



Jenny Macmillan

Piano Teaching Ideas

Ideas drawn from my experiences as a Suzuki teacher

*Enjoy your teaching more and help your pupils play better
by Jenny Macmillan*

- **Lessons** – motivation and encouragement
- **Practising** – making repetition interesting
- **Performing** – opportunities and rewards
- **Group work** – fun with games
- **Ensemble work** – doubling up in duets and trios
- **Listening** – to recordings and live performances
- **Observing** – other pupils' lessons
- **Young pupils** – singing and rhythm games
- **Involving parents** – in lessons and practising
- **Developing memory** – playing by ear
- **Building repertoire** – favourite pieces
- **Theory and aural** – the early stages
- **Sight-reading** – duets with teacher
- *Scales and arpeggios – introducing variety*

LESSONS – motivation and encouragement

- Give honest praise followed by positive ideas for improvement
- Emphasise pupil's strong points – build self-esteem
- Teach one thing at a time – thoroughly
- Achievement of small manageable targets motivates pupils
- Pleasure/satisfaction of knowing a piece is played well in lesson or concert
- Boredom sets in when too much playing straight through pieces and not enough working on details
- Football teams game – favourite and least favourite – favourite team scores if assignment played correctly, and vice versa
- Group lessons
- Ensemble work
- Observing lessons



PRACTISING – making repetition interesting

- Set short sections, making it clear in what way the music/technique is to be improved, and doing it together several times in lesson
- Let child choose number of repetitions, or roll dice, or age number – if mistake, start again
- Count down towards zero – heightens concentration
- Tally/chart
- Smartie for every 10 correct repetitions
- Make jigsaw, colour square, colour in picture, do dot-to-dot for every (10) repetitions
- Lucky dip with practice points or complete pieces
- Practise last bar of phrase 4x, last 2 bars 4x, last 3 bars, etc
- Vary repetitions, eg staccato/legato, different rhythms, different 8ves, increase difficulty eg practise leaping 2 8ves instead of 1 8ve
- Explain what is to be practised, and why, and how

PERFORMING – opportunities and rewards

Regular performance opportunities at different levels

- Individual lessons – observers
- Group lessons – perform pieces prepared/unprepared/sight-read/ensemble
- Informal concerts in teacher's music studio
- Formal concerts in hired halls
- Combined concerts with other teachers, other instruments
- National performing opportunities
- Home concerts – 2 or 3 families get together, all bringing something for tea afterwards
- Children perform weekly to family; or teddy bear concert – issue tickets
- Follow concerts with tea parties and social events
- Reward with an outing, especially musical

GROUP WORK – fun with games

- Finger games
- Rhythm games – clapping/tapping
- Singing games
- Flash cards – note naming games, rhythm games
- Dynamics game – all crouch down and whisper “pianissimo”, start to stand up and say “piano”, etc, until standing up straight with arms stretched up and shout “fortissimo”
- Spot the mistake – teacher plays pieces with mistakes for pupils to hear and/or see, eg playing too near edge of keyboard, heavy thumb, wrong key, wrong LH, inaccurate rhythm
- Wrong note game – children sit in pairs with hands outstretched, one child's hands over partner's hands; teacher plays a piece; if child hears a mistake, tries to slap hands of partner, who tries to pull hands away
- Major/minor – pupils play a major piece in a minor key or a minor piece in a major key
- Sock improvisations – 2 pupils at 2 keyboards – put socks on hands and play glissandi and clusters, etc, varying speed, dynamics, register, etc
- Pentatonic improvisations – 2 pupils improvise question and answer on black notes



- Lucky dip – each pupil has box with pieces of paper with names of pieces s/he can play – draws one out and performs it
- Matching pieces – several pupils play same piece one after another, encouraged to make positive comments about each others' performances
- Football – at 2 keyboards – one child starts playing piece; when teacher indicates, other child takes over – 'passes the ball'; or one child plays RH while other plays LH
- Playing questions – one child plays familiar piece, meanwhile answering questions posed by other children, eg what is your name, telephone number, etc
- Cross hands – play piece with hands crossed
- Continuous scales – take turns to play a scale round circle of 5ths at 2 keyboards
- Dynamic scales – pupil takes card indicating dynamic and/or speed and plays scale accordingly; others guess dynamic/speed
- Sight-read double duets/trios – 4 or 6 pupils at 2 keyboards
- Follow the score – give each pupil a copy of some music; discuss all the signs, notes, rhythms, as appropriate to the stage of the children; then teacher plays some of the piece and pupils point to place in score where teacher stops

