

Hot Tips for Positive Practising by Monica Christian

Dr Suzuki's wise words are – 'Only practise on the days that you eat'. I think that this is the first clue to positive practising. I can almost see the twinkle in his eye as he says these words. Practising with **dedication** and a **consistent routine**, but also a **sense of humour** is a fine beginning.

He also suggests that our students do well to reach the point where playing their pieces as beautifully as possible is **intuitive**, and another of his ideas is that students should know their pieces **so** well that they could not possibly make a mistake. We know that *practice makes permanent, so it follows that **persistent perfect practice makes permanently perfect!** This is the second clue.

Suzuki writings always remind us too that the element of **love** is a vital ingredient. We parents know how deeply we love our children, and this combined with a love of the instrument and the beautiful repertoire is perhaps the most important clue to positive practising.

So, what is practising? Practising anything, not just music, involves repetition, with the plan to constantly build skill and comfort in a task. Eventually we can do it without even thinking about it. We adults remember, for example, our first driving lessons. There were so many skills to integrate and we grated gear changes, braked too suddenly and took corners too widely simply because we **lacked experience** in driving. Now it's **intuitive** for us. Similarly, we generally have no trouble finding our way around our neighbourhood, getting to our own homes and safely getting into and down the driveway without hitting the letterbox or accidentally crashing into the back wall of the garage! Now we have all the experience we need to achieve these things skilfully and comfortably.

With this in mind, it is the responsibility of the adults in the students' lives to enable them to reach this level of skill and comfort, and ultimately, joy in their music. How can we do this? Setting up an **environment** to enable this to happen is vital. One way we do this is by creating opportunities for listening to, watching, sharing and performing our music. We Suzuki people are **so** fortunate to have fine recordings of our repertoire and we have group lessons, concert opportunities and workshops. Enthusiastic use of all of these advantages is such a bonus for our students. A peer group is very important for all of us – students, parents and teachers.

I know, though, that you are waiting for some hot tips for what happens day to day at home! How to keep the enthusiasm going day by day and even year by year is the question? I find that I like best to do the things that I am 'good at'. I am sure that our students feel the same. It's **fun** to do things you are good at doing. It's no fun at all to be doing things you don't feel you do well. To become good at something one needs to **want to be successful**, i.e. **self-motivated**, and to be able to identify anything which might be inhibiting success. Once problems are identified they can be rectified by **correct repetition**.

In our music we usually find that there are particular notes or sections which prevent comfort until they are well learned. We teachers can often anticipate which sections these will be for your student, and encourage you to commence learning these *yummy bits before starting the piece. This is a good Suzuki tool. Another Suzuki tool is constant reviewing of pieces already learned, as this builds technique, and very often we experience the same musical or fingering pattern in future repertoire, so review prepares the way for what is ahead. It is **fun** to play things we play easily and well.

Charts and **games** are a great way to achieve successful repetition, either when learning something new, or working on yummy bits. These give the student a chance to 'go away' from the task for a moment. Each time he/she returns to repeat the pattern it will be slightly easier than the previous time. By the way, be sure that the task is small enough to make it easily achievable. If frustration is evident, it is because the task is too big. This method of improving works for students of all ages.

- 1) Ticking boxes or colouring in squares or pictures on a chart **after each repetition** gives everyone a sense of just how far the student has come, especially when viewing the final product on the page.
- 2) 'Dot to dot' pictures work well in the same way.
- 3) An element of competition adds some spice to small section repetition. Games such as noughts and crosses, Hangman, Connect 4, Snakes and ladders are fun.
- 4) Sometimes we add pieces to a jigsaw with each repetition. Learning becomes almost effortless.
- 5) Some families use the macaroni jar game. Add a piece of macaroni for each successfully achieved yummy bit, and when the jar is full the reward is something which the parents and students have planned and worked towards.
- 6) Invite along some 'concert people' - i.e. an audience of small toys added one by one to the music stand. (My 32 year old son's Smurfs have been concert goers for many years!)
- 7) A roll of a dice can help us make decisions about which yummy bit to practise, or how many repetitions should be played. There's no arguing with a dice.
- 8) Bead or macaroni threading appeals to some.
- 9) Counters (magic music buttons) or an abacus help keep track of the number of repetitions. Edible counters are good motivators, although not every one approves of these. I've seen amazing improvements for the joy of receiving one smartie!
- 10) Does anyone have a problem with earning money for work well done? Maybe pocket - money can be earned this way.
- 11) Fold a piece of paper and cut it for each repetition. Enjoy the beautiful pattern created.

