

Suzuki repertoire, lessons and practice

Developing musical and technical skills through the Suzuki piano repertoire

by Jenny Macmillan

THERE ARE seven books in the Suzuki piano repertoire, which includes pieces ranging from folk songs, Bach minuets and Clementi sonatinas to Haydn and Mozart sonatas, nocturnes by Grieg and Chopin, and Bach's Italian Concerto. In this article, I list many of the techniques addressed. I then take three techniques – scales, Alberti basses, and dynamic control – and examine how these skills are developed systematically through the books.

The Suzuki repertoire is a small miracle of planning. It is carefully constructed to develop technical and musical skills sequentially. Each piece includes one or two new techniques while developing existing skills. Pupils retain their past repertoire and continually return to these pieces to learn to play them more musically. This means that, when learning new repertoire, they can draw on a library of current, maturing skills.

Techniques in book 1 cover:

- Finger staccato
- Legato
- Dynamic control
- Scale passages
- Broken chord passages
- Block chords
- Alberti basses
- Balance between hands
- Thumb under/finger over
- Changing finger on repeated notes
- Changing hand position
- Leaps
- Combining staccato and legato
- Rests
- *Ritardando*, pause, *a tempo*



Jonathan (age 4) playing Twinkle

Book 2 adds many techniques including grace notes, slurs, double thirds and sixths, and um-cha-cha basses; it introduces the contrapuntal style with minuets by Bach. Book 3 includes further ornaments, syncopation and chromatic scale passages. Book 4 introduces extended part writing and crossing of hands. Book 5 requires use of pedal.

The repertoire is firmly grounded on Baroque and classical music, but has recently been revised to include music by composers such as Chopin, Grieg, Debussy, Granados, Bartok and Villa-Lobos. Bearing in mind that many children start Suzuki lessons at the age of three or four, the music is appropriate for young children to form a secure technique. The early pieces are highly suitable for young children with small hands, who are unable to reach the pedals, and who do not yet have the emotional maturity to tackle much romantic music. Of course, Suzuki teachers are not restricted to the core repertoire – they add extra pieces according to the needs of each child.

To demonstrate how techniques are developed, I shall take three elements – scales, Alberti basses, and dynamic control – and chart them through five pieces in the piano repertoire:

1. The first piece in book 1, a set of variations on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* [Tw], is continually used throughout the repertoire to refine techniques.
2. The folk song, *Lightly Row* [LR] comes near the beginning of book 1.
3. Lichner's *A Short Story* [SS] is near the beginning of book 2.
4. Clementi's *Sonatina in C Op36 No1* (we shall examine the 1st movement) [CI] is at the beginning of book 3.
5. As a final example, we will look at the 1st movement of Mozart's *Sonata in C K545* [545] in book 6.

Performances of these pieces may be heard on my website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.

Scales

Before starting to learn pieces, all Suzuki children study the Twinkle variations. These establish many aspects of technique such as posture, hand position and correct finger movement, together with developing control, strength and independence of the fingers. While studying these variations, children learn to concentrate, relax and listen to their sound.

Twinkle Theme includes the notes coming down the scale A A G – F F E E D D C in bars 2 to 4 (Example 1). Children learn to play each note with a beautiful tone, the fingertips forming a rainbow shape on the keys (ie the long fingers stretching in), keeping the hand balanced even when the short 5th finger plays, and listening for a smooth legato between repeated notes as well as adjacent notes.

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star Folk Song

Example 1

The right hand 5-finger scale in bars 3 and 4 *Lightly Row* (Example 2) requires the same care as in Twinkle Theme, with the addition of relaxing the thumb under the right hand after playing the first note in order to keep the hand balanced. Each note is now played only once. When the right hand melody can be played musically on its own, the left hand accompaniment is carefully learned and added (see *Alberti basses* below).

Lightly Row Folk Song

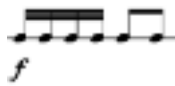
Example 2

Two further pieces in book 1 strongly feature 5-finger scales – each successive piece to be played at a faster speed. So when pupils move onto *A Short Story* in book 2 they are ready to play complete scales putting thumb under or finger 3 over. The scales in the 1st movement of the Clementi are much faster and include black notes. If well taught, by the time children get to Mozart K545, they generally have no particular problem playing the fast light semiquaver scale passages.

