

The Importance of Review

By Jenny Macmillan

One of the joys of learning a musical instrument must be the pleasure it offers of simply being able to play music at any time, anywhere – at home or at school, for oneself, or for friends or family. Suzuki children are particularly lucky in that they are encouraged to keep up their repertoire and that they play from memory, so they do not first have to find a copy of the music. Repertoire which has been played over a period of months or years develops a musical maturity not usually evident in newly learned pieces. Indeed, musicality is developed by reviewing old, familiar pieces, rather than fresh ones which include new and more challenging techniques.

Regularly reviewing the Suzuki repertoire helps expand children's memory, lengthen concentration span, and improve self-confidence. Daily repertoire practice increases the rate of learning – by improving techniques in old pieces, children have a library of skills on which to draw, so only a few new things need to be learned to master each new piece – assuming they are listening well to repertoire recordings. It is noticeable that those children who play their repertoire pieces beautifully are exactly the same ones who produce musical sounds in their newest pieces.

Sometimes pupils forget their repertoire pieces. There is a question of trust here. As parents, you know the importance of review, and that your teachers expect repertoire to be kept up. Teachers cannot listen to every single repertoire piece every lesson. It is up to parents to ensure their children play and practise each piece regularly. It is possible your teacher has a system of hearing old pieces, and you always know which review piece(s) will be heard next. But the idea is not that each piece is relearned as it is requested. You should be spending, for instance, 20 minutes twice a week playing through a complete book twice,

rather than 40 minutes during the week relearning a piece from that book for your next lesson.

The only way to be sure repertoire is kept up is by having a chart which is regularly updated. Mark each time a piece is played and – importantly – mark if it needs any special attention before it is next played (eg hands separate work, an awkward middle section, trills). I know it is hard work (I have been there with my own three children) and it needs plenty of planning, but it can be done, and needs to be done if your child is to play really fluently, confidently and musically. Try to make the chart attractive enough for your child to want to follow it, adding in new pieces as they are learned. Parental interest in and attention to the chart will be reflected in your child's motivation to follow it through.

When reviewing, concentrate on a particular aspect of musicianship, eg posture, quality of sound, rhythm, dynamics. To keep a piece fresh, try playing it only hands separately for a few practices, plus practising the awkward passages; when it is next played hands together, you will be amazed at the improvement. If a piece is really forgotten, try listening to it repeatedly, literally about fifty times, combined with lots of hands separate practice. Try listening to the recording, then playing along with the recording, then playing the piece solo. Another time play the complete book along with the recording.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of keeping up review pieces. It forms the basis on which children develop their musicality to enable them to tackle challenging new pieces with confidence and assurance. ♪♪

Jenny Macmillan is a Suzuki piano teacher and BSI instructor in Cambridge.