

# Ideas for *Group* lessons

by Jenny Macmillan

Group lessons are crucial to Suzuki philosophy. They support and develop the work covered in weekly individual lessons. Groups offer opportunities for developing musicianship through ensemble playing and informal performances. Children's enthusiasm and enjoyment usually shine out in group situations, leading to increased motivation to practise at home. Children and parents appreciate the social aspect of group lessons – in my teaching studio group lessons are called Piano Club.

With orchestral instruments, it is possible to play in large groups – in unison or in parts. Much fun can be had and useful performing, ensemble and musicianship skills can be developed through games for co-ordination, listening, reading and performance. The use of piano in groups is not quite so obvious. Most Suzuki piano teachers have two pianos, so they can put two (or even three) children at each instrument playing in unison, one hand each, or duets and trios (doubled up – six hands at each piano!). I have an extra keyboard I can bring into my music room for groups, providing yet further opportunities for ensemble work. However, we also play many games away from the piano.

Suzuki groups can vary in size from four or five children up to twenty or more. And group lessons may be held weekly, or monthly, or however it suits the teacher and pupils. There is much overlap in the function of musical activities I use in group lessons. However, for clarity, I shall divide games into four sections: to develop co-ordination, ear training, visual reading skills and performance/ensemble skills. For this article I have selected games which can be used equally well by non-Suzuki teachers.

## Co-ordination games

These are especially useful and necessary with very young children to help them learn basics such as right and left, finger numbers, hand shape, independence of finger movement, and feeling the music with their bodies. With teenage pupils we may warm up with exercises of the swinging arms and rolling shoulders variety. I have also tried teaching pupils to juggle – to develop their co-ordination, but also to develop their peripheral vision which is important when sight-reading.

Co-ordination games include:

- Simon Says, eg "Simon says put your right hand on your nose" or "Put your left hand on your tummy" (don't do it!).
- All put hands behind back. "Bring out left hand with finger 3 waving."



Dynamics game

- All sing *Twinkle* (or another folk song) with actions: as you sing the first line "*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*", touch feet, feet, head, head, arms in air, head; continue with shoulders, waist, knees, feet, etc.

## Ear training games

The first of these games is from Caroline Fraser who has many wonderful ideas for teaching.

- All sing a familiar, simple song. Then sing it again, clapping hands together for the short notes (crotchets) and tapping hands on shoulders for the long notes (minims). Then do the actions again, this time hearing the song in head, but not singing out loud. Next time, half the group clap the crotchets and the other half tap the minims, again everyone singing silently in their heads.
- Teacher (or child) do actions as in previous game – others have to guess which song is being performed (another of Caroline's fascinating games which the children love!).
- Dynamics game – all crouch down and whisper "*pianissimo*", slightly sit up and say "*piano*", rise more and say "*mezzo piano*" a little louder, start to stand up and say "*mezzo forte*", stand fully and shout "*forte*", stretch arms high in air and yell "*fortissimo*". Then vice versa – from *fortissimo* down to *pianissimo*.
- Tempo game – all walk very slowly round room saying "*adagio*" four times, speed up walk a little saying "*andante*" four times, ditto "*moderato*", "*allegro*" and finally run around saying "*presto*".

- Twinkle dance – each child is assigned the rhythm of a Twinkle variation. Teacher plays variation rhythm on a drum (or other instrument). When pupils hear the rhythm of their variation they must quickly stand up and dance to their variation and quickly sit down when the rhythm changes to a different variation.

With older pupils we discuss and identify intervals, chords, cadences, time signatures, key signatures, circle of 5ths, forms, periods, and so on. We also share ideas about practising.

Specific activities with slightly older children (eg age 8+):

- Canons – all look at score of a short (eg 4 bar) canon. All sight sing it together. Sing it again, each child working out suitable fingering by miming it on knee meanwhile. Sing in canon. Take turns to play melody from memory at instrument. All play melody in unison. Play in canon.
- Continuous scales – children line up at two pianos. One child plays C major scale two octaves with metronome set to, for instance, 100. Child at other piano plays G major. Another child at first piano plays D major, and so on round circle of 5ths.