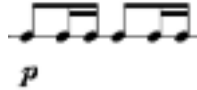
Scales	Tw	LR	SS	CI	545
5-finger scale – slow, each note played twice	•				
Rainbow shape; balanced hand	•	•	•	•	•
RH ascending – relax thumb under hand; other hand accompanying		•	•	•	•
Full scale with thumb under or finger 3 or 4 over; faster			•	•	•
With black notes				•	•
Very fast; sequences					•

Alberti basses

Alberti basses need to give a clear pulse as well as a glow of chordal accompaniment to enhance the melody (Example 2). The sound required with left hand fingers 5 1 3 1 on C G E G is strong-soft-medium-soft. So the 5th finger needs to lift and strike the key strongly, the thumb needs to play from much closer to the key, and the 3rd finger stretches in towards the black notes to keep the hand and arm supple for a flowing sound. Suzuki teachers will devise many exercises and activities for their pupils to master this simple, yet challenging, skill. The rhythm of Twinkle variation 1 (Example 3) may be repeated with finger 5 for developing strong sounds, and Twinkle variation 3 (Example 4) may be practised with the thumb for developing the control required for the soft sounds.



Example 3



Example 4

Lightly Row uses only tonic and dominant chords, crotchets in both hands. *A Short Story* adds chords II and V7, a left hand leap in bar 3, and a rhythmically more elaborate right hand melody over the left hand quavers (Example 5).

A Short Story

Moderato Lichner

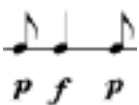
Example 5

The 1st movement of the Clementi has a faster Alberti bass, including black notes, which needs to be played much softer than the right hand in order not to dominate it. And the Alberti bass comes in a wide variety of guises in all movements of K545 – in each case pupils need to listen and judge carefully how to play it musically.

Alberti basses	Tw	LR	SS	CI	545
Twinkle variation 1: to be practised strongly with 5th finger	•	•	•	•	•
Twinkle variation 3: to be practised softly with thumb					
Tonic and dominant chords only; one melody note to one accompaniment note		•			
Further chords (eg V7); stretches; hand leaps; accompaniment twice as fast as melody			•	•	•
Faster; use of black notes				•	•

Dynamic control

The control of strong and soft sounds is commenced with Twinkle variation 2 (Example 6). Suzuki teachers use games to ensure young children listen to their sounds and master the control of soft and strong sounds. When they have learned the notes of pieces such as *Twinkle* and *Lightly Row*, they will have the control to shape the phrases, eg to *crescendo* up scale and arpeggio passages and *diminuendo* down, to vary the sound through repeated notes, to ease off at the ends of phrases.



Example 6

A Short Story is one of the first pieces to include written gradual dynamics. At a very early stage of learning the piece, the teacher will encourage attention to the written dynamics. This is done through following the score, listening to recordings, listening to the teacher demonstrate short sections, repeating short passages (eg just one *crescendo*), and listening carefully to their own sound. As the pupil progresses through book 2, the teacher will continually return to the earlier pieces to improve dynamic control.

By the time pupils arrive at the Clementi sonatina in book 3, they should be in command of a wide range of dynamics. The dynamics in this 1st movement are mainly terraced, *forte* and *piano*, and pupils will be encouraged to differentiate clearly between these two extremes. They will also be required to shape the phrases sensitively in both this and the slow 2nd movement and the lively 3rd movement of the sonatina.

With this experience, and having worked methodically through books 3, 4 and 5, pupils are in a technically capable and musically informed position to master all movements of K545. No dynamics are marked into the score. However, through listening to recordings of K545 and other works by Mozart, especially his operas and piano concertos, pupils are able to follow their instinct, guided by their teacher, to give a stylish account of their Mozart sonata.



Irena (age 11) playing Mozart

Dynamic control	Tw	LR	SS	CI	545
Twinkle variation 2: control of strong and soft	•	•	•	•	•
Feel shape of phrases		•	•	•	•
Follow written dynamics – mostly gradual			•		
Follow written dynamics – mostly terraced				•	
No dynamic markings					•

Each piece in the Suzuki repertoire is a little gem. As in any discipline, the more closely something is examined (eg the repertoire, one piece, one phrase, the quality of sound of one note), the more interesting it becomes. It is a joy to teach at this level of detail, with the overall aim being to help each child play as musically as possible. Though apparently simple, the Suzuki repertoire is a very sophisticated introduction to all the techniques that need to be mastered in order to play well. Working with the pieces in this comprehensive way makes teaching both challenging and fascinating as teachers see pupils develop their musical abilities.

The next article in this series will show how some of these techniques are taught in lessons; the following one will describe how they may be practised at home. ■

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■ *Jenny Macmillan has written a book, Successful Practising, for music teachers, teenage and adult students, and parents of primary age pupils. It will be published in the Autumn. See sample pages and purchase via the internet on www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.*

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