



Jenny Macmillan

Ping Pong or Tinkle Twinkle

Jenny Macmillan compares learning a sport with learning a musical instrument

After a lifetime of playing table tennis (from playing as a child on two pieces of green-painted plywood balanced on a table in the garage, to playing weekly with the University of the Third Age), I have recently taken some coaching. Apparently I've now progressed from being a "social" player to being a "beginner"! I aspire to become an "improver" but that may be a step too far for me.

As an experienced piano teacher, I've been struck by the similarities between learning a sporting skill and learning a musical skill. There are the obvious similarities, such as the intense focus required in order to improve. There is the regular practice if one is to do more than just hit the ball over the net or pick out a tune on an instrument.

But there are so many other similarities, too. For instance, the importance of learning basic technique thoroughly, such as the bat hold – firm but loose, not stiff and not floppy – similar to Chopin's "toujours la souplesse" ("always supple") in the wrist. And the position of the body, arms and feet – to create a balanced posture for optimum results – indeed, using the weight of the body correctly to get power behind the ball or produce a powerful tone from the piano. In table tennis, as at the piano, in the early stages it's essential to return to the relaxed "rest" position between shots or notes. As the pace moves on, the rest position will not be evident visually, but the constant (very brief) relaxation between exertion is essential.

There is the preparation – what happens before (as well as what happens after) the stroke. Adjusting one small part of the movement can make a big difference to the shot or the sound. Starting with the bat higher or lower, finishing with the bat in different positions, angling the bat differently, will affect how and where the ball lands. How much the finger is lifted before playing, and how much circling of the wrist, or how much the arm rolls through after playing, influences

the sound of the piano. I'm learning that two-thirds of the stroke takes place before hitting the ball and one-third after. And I understand the importance of finishing one shot or note (watching and listening to the end) before quickly preparing for the next.

Watching great performers, both sportspeople and musicians, one senses they always seem to have plenty of time. I believe this is because they are constantly aware of the relaxation (rest) position of

their bodies, they prepare very quickly and then have lots of time (all of a nano-second!) to play. They also have plenty of space around them. Because they know how to use their bodies efficiently, nothing looks cramped.

Practising first slowly – or with stops – is essential. Taking one element, whether it be a topspin forehand drive or a scale passage, and repeating the element, feeling the movements, also feeling the ball on the bat (almost caressing it rather than hitting it) or feeling the key under the fingers (feeling the pressure, not hitting it), watching the ball or the hands, listening to the sound (in table tennis as well as in music

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– there is pure beauty in the rhythmic sound of well-timed shots of ball against bat). First practise slowly (with stops – the coach sending each ball individually, the musician playing one fragment and then stopping to prepare for repetition), then gradually speed it up.

Whether it's music or sport, we need to practise – but practise in the right way – in order to improve. Playing games in sport, performing straight through a piece of music, rehearsing in an ensemble – it's all fun, but it's not the same as deliberate practice which will improve our technique in order to improve our skill. Indeed, I'm currently of the impression that, by continuing to play games socially, I'm simply reinforcing my old bad habits. I need to spend more time practising, and less time playing, in order to improve. Either that, or it's like watering the roots of a plant – one keeps watering, but it takes a while for the plant to blossom.

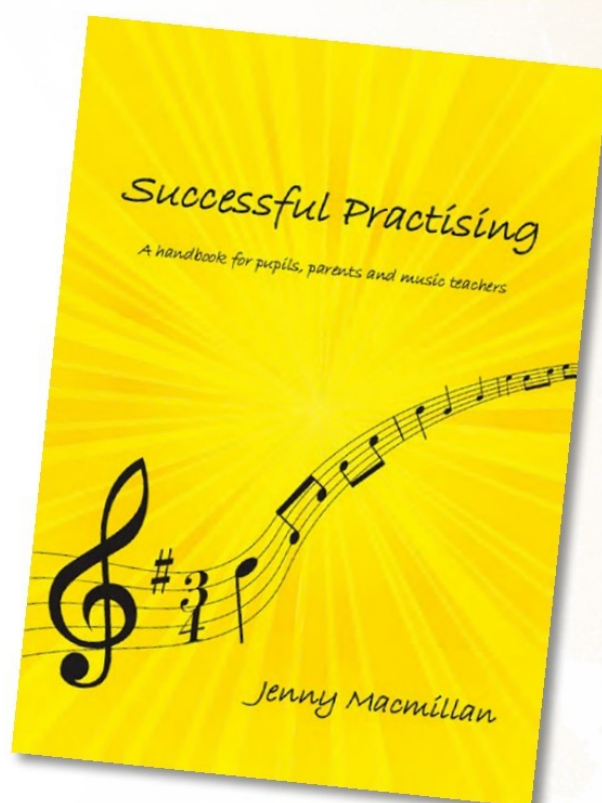
Of course, excellent teaching or coaching is required for good progress to be made. A skilful teacher or coach knows the importance of teaching one point thoroughly – explaining clearly and briefly, demonstrating, then offering many opportunities for repetition, stopping as necessary to improve some small detail. And a good teacher will know when it's time to focus on another aspect of playing, for instance position/movement of feet, which will then support the previous focus on, for instance, arm and wrist movement.

With the superb table tennis coaching I am receiving, and lots of practice, my strokes are definitely improving. But there's so much more to playing well, such as how to respond to different shots from one's opponent in a match (and then, I suppose, how to play an attacking game – I've not got there yet). One may be able to learn to play one note beautifully at the piano, but then we have to learn how to shape a melody, how to play with rhythmic subtlety, how to balance the sounds, how to tell a story, how to communicate the complete piece of music to an audience.

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One difference though is that, when performing classical music, the performer knows what happens next – the performer is recreating what the composer wrote. By contrast, in sport, the sportsperson doesn't know how the ball will come – speed, direction, type of spin – so the decision as to how to return the ball has to be made on the spur of the moment. What is the musical equivalent? At the highest level, the performer responds to their instrument (pianists, for instance, don't normally perform on their own piano in a



concert hall), the acoustic of the concert hall, the audience and, depending on how the one phrase goes, will vary the next phrase accordingly. If playing in an ensemble, performers respond subtly to how their fellow musicians play. Or, of course, if improvising, they will invent the music on the spot.

Just as it's useful to listen to fine performances of music one is studying, and other music by the same composer, and generally immerse oneself in plenty of good music, it's invaluable to watch sporting games. Even though I know this, I was amazed when I played table tennis with one of our sons recently. The first time I just managed to beat him. The next time, a couple of weeks later, he'd not touched a table tennis ball in the interim, but he beat me easily. What had he been doing? He'd watched table tennis games online!

We play the piano, we play table tennis. We play a musical instrument, we play sport. We can have fun playing games. And it's certainly enormously satisfying to feel oneself improve – however slow the improvement may be!

Jenny runs a Suzuki piano teacher training course in Cambridge, currently online on Sunday afternoons, attended by trainees and observers from all over the world. She has a thriving teaching practice based on the belief in the potential of every child to be able to play the piano well when given appropriate support.

Jenny's acclaimed book is *Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers*. Her articles on a wide range of music education topics, audio recordings of Suzuki repertoire and videoed tutorials on early Suzuki repertoire are all freely available on her website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.