

IV Music reading: Teaching students how to read music with intellectual understanding

*"A child will learn anything if there is somebody who knows how to teach him"*Zoltán Kodály

During one journey from San Francisco to Lima, I had my usual stop over in Dallas, Texas, and I struck up a conversation with a fellow traveler. On hearing that I was a music teacher, my new acquaintance told me that there was a new method being implemented in Peru, called the Suzuki method. "Do you teach Suzuki, or do you teach reading?" she asked. At that moment I knew that I had to start to write about teaching music reading! It is a complete misunderstanding to think that teaching "Suzuki" means not teaching music reading. The Suzuki Method is the Mother Tongue Approach. All children hear their language, speak their language, and in school they are taught how to read and write their language. This is the natural process in language learning. This is the Mother Tongue Approach. Therefore the Suzuki approach is to let the children hear the music, to teach the children how to play the music and then to teach them to read and understand the written score.

In previous articles I have addressed how to prepare children for music reading with pre-reading or reading readiness activities. I have stressed the importance of letting the children learn through their senses, and developing their intuition. Now I will focus on the student who has reached the next stage of learning: she is ready to approach music reading and theory from a more intellectual point of view. She is a school aged child, she plays fluently and with ease, she plays with good tone, she has been exposed to the written score, and recognizes basic rhythmic and melodic written elements. The student is now studying music reading from a method book (or better still, books) other than the Suzuki repertoire. In other words, the student is continuing to hear the Suzuki repertoire, and learn the Suzuki pieces using the score as a guide, and at the same time she is studying music that she has neither heard nor read before.

Here, it is important to make a clarification: many Suzuki students appear to read very well, as they open their Suzuki book and play. However, do not be fooled by this. This is not truly reading. The student has heard the music, therefore knows the rhythm and melody. Therefore she has no need to read the rhythm and can find the notes by following melodic patterns, or perhaps just reading the finger numbers! It is not enough for Suzuki students to be able to read only their Suzuki repertoire. Reading music you have heard many times is useful, but it does not train you to be able to read a score you have never heard. This is an important ability which we must develop in all our students. Let us look to the future. As adults, our students will gain a great deal of pleasure from music when they can get together with fellow musicians and enjoy playing together. This usually implies having the ability to sight read a score they perhaps have never heard. We must train the students so that reading music is just like reading their language. It is interesting to note that when your native language passes before your eyes (billboards, shop signs, newspaper headlines) you cannot help but read. You don't have to consciously decide "now I will read". A good music reader will do the same: she will see the score and will not be able to help but start to hear it.

Now let us discuss how we can teach new theoretical concepts, by first helping the

student understand the concept in the music she has already experienced, and then applying the concept to new material.

With every new concept we want to teach, we can follow three steps:

- a. relate the theoretical concept to known material first. (ie. repertoire the student has played)
- b. then guide the student to discover the same concept in unknown material. (ie. Music the student has neither played nor heard)
- c. now practice, practice, practice

We can apply this procedure to develop the following abilities in the students:

1. **The ability to read ascending and descending melodic patterns which move by step**
 - a. choose a known piece, or part of a known piece which moves by step. Have the student point to the notes and sing "step up", or "step down" or "same note".
 - b. now have the student do the same with an unknown piece.
 - c. now play the piece, and practice the same concept many times in many different pieces.

2. **The ability to read melodic patterns which move by step or stay on the same note**
 - a. choose a known piece which moves by step and has repeated notes. Have the student point to the notes and sing "step up" "step down" "same note"
 - b. now have the student do the same with a an unknown piece
 - c. now play the piece and practice the same concept in many different pieces

3. **The ability to read melodic patterns which include moving by step and by 3rds**
 - a. choose a known piece, or part of a known piece which includes movement by step and by 3rds. Have the student point to the notes and sing "step up" "step down" "skip up" or "skip down" or "a third"
 - b. now have the student do the same with an unknown piece.
 - c. now play the piece, and practice the same concept many times in many different pieces.

4. **The ability to read notes by note name**
 - a. sing the note names of a known piece while pointing to the notes.
 - b. do the same with an unknown piece which stays within the same range
 - c. now play the piece and be able to stop anywhere and name the note.

