

III The First Music Reading Book: success with every student

"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

1. Introduction

The student's first class with a music reading book should not be his first exposure to music reading. He should have been prepared for this experience over a long period of time. Let us return to the Mother Tongue Approach. When a child at school receives his first reading book in his native language, it is not at all the first time he sees the written symbols of his language. He has had many years of preparation. Success in reading depends on all that has happened before. A child who is successful in reading at school is one who has a rich vocabulary, and fluent use of his language; one who has been read to at home, and been exposed to many forms of the written language over a long period of time. Sensory development prepares the way for involvement of the intellect.

In previous articles I have discussed in detail how we can prepare the children for music reading while they are studying in Suzuki book one. The goal of these pre-reading activities is that children will see the written score and try to hear it. They will see, hear and play, not see, think and analyze. Learning music reading in the Suzuki style means that musical notation will be introduced in the same way that written language is introduced. Using the known Suzuki repertoire, the children are exposed to the written musical elements. With enlarged notation of the Suzuki repertoire, the children are lead to discover the basic melodic and rhythmic concepts. The children will succeed because the process is natural and gradual, and because the music is already thoroughly internalized. As in language learning, the written symbol is always linked to a sound already in the ear.

Learning to read music is a gradual process. I believe the secret lies in the very beginning of this all important preparation period. In this "Suzuki" approach to music reading, reading readiness activities flow naturally from playing abilities, and flow naturally into music reading. This allows the children to be free to develop their intuition, and not be limited by our adult way of thinking which is bound by reason.

As Dr Suzuki so aptly noted, children love to do what they can do well, and what they can do with ease. Therefore success at the first lesson with the music reading book is of the utmost importance. A successful lesson on music reading develops confidence and motivates the student. On the other hand, a frustrating experience can be traumatic, and the young child can develop insecurities and fear. Such experiences develop a negative way of thinking; "I can't do it" and "I don't like reading". Whereas the successful approach allows the child to have the confidence to proceed, and the enthusiasm and know how to try something new.

2. Preparation.

Success in anything we teach depends on preparation. When a young child comes forward for their first piano lesson, the success in that lesson depends on everything that happened before. If the student has been surrounded by good

music, including the Suzuki repertoire, has watched other children having lessons, has developed his inner desire by attending student recitals and group lessons, then when he is ready to receive his first lesson, it will be successful experience. All the preparation period guarantees success. Success means that the student will accomplish something at the lesson and feel good about his accomplishment. Then he is ready to proceed to the next step with a sense of joy and confidence.

It is exactly the same with music reading. Here is how we can prepare the young student for success:

- a. During the Suzuki lessons in Book One we develop in the student:
 - A well developed ear
 - An excellent musical memory
 - The ability to find notes already in ear
 - The ability to listen to and produce beautiful tone
 - The ability to use body with flexibility and ease
 - A well developed musical sense
 - A thoroughly internalized, ample repertory

We also have trained a supportive and informed parent

- b. In addition we gradually train the students in:
 - The names of the notes on the instrument
 - The lay out of notes in all ranges of the instrument
 - Recognition of their finger numbers
 - A well developed kinesthetic memory

Using engaging activities and games we can develop the following abilities in the Book One student: (I have given some examples of activities, but there are many more!)

The ability to follow the written score

Materials: Cards with the Suzuki repertoire melodies in enlarged notation, with one measure per card. The cards include clef, time signature, key signature and tempo markings

- Guide the student to lay out the cards in phrases, singing as you put down each measure. Guide the student to sing and point to the notes of a song they have already heard and can play.

-You play the song, and guide the student to follow on the cards, indicating each note as you play it.

-You play from the beginning and stop at a certain point. Ask the student to indicate where you stopped. (end of the first phrase, end of the second phrase)

Familiarity with the appropriate clef(s)

The clef(s) will appear on the cards with enlarged notation.

-Indicate the clef and name it. "This is called treble clef".

-Find the clef in your Suzuki Book.

-Show the student the general range of the clef at the keyboard

A well developed sense of metre

The Suzuki student has already a well developed sense of metre, through listening and playing very familiar repertoire. Now we can link that up with the written symbol by:

- Having the student point to the first beat of each measure while we play. This is a very important ability to develop.
- Have students clap the first beat of each measure.
- Teach older students how to conduct and feel the downbeat.

