



Nourishing studies

Suzuki teacher **Jenny Macmillan** emphasises the importance of developing all-round musicianship rather than focusing solely on technical achievement at the piano

Achieving the technical mastery required to play complex piano repertoire is a primary goal for many students, but as Murray McLachlan notes in his excellent article on 'levelling' in *International Piano* (Nov/Dec 2020, page 39), 'Beauty for beauty's sake can be lost as complexity rises'.

I believe many disadvantages of the exam-focused traditional lessons McLachlan identifies can be resolved by following the Suzuki approach. One issue he raises is that of parents wanting kudos from seeing their children progress through graded exams, moving ever 'upwards' with no consideration for the breadth of the young person's musical development.

Murray writes: 'Young players can become fixated, seeing progress exclusively in terms of managing greater and greater levels of technical difficulty.' As a result, some traditional teachers feel forced to teach from one exam to the next. They find themselves unable to persuade pupils of the importance of developing their technical and musical abilities in order to play with maximum elegance and style.

Suzuki-trained children love progressing through the repertoire too, but they also appreciate thoughtful interpretations and beautiful tone quality, rather than just learning to play faster and more technically challenging pieces. Many Suzuki parents grasp the broader educational benefits of learning a musical instrument, so do not push for progress ever onwards and upwards.

Suzuki-trained children rarely take exams until they reach Grade 8. Instead, pupils give recitals as they complete each Suzuki book. There are seven books in the piano repertoire, taking children from the very earliest stages with folk songs, minuets and sonatinas, through to pieces such as the Bach *Italian Concerto*, Mozart sonatas, Chopin Nocturnes, Bartók's *Romanian Dances* and Villa-Lobos' *O polichinelo*.

On completion of each book, pupils give a polished performance for their family, friends and other families in their teacher's circle. Two or three children may perform on the same occasion (each book lasts about 20-25 minutes), typically followed by a tea party provided by the parents of the children performing. Each pupil giving their book recital learns how to communicate musically and form a connection with their audience. They share their music, rather than having to perform three pieces in a clinical environment to one examiner tasked with giving them a mark.

These recitals provide all the evidence necessary of attainment that McLachlan mentions. Parents can see and

hear their children's progress, and they and their children are inspired by other children's performances. The shared community spirit is incredibly important in motivating children to continue with their regular practice. Meanwhile, parents gain a group of friends whose children are also learning a musical instrument, and they support each other in the children's musical journey.

The Suzuki piano repertoire has been carefully constructed to develop the skills necessary to become a fine pianist. The majority of techniques are encountered as early as Book 1, then developed incrementally through to Book 7 and the *Italian Concerto*. The focus of lessons, from the very beginning, is always on encouraging children to listen, especially to their tone quality – to be aware of the sound they produce.

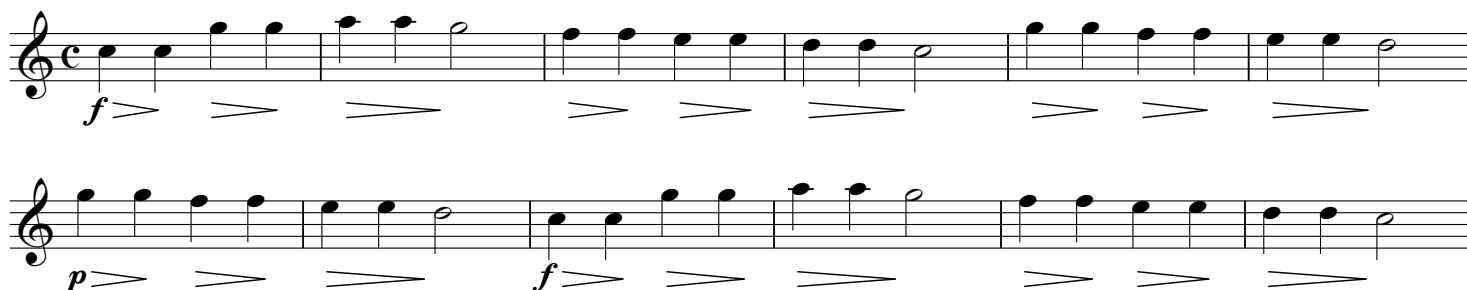
The basics, such as sitting position, height of stool with feet supported on a footstool, posture, hand shape, and so on, are dealt with in great detail from the first lesson (children often start lessons at the age of three or four). Early pieces, initially a set of rhythmical variations on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, cover finger staccato, legato and dynamic contrasts. For example, each note of Variation 2 is played staccato-legato-staccato and *p-f-p* (see **Example 1**, p36).

