

## **V Teaching Music Reading in the Suzuki Style**

*“A perfect musician is able to see any complex orchestral work in his mind’s eye, as though it were a score. This is the highest level one can reach”* Robert Schumann, Jugend Album

### **The importance of music reading**

It is essential that all our students become excellent music readers. As professionals or as amateurs, the ability to read music fluently will be a key factor in our students’ enjoyment of music now and in the future. As pianists, music reading takes on a special dimension. Piano students must be able to sight read very well. How often are pianists asked at the last minute, “Can you accompany this”? The soloist or chamber group player very often has one line of music, while the pianist has 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 profoundly internalized the musical style.

### **What is music reading?**

Music reading is recognizing a written symbol, recalling a sound and reproducing it. We must see a rhythm, hear and feel it, not see a rhythm and identify it as “a crotchet equal to two quavers”. We must see a melody and hear it, not see a melody and name the notes or identify the intervals. We must see a tonality and “feel” it kinesthetically, not identify how many sharps or flats are present. We must see a harmony, hear and “feel” it, not just identify its root, quality and inversion. Knowing the theory is very important and certainly helps, but theoretical 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 sees, hears in the inner ear, understands and plays.

### **How do we achieve this direct connection between written symbol and sound?**

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. The sound must be put there. Putting sounds into the ear translates as “hearing” or “listening”. Once the sound is in the ear, the student can develop the skill of inner hearing; the ability to hear inside. 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) first through the ear is the basis of the philosophies and methodologies of Kodaly, Orff, Dalcroze, Suzuki, and Gordon. There is no sense in talking about beat in music before the child has heard and thoroughly felt it. There is no sense in talking about high and low, loud and soft, fast and slow until the child has heard these concepts in the music (unconsciously) and has thoroughly “experienced” them. By “experience” I mean internalize by doing; first by singing and then by playing on an instrument repeatedly over a long period of time.

### **Suzuki students’ preparation for music reading**

Suzuki students start their studies with a period of intense hearing, absorbing the

repertoire they will play. As the parents put the CDs with the repertoire on, the children's hearing is unconscious, just as children absorb their language before talking. The children are unaware of "having to listen" or of "ear training". They are just absorbing through all of their senses. Once the music has been internalized, the Suzuki student will start to find the repertoire on his instrument, at first imitating his teacher and later letting his ear guide the fingers to find the notes, with the careful supervision of the teacher and the parent who is the home coach. In this way the children develop the important direct connection of ear to instrument. They hear the melody and their fingers find it; they hear the rhythm and their bodies perform it; they hear the harmony and their hands find it. This unconscious hearing continues as the children progress, and is gradually combined with conscious listening.

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. Feeling the beat and identifying it as such on the page is easy once the body has experienced it. Writing and reading simple rhythms and melodies is easy once these rhythmic and melodic elements have been internalized.

Suzuki book one students have experienced the following concepts: simple, mainly step-wise melodies; basic rhythmic patterns including crotchets, quavers, semi quavers, minims, dotted minims, semi breves, and dotted crotchet with quaver; mostly simple metre; tonalities of C and G major, a and d minor (and other keys through transposition); mainly tonic and dominant harmonies, along with subdominant in second inversion and dominant 7th in first inversion; combinations of same, different and similar 4 measure phrases; and a variety of dynamics, tempi, musical styles, and articulations (legato and staccato).

### **How to teach the Suzuki students music reading**

Once these elements have been absorbed and performed repeatedly by the student, we can gradually introduce the student to the concepts in the written score, skillfully separating the elements and presenting them in a carefully thought out sequence. Detailed examples of how to implement this are found in my articles on music reading first published in the Journal Ensemble\* by the Peruvian Suzuki Association (Asociación Suzuki del Perú).

### **Music reading with understanding**

Robert Schumann said that a good musician can

*See the score and hear the music*

*Hear the music and see (imagine) the score*

We want students to be able to read and perform the music with understanding. It is not enough to read correctly every note and every rhythm. Reading with understanding means seeing the symbols, and hearing and understanding the musical sense, the style, the character; and very importantly, being able to second-guess the harmonies. There must be a direct connection between the sound in the ear, the feeling on the keyboard and the chord on the page. Theoretical analysis is important, but it is not enough! Schumann said that a good musician is one who "can 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 the children learn to read music in the same way they have learned to read their language. In language, children hear and absorb on a purely unconscious level, and then they speak. While gaining fluency they are exposed in a very natural way to the written symbols for familiar words and sounds. Later, they will learn to read, being introduced to familiar vocabulary long before being presented with the unfamiliar.

Children who hear their language, internalize it and then read it have a tremendous advantage over those who try to read a language they have never heard. The success of reading and writing in language depends greatly on having the language in the ear, rather than only understanding the grammar. In English we know how to pronounce differently words with exactly the same spelling pattern; “**tough, though, through, bough, cough, borough**” simply because that is the way it sounds. “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

## **Conclusions**

The Suzuki Method prepares the students for music reading in a natural way by experiencing the musical concepts first in an ample, thoroughly internalized repertoire. In a carefully sequenced approach we can extract the musical elements from this repertoire and lead the children to discover them in their written form. We then gradually guide the children to discover and perform the same elements in a new context. This results in the children sight reading through their ears.

To read with musical sense, we must first immerse the children in music, and then expertly guide them to understand the written language based on what is already thoroughly internalized. The Suzuki Method therefore has the potential to produce excellent readers. This is learning-based teaching: teaching music reading as naturally as children are taught to read their language.

*“Do not play a piece before hearing it very clearly in your mind”*  
Robert Schumann”, 1824

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