The ability to read and clap basic rhythmic patterns

- Guide the student to write the rhythms only of known song. Begin with songs which use only two rhythmic elements. For instance the quarter note and half note of Twinkle twinkle. Then Lightly Row, using the same two rhythmic elements.

- Move to unknown rhythmic combinations using the same elements. Have flashcards which combine half notes and quarter notes in different combinations in 4/4 time. The student will clap the rhythms.

- Introduce eighth notes in the same way with Aunt Rhody and the first part of Long, Long Ago. Then introduce the dotted quarter note with Cuckoo in the same way, and the whole note in French Children's Song.

- Rests can be introduced in a similar fashion.

The ability to sing at sight simple melodic lines

Material: Magnetic board with the staff and magnets

Work first of all with melodic lines that are already in the student's ear and are part of his experience with the Book One repertoire. For example, to teach him to sing a melodic pattern of the first five notes of the major scale ascending, you can do the following:

- Choose a part of a known song that has this pattern (Lightly Row, Little Playmates, Allegretto 2)

- Sing the song together

- Show the students how the pattern looks on the magnetic board, singing as you write. Now show the student slight variations, but always just moving by step, or repeating the same note. Guide the student to sing what you write.

The ability to recognize the starting pitch used in the reading book.

Look and see what pitch the reading book starts with and teach this note to the student. Show the student where it is on the instrument and call it by its name.

3. The first reading book (not the Suzuki repertoire book)

If the student can do all of the above with ease, then the first lesson with the reading book will be easy, as the student will read with his ear. If the student plays a wrong note, the ear recognizes the mistake and quickly corrects it. Inaccurate rhythms are similarly put right, perhaps with a little guidance from the teacher. The use of the body is already well developed at the instrument, as is the ear. The parent is also supportive and understanding. With all these areas so well prepared, the first reading lesson is just one more step in a gradual process.

Here are some suggestions for the first lesson with a reading book:

- Go directly to the first reading piece in staff notation. I do not use the preparation pages which appear in many publications. Many of these encourage the student to read by finger number, or by note name, and not by recognizing patterns and using their ear.
- Ask the student to clap the rhythm.
- Ask the student to identify the starting note of the piece.
- For pianists, ask the student to identify the clef and which hand and which finger starts.
- Set a pulse, ("one, two, ready, play") and the student is sight reading.

The student is playing a rhythm he has already clapped, a melody he can inner hear, and technically the piece is completely within his capabilities. He will be playing Suzuki repertoire at a much more advanced level. Therefore in this lesson we are just putting together skills which have already been well developed separately. The student leaves the lesson happy and with the feeling that reading is easy! The student will look forward to his next music reading experience.

4. Choosing a reading method

Choose a book which moves slowly and gradually with plenty of repetition of basic concepts. The best method is a series which has many books available at each level, all of which re-enforce the same basic concepts. Choose a method book which encourages the student to read by interval and by patterns. One which moves first by step with a lot of repetition of basic concepts before adding more. If the book becomes too difficult too soon, we are training the students to read with hesitation. Fluency is achieved by having the students read what they can read with ease!

5. Common misconceptions

Suzuki students cannot read

It is up to us to convince with our results that this is not the case.

The Suzuki students play so well by ear that they don't want to read

If a young child does not want to learn to read their language, it is up to the teacher to find a way to motivate him. We don't give up because the child doesn't want to!

Usually not wanting to do something is the result of finding it difficult, or not being ready. Therefore we must change our approach. In music reading we, the teachers must assume the responsibility of motivating the student, in the same way that we assume the responsibility for motivating the student to play their instrument well. The student's desire depends on the teacher's attitude and methodology, and on the support he receives from his parents.

Suzuki students cannot read at the same level that they can play

This is certainly true during the first few years. This is part of the natural learning process. In language, the beginning reader is reading material far below the level at which he can speak and express himself. Reading to learn (as opposed to learning to read) is a gradual process which happens over a long period of time. Little by little the ability to speak and the ability to read level out. It is exactly the same with music. We don't stop advancing in the repertoire. We don't ask the child once he is learning how to read, to limit his spoken language to what he can read. Children are constantly hearing language spoken at a very high level and are constantly acquiring new vocabulary through listening while they continue to use the vocabulary they already know. Little by little their ability to read catches up with their ability to speak.

