

Suzuki repertoire, lessons and practice

Suzuki lessons: Listening, technique and musicianship

by Jenny Macmillan

IN THIS ARTICLE I describe the format and content of typical Suzuki lessons. Specific to the Suzuki approach are elements such as

- involving the parents
- emphasizing from the very beginning posture, technique and listening
- Developing musicianship through reviewing past repertoire.

However, all Suzuki teachers teach in their own way – their own ideas, experiences, personality and enthusiasm will colour their approach to their pupils and their teaching.

Ideally, Suzuki children begin lessons around the age of three, four or five. For several months prior to their own individual lessons starting, children will have listened at home to plenty of good music (including Suzuki repertoire) and observed other pupils' lessons. One of their parents may have attended a few lessons and discussion sessions with the Suzuki teacher to learn some basic skills at the piano and to learn how to practise with their child. Parents are instructed in the vital role they play in their children's musical education. The children may already have attended a few group musicianship classes. These preparations, creating a stimulating learning environment for children, ensure good progress is made once lessons begin.

Warm ups

From the very first lesson, Suzuki pupils will be encouraged to sit with good posture at the piano. The first sounds to be taught will probably be the variations on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Good hand shape and hand position at the keyboard are modelled by the teacher and copied by the child. The teacher will play a few notes so that the child can hear the quality of sound and see the hand and finger movements before repeating them. The teacher will regularly ask the child to listen to the sound, ask whether or not the child likes the sound, and praise the child's achievements. The parent watches and takes notes in order to be able to do the same at home. Several weeks or months will be spent mastering the Twinkle variations before moving on to learning pieces. The variations will be maintained and improved while the child progresses through the Suzuki repertoire.

As pupils advance, perhaps as they finish Suzuki book 1 (mostly folk songs), they will start playing scales. Initially, they will learn them one octave, hands separately, playing the Twinkle variations on each note of the scale, i.e. returning to familiar ground (Twinkle variations) when faced with new material (scales) – a typically Suzuki concept. Later, once scales and arpeggios are becoming familiar and fluent, studies may be added to a student's warm-up routine.



Mila lesson for MT

Reading

After the warm-up part of the lesson, Suzuki teachers may work on reading. Children learn note names and pitches in group classes. By the time they have mastered Suzuki book 1 with fine posture, playing musically with good technique, listening for excellent tone, they should be ready to start reading at the piano. Everything in their first reading book should now be familiar to them – stave, clefs, note lengths and pitches, also simple dynamics. Once the first note has been identified, the rhythm clapped, note pitches discussed (e.g. “up one”, “down one”, “same note”), it should not be difficult for the child to sing the exercise, or mime it at the keyboard, and then play it. Praise will be given, and the child encouraged to repeat this first exercise several times at home. Succeeding and finding this easy, the child will be keen to do more reading. In this way, reading skills are developed in a positive atmosphere.

Reading exercises are prepared at home and then played to the teacher in lesson. Suzuki children learn first to read well – to look carefully at the page and extract all the information from it, such as slurs, staccatos and dynamics, and to play the piece musically. They are then in a good position to read at sight. There are no special Suzuki reading books but I use a combination of ‘sight-reading’ books such as Alan Bullard’s *Joining the Dots* and Paul Harris’s *Improve your Sight-reading* and ‘real’ music such as Bartok’s *Mikrokosmos*. Additionally, teachers will sight-read duets with pupils whenever possible.

Review

Next in the lesson, teachers may ask for one or more review pieces. Suzuki pupils keep up many past pieces in order to learn to play more musically, to develop their memory, and to reinforce new concepts in the most recent pieces. A pupil currently learning a Clementi sonatina in book 3 may be asked to play a folk song such as *Lightly Row* in book 1 (Example 1).

