

How fluent are your twinkles?

General Remarks on Teaching Suzuki Piano

The world behind the Twinkles and their accompaniment

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If you want to become fluent in a foreign language, the best way to learn would be by using the Mother Tongue Method and immersing yourself in the natural environment of that foreign language. The least good option would be to choose a teacher whose ability in the language is poor.

What applies to mastering a foreign language applies, in the same way, to Teaching Suzuki Piano. It is all about finding the best learning environment and guidance possible. The best is not always right around the corner, so you might have to cross a few borders once in a while.

The essence of Suzuki Piano Teaching lies in understanding and being able to play, demonstrate and teach the Twinkles and their accompaniment well. Teachers who teach Suzuki Piano will gradually discover that the Twinkles are not merely the technical part of a bigger picture, they *are* the bigger picture and understanding this is crucial. When teaching Suzuki Piano, you will find yourself doing never-ending research and redefining the basic principles compressed in this wonderful set of simple variations. Teaching Suzuki Piano is basically an urge for continuous research of universal principles in piano playing.

The Twinkle Concept

Teaching Twinkles is, before anything else, to question why you are playing and teaching them in the way that you do. If anything, the piano Twinkles are not dogmatic. The concept is totally free to change, discarding what was wrong and keeping what is right, this being the true meaning of tradition. At the Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, however, the word traditional, with regard to piano playing, was mostly used in a negative sense, referring to teaching and playing methods based on gradually frozen or dogmatic concepts. It is only natural that the teaching of the Twinkles shows a long history of changing and deepening from the very start to what it has become now and how it continues to move on.

At the beginning, the Twinkles were supposed to be played hands together. The hands together idea was based on the adult way of thinking that reading unison is easy. For a very young beginner, though, combining finger 5 in the left hand and thumb in the right hand, 2 left, 4 right, etc. is extremely complicated. Naturally, this idea disappeared from teaching a long time ago.

Also the fingering: 1454-4321 5432 5432 1454-4321 was abandoned because, although it follows the musical phrase nicely, it is far too complex for a beginner. Always playing hands separately and making Twinkle more accessible through the new fingering, were changes that remain. Also ideas about posture, how to sit and approach the keyboard, have been periodically changed, adjusted, changed back again or even dropped completely. Of course this is not done for the sake of change, but while researching the playing and studying the body posture, gradually concepts do change and redefine themselves.

This process took place for many years in Dr. Kataoka's class, directly affecting the teaching of the associated teachers in Japan and abroad. These changes in the Twinkle concept through the seventies, eighties, nineties and the beginning of this century, were fascinating to follow, always allowing us to get a little closer to what it is basically all about.

I recall playing Twinkles in Matsumoto in 1979, using an extreme low wrist, pulled down even more by a bag hanging down from it. At that time Dr. Suzuki was experimenting with low elbows, using heavy bags to lower the bow arm, and briefly the experiment was applied to piano. The idea made no sense for piano whatsoever, so it disappeared as quickly as it had come. There have been times when “walking” into the keys was a common thing to teach, but over the years the teaching has moved on to a different approach.

Witnessing all these changes, every teacher was to discover for him-or herself why the change was made and if it were to last. Change is opposed by most of us, because the body refuses to leave the trodden path. One must make oneself do it for quite a while in order to find out if something is right or wrong or ready for change or improvement.

The idea of letting your arm follow the long middle note in Twinkle B, has been abandoned for decades now, and replaced by a much clearer and more beautiful approach based on arm support and finger action. This coordinated with the same approach for the Theme and legato playing in general. The moving of the arm seemed to work for a while, but also could easily turn into becoming a really bad habit, so the idea was dropped and changed.

Now the question might rise: “How up to date is my teaching?”

A Suzuki Piano Teacher should be very much aware of the fact that teaching Twinkles for a long period of time does not mean that the understanding as well as the ability to play or teach the Twinkles is always deepened. In fact, the teaching and playing of Twinkles can gradually lose its meaning, not being the solid base anymore for anything that follows after, as it should be. Repeating movements and concepts which, by lack of research, are not basically understood, will cripple the development of both teacher and pupil.

If studied in the right way, the Twinkles will provide the basis for understanding the following points:

- Beat: up or down
- Tone production
- General posture and particularly arm posture
- Awareness of inefficient movements

These four points are based on universal principles and the understanding of coordination of mind and body.

Common mistakes in piano Twinkles are:

- Wrong Posture The posture should be slightly forward and down into the chair.
- Wrong Posture of Arm Often due to the fact that the arm follows the finger touching the key. Instead the arm should carry, allowing the fingers to play freely.
- The arm should not move forward in twinkle B and in the Theme, especially not on the thumb. This mistake has become so common among teachers in Europe that by democratic vote it seems to have the right to stay.
- Wrong understanding of accompaniment movements, both in the down and up movement for the first 3 twinkles and in the Alberti Bass for the Theme. The down and up beat are played from the centre of the body and have to be practiced a lot from the very beginning. This is basic knowledge for a starting Suzuki Teacher.

Also playing the Alberti Bass means not making the same mistake as in Twinkle B or the Theme. The arm does not move forward and the hand does not tilt towards the thumb or towards the little finger. In fact this is a most difficult movement to master.

The Suzuki Piano Twinkles plus their accompaniment in the form of down and up beat movements in the left hand for the first 3 and the Alberti Bass for the Theme, form the key to a far more complex understanding of piano technique as a whole, including chords, arpeggios and scales.

When the research of the above is not deeply part of a teacher's conscience, he or she will not be able to find the deeper value behind it and may belittle the importance of the Twinkles and their accompaniment movements as no more than starting off Book One. The Suzuki teaching will be more and more falling back to the negative Matsumoto definition of "traditional" teaching.

Is there a need to agree on Twinkles in every aspect?

The only thing we might, as teachers, want to agree on is, that in order to understand how to play and teach or even how to be able to discuss Twinkles, one must continue the research and be prepared to let go of old stuck concepts. Looking for cooperation and study with teachers who form a living link in passing on the Twinkle tradition is a sure way for Suzuki Piano Teaching to keep refreshing itself and to avoid falling into the same old trap of teaching stale concepts. However, discussing Twinkles in a conference once in a while, comparing opinions in a so-called democratic way is just an empty shell and can only create false hopes.

Teaching Suzuki Piano is about committing oneself to the living tradition.