ENSEMBLE WORK – doubling up in duets and trios

- Duets for pupils of similar age, or older with younger pupils
- Family duets/trios with siblings or parents
- Sight-read/prepared ensembles
- One pupil accompany another
- Pentatonic improvisations – 2 pupils improvise question and answer on black notes
- Sock improvisations – 2 pupils at 2 keyboards – put socks on hands and play glissandi and clusters, etc, varying speed, dynamics, register, etc

LISTENING – to recordings and live performances

- To fine performances
- To pieces being learnt – about to be learnt – current repertoire
- To other pieces by same composers
- To other music for own instrument
- To classical music, especially choral (singing sounds) and orchestral (sounds of different instruments)
- To CDs, radio, and especially to live performances – excitement of an outing



OBSERVING – other pupils’ lessons

- Observe another pupil ideally a little older and more advanced after pupils’ own lesson
- Can be more receptive if something explained to another pupil – when not in hot-seat
- Motivating for pupil and parent
- Social benefit – helps prevent feeling of isolation (especially for pianists)
- Pupils become accustomed to having an audience while playing; also to sitting quietly, colouring and listening, while observing other pupils

YOUNG PUPILS – singing and rhythm games

Change activity frequently – pool of ideas

- Right and left – play Simon Says, eg “Simon says put RH on nose” – pupils must do it; but “Put RH on nose” – don’t do it! When teaching any pair concept, teach only one of a pair for a long time, then there is no confusion.
- Finger games – name and wiggle Mr Men fingers (Mr 1, Mr 2, etc); speed games – “Put your hands behind your back and take out Mr 1” or “Put Mr 2 on your nose”; cumulative fingers – say and move fingers, eg 1, 1-2, 1-2-5 – add a finger each time
- Hold bubble and 10 finger dome – drop hands by side, then lift them up and pretend to hold bubble in each hand; gently place together thumbs, Mr 2s, Mr 3s, etc; tap fingers as requested by teacher; hold finger dome over head so cannot see
- Strong finger Os – make O-shape between Mr 1 and Mr 2, or Mr 1 and Mr 3, etc, squeezing tightly – no collapsing joints
- Finger wrestling – link finger Os with another pupil and pull – who has the strongest fingers?
- Pick up pencil – using thumb and specified finger – plenty of thumb and fingertip movement
- Copy me game – pupils copy teacher’s actions, keeping steady beat, eg clapping hands, tapping knees, etc, adding an extra action on each repetition
- Pass the ball – one child or teacher plays a piece while others pass squashy ball round circle, passing to the next person on the beat, using specified fingers, eg RH Mr 1 and Mr 2, or Mr 1 and Mr 5
- Action songs
- Copycat rhythms
- What piece is this – clap rhythm or play melody
- Miming game – teacher mimes piece at piano for pupils to identify
- Spot the mistake – teacher plays pieces with mistakes for pupils to hear and/or see, eg playing too near edge of keyboard, heavy thumb, wrong key, wrong LH, inaccurate rhythm
- Wrong note game – children sit in pairs with hands outstretched, one child’s hands over partner’s hands; teacher plays a piece; if child hears a mistake, tries to slap hands of partner, who tries to pull hands away
- Sing nursery rhymes – loud then soft, or fast then slow



INVOLVING PARENTS – in lessons and practising

- Parents attend lessons and take notes (perhaps have lessons themselves)
- Parents supervise practice – discuss with pupil what is to be done and how, and guide practice accordingly
- Make practice chart for child to follow
- Make lucky dip for practice points
- Offer plenty of encouragement and moral support in gentle enthusiastic manner
- Stimulate child's natural desire to learn – make practice interesting rather than fun