Jenny Macmillan:
'The magic of the Suzuki approach is that children maintain their repertoire, and continually return to pieces to improve their technique and musicianship'





Example 1... Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star – Variation 2



Example 2... Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star – Theme

Teachers help to emphasise the subtle shaping of sounds. In the *Twinkle* theme, pupils are encouraged to listen to repeated notes and play the second softer than the first, to ease off at the ends of phrases, and to play an echo in the repeat of the middle section (**Example 2**, below). These subtleties may not be possible in the very early stages of learning, but will be encouraged as the child moves through the first book and reviews earlier repertoire.

Other early Book 1 pieces include five-finger scale passages, broken chords and rests. For accompaniments, three- and four-time Alberti basses, block chords and broken octaves are introduced. Balance between hands becomes a key focus in lessons. There are hand-position changes to contend with, along with leaps and soft repeated offbeat bass notes. New ideas and challenges are introduced at every turn: combinations of staccato and legato in one hand or both, finger changes on repeated notes, wrist rotation and musical concepts like *ritardando*, *fermata* and *a tempo*. At the end of the book, a piece includes two voices to be played in one hand.

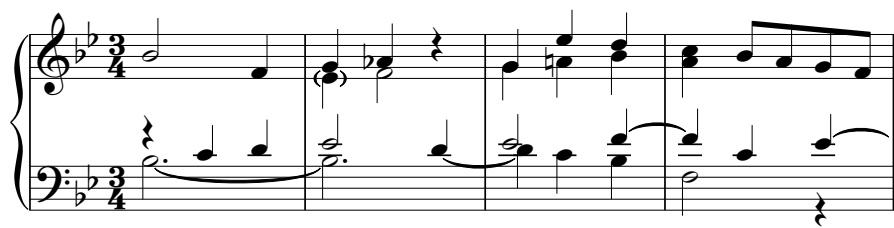
All these techniques are introduced and mastered at

a certain level. The magic of the Suzuki approach is that children maintain their repertoire, and continually return to pieces to improve their technique and musicianship. The repertoire forms a 'nutritious and inspirational regime', to use McLachlan's expression. Each piece is a little gem which easily bears repeated study.

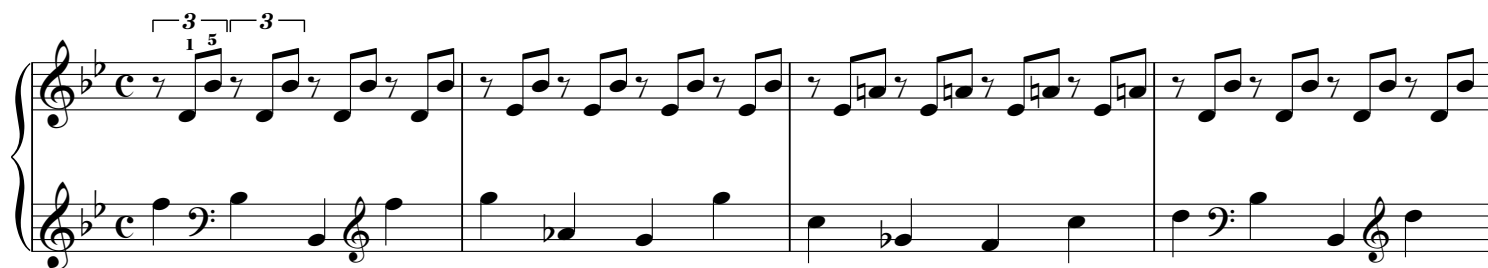
In Book 2, children are introduced to grace notes, more complicated two-part writing in one hand, slurs, upbeats, extended scale and arpeggio passages, thirds and sixths in one hand, sliding from a black note to a white note, changing finger on a held note, triplets, feminine endings, left hand tonic-dominant-tonic cadences, um-cha-cha basses and arpeggiated chords. While learning these new skills, children continue to review Book 1 pieces and techniques.

