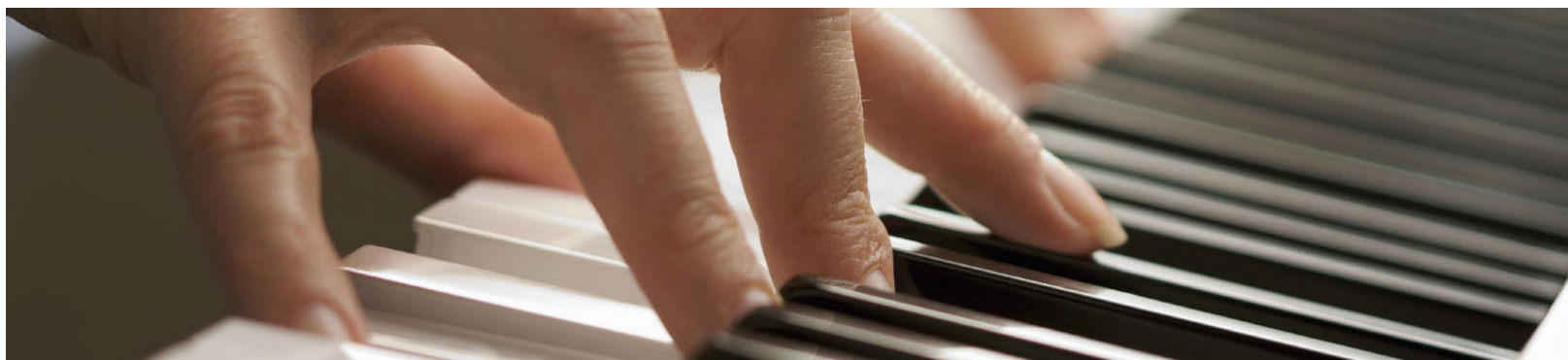


# They All Twinkle

Introducing Suzuki twinkles into 'standard' teaching, by Hilary Dawson



I started twinkling in January 2014 as the novice trainee on Jenny Macmillan's Suzuki teacher training course. My fingers were carefully guided into the 'Piccadilly Circus' variation as the anatomical details of each finger joint, hand, wrist and arm were highlighted in a way unknown to me during decades of piano playing. Twelve months on, I am a Twinkles Missionary. My own playing has benefited enormously from a regular routine of practising the variations and, although I have yet to take my first Suzuki pupil, all my pupils now start their lesson (and, I hope their practice) with a good helping of 'pepperoni pizza', aka 'Piccadilly Circus'. This article describes the experiment of integrating the Twinkle Variations into my standard teaching practice, complete with deviation (the purist should read no further!), hesitation and, of course, repetition.

First of all: **deviation**. My pupils have adopted the pizza theme with enthusiasm. Piccadilly Circus is 'Pepperoni Pizza', legato minims are 'Mozzarella', 'Blackberry Raspberry' is now 'Black Pepper Anchovies' and 'Please Squeeze Me' stays just that for ketchup lovers and becomes 'More Cheese Please' for others. After focusing on one of the variations in detail, the menu at the start of a lesson for a pupil who has learnt all four might be something like this: 'Please can I have black pepper anchovies, followed by mozzarella, more cheese please and finish with a strong pepperoni pizza?' Each variation is played as a four-bar phrase, often as a duet with me busking a lower part.

Second: **hesitation**. Mostly mine (!), prompted by my fear of hesitation, even resistance, from parents and pupils. Will they get bored? Will they be able to appreciate the purposes of the twinkle routine? Will

teenagers play a nursery rhyme? Happily, my fears proved groundless. Recently, when I started a lesson with another activity, I was prompted by my young pupil, 'Haven't you forgotten something?' More than one observing parent has commented on their child's post-twinkle technical progress and capacity for expressive playing.

Thirdly: **repetition**. This has been the biggest surprise of all. As teachers and pianists, we appreciate the importance of repetition, but it is only now, five years after I started teaching, that I understand that children and teenagers like repetition. As Edward Kreitman says in his book 'Teaching from the balance point':

*Children love repetition and will usually welcome playing through their familiar and favorite pieces, just as they enjoy hearing the same bedtime stories over and over. It is usually the parent who is tired of hearing the review repertoire, and he can easily convey that message to the child. Be careful of what you say and do.*

To what can we ascribe this? Perhaps we can include the following: the security of routine, starting a lesson with something which is well known, freedom from the score, which allows for full focus on hand and ears and, not least, children experiencing for themselves that repetitions over time lead to greater skill.

For me as a teacher, the variations are a godsend. They give us a focus, a language and shorthand to describe technical points of repertoire pieces. 'Mozzarella touch please', 'Remember your Twinkle Hand', 'Pepperoni Pizza here', 'That was a lovely Please squeeze me', this last one for a well-played feminine ending. They give us tools to unpick the technical challenges of a phrase and a means

of practising those challenges 'off the page'. Jenny Macmillan talks about the 'Piccadilly Circus' treatment in her training course and in her book 'Successful Practising', and I will often apply the 'Mozzarella' treatment to a descending legato phrase. We can extend the challenge and vary the menu still further, for example by introducing dynamic contrast and gradation to the variations, by playing separate hands or with hands together playing the same or even different rhythms. Pupils can play the variations in a different key. Variations can be played by groups of two or even three children. Improvisation can include chords I, IV and V and, for the adventurous, more complex harmonies.

The proof of the pudding has been vividly brought home to me by an 11-year old pupil; let's call him Jonnie. After several years in group keyboard lessons at school, his hands were locked and wrists and arms tense. Ram-rod straight fingers made any dynamic variation impossible - it was all *forte*. He sang beautifully and wanted to play, but when he first came to me we joked that he was the 'Iron Man'. Last week, several hundred variations later, he played me a Lullaby in 6/8 with opening 'Squeeze Me' dotted crotchets, Mozzarella lines which gently rose and fell and a sensitivity of touch which, I have to confess, was beyond my limited and limiting expectations. This Lullaby 'sang' as the cradle rocked gently. ■

## References

Online material: [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk)  
Macmillan, Jenny: *Successful Practising*, 2011  
Kreitman, Edward: *Teaching from the Balance Point*, Western Springs School of Talent Education, 1998