Suzuki students find reading difficult because their ear is too well developed

This is absurd! Do we say the reason a young child cannot learn to read their language is because their ear is too well developed? Of course not! We blame the school, the teacher or the system. We never blame the fact that their ear was developed first. We certainly don't say that the solution is not to let the children speak before they learn to read. That would be a sure recipe for disaster! Having a well developed ear is only an advantage when it comes to music reading!

Suzuki students memorize too easily

Also absurd! Since when was being able to memorize quickly a problem, or a disadvantage? I wish I could! It just means that as soon as something is memorized it is no longer a reading exercise. We have to furnish the student with more material.

Suzuki students become too dependant on recordings

As the student is advancing in the repertoire, we must augment his studies with supplementary literature which the student has not heard. We must develop in the student the ability to read and interpret music which he has not heard. This ability develops naturally if the skill is introduced after the ear has been developed with a great deal of repetition, and after the music reading concepts have been thoroughly internalized. The student develops the ability to read and record in his inner ear.

Suzuki students cannot sight read

Sight reading can be worked on as a separate skill once the ear is developed, playing abilities are in place, and basic reading skills are internalized. In time the student will be playing at three different levels; his playing level will be more advanced, his reading level slightly less advanced, and playing at sight will be at an easier level. Fluent reading skills are developed by reading fluently! The ability to

read at sight for the piano student also depends on harmonic understanding. That is a topic for another article!

6. How to ensure success

- Prepare all steps above thoroughly and gradually throughout the study of Book One repeating each step many times in many different ways, so that the student can have success at each step
- Choose a reading book following the guidelines above and one that is appropriate for the students' age. Study the first pieces in the reading book. Decide what the student needs to know in order to read these pieces successfully. Then make sure the student is prepared in all these areas.
- Introduce the reading book at the appropriate time and when all above steps are thoroughly mastered. Here is a general guideline. For a pre school student, usually the reading preparation activities and games are the most appropriate. The student is generally ready to read at the instrument around age 7. This is the age when children are able to decode the written symbols with ease. For a school aged piano student (7-9) reading at the instrument should be introduced around the beginning of Book 2. For a student 10 or older, the reading book could be introduced in Book One, once good playing habits are well established.
- Now guide the student to practice! Remember Dr Suzuki's magic formula: Ability = Knowledge + 10,000 times
- Learning to read music requires a great deal of practice and consistency. How much does a child practice learning to read their language? That is what they work on every day at school! As Suzuki students memorize easily they need a lot of reading material. Once something is memorized it is not an exercise in reading any more. Students need regular weekly reading assignments. These need to be heard at every lesson.
- Make reading a priority. Once reading is introduced, reading non-Suzuki repertoire needs to have as much priority as learning the Suzuki repertoire. This means that we should work in each class with a book which is not the Suzuki repertoire. Reading should also be an integral part of the student's practice at home.
- Find ways to motivate and encourage the student in his reading. We must give the student a reason to read! Assign reading pieces for the next recital. Arrange duets and ensembles with other students. Choose repertoire that is attractive to the student.
- Find ways to encourage the student to read with his ear. For instance, close the book after playing the reading exercise once. Can the student perform it from memory? Can the student write from memory the rhythm of a simple melody he has read? Can the student transpose the melody to a different key? If the student has been sufficiently prepared in a step by step manner, he will be able to perform these tasks and music reading will be enjoyable and relatively easy. Learning to read music will be just another step in a natural process.

7. Conclusion

Children love to do what they can do well. If the first lessons in music reading are successful, positive experiences, our students will enjoy reading. Being able to read music fluently and with understanding is vital whether our students choose to

pursue music as a career, or whether music will be their hobby

Kodaly states that the characteristics of a good musician are:

1. a well trained ear
2. a well trained intelligence
3. a well trained heart
4. a well trained hand (let us think of the whole body)

He reminds us that all these areas must develop in constant equilibrium. We must find a way to integrate music reading with our teaching of the Suzuki repertoire, in such a way that all four of these areas are addressed. Playing skills and ear development pave the way for reading readiness activities, which in turn will form a smooth transition into music reading.

The first key to success in music reading lies in the preparation steps in which we are linking the eye with the ear, so that the student looks at the page and starts to hear. The fingers will then follow the ear, not vice versa. Following this, the necessary components for success are motivation, practice, and consistency.

Knowledge can be acquired in a moment. Abilities on the other hand are developed gradually, over a long period of time.

Let us work in this way so that all our Suzuki students will become excellent readers with excellent ears, fine players, and sensitive, compassionate human beings. This is the Mother Tongue Approach.

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