



Jenny Macmillan in her studio

Suzuki Training for Children With Dyslexia

by Jenny Macmillan

Music and Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a broad term covering a wide variety of conditions. There is no universally accepted definition. People with dyslexia may have significant difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, number work, short-term memory, sequencing, auditory perception, visual perception, motor skills and/or spatial skills. The crucial element in diagnosis is the discrepancy between the intelligence of the child and the child's performance in literacy-related skills (British Dyslexia Association, 1999; Oglethorpe, 1996/2001).

An estimated 15% of the population have significant dyslexic difficulties (Adult Dyslexia Organisation, 2002). However, few basic skills are totally impossible for people with dyslexia if they are sufficiently determined and are given, or discover for themselves, the appropriate compensatory strategies (Miles, 2001).

Problem Areas for People With Dyslexia

Anecdotal reports suggest children with dyslexia often experience difficulties learning to play a musical instrument. This is not surprising, for they may encounter problems in one or more of the following areas:

- auditory skills
- motor skills
- spatial skills
- visual perception
- timing skills
- short-term memory
- phonological processing
- co-ordination
- concentration
- organisation
- sequencing
- working at speed

People with dyslexia may suffer from:

- erratic behaviour
- low self-esteem

- frustration
- exhaustion
- anxiety
- fear of failure

Additional common problems for those with dyslexia when studying music include:

- learning notation
- sight-reading
- melodic and rhythmic repetition
- maintaining a steady beat

(British Dyslexia Association, 1996; Oglethorpe, 1996/2001; Overy, 2000)

Benefits of the Suzuki Approach

In developing his instrumental teaching method, Shinichi Suzuki claimed that his "mother-tongue" approach to teaching children was effective for *all* children unless severely brain-damaged or disabled (Suzuki, 1982).

"There are no failures. Any child who can speak his native language has the potential to learn to play the piano" (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979: 2).

The Suzuki approach does seem to address many of the problems identified in the research literature for young musicians with dyslexia.

As long ago as 1970, Rawson recommended that teaching programmes for people with dyslexia need to be "*structured, sequential, cumulative, and thorough*", [as well as] *multisensory*." The British Dyslexia Association (1996) emphasises the need to build new information on existing knowledge, while Westcombe (2001) stresses the importance of providing plenty of opportunities to revise previous work. The Suzuki programme is highly *structured*, with pupils progressing *sequentially* through a set repertoire of pieces which gradually introduce various musical and technical skills. The method is *cumulative* as pupils maintain their past repertoire, developing their skills on these now well-known pieces. The approach is *thorough* as pupils are required to master every musical and technical point in one piece before progressing to the next. Suzuki pupils learn using *aural, visual and kinaesthetic senses*. They listen to recordings of their pieces, observe other pupils' lessons, and watch their teacher demonstrate. Because of the emphasis on



technique from the very first lesson, they learn to be aware of every movement at their instrument; because of the emphasis on musicianship, they learn to listen very carefully to the sounds they are making.

Case studies of musicians with dyslexia by Backhouse (2001) and Ganschow *et al* (1994) mention the importance of repetition, and of listening to recordings when learning a new piece, the latter also claiming that rhythms are easiest to learn by hearing them. Dr Suzuki would ask pupils to practise an assignment many times, not so that they could play it correctly, but so that they could not play it incorrectly (Suzuki, 1969). Pupils are expected to listen daily to recordings of the music they are learning.

Suzuki children attend regular group lessons, in addition to their individual lessons, at which rhythm games and singing activity games are played. This type of activity is recommended by Overy (2000) in her study of children with dyslexia. People with dyslexia have difficulty maintaining a steady beat (British Dyslexia Association, 1996). This can be remedied by playing along with the recording as recommended by Suzuki teachers, and by playing with other children in unison, duets, or other ensembles at group lessons.

Music notation is taught from the very first lesson in groups, using flash cards and games. Once children have a secure technique and are producing a beautiful sound, they learn to read at their instrument. Lauridsen (2002), a Danish piano teacher who has investigated using off-staff notation, traditional notation and no notation, considers that

“not using any music notation at the beginning level may be a very effective method for developing important listening skills” (p14).

