

# Teaching Musicianship, Style and Analysis

by **Sue Bennett**

*What do we focus on when we're teaching?*

There's definitely a fluidity between the shortest-term goals (the next lesson), the short-term aims (pieces and skills we are working on at the moment), medium-term objectives (this term or half term) and longer-term ambitions (the year ahead). Planning tends to revolve around practical matters. But while we're focused on pieces and technical skills, maybe we don't see the wood for the trees and inadvertently put the overall purpose of our teaching to one side in favour of immediate concerns like getting the next bit of repertoire ready for a forthcoming deadline. I'm sure we'd all agree that we're training musicians, not just players of piano pieces. So, what's the difference between someone who can play music and a musician?

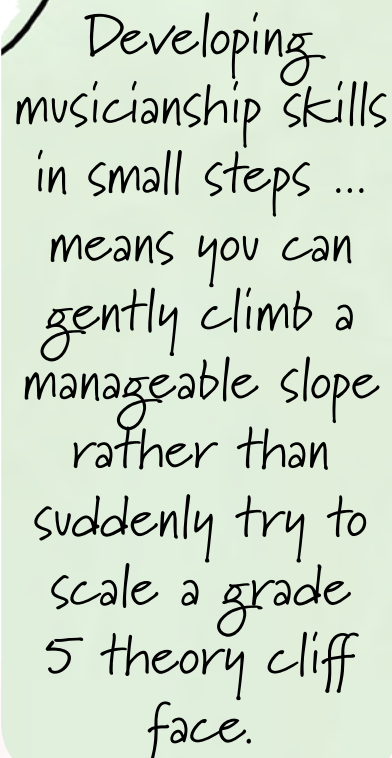
As a Suzuki teacher I'm encouraged to explore the teaching of musicianship, style and analysis, and I think these are the magic ingredients that elevate our teaching from the mundane to the musical. Stepping back from the details and looking at an overview of our lesson content in this way puts us back in touch with the global skills that we want our budding musicians to develop.

*What do we mean by musicianship, style and analysis?*

When looking for dictionary definitions of musicianship you'll find they are as diverse as they are numerous, but there are common concepts included in them all. Accuracy, expression, listening, memory, performance, sound quality, technique and perhaps an umbrella term for all that – MASTERY. Style and analysis have their own definitions and sub-groups. Style can mean an individual's personal style that sets them apart (all our favourite professionals have their distinctive style or musical personality) or it can mean "to play stylishly" i.e. in the style of the period or composer of the piece. Analysis is probably the easiest to define, being more objective. It is understanding the form, key/tonality, rhythmic and melodic devices, harmonies, and structure of the piece – the nuts and bolts that hold pieces together.

*When do we start teaching these skills?*

I put forward the case for starting in the very first lesson and continuing, using this as the thread that brings cohesion to all we do. Whenever we ask a young student to play with more character by imagining they are clouds in the sky or a



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heavy elephant, we're starting to foster good musicianship. *Players* can produce soft sounds and loud sounds, but *musicians* make us think of floaty clouds or a big lumbering beast. Making the best sounds is also a habit we need to foster from the beginning. Piano is often seen as the easier instrument to play because the keys are there in front of you, ready to be played, as opposed to having to create pitches on string or wind instruments. When we demonstrate with good tone and articulation, and encourage that in our students from the first lesson through to advanced stages, we're fostering good musicianship.

Don't be afraid to bring in analysis too early either – but have fun with it. The most rudimentary pieces go on

journeys, and the youngest of children can learn to spot when the music has returned home. Then when they learn about perfect cadences, they already have that concept in their ears to hang the technical term onto. "Home" and "away" terminology is also useful for understanding pieces with two-chord harmony, and again children will soon learn to listen to the sounds if we make a game of it and save the "tonic-dominant" vocabulary for later.

### How do we develop these skills?

Having begun lessons with musicianship in mind, we hope to keep that going on a smooth trajectory that keeps advancing. Once home and away chords are familiar, start exploring chord IV, or V<sup>7</sup>. Later on, pupils will use these chord numbers fluently and will naturally progress to chords on all degrees of the scale. If they understand what they're playing in their pieces (analysis), listening well and exploring these details as a matter of course, then theory and aural skills will come more comfortably.

When students are accustomed to looking at the structure of pieces with their teacher from the beginning, for instance describing pieces as sandwiches or cakes, with the same music either side and a different "filling", or identifying the same music coming back repeatedly like verses and a chorus, then ternary and rondo form will follow easily. Learning to "spot the difference" between passages so that "it looks the same shape but in a different place on the piano" develops into "it's the same theme in a different key". After that, "sonata form" is no great mystery. Sonata form again has a different filling (development), but now it's

something much tastier and more interesting! Developing musicianship skills in small steps, appropriate to the age and stage of the child, means you can gently climb a manageable slope rather than suddenly try to scale a grade 5 theory cliff face.

Most of this taps into concepts we'll be familiar with elsewhere. Paul Harris' *Simultaneous Learning* is about the web of skills we teach being integrated into all the separate sections of a lesson. A lesson on dynamics that makes use of scales, pieces, sight-reading and aural work results in students with a deeper and more rounded understanding than if they'd worked on the *crescendo* only in their current piece. Suzuki pedagogy has a concept of "the one-point lesson" where the teacher will address the same point in as many different ways as possible. Both of these approaches reinforce ideas and deepen understanding, so are highly effective at building musicianship.

Musicianship also grows more naturally with a "sound before symbol" approach. Listen, then play, then read music, maybe even write it after that, in the same way we know children learn to read. We don't stop them from telling stories because they can't yet read the words from books. Instead, we get them comfortable with hearing and speaking the sounds before expecting them to read the symbols. The same approach to music – lots of listening to piano music and learning to produce good sounds from the instrument before reading a score – is a natural approach to developing a musical style.

Listening undoubtedly plays a vital part in developing musicianship, and there are two different types. There's listening

to others for inspiration and understanding, and there's listening to one's own playing. David Blum, who knew well the cellist Pablo Casals, marvelled at his "uncanny ability to listen to what he was actually playing". That sounds banal on the surface but is a pertinent point. How often have students said, "but I did play louder there," when we couldn't hear any difference? Learning to produce the sound we intend, a cornerstone of stylish performance, involves highly developed and focused listening skills. Listening is vital for developing style. Without hearing music played stylishly how do any of us understand what that is? Without listening to recordings of pieces they are much harder to memorise. Listening is enjoyable. Through listening we pick up the sounds and expression to inspire us. This improves our accuracy. Many of these facets of musicianship can be emphasised right from the very earliest stages.

So, in our own playing, as well as our teaching, we and our pupils are immersed in musicianship, style and analysis. Musicality is placed where it belongs, centre stage.



**Sue Bennett** teaches piano from "The Piano Barn", a self-contained studio at her home in Kneesall, on the edge of

Sherwood Forest. In 2016 Sue discovered Suzuki piano teaching, began training, and hasn't looked backed since. She especially enjoys the community spirit and the friendships that grow between students as a consequence of the common repertoire and ensemble work.