Violin

Suzuki in the Schools – Part II

by Katie Gustafson

In my last submission to *String Notes*, I outlined a plan to incorporate some elements of the Suzuki Method into a string orchestra class. I have since begun implementing these ideas with my own students, and would like to share some further resources and observations on this subject.

First, an observation about teaching unison repertoire. The Suzuki Method recommends delaying note reading to develop mechanics and ear training in young students. Because of this, the logical choice in repertoire is unison tunes, and I am discovering that there is huge benefit in doing this. At many different levels of ensemble playing, it encourages students to listen more closely to intonation, tone blending, uniform bowing, etc. In a discussion with former Stillwater High School director Jim Hainlen, he shared with me that even at the high school level, he would often incorporate unison pieces for these purposes. Unfortunately, choosing the repertoire can be difficult. Music that works well for violin and viola often does not work for the string bass.

However, I was recently introduced to the method book *Learning Together,* developed by Winifred Crock, William Dick and Laurie Scott. This method contains repertoire similar in style and difficulty to the Suzuki books, but has been appropriately adapted to suit a string ensemble. The musical selections work for all of the instruments. It also contains a CD for student listening, and harmony parts for a more accelerated ensemble. This method is not currently being used by my school district, but it is one that you might consider if you are currently selecting resources for your own use.

Fellow violin instructor Katie Bast pointed out another useful resource to me. It is called *Mastery for Strings* and was also developed by William Dick and Laurie Scott. This book provides suggestions on how to structure your class time with students when note reading is being delayed. They outline how to introduce technical skills in kid-friendly terms, and a clear sequence of technical skills that lead to mastery (hence the title). They also provide some resources that you can use to introduce note reading to your students as they progress in their playing.

One interesting element that jumped out at me was their recommendation to use an "Orchestra Mastery Chart." It allows you to identify benchmarks that you want your students to master, and track how many benchmarks they reach in a given timeframe. The first eight elements to master are all mechanical skills related to holding and using the instrument and bow. This might sound unnecessarily obvious, but it is surprisingly uncommon in the mainstream orchestra method books that I have seen. Most methods show a few diagrams demonstrating how the instrument should be held, and then jump directly into playing notes and reading music. Most of us would probably agree that good technique on a stringed instrument requires a bit more time and attention up front.

As a side note, the concept of a Mastery Chart poses an interesting framework for grading. Many music instructors (including me) give their students a number of minutes per day or week that represents an adequate amount of practice. This method is useful in that it gives students a clear understanding of what is expected from them. But in addition to giving students this standard of time, many string classes also use it to assign grades. The pros and cons of this could fill another entire article. What I like about the concept of a Mastery Chart is that it does more than show how long they spent; it answers a much bigger question: did they accomplish anything? I personally find this more useful and more motivating.

Finally, I would like to report an initial observation about my first attempts at incorporating some Suzuki elements into my teaching. For those who have not read my previous article, the concept of delaying note reading was the aspect of the Suzuki method that I was most skeptical about. I decided to start note reading immediately with my beginners, but separate from playing the instrument.

My students have done a number of note reading games and activities, including Music Symbol Bingo and a Musical Spelling Bee (and yes, several boring worksheets). What I have discovered is that while some students entered my class with a working understanding of how to read notes on the staff, many of them needed the extra time to gain confidence. I know this because even after a number of class periods working on note identification, I gave them a short quiz, and many of them still got several notes wrong on the quiz. There has been progress, but I am glad that we are taking the time to learn it well before making them use note reading as the primary means of learning our music.

I would like to thank the colleagues whom I have consulted on this subject. Mark Bjork, Katie Bast, Jim Hainlen and Mark Gitch have all been wonderful resources. More to come.

Katie Gustafson teaches elementary orchestra in the Eden Prairie School district, and keeps a private studio on the side. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband. Katie welcomes your feedback at kgustafson411@gmail.com.