## Visual reading skills

I have many sets of flash cards, some purchased from music shops (eg Chester, Kodaly, Hal Leonard), others I make up myself as the need arises (eg Italian terms used in Suzuki book 1). We have games for identifying note values, and others for pitches.

- One Minute Club – to become a member of my One Minute Club (which is rewarded with the child's name on a poster in my music room and a certificate to take home – to say nothing of the cheers and jubilation from the other members of my Piano Club and their parents), children must name in random order from flash cards all the notes on the treble and bass staves (from low G in the bass clef to high G in the treble clef) in 60 seconds (holding the stopwatch to time it is a popular job!). Each child's short term goal is to beat their own previous best time.
- Telephone game – each child is given two rhythm cards each with, for example, a four beat rhythm such as crotchet, crotchet, two quavers, crotchet. These cards are laid on the floor in front of each child. Teacher claps a rhythm (telephones the child) and the child replies by clapping the rhythm back and turning the card over.
- Another game is to lay out four of the above rhythm cards and all together clap the four bar rhythm. Teacher then turns one card face down, and all clap the four bars again, this time one bar from memory. Then teacher turns another card over, and all clap it again. Ditto until the whole four bar rhythm is clapped from memory.
- Follow the score – each child has a copy of the same piece of music. One child plays piece at piano, others have to follow score (parents and teacher help). Or teacher plays at piano and stops every so often, and children have to point to place in score when music stops.
- Score questions – each child has a copy of the same piece of music. Teacher plays piece and then asks children

questions such as:

*Can you find a B?*

*What is the name of the first note in the right hand in bar 2?*

*Where can you see this rhythm (teacher claps it)?*

*What does "rit" mean?*

- Joint reading – two children sight read a piece, one hand each; or four children at two pianos – two play right hand and two left hand; or double up for a duet – two children at each piano; or a trio – three children at each piano.
- ## Performance/ensemble skills
- Six children sit at two keyboards and play a simple piece, eg *Twinkle*, in unison.
  - One child at each of two keyboards – one plays left hand of a familiar piece, other plays right hand.
  - As above, but children swap hands every four bars, or every two bars, or every one bar.
  - Football game – children line up behind each other at two pianos. One plays bar 1 of a piece, child at other piano plays bar 2, new child at first piano plays bar 3, etc.
  - Two children, a piano each – one plays all *forte* sections of a familiar piece, other plays all *piano* sections (and when not playing each gets up and walks round stool!).
  - Children prepare duets and trios (doubled up at two pianos), or accompany a child on another instrument.

Group lessons are also an ideal opportunity for children to practise performing in an informal atmosphere.

- Lucky dip – each child has box of pieces of paper with names of all the pieces in their repertoire. Each child picks a piece of paper and performs that piece. Other children may be given specific areas to check meanwhile, eg posture of performer, hand position, sound quality, balance between hands, dynamics, etc. Everyone must first say something positive about the performance, and can then make a suggestion for improvement.
- Mini-concert – everyone practises performing their piece for a forthcoming concert.

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## Conclusion

Carefully led group sessions can develop pupils' confidence, giving them opportunities to get to know each other and to work together. Even if children find the practising tough, they usually love their group lessons. Their enthusiasm is infectious – parents and children alike are greatly motivated by working and socialising together. It helps parents to see what other pupils of a similar age and standard are doing, and it inspires children to feel they are members of an active and exciting group.

One of my 11 year old pupils, who has also had experience of non-Suzuki music lessons, recently said to her mother:

*I WISH other kids could come to just ONE Suzuki lesson or workshop or something. Then they'd SEE how great it is that we all know each other's stuff and can do things together! It's SO much better!*

More ideas for group lessons are given on my website: [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk) and particularly in the chapter on group lessons in my *Notebook*: [www.jennymacmillan/Notebook.pdf](http://www.jennymacmillan/Notebook.pdf). ■