

I Music Theory, Reading and Intuition.

"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 he has no connection. The way should be paved for direct intuition" Zoltán Kodály, 1964

In July 1999 at Holy Names College in Oakland, California I was teaching a pedagogy class entitled "How to teach music theory to young children". During the class I used my own students for demonstration purposes. Four year old Faithlina was receiving her first Introduction to Theory class. She had not studied staff notation before. I sang the pitches of the first 5 notes of the major scale singing lu lu lu lu lu (not using the name of the note), while moving the note on a magnetic staff board. I then asked "I wonder how this would sound?" and showed her the same pattern descending on the magnetic board. She laughed gleefully as she sang with accuracy the descending scale pattern. Faithlina immediately related the sound to the written symbol and intuitively applied what she "knew" to a new pattern. There had been no previous explanation of lines, spaces, patterns, seconds, ascending, descending, whole steps, half steps, treble clef, bass clef, melody, pitch, or notes names. Faithlina was learning to read by being led to develop her intuition. All young children learn best this way.

As Dr Suzuki discovered, children have an amazing ability to learn through their senses. It is easier to understand what this means when we watch how a young child can develop their musical sense by absorbing through their ear, or see how they can develop their technique by watching and listening to their teacher. However we tend to think that teaching something as mathematical as musical notation and music theory must immediately involve engaging the child's logical and rational way of thinking. Therefore we start by explaining the concepts with words. Not only is this approach boring for the child, but more importantly, it is not allowing the child to develop her full potential. Children can learn in a completely different way when we allow them to be free to develop their intuition, and not be limited by our adult way of thinking, which is bound by reason.

Please do not misunderstand me. Rational thinking and analyses are very important in the study of music. For the past 7 years I have been teaching theory, harmony and musicianship at University level. I love to teach form, harmonic and melodic analyses. I have worked with university students and with Suzuki students of all ages. Through experience I know that the way to achieve high level analytical thinking is to develop the intuition first. I have watched university students struggle with the practical application of such concepts as secondary dominants and Neapolitan 6th chords, while advanced Suzuki students understand with ease, because for them theory and practice have been thoroughly integrated.

How can we teach music reading and theory through the senses? As the Suzuki method is based on the mother tongue approach, let us consider how children become literate in language and draw a parallel in music.

From birth the child is surrounded not only by the spoken language, but also by its written form (in books, newspapers, television, advertisements, street signs, and billboards). While the ear is absorbing the sounds of the language and the child is starting to speak, the written language is everywhere. Of course, having the language in the ear and learning to speak it are very essential preparation steps for learning to read. Just as children absorb the sounds they absorb the shapes and

symbols making no conscious effort to do so. Therefore similarly in music we should surround the children with musical notation, exposing them to it in a very natural way while they are hearing the recordings and learning to play their instrument. We should not hide the musical score in order to have the child develop her ear!

Children love to be read to. Educators know that the children who are read to most are the children who will learn to read easily and therefore do well in school. It would be absurd to say " Don't read to your children. It will make them lazy and they won't want to read". On the contrary, developing the ear and the imagination while exposing the child to the written symbol, is a natural preparation for success in reading. Young children love to hear the same stories over and over again until they have them memorized. Very often the child will pick up her favorite storybook, tell the story and say she is reading. She will even know when to turn the pages, although she cannot actually read.

Children in preschool are constantly being led to experience language, both spoken and written, although they are not yet learning to read. The children's favorite nursery rhymes and songs are written and hung on the wall. Children trace letters, and manipulate letters and words. They are absorbing the written language through their senses.

Children who are being taught using the Suzuki approach have a rich and extensive repertoire in their ear and in their fingers. We ought to take advantage of this. The known melodies are like stories the child has heard over and over again. They become like friends for the young child. We can expose the children to the notation for these melodies. Let me be clear. In language, we do not begin by asking the very young child to read, we read to them. Similarly, we do not ask the children to read the music. They hear the melodies, and play them. We show the music to the parents while we play and later talk about the piece. In this way the child immediately knows that music also has a written form. Very soon the child will point to the music and say, "I know how to play this piece, and this one, but I haven't learned this one yet" This is very important preparation. Then enlarge the notation by putting the music from the Suzuki repertoire on cards, one measure per card. Include all the musical symbols, clefs, rhythm, pitch, dynamic and tempo markings and repeat signs. Sing the melody while pointing to the notes, and invite the child to do the same. She is being exposed to written symbols for sounds that are already thoroughly internalized. In this way the child will absorb musical notation through her senses. It is amazing how much a child can learn in this way. I have pointed to repeat signs and said " I wonder what this means?" Of course, the child laughs and says "repeat" because she hears the melody in her head and knows that it repeats. As you show the child the notation while singing the melody, the child will begin to anticipate the sound of the next note or phrase. This means she is immediately linking the sound to the written symbol. The symbol represents a sound already in the ear. As Schumann stated, a good musician can read with the ear and hear with the eye. In other words, music reading and theory should never be divorced from the sound.

At school, when the child arrives in first grade, and learns to read, she comes with extensive preparation. It is not that all of a sudden she has to decipher a completely unknown written notation. All the elements of the written language are familiar to her. We should make the experience similar in music. In a successful language program, the process is so gradual and natural that the child just one day finds herself reading. This is the result of very careful preparation over a long period of time, with emphasis on guiding the child to learn through her senses. At the

beginning no explanation of consonants and vowels is necessary, no explanation of the grammatical structure. That will come later. The reading material is full of familiar words and very familiar contexts. We don't test the child by giving them unknown scientific terminology to make sure they are really reading and not just memorizing. We build confidence by a lot of repetition of very familiar vocabulary. Therefore in music, we can use the known repertoire to build confidence and to lead the child to understand the concepts. For instance, by moving a magnet on a staff board, we can have the child read very familiar patterns, starting with step-wise motion only. I do this first singing to "lu" and later playing on the instrument. As I said at the beginning of this article I do this with no explanation at this point of the name of the note, the lines and spaces, or the clefs. I want to develop the child's intuition. Similarly the child can read and write the rhythms of the known Suzuki repertoire, first presenting pieces that use only two rhythmic elements. With no explanation of quarter note or half note, time signature, beats in a measure, the child can intuitively sense the difference between the note values because she already has the sound in her ear.

All that I have been discussing here is preparation for reading and pre reading concepts. This should be done throughout the study of Suzuki Book One. Of course in time the child must learn the names of the notes, the time values, key signatures, time signatures and all the correct musical terminology. All this will make so much more sense after the sound and the written symbol has been absorbed through the senses.

Let us return to 4 year old Faithlina. In the same Introduction to Theory class, we sang Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. I then started to write the rhythm of the first phrase on the board using stick notation while I sang the song again. Handing the chalk to Faithlina I continued to sing and she very naturally continued to write the rhythm accurately on the board with no previous knowledge of half notes and quarter notes, or any explanation of the beat. Having the music thoroughly internalized and having been previously exposed to written musical notation, Faithlina was free to develop her intuition. This will help her become an excellent musician and an excellent reader. After the class her mother thanked me for making Faithlina's first exposure to theory such a pleasurable one. I thanked her. Leading a child to develop her intuition is sheer joy for the teacher.

Ear, eye then intellect.

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