She thinks that advanced students are reluctant to engage in the process of elementary reading, and that they may find it difficult to unlearn the habit of looking at their hands when performing. In my experience it is a matter of timing when to introduce reading skills at the instrument (having ensured that notation is learned sequentially and thoroughly in group lessons); and that Suzuki children have no particular problem in looking at the music and

developing ear-eye-hand co-ordination because their motor skills are so secure.

Backhouse (2001) mentions the low self-esteem that can easily develop in people with dyslexia. Inevitably, repeated scolding by unsympathetic teachers will destroy the child’s self-confidence (Miles, 2001). Gilpin (2001), the mother of a cornet player with dyslexia, indicates that a structured approach with lots of repetition and praise is successful, and stresses the importance of being well prepared for examinations. Suzuki teachers are trained to be very positive in their teaching and always to find something to praise before suggesting some aspect for improvement. They know it is essential for pupils to be thoroughly prepared for their regular concert performances, so that each performance is a good experience and builds self-confidence. As Suzuki children receive enormous parental support, especially in the early stages, they can start their lessons very young, often at the age of three or four. While children with dyslexia may be behind their peers in some aspects of their learning, they may well be in advance of non-Suzuki children in their music-making, and this helps build their self-esteem.

Dyslexic Positives

Oglethorpe (1996/2001) identifies many positive aspects of dyslexia. She notes that people with dyslexia can be very resourceful, determined, hard-working, ingenious, inventive and creative. She suggests that musicians, artists and craftsmen with dyslexia are often outstandingly good at their art—they seem to have an affinity with it which those without dyslexia may never achieve, however hard they try.

PM, the professional musician in Backhouse’s case study (2001), feels that for a pianist with dyslexia

“to succeed as a performer... requires huge reserves of drive and determination” (Backhouse, 2001:81).

Arguably the same could be said of virtually any musician, whether with dyslexia or not—but some people with dyslexia seem to have a good share of drive and determination:

“It is a phenomenon of many dyslexics that they never give up” (Oglethorpe, 1996/2001: 7).

“Can music be a cure for dyslexia?” is not a relevant question (Miles and

Westcombe, 2001: preface: xv). There are advantages, as well as disadvantages, for people with dyslexia, and no-one would wish to ‘cure’ the advantages. It is more appropriate to think in terms of providing those with dyslexia with appropriate strategies to minimise its adverse effects (Miles and Westcombe, 2001, preface).

“PM feels she has gained considerably from understanding her learning style. Forced by her learning difficulty to focus on music at a level beyond the notes, she brings an intense musicality to her concert performances, which critics have responded to, praising the ‘tonal colours and structural qualities’ of her playing” (Backhouse, 2001: 83).

Conclusion

Teaching programmes for people with dyslexia should be structured, sequential, cumulative, thorough and multisensory. Plenty of listening to music, repetition of assignments, participating in group lessons, initially learning by ear, and building self-esteem are to be recommended for children with dyslexia. These issues are all addressed by the Suzuki approach. What is most important is for teachers to be as flexible as possible in their approach to students with dyslexia—if one method does not work, another may be successful. At the same time, *all* students will benefit from the use of the most flexible and effective teaching strategies, which teach to pupils’ strengths and encourage them to analyse their own learning styles.

Publications on Music and Dyslexia

The two main publications to be recommended to those who are interested in reading further on this subject are *Instrumental Music for Dyslexics: A teaching handbook* (Oglethorpe, 1996/2001), which is full of useful suggestions for teaching children with dyslexia and which has been condensed into an excellent article (Oglethorpe, 2003), and *Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* (Miles and Westcombe, 2001), which is a fascinating set of case studies. ♪

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*Jenny has written two other articles on the topic of music and dyslexia which appear on her website jennymacmillan.co.uk: a longer, more detailed article on Music and dyslexia in the April 2004 issue of **Piano Professional** (journal of the European Piano Teachers' Association), and a shorter, more specific article entitled Can Suzuki training help children with dyslexia? in the Spring 2004 issue of **Ability** (journal of the British Suzuki Institute).*

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