



Suzuki repertoire, lessons and practice

Suzuki at home: Establishing good practice habits

by Jenny Macmillan

Good quality practice is essential for good progress at an instrument. In this article I show how parents, with support from the teacher, are able to assist their young children's practice. This guidance leads to good practice habits which children can maintain as they approach their teens and practise independently.

Musical progress is determined by quantity, but also quality, of practice. The natural instinct often is to start practising a piece at the beginning, playing until getting stuck, playing another piece as far as possible, closing the book and saying that's it for the day's practice. Suzuki parents, however, are instructed by the teacher how to guide their children at home. They attend their children's lessons and make notes on what the teacher covers, how it is dealt with, and why. With this information, they can ensure their children benefit to the utmost from the teacher's instruction.

Practising with a three or four year old child

Home practice with a young child will closely resemble the previous lesson. The parent will have attended the lesson, so will be familiar with what the teacher is doing as well as how and why. All early lessons are concerned with establishing good posture, focused listening, attention to technique, and good practice habits.

These are developed initially through the study of variations on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Rather than play straight through a variation, parents will encourage their child to play short sections as demonstrated by the teacher and repeated by the child in the lesson. The teaching point of the previous lesson may have been to keep the hand level and balanced when playing fingers 4 and 5 on G and A. So the parent will ask the child to get the right hand ready with finger 4 on G and play variation 1 rhythm, *Piccadilly Circus* (Example 1), repeating this perhaps the number of times of their age, ie four times for a four year old.



Example 1

The parent will then ask for the same to be repeated with finger 5 on A. The teacher may have suggested then playing “seesaws” between fingers 4 and 5 on G and A (Example 2), still focusing on a level hand.

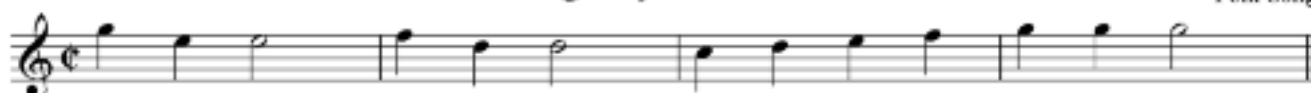


Example 2

The child may be learning *Lightly Row* (Example 3) in book 1.

Lightly Row

Folk Song



Example 3

The teacher may have been working at listening for legato repeated notes in bar 4, and the child may have imitated the teacher's “chiming” (Example 4) in lesson.



Example 4

So the parent will ask the child to repeat finger 5 on G as shown by the teacher. Once the child is listening well to the legato, the parent may ask the child also to focus on that week's teaching point from the Twinkle variations, ie a level, balanced hand for finger 5.

The child may now be encouraged to pick out the tune of *Lightly Row* – which will be well known because the parent will be playing the recording regularly at home. To end the practice, the parent may ask the child to play through a well known piece such as *Twinkle Theme*.

Practising with a seven or eight year old child

By the time children are seven or eight and have been learning for three or four years, they will be playing scales and reading, as well as working through the Suzuki repertoire books. Practices will still reiterate the work of the previous lesson. The teacher may start with scales – but still based on the Twinkle variations. So the parent will ask for the current scale as set by the teacher, eg B major, first playing variation 1 rhythm, *Piccadilly Circus* (Example 1) on each note in one hand, watching for a level, balanced hand, staying well over the black notes and listening for a good quality of sound with each finger.

After warming up the fingers and the ears with scales and variations, many Suzuki teachers will cover reading next, while the child is still fresh, and will ask parents to do the same at home. Initially children do prepared reading, so they examine the new piece for key, time, rhythms, dynamics, etc. They may clap the rhythm and/or they may mime or sing the music before playing the piece at the piano. Any errors or problems will be examined and those few tricky notes repeated several times. The piece will be practised hands separately as well as hands together. The parent will reiterate the teacher's comments from the previous lesson, eg keep your eyes on the music. After two or three days, when one piece can be read fluently, the child will be asked to prepare the next one. After practising that, the child is asked

Early parental support leads to constructive independent practice

to play the previous one again, every day making it more musical, for instance by shaping the phrases better. By attending the child's lessons and practices, the parent learns alongside the child – the theory, if not the actual playing, of music!

The child's review piece for the week may be Lichner A Short Story in book 2. The teacher will have set an assignment for practice; the parent will ask or remind the child what it was, and how it is to be practised. After several repetitions of the

assignment, a longer section may have been set for hands separate work, after which the child may be asked to play through the complete piece – focusing particularly on whatever the teacher has set, eg listening carefully for a soft left hand accompaniment.

The child's newest piece may be a Clementi sonatina at the beginning of book 3. Having listening critically to so much music from an early age, and with a well established technique through concentrating on this from the first lesson, learning new notes is not a big issue. Children usually love learning new pieces. The parent will encourage the child to learn a few notes at a time, each hand separately, working them out by ear and from the music, parent and child reading the correct fingering as written in the score. By repeating short sections – a few notes or bars, or a phrase – the music soon becomes securely memorised.

So far during the practice there will have been very little playing straight through pieces. However, each day Suzuki children review a selection of the pieces in their repertoire. Here the parent may offer a suggestion at the beginning or, better, ask their child what they should focus on (eg shaping the phrases, or crisp staccato), but must then let the child play through with no interruption.

Supporting an 11 or 12 year old child

As children head towards secondary school, they start to take responsibility for their own practice. Parents will still attend lessons and take notes. But they may supervise perhaps only the first practice after a lesson and again the final one before the next lesson, or just for five or ten minutes each day, in order to help interpret the lesson notes. If good practice habits have been instilled, many 11 and 12 year olds will be able to practise efficiently on their own.

Parents and children

Most children get obstreperous at some stage about practice – most are not always sweet and amenable! It is good if parents can give their children as much control as possible over their practice. They can involve their children by drawing information out of them – discussing what is to be done, and how and why – questioning them, and guiding the practice accordingly. Parents need to display a positive attitude, showing interest and appreciation, and giving plenty of praise and approval. Children concentrate more and therefore learn more when they are praised than when they are criticised.

Practices with young children should be kept short but focused. Initially, parents need to make practices fun, but soon they will need to make them interesting in order to maintain their children's enthusiasm to learn well. Variety is often the secret.

Teachers will suggest specific games to motivate children to practise certain points. For numbers of repetitions of a short assignment, the child can be asked to choose a number (eg between four and ten), can roll a dice, or play the assignment at every octave of the piano. Lucky dip boxes can be useful – after a lesson, the parent writes each practice point on a separate piece of paper (eg "Lightly Row bar 4 RH 4 times"). Lucky dip boxes labelled 'Do' and 'Done' can help with daily review of scales and repertoire. Alternatively the child can discuss and choose the order in which to play the review pieces. Charts with ticks or stickers form a visual reminder of what has been practised.

Focused practice includes listening intently. It means repeating short sections in order to improve a technical or musical issue; it means playing hands separately for clarity, for developing musical shaping and for security so neither hand is dependent on the other; it means some slow work in order to listen and hear the quality of sound and to reveal any inaccuracies.

Children need to practise constructively in order to improve. However, they should also have regular opportunities to play by ear, to improvise, and to mess around at their instrument for instant enjoyment and emotional satisfaction.

Suzuki children benefit from parental involvement in lessons and practices. Teachers guide parents to assist their children sensitively at home. A good three-way relationship between teacher, parent and child results in thoughtful practising at home. This early parental support leads to constructive independent practice later. ■

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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. See sample pages and purchase via the internet on www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.*