Twinkle variations can all be played well, organise a Twinkle graduation performance with a certificate, whether in the lesson with observers, in a group lesson, or at a pupils' concert. I find most children are nearly ready to perform their book 1 recital before the Twinkle variations are sufficiently well played for a Twinkle graduation. It's not a matter of just being able to play the notes and the rhythm – there is so much more to the Twinkle variations than that. They are fundamental to developing superb technique which will produce wonderful tone.

Fitting Twinkle variations into practice and lesson routines

I would strongly recommend starting each practice with the Twinkle variations, rather than playing them later in the practice, while fresh and to develop good listening and good technique from the beginning. And that means, as teachers, starting each lesson by working on Twinkles.

All through book 1, it is essential the Twinkle variations are practised daily, to train the fingers/arms/body/breath how to work. When in book 1, I would recommend between 5 and 10 minutes of Twinkles practice each day.

When the Twinkle variations can be played really well, hopefully at least when the pupil is around the end of book 1, the variations should still be practised daily, sometimes repeatedly on one note, and sometimes with stops, but there can also be more playing through a Piccadilly Cocktail, and also playing them in different keys.

I start teaching scales around the beginning of book 2. Pupils play a Twinkle variation on each note of the new scale being learned, initially with stops so the child never plays a wrong note or wrong finger, because the teacher or parent waits to say the "ready and" until they see the child is set up to play the next note correctly. As the scale becomes more familiar, it can be played with Twinkle variations with no stops. At the beginning of each lesson I work on technique in this way with scales, and later also with arpeggios.

When pupils can play their Twinkles very well, it means the variations can be used to work on the appropriate beautiful sounds required in their repertoire pieces. This applies from book 1 pieces all the way through to the last books of the Suzuki repertoire (and beyond!).

For each instrument, each variation develops different techniques and produces different sounds. Suzuki teachers know which variation to use to help produce the sounds and movements required on any particular note of any piece of music. In lesson they will work on tone quality, and the pupil should work in the same way daily at home – applying what they already know (the Twinkle variation) to what is new (the newest piece of music) or, indeed, to improve a review piece.

If the Twinkle variations are practised only three or four days a week (rather than seven days a week), it will take more than twice as long to develop fine technique – longer than twice because, if they are not practised one day, the previous day's practice is diluted.

The importance of Twinkle variations

When I was training to become a Suzuki teacher, I was told that 90% of all technical issues were covered in the Twinkle variations, and 95% in book 1. It's taken me a long time to realise the importance of the Twinkles in learning to play book 1 beautifully with excellent tone; and the importance of playing book 1 musically in order to play the complete Suzuki repertoire beautifully and with wonderful tone. I hope, perhaps, you will learn this quicker than I did!

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