DEVELOPING MEMORY – playing by ear

- Playing from memory never an issue if children always used to listening to sounds and working out notes for themselves and playing from memory
- Start by setting easy pieces from memory
- Each lesson ask for more from memory

BUILDING REPERTOIRE – favourite pieces

- Sense of satisfaction and achievement from being able to sit down anytime anywhere and play favourite repertoire pieces from memory
- Pupil add a piece each month (or week, or term) to repertoire
- Work regularly on old repertoire pieces so pupil learns to play them more and more musically

THEORY AND AURAL – the early stages

Studied in group lessons

Theory

- Flash cards – note naming and rhythm games
- Telephone game – place in front of each child a card with a rhythm on it; teacher claps one of the rhythms; child whose rhythm it is answers the call by clapping the rhythm back and turning the card face down
- Right or wrong rhythm – lay out row of rhythm flash cards; teacher clap rhythm; pupils say whether or not clapped correctly
- Rhythmic counterpoint – lay out rhythm flash cards in two rows; teacher or pupil clap one row and others say which was clapped; half group clap one row, other half clap other row; clap one row with RH, other with LH; add dynamics
- Follow the score – give each pupil a copy of some music; discuss all the signs, notes, rhythms, as appropriate to the stage of the children; then teacher plays some of the piece and pupils point to place in score where teacher stops



- Dynamics game – all crouch down and whisper “pianissimo”, start to stand up and say “piano”, etc, until standing up straight with arms stretched up and shout “fortissimo”
- Tempo game – all walk very slowly round room saying “adagio” four times, a little faster saying “andante”, faster saying “moderato”, much faster saying “allegro” and very fast saying “presto”

Aural

- Listening game – all sit very quietly; teacher plays one note at piano; pupils listen carefully and raise hands when sound has completely gone; use different ranges of piano; identify high/low, short/long, soft/strong sounds
- Listen in silence – all sit comfortably with eyes closed and listen to the silence for two minutes; then pupils say what they heard; after 30 seconds teacher can add own noise, eg tapping; CF Kim’s Game – remembering objects on tray
- Wrong note game – children sit in pairs with hands outstretched, one child’s hands over partner’s hands; teacher plays a piece; if child hears a mistake, tries to slap hands of partner, who tries to pull hands away
- Copycat rhythms; question and answer rhythms; question and answer melodies

SIGHT-READING – duets with teacher

- Or 2 pupils sight-read duets in adjacent or overlapping lessons
- Double duets or trios in group lessons – 4 or 6 pupils at 2 keyboards
- Pupil study piece for a few moments, then from memory answer questions on piece
- Name notes and clap rhythm
- Mime notes
- Play correct rhythm but improvise notes (for perfectionists who will insist on going back to correct mistakes)
- Teacher/pupil alternate playing a bar each; or one play naturals (white notes) and other play sharps and flats (black notes)
- Regular ‘prepared’ reading as well as reading ‘at sight’

SCALES AND ARPEGGIOS – introducing variety

- 1-2-3-4 scale for speed and dynamic variety – set MM eg crotchet 60 and play 1 8ves slowly in crotchets forte, 2 8ves in quavers mf, 3 8ves in triplets mp, 4 8ves in semiquavers p
- Different rhythms
- Down then up
- One hand forte, the other piano
- One hand staccato, the other legato
- Double staccato – each note 2x
- 2 8ves apart
- Crossed hands
- Russian style – play 2 8ves ascending in similar motion, 2 8ves contrary motion, 2 8ves up and down in similar motion, 2 8ves in contrary motion, 2 8ves down in similar motion
- Top 8ve 4x



- Very fast, but stopping on each tonic
- 1 8ve up and down until perfect 2x, then 2 8ves until perfect 2x, etc
- MM – increasing speed when perfect 2x consecutively
- Eyes closed

Arpeggios

- Play chord up and down piano alternating RH and LH
- Repeat 1 8ve up and down arpeggio – circling hand round
- Double staccato on each note
- Slow with good tone

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Jenny Macmillan has a thriving teaching practice in Cambridge and is an ESA piano teacher trainer. Her own three children all learned piano by the Suzuki approach.

Jenny has written extensively about the Suzuki approach and her articles feature on her website:
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She has published a book:

Successful Practising A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers



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