5. **The ability to read rhythmic patterns at sight**
 - a. choose a familiar piece which has the rhythmic elements you want to study. Ask the student to say or tap the rhythm while indicating the

pulse.

- b. do the same in an unknown piece but with the same rhythmic elements
- c. practice the same elements in many different pieces.

6. The ability to feel a sense of meter

- a. in a familiar piece, have the student first establish a beat, then feel the first beat of each measure. Now sing the melody and point to the first beat of each measure in the score. A later activity can be singing the melody while conducting.
- b. do the same with an unknown piece which has the same time signature. If the student cannot sing the melody, instead she can indicate the first beat of each measure while counting.
- c. experience the same time signature in many different pieces.

7. The ability to recognize major and minor modes

- a. play an easy Book One piece (for instance Mary had a little Lamb) as it is written. Now the teacher plays the same piece but changing it to the minor form. The student will immediately recognize the difference. You can ask the student to describe the mood, or just tell her, this one is major and this one is minor. Now play other Book one pieces and discuss whether they are major or minor.
- b. in the reading pieces always discuss, does this sound major or minor. If it is minor, how could I play it in the major? If it is major, how could I play it in the minor?
- c. with every piece make the student aware of the modality

8. The ability to know what key you are in.

I am not speaking about memorizing key signatures, but about "knowing" the tonal centre by ear. A sense of tonality can easily be developed using known repertoire and guiding the ear to hear.

- a. play a Book one piece which ends on the tonic (as most do) and slow down towards the end, missing out the last note. Ask the student to sing or play the last note. Now transpose the same melody to another key, and do the same. You can say, "yes, that is the home note. That means we are in the key of" . Play it again in another key and now ask the student "What key am I in".
- b. go to an unknown piece in a familiar key. Let the student play it and now ask what key was it in.
- c. always guide the student to listen for the tonal centre. Don't just teach them "One sharp is G major".

9. The ability to read in different keys

Reading in a key is much easier to do once the body has a sense of playing in that key. Much of the Suzuki book One piano repertoire is in C major, not giving the student the opportunity of "feeling" other key patterns.

- a. transpose an easy piece into different keys. Play not only the melody but also the LH chord patterns.
- b. now read a piece in one of these keys
- c. transpose it to another familiar key

10. The ability to recognize basic harmonic structures

Developing a harmonic sense is something which is fundamental for all musicians, and of utmost importance for reading music at the piano. After playing the pieces in Suzuki Book One, the sounds of the basic harmonic patterns are in the student's ear and the shapes of the chords are in the student's fingers.

- a. play an easy Book One piece, such as Mary had a little Lamb. Now play just the first chord. Now play it as a broken chord, singing each note. Tell the student this chord is called "C". Transpose the piece into G major, play the first chord and tell the student "this chord is called "G". Experiment with different keys, indicating the root position chords only.
- b. as the student plays her reading piece, ask her to identify chords in their root position
- c. always guide the student's eye to scan the page of a reading piece and pick out the chords in root position.

In the same way, we can introduce next the inversions of these familiar chords. First play each position, get used to the sound and the feel, and then label them; root position, first inversion, second inversion. We can then introduce functional names of the chords. Play Aunt Rhody, now isolate the left hand, block the chords and identify them. First by saying only C or F or G major, then add the position, then the function, I, IV, V. Finally we can introduce the terminology tonic, dominant and subdominant.

Let the student learn the new theoretical concept through repertoire she is very familiar with. Then go to a new piece of music that has the same features, and guide the student to discover them. This is an integrated approach to learning: we should not separate reading from theory, playing from reading, or playing from theory. Theory and music reading should grow naturally out of the student's ability to hear and play, just as in language, reading and grammatical understanding evolve naturally from the child's ability to speak and from the child's experience.

Music reading is seeing, hearing, understanding and performing. We must research how to train our students to play beautifully, read fluently and understand the written score. This is the Mother Tongue Approach. This is the Suzuki Method. I hope that next time I am passing through Dallas I will find my fellow travelers better informed!

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