Book 3 develops passagework and staccato. Pupils meet chromatic scales for the first time, along with more elaborate ornaments, sforzandi, block octaves and pedalling. Book 4 includes extended part-writing, such as Minuet II from Bach's First Partita (**Example 3**), as well as examples of crossed hands, like the Gigue from the same Partita (**Example 4**).

After completing a book, Suzuki children don't drop pieces and focus solely on new material. Each lesson their teacher will hear one or more of their repertoire pieces and help them play it with greater understanding. So a child on Book 4 will play their Book 2 pieces more imaginatively than when they first encountered them. And the more musically children play the pieces from previous books, the more stylishly they play their newest pieces, because they are building a library of skills (for instance balance between



Example 3... JS Bach Partita in B-flat major BWV 825: Minuet II, bars 1-4



Example 4... JS Bach Partita in B-flat major BWV 825: Gigue, bars 1-4

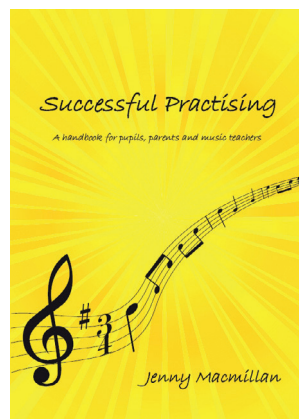
hands, or shaping slurs, or breathing between phrases) on which to draw when learning new repertoire.

Quoting McLachlan again: 'We can all return to simpler repertoire and bring more intensity, imagination and facility to it after having worked at apparently more challenging fare.' Indeed, understanding 'voicing, tone quality and phrasing' in a simpler piece prepares students for incorporating these elements into more complex music. Audiences always prefer to hear an elementary piece 'executed with grace, agility and elegance' than the 'ungainliness in the more challenging burden'. And this is exactly what Suzuki teachers encourage their pupils to do – to give fine performances of old and familiar pieces, rather than uncomfortable renditions of pieces that are currently beyond their capabilities.

In the Suzuki approach, teachers move at a pace that suits each child. There is no hurry to move through the repertoire – teachers do their best to challenge each pupil without overwhelming them (finding the 'sweet spot' identified by Daniel Coyle in *The Talent Code*). The Suzuki approach trains rather than tests. Scales, reading and aural are all covered – at a time and pace that is right for each child, not just so they can jump through the next exam hurdle. Moreover, Suzuki-trained children develop acute aural awareness – an ability to hear subtle differences in

quality of sound – that prepares them well for the specific requirements of graded aural examinations.

McLachlan suggest that 'we need to develop a ... curriculum that nourishes the whole musician'. I believe the Suzuki repertoire, taught by trained Suzuki teachers, meets this need. It includes most, if not all, of the essentials necessary for the nourishment and development of all-round musicianship, evidenced by the many Suzuki students who demonstrate elegance and agility in their playing, as well as their genuine love of music. **IP**



Jenny Macmillan is the author of Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers. She runs a Suzuki piano teaching practice in Cambridge, UK, and leads a Suzuki piano teacher training course, currently online. jennymacmillan.co.uk

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