

Music Reading in Book One? Yes, by ear! Caroline Fraser

***“Read a lot of music...this will develop the internal ear to its keenest. Do not play a piece before hearing it very clearly in your mind.” Robert Schumann, 1824.***

Travelling from San Francisco to Lima, in a casual conversation about music teaching, a fellow passenger asked me “Do you teach the Suzuki Method, or do you teach the children to read?” This made me think. Wait a moment, the Suzuki Method is the Mother Tongue Approach. In the mother tongue do our children learn to read? Yes of course! I knew I had to do something drastic to change people’s perception of the Suzuki approach.

I am in agreement with Dr Suzuki’s emphasis on the importance of postponing music reading in order to develop the ear, the memory, beautiful tone, physical ease at the instrument and fluent expressive playing. I want to stress the importance of developing all the skills Dr. Suzuki mentioned, while experiencing music reading through activities away from the instrument.

Yes, postpone music reading at the instrument, but do not postpone music reading!

One of our goals as music educators is to develop the same level of literacy in music as people have in their native language. We cannot pass a sign in the street without reading it. That is, without hearing it in our heads. With music, it should be the same. It should be impossible for a musician to glance at written music and not hear it.

Going back to the Mother Tongue, think about the vast preparation children have in their written language, while they are learning to speak and long before we teach them to read. From the moment the young baby can focus her eyes, she is surrounded by words and letters. As she is developing language acquisition through the ear, she is also becoming familiar with the images on the page, and naturally associating what she hears with the written language. This preparation stage for reading is an all-important step in achieving language literacy. The natural way of learning to read is achieved by exposing the child to the written elements of language, not through direct teaching but by guiding the child to absorb through her senses. We let the child imitate, associate and self-discover, before adding a grammatical explanation. We create the environment and let the child learn! It is an advantage that children already have the language in their ears and memory as they are learning to read. Reading is recognizing familiar images for sounds already in the ear!

In music, I propose the same approach. Expose the child to the written notation from the beginning. Let the child associate sounds with images and learn to write by imitating shapes on the page. Guide the child to unconsciously absorb the concepts while separately and simultaneously developing the physical and aural skills associated with the instrument. We must link the written symbol to the sound from the beginning and take advantage of the ample musical language already in the child’s ear. This is the key to music reading with ease. We want the child to be able to look at the score and hear it. Look at the rhythm and feel it. Look at the dots on the page and sense the music. Our Suzuki students with well-trained ears and an already developed musical sensitivity have all the advantages. Once we connect the symbol to the ear, they will be able to hear what they see.

Music reading activities through the senses, not the intellect at first, will encourage self-discovery, enhance musical intuition and eventually, through careful guidance, lead to advanced analytical skills. I remember when I asked Haruko Kataoka about forty years ago, how do you teach sight reading? She said to me, “You read to the child”. I didn’t understand. Now I know this is the all important first step. It paves the way towards reading by ear.

Here are some of my ideas. All concepts must first be “unconsciously experienced”.

**Rhythm:** There is no point in talking about the beat if the child cannot feel it. Feel the beat, feel the rhythmic patterns, associate images with known rhythms. Discover there is one symbol per sound, therefore every symbol represents a sound. Follow the score from left to right. Become familiar with basic note values already in the ear.

**Melody:** Understand the basic concept of melodic patterning, rather than saying “that line is a G”. With familiar patterns, feel the music ascending and descending, feel phrase lengths, feel question and answer, all without explanation. Sing, sing, sing. Singing will develop the skill of inner hearing. See these patterns on the staff. Sing and follow.

**Global:** Without explanation, expose the child to the complete score of familiar music, with rhythm, melody, bar lines, clefs, time and key signature, and all indications on the page. Follow the score while singing or clapping and let the child discover. It is amazing how the child develops her intuition when we show her the score for what is already in the ear.

**Musical Form:** Through familiar repertoire feel phrase lengths, feel same and different, question and answer. Express with gestures. Experience leads to discovery and eventually to analysis through the senses.

**Tonality:** Develop a sense of tonality through transposition by ear. The ear guides the child to an “unconscious understanding” of whole steps, half steps and key, not based on memorizing key signatures, but by using the ear and sensing the pull to the tonic.

In conclusion, let the child develop the ear and memory, beautiful tone and physical ease at the instrument, and at the same time introduce reading through singing and feeling while not playing. Fluent and expressive music reading depends on fluent and expressive playing, together with an approach which allows the child to connect the sound and sensitivity to the written score. We must rid ourselves of the myth that a trained musical ear and memory will cause a child to have reading problems. In language, it is just the opposite. No-one would think of blaming a child’s reading difficulties on the fact that the language is already in the ear. We blame the school, the teacher, the system.

Which brings me back to the Mother Tongue. I remember my husband showing concern that our five-year-old son was not yet reading. I told him “If you want him to read, just read to him” So he did. Constantly. One day, our son was reading naturally in the same languages he already had in his ear.

***“We should read music in the same way that an educated adult will read a book: in silence but imagining the sound”. Zoltan Kodaly, 1954***