

Music Club: Ideas for Group Teaching

By Jenny Macmillan

Group lessons are crucial to Suzuki philosophy. They support and develop the work covered in weekly individual lessons. Groups offer opportunities for developing musicianship through ensemble playing and informal performances. Children's enthusiasm and enjoyment usually shine out in group situations, leading to increased motivation to practise at home. Children and parents appreciate the social aspect of group lessons – in my teaching studio group lessons are called Piano Club.

With orchestral instruments, it is possible to play in large groups – in unison or in parts. Much fun can be had and useful performing, ensemble and musicianship skills can be developed through games for co-ordination, listening, reading and performance. The use of piano in groups is not quite so obvious. Most Suzuki piano teachers have two pianos, so they can put two (or even three) children at each instrument playing in unison, one hand each, or duets and trios (doubled up – six hands at each piano). I have an extra keyboard I can bring into my music room for groups, providing yet further opportunities for ensemble work. However, we also play many games away from the piano and these, of course, can be played by students of any musical instrument.

Suzuki groups can vary in size from four or five children up to twenty or more. And group lessons may be held weekly, or monthly, or however it suits the teacher and pupils. The games I suggest here can be used by teachers of any instrument. They can also be used at home by parents to support their children's musical learning. There is much overlap in the function of musical activities I use in group lessons. However, for clarity, I shall divide games into four sections: to develop co-ordination, ear training, visual reading skills and performance/ensemble skills.

Co-ordination games

These are especially useful and necessary with very young children to help them learn basics such as right from left, finger numbers, hand shape, independence of finger movement, and feeling the music with their bodies. With teenage pupils we may warm up with exercises of the swinging arms and rolling shoulders variety. And this term I plan to teach pupils to juggle – to develop their co-ordination, but also to develop their peripheral vision which is important when sight-reading.

Co-ordination games include:

- Simon Says, eg "Simon says put your right hand on your nose" or "Put your left hand on your tummy" (don't do it!).
- All put hands behind back. "Bring out left hand with finger 3 waving."
- All drop hands by side – notice relaxed shape of pianist's hand. Raise hands, palm upwards, and imagine gently holding a bubble in each hand – don't burst bubble. Place both hands together, fingertips touching to make a ten-finger dome. Gently tap finger 2s or 4s, etc. Then hold ten-finger dome above head, where child can't see own hands, and tap fingers.
- Teacher (or pupil) play Suzuki's Allegro while others hold hands in circle and march in time to music singing:
*Marching, marching, everybody marching,
Stamp your feet and make a lot of noise.
Marching, marching, everybody marching,
Stamp your feet and make a lot of noise.
Softly, softly, on your tiptoes,
Round and round without a sound.
Marching, marching, everybody marching,
Stamp your feet and make a lot of noise.
Stamp feet and walk on tiptoe as appropriate, and crouch down without moving at the pause on "sound".*
- All sing Twinkle with actions: as you sing the first line "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", touch feet, feet, head, head, arms in air, head; continue with shoulders, waist, knees, feet, etc.

Ear training games

The first of these games is from Caroline Fraser (superb Suzuki piano teacher and trainer from Peru) who has many wonderful ideas for teaching.

- All sing a familiar song, eg Lightly Row. Then sing it again, clapping hands together for the short notes (crotchets) and tapping hands on shoulders for the long notes (minims). Then do actions again, this time hearing the song in head, but not singing out loud. Next time, half the group clap the crotchets and the other half tap the minims, again singing silently in one's head.
- Teacher (or pupil) does actions as in previous game – others have to guess which book 1 piece is being performed (another of Caroline's fascinating games which the children love!).
- Dynamics game – all crouch down and whisper "pianissimo", slightly sit up and say "piano", rise more and say "mezzo piano" a little louder, start to stand up and say "mezzo forte", stand fully and shout "forte", stretch arms high in air and yell "fortissimo". Then vice versa – from fortissimo down to pianissimo.
- Tempo game – all walk very slowly round room saying "adagio" four times, speed up walk a little saying "andante" four times, ditto "moderato", "allegro" and finally run around saying "presto".
- Spot the mistake – teacher performs on instrument and children have to say what looks or sounds wrong. Teacher may be sitting too high at piano, or slouching at piano, playing left hand accompaniment too strongly, with the hands unco-ordinated, or playing the wrong accompaniment, eg broken chord accompaniment of London Bridge instead of solid chords for Mary, or dominant chords of Mary instead of dominant 7th chords for Little Playmates.
- Twinkle dance – each pupil is assigned a Twinkle variation. Teacher plays rhythm of a variation on drum (or other instrument). When pupils hear rhythm of their variation they must quickly stand up and dance to their variation and quickly sit down when it changes to a different variation.
- Canons – all look at score of a short (eg 4 bar) canon. All sight-sing it together. Sing it again, each pupil working out suitable fingering by miming it on knee meanwhile. Sing in canon. Take turns to play melody from memory at instrument. All play melody in unison. Play in canon.
- Continuous scales – children line up at two pianos. One child plays C major scale two octaves with metronome set to, for instance, 100. Child at other piano plays G major. Another child at first piano plays D major, and so on round circle of 5ths.