Example 1

Lightly Row

Folk Song



After hearing it, the teacher will set one point for practise to make the piece even more musical, e.g. better sound quality on the first right hand note, more legato between the repeated notes, more musical crescendo up the right hand scale, better shaped left hand Alberti bass, or better balance between the hands. All these points apply also to the Clementi sonatina. The teacher will identify the selected point, suggest (or ask the pupil for) a way of practising it, and then get the pupil to demonstrate how to practise it. This is so that the child knows what to do and so that the parent can see, note it down, and remind the child to repeat this at home. Another one or two review pieces will be set for the next lesson, to which the previous week’s practice point may be expected to be applied, so the parent and child always know what to focus on in practice.

Concert piece

After developing children’s ability to listen and focus carefully in a review piece, Suzuki teachers might move on to work on a concert piece. Here again, children will be encouraged to listen to their own playing and to develop their musicianship. The basics of the piece (notes, fingering, and rhythms) will have been learned before the piece is chosen as suitable for concert performance, so that the teacher is able to challenge the child to improve further aspects.

Perhaps the concert piece is Lichner’s *A Short Story* in book 2. Towards the end the right hand crescendos up a C major scale, and decrescendos down (Example 2).

Example 2

A Short Story

Lichner



The teacher might work on the right hand scale ascending only, starting softly and ending strongly. The child will frequently be asked to judge whether or not s/he is successful in achieving a good crescendo. Once it is played well, it may be repeated, say four times. Then the left hand could be added and played a further four times. This bar would then be put into context – starting a bar earlier, or at the beginning of the phrase – and played four times. The child can be asked how many times s/he could repeat each part of this at home. The parent makes a note of what is to be practised and how, and guides this work daily at home with the child. This focus on specific elements ensures children retain interest in their pieces.

Newest piece

After the main work of the lesson, teachers may now hear the child's newest piece (which is, of course, what the child really wants to play to the teacher!). Because children listen to recordings of their pieces, and because their aural faculties are very well developed, notes are learned at home. So, even in the first lesson on a new piece, teachers are able to work on technical and musical points rather than notes. The child's newest piece may be the 1st movement of Clementi Sonatina in C in book 3 (Example 3).

Example 3 Sonatina in C Op36 No1: 1st movement Clementi

Typically children hold the left hand crotchets too long. So the teacher would demonstrate the sound and length required, repeating bar 1 several times, first left hand alone, then hands together. The child hears and sees, and learns to repeat it correctly. When bar 1 is accurate, other instances of this left hand crotchet followed by rests will come easily – but it is essential that the child (and parent) understands how the beginning should sound so that they know what to listen for and how to practice it at home. Review of this point in *A Short Story* (Example 2) will also be encouraged.

Ensemble

Before finishing, the teacher may ask the pupil to choose a favourite piece and play it in unison with the pupil or with a duet accompaniment at a second keyboard. Or the teacher may ask the pupil to play a piece in unison or sight-read a duet with the next pupil.

One point lessons

Especially with beginners, Suzuki teachers try to give 'one point lessons'. Not only do they pick up just one point in each piece (e.g. dynamics or rests) but they may work on only one point throughout the whole lesson, e.g. playing with a balanced, level wrist. Then the child and parent have one general point to apply to all their pieces throughout their week's practice.

Praise

Every small achievement of the child is received with sincere praise. Even if the point has not been achieved, but the child has tried, praise is given. That motivates the child to try again and, eventually, success will be achieved. Small steps mastered one by one lead to major achievement.

Parents

As Suzuki children get older, their parents gently retire into the background. For a while, parents may still take notes for their children to refer to when practising on their own. Eventually, parents are no longer required, even in lessons. If the teacher-parent-pupil relationship is robust, this weaning process takes place relatively smoothly, possibly around the time children go to secondary school, around age eleven, though it may happen as early as age seven, or as late as fourteen.

Gradually, lessons become more similar to traditional lessons. So, by the time children have completed the seven books of the Suzuki piano repertoire and are working towards grade 8, there is little difference between Suzuki and traditional lessons.

The next article examines how good practice habits are developed at home. ■
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■ *Jenny Macmillan has recently published a book, Successful Practising for music teachers, teenage and adult students, and parents of primary age pupils. See sample pages and purchase on www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.*