

Reading Music and the Suzuki Method

—Michelle Baylor, March 2010

A common criticism of the Suzuki Method is that students play everything by ear and never learn to read music. Hopefully the questions and answers in this article will address those concerns and explain how reading skills are developed and strengthened in your student.

Back to the language learning idea...

The formation of language begins at birth with listening. Babbling starts soon after birth, but words don't emerge until somewhere around the first year, and sentences and paragraphs come later. Reading and writing develop even later, normally between four and six years of age. Once a student begins learning to read and write it takes many years for them to gain the proficiency needed to write a cohesive essay or read and comprehend a textbook. As with any other language, learning the language of music also takes time and develops in different stages.

Why don't you give written music right away?

Music is sound—an auditory experience, not a visual one. Students should be exposed to good-sounding music from the very beginning. They can recreate beautiful sounds, just as they recreated spoken words, long before they have the experience and skill to read music. As with spoken language, my goal is to develop in your child a sense of how music works and sounds so that when written symbols are introduced, the student has real-life experience for the symbols to relate to. Initial music experiences are building the scaffold for later understanding.

When will my student start learning to read?

Believe it or not, your student actually began the reading process at the first lesson. Exercises and games are included right away to help develop rhythm skills, a fluency with the musical alphabet, and an introduction to the way printed music is put together. Activities like Alphabet Snakes and Blue Jello are more than just fun games. They are experiences designed to add one piece at a time to the foundation necessary for making sense of printed music. As the student matures both musically and cognitively, the time for printed music will come quickly.

When does my child actually get printed music?

The answer varies with each student. Most children are ready to begin working with printed music somewhere near the middle of Book 1—later with younger beginners, sooner with older beginners. Remember, your baby spoke for several years before starting to read and write! After printed music is introduced, skills will continue to develop and grow. In Book 1, the printed Suzuki repertoire music is almost exclusively for parent and teacher reference. By Book 2, the Suzuki music might be helpful to your child in learning some parts of songs, but most of the learning is done through listening first and reading second. Generally by somewhere in Suzuki Book 3 the students' reading skills are strong enough to guide their learning of the Suzuki repertoire.

How can I help my student learn to read?

Reviewing pre-reading concepts or games used at lessons can be a fun thing to do with children at any age. Once printed music is introduced, spend at least 8-10 minutes of each practice time working on reading. Reading music is a separate skill from playing music, so don't be surprised when beginning reading assignments are much simpler than the Suzuki repertoire your child is studying. Look at the printed page, review the lesson notes, and talk with your child about anything the teacher pointed out as important. Clap the reading assignment first to practice the rhythm. Have your child name the notes they see on the page. Then ask him/her to play through the assignment and listen for correct notes. Play through the assignment again with the goal of having correct notes that follow the rhythm you practiced clapping. If reading is a struggle, break the assignment down into smaller chunks—even one or two measures at a time, if necessary, and practice using the same steps. Remember when you worked with your kindergartener at sounding out words? This is the same idea! As your child's reading ability develops, a progressive variety of music will be introduced to continue developing skills. Picture books lead to early chapter books which lead to novels!

If my student is really good at listening, why should he or she learn to read?

Musical literacy involves both speaking and reading, just like language literacy! Complex musical concepts and challenging pieces of repertoire are impossible to learn without reading skills. The ability to read music is an important way for students to access music they have not heard before, or music for which a recording is not available. Reading music fluently is also essential for developing a talent that is useful for many situations, things like accompanying a soloist, playing with a choral group, or even picking up a book of Christmas carols for a family sing-along. Reading can also be a motivating force because it opens the door to a huge variety of songs and styles, allowing students to learn "fun" music like popular songs, duets or Disney favorites, along with the prescribed music in the method books.