

Music reading in the Suzuki style

by Caroline Fraser

Music must not be approached from its intellectual, rational side, nor should it be conveyed to the children as a system of algebraic symbols, or as the secret writing of language with which they have no connection. The way should be paved for direct intuition. Zoltán Kodály, 1964



What is music reading?

Music reading is recognising a written symbol, recalling a sound and reproducing it. We must see a rhythm, hear and feel it; see a melody, hear it; see a tonality, “feel” it kinesthetically; and see a harmony, hear and “feel” it. Knowing the theory is important, but that knowledge in itself is not going to produce an excellent music reader. There has to be a direct link between the symbols on the page and the ear, and between the ear and the instrument; the student must see, hear in the inner ear, understand, and then play.

In order for the student to see the written symbol and connect it with a sound, the student must first have the sound in the ear. Therefore the first step in music reading must be to hear the music and let all the musical elements of rhythm, melody, harmony and form be absorbed in an unconscious manner, so that these same elements may later be identified in a conscious way. Teaching music reading through the ear is the basis of the philosophies of Kodály, Orff, Dalcroze, Suzuki and Gordon.

The importance of music reading

It is essential that all our students become excellent music readers. The ability to read music fluently will be a key factor in their enjoyment of music-making as amateurs or professionals. As pianists, music reading takes on a special dimension. How often are pianists asked at the last minute, “Can you accompany this”? Many soloists or chamber music players have only one line of music, while pianists have to sight read a much more complicated score. In addition, pianists are called upon to recreate a full orchestra when accompanying a concerto soloist. The secret of success in both these scenarios lies in the performer having internalised the appropriate musical style: by that I mean that the essence of the style has become a part of the performer’s very being.

Suzuki students’ preparation for music reading

Suzuki students start their studies with a period of intense hearing and absorbing the repertoire they will play. As parents play the repertoire recordings, children’s hearing is unconscious, in the same way as children unconsciously absorb their language before talking. Once the music has been internalised, Suzuki students start to find the repertoire on their instrument, at first imitating their teacher and later letting their ears guide their fingers to find the notes. In this way children develop the important direct connection of ear to instrument. They hear and find the melody, rhythm and harmony. With the ear-finger connection in place, the next

- ▶ step is to show the child the written symbol for the sounds already in the ear, and thus the symbol-ear-finger connection is complete.

Once simple musical elements have been absorbed and performed repeatedly by the student, we can gradually introduce the student to these same concepts in the written score. We can skilfully separate the elements and present them in a carefully thought out sequence, thereby creating a smooth transition into music reading by using first the familiar Suzuki repertoire. Detailed examples of how to implement this are found in my articles on music reading on my website: www.carolinefraser.no.

The student must see, hear in the inner ear, understand, and then play

Robert Schumann said that a good musician can see the score and hear the music; hear the music and see (imagine) the score and guess in a new piece and know in a familiar piece what is coming. Children who have been trained to read by ear, by having being "bathed" in the musical style can achieve this level of musicianship.

A natural approach

This is a natural approach to music reading in which children learn to read music in the same way they have learned to read their language. In language, children hear and then speak. They are exposed to written symbols and later they

will learn to read, being introduced first to familiar vocabulary.

Children who hear their language, and then read, have a tremendous advantage over those who try to read a language they have never heard. In English we know how to pronounce "tough, though, through, bough, cough" because that is the way it sounds, although the spelling patterns are the same. "I am on the bus" but not "on the car"; "I'm at home" but not "at shop" because that is how we hear it in our inner ear.

The Suzuki approach should produce excellent music readers. This is learning-based teaching: teaching music reading as naturally as children learn to read their language.

*Teach music in such a way that it is not a torture
but a joy for the pupil.*

*Instill a thirst for finer music in him, a thirst
that will last a lifetime.*

Zoltán Kodály

Children learn to read music in the same way they have learned to read their language

■ Caroline Fraser was born in Scotland and now lives in Peru. She started teaching using the Suzuki approach in 1974 in California, pioneering Suzuki in Peru in 1981 and Chile in 1988. She was a lecturer in music theory at Holy Names University and directed the Suzuki Teacher Training Institute there. She is President of the Suzuki Association of Peru.

Since studying Kodály methodology for a masters degree, Caroline has been researching how to integrate the Kodály and Suzuki approaches in relation to music reading. She frequently offers teacher workshops on music reading. Email: blondetfraser@terra.com.pe

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