- 12) Add loops to a paper chain to decorate your music practising space.
- 13) Expecting 3 perfect repetitions in a row really demands good focus.
- 14) Add notes to the staff and play the tune at the end of the practice. How does it sound?!
- 15) Add rhythms one by one and clap them at the end of the practice.
- 16) Lucky dips of tasks required – i.e. yummy bits, or even whole pieces add an element of chance. I am looking forward to hearing **your good ideas** now.

This list is just the beginning! Most of these games give many opportunities for laughter and all give opportunities for **praise**. Do be sure to do the task followed by the activity with each repetition to give the brain a moment to absorb the skill, and be sure that the repetitions are not only accurate, but that the **sound is beautiful**.

Charts are also useful to ensure that practice is regular, preferably daily. Each day of practising missed means **more** than a day missed, it means that progress is halted, and perhaps ability even regresses. This doesn't boost morale, or build comfort or skill. A weekly practising chart drawn up cooperatively can work as a contract between parent and child. To be faithful to a contract is a lesson for life.

100 day practising charts have been used around the world with great success. The only rule for these charts is that **not a single day of practice may be missed**. Once the first 100 day chart is complete, it can be followed by another, and another. I have young friends in USA who are on about their 5th or 6th 100 day chart. Their parents are taking them on holidays in Hawaii once their 10th chart is complete. Of course, the real rewards are already huge. Their parents tell me that their their playing has progressed beyond belief, and the children realize this too. By the way, on the occasional day circumstances such as sickness prevent a real practice taking place. On these days 'ear-practising', i.e. just listening to the CD is acceptable, and if possible, a loving greeting and apology to the instrument is good. I almost forgot to mention, a side benefit in the case of my young friends has been some good earnings with busking!

Working with a **practice partner** is another idea. To spend some regular music time with either a more advanced student or someone who is a peer is motivating. An idea along the same lines is for home teachers to swap students with another home teacher every once in a while. Find someone else from your teacher's studio or another Suzuki family who might like to try these ideas. It promises to be very interesting. Those who have tried it found that they were much more polite with other people's children!

Allow me to summarise the hot tips.

- First of all, remember that this student, your child, with whom you are practising is one of the people you love most of all in the world! You are spending precious moments with him/ her – moments which will never come again. Enjoy your child's uniqueness and praise him/her for each goal set and achieved.

- Create an environment which allows your child to flourish as a musician.
- Remember that children learn best of all through play, so have fun as you achieve your goals.
- Keep the steps small enough to guarantee success.
- Love our music – it is so special – ensure that your child knows how much you love it and how special it is.
- Make listening to classical music a part of your everyday lives.
- Share music with others whenever you can.

The Suzuki philosophy deals with much more than teaching a child to play a musical instrument. Suzuki music education is education for life. Dr Suzuki's main aim was to create fine human beings through the study and love of music. In the Suzuki triangle of student, teacher and parent we have wonderful opportunities to experience team work – we set goals together and work cooperatively together to achieve those goals. Then we celebrate the achievement. What excellent training for life. Other life-skills which we acquire and celebrate are: concentration, always striving for the best, determination, dealing with problems by approaching them one step at a time, self-control, physical control, good listening skills, an appreciation of quality, a love of beauty, respect for music, respect for the instrument and respect for other people, inner strength and joy in achievement.

Enjoy the journey!

*My thanks to fellow Suzuki teachers Elizabeth Robinson for teaching that practising makes permanent, Margaret Bland for coining the term 'yummy bits' and Erica Booker Thomas for reminding me many years ago that I love my daughter dearly, and that this was much more important than any practising issues we were having!