Visual reading skills

I have many sets of flash cards, some purchased from music shops (eg Chester, Kodaly, Hal Leonard), others I make up myself as the need arises (eg Italian terms used in Suzuki book 1). We have games for identifying note values, and others for pitches.

- One Minute Club – to become a member of my One Minute Club (which is rewarded with child's name on a poster in my music room and a certificate to take home – to say nothing of the cheers and jubilation from the other members of my Piano Club and their parents), children must name in random order from flash cards all the notes on the treble and bass staves (from low G in the bass clef to high G in the treble clef) in 60 seconds (holding the stopwatch to time it is a popular job!). Each child's short term goal is to beat their own previous best time.
- Telephone game – each child is given two rhythm cards each with, for example, a four beat rhythm such as crotchet, crotchet, two quavers, crotchet. These cards are laid on the floor in front of each child. I clap a rhythm (telephone the child) and the child replies by clapping the rhythm back and turning the card over.
- Another game is to lay out four of the above rhythm cards and all together clap the four bar rhythm. I then turn one card face down, and we clap the four bars again, this time one bar from memory. Then I turn another card over, and we clap it again. Ditto until we clap the whole four bar rhythm from memory.
- Follow the score – each child has a copy of

With older pupils we discuss and identify intervals, chords, cadences, time signatures, key signatures, circle of 5ths, forms, periods, practising, and so on.

Specific activities with slightly older children (eg age 8+):

the same piece of Suzuki repertoire music. One child plays piece at piano, others have to follow score (parents and teacher help). Or teacher plays at piano and stops every so often, and children have to point to place in score when music stops.

- Score questions – each child has a copy of the same piece of music. Teacher asks children questions such as:

Can you find a B?

What is the name of the first note in the right hand in bar 2?

Where can you see this rhythm (teacher claps it)?

What does "rit" mean?



Performance/ensemble skills

I will describe these games for piano but, obviously, most will adapt well for string and other instruments.

- Variation copycat – one child plays first note of first variation, second child copies it at second piano, first child plays second note of variation, second child copies it, etc.
- Six children sit at two keyboards and play Twinkle in unison.
- Mixed variations – four children sit at two pianos. Each child is assigned a different Twinkle variation. All children play their variation at the same time.
- One child at each of two keyboards – one plays left hand of piece, other plays right hand.
- Ditto, but children swap hands every four bars, or every two bars, or every one bar.
- Older child learns a duet to play with younger child playing book 1 piece.
- Football game – children line up behind each other at two pianos. One plays bar 1 of a

piece, child at other piano plays bar 2, new child at first piano plays bar 3, etc.

- Two children, a piano each – one plays all forte sections of piece, other plays all piano sections (and when not playing each gets up and walks round stool!).
- Play duets and trios (doubled up at two pianos) – sight-read or prepared in advance.

Group lessons are also an ideal opportunity for pupils to practise performing in an informal atmosphere.

- Lucky dip – each child has box of pieces of paper with names of all pieces in their repertoire. Each child picks piece of paper and performs that piece. Other children may be given specific areas to check meanwhile, eg posture of performer, whether feet stay still, hand position, sound quality, balance between hands, dynamics, etc. Everyone must first say something positive about the performance, and can then make a suggestion for improvement.
- Mini-concert – everyone practises performing piece for forthcoming concert.

Conclusion

Carefully led group sessions can develop pupils' confidence, giving them opportunities to get to know each other and to work together. Even if children find the practising tough, they usually love their group lessons. Their enthusiasm is infectious – parents and children alike are greatly motivated by working and socialising together. It helps parents to see what other pupils of a similar age and standard are doing, and it inspires children to feel they are members of an active and exciting group.

One of my 11 year old pupils, who has also had experience of non-Suzuki music lessons, recently said to her mother: "I WISH other kids could come to just ONE Suzuki lesson or workshop or something. Then they'd SEE how great it is that we all know each other's stuff and can do things together! It's SO much better!" 🎵

More ideas for group lessons are given on my website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk and particularly in the chapter on group lessons in my Notebook: www.jennymacmillan.com/Notebook.pdf