



TWINKLING THE IVORIES

April 2017

“CHILDREN LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER” – ABOUT ORGANIZING ESPS GROUP CLASSES

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Parents may wonder, why is my child (who is learning piece “x”) in the same group class as another child (who is learning piece “y”)? Sometimes I hear students or parents commenting on how a child may be learning a piece much farther ahead in a book than the others, or much farther behind. As soon as this happens, I try to speak to the concern behind this, that a child or parent may feel someone should be with other students, either because they are perceived as “advanced” or “behind.” To me, those are dangerous words that imply judgement and labelling, and for this article, I will not use them. My quick explanation when that question is raised, is that the classes are organized for many reasons, and that it is better to compare how much practicing is being done rather than where a student is in the repertoire.

Suzuki himself taught group classes in Japan with book levels all mixed up, so that students in book 1 would be in the same class as book 4, and he routinely would have, for example, book 5 students prepare a book 2 piece for performance, rather than a book 5 piece. This may seem strange to us, since our society can put labels on people. And it is easy to forget the value of review and how we can increase musicality in an older piece, rather than in a newer piece where we are still trying to remember all the notes and fingerings.

An inspirational video about violin group classes in Japan as taught by Suzuki is the “Parents as Partners” video by Winnifred Crock, called “More Than a Method.” Ask your teacher about accessing the video from the SAA (Suzuki Association of the Americas) website.

Suzuki teachers are teaching the whole child; we are teaching children to have “beautiful hearts;” and the repertoire is just part of that. If we were teaching all children to become concert pianists, we would need to put such labels on children. And we would have very few happy children and a completely different program, in fact the opposite of Suzuki piano education.

Our group classes include a wide variety of activities; there are opportunities to play together, and most teachers include some elements of reading (or pre-reading for the youngest students) or other theory, and perhaps creative games, and other social and fun elements.

There are many ways to organize group classes. In general, the piano teachers organize the classes so that the students are relatively close to each other in age and where they are in the repertoire.

In some instruments, it is relatively easy to have five or ten or fifteen students working on a technical aspect of a piece at the same time, and therefore they would all need to know that piece (and thus be very close to each other in the repertoire). But in piano groups, we are sitting at instruments, looking at our hands or the printed music, not easily looking at a teacher giving instructions. A group of pianos together is not the easiest setting for working on technique; true, it is possible to do so, but I would say that is not a major focus of our Suzuki piano groups. It is true that we can use two rooms at the Suzuki school with five pianos for our groups, but if the teacher takes one piano to demonstrate the technique, that would allow only four pianos, and many group classes have more than four students. Our piano teachers who teach groups from home understandably don’t have room for five pianos. So these are all important reasons why our piano groups are not primarily organized by students being on the same song in the repertoire. *Continued on page 2*

“CHILDREN LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER,” CONTINUED

Let's remember what Suzuki said, that “Children learn from one another.” An older student can play a piece that a younger student doesn't know, inspiring him or her. A younger student may fearlessly participate in a creativity exercise, showing a more reserved older student that it's not hard to try something new. Cognitive skills used in reading may be similar for a book 2 student as for a book 3 student, so it can make sense for such students to be in the same group. An older student can learn about being a mentor to younger students, offering encouragement, and demonstrating how to break a challenge into small enough steps, the same way that he or she learned these skills from the teacher. And a younger student can learn about perseverance from an older student.

Every child brings their own unique skills and personality to groups, and we as teachers and parents can celebrate that. And when we notice skills and good behaviour, and beautiful tone and good bows and smiles in performances, and sharing and moments of kindness, and do not focus on where someone is in the repertoire, the students also learn to accept each other without labelling. When a student helps another student with a footstool, or compliments another on their solo performance, or helps the teacher by picking up game pieces, these are also important parts of group class.

An anecdote from a group class of mine: Last year, a girl who is usually on the quiet side and who happened to be not in the same place in the repertoire as the others, was the one who totally excelled in an improvisation activity. She had more improvising ideas than the others, and went on playing for many minutes, with a huge smile on her face, whereas the other more talkative students who knew more pieces had improvised only for a few seconds. Her joy was palpable. This was a true learning moment for all of us.

Tim Eckert, ESPS Teacher

*Rhonda's Groups B and D
take a break from group class
to pose for a photo*



NEWS FROM GROUP CLASS:

RHONDA'S OVERLAPPING GROUPS BRING STUDENTS TOGETHER!

One of the advantages of the new group class format that ESPS piloted this year was that teachers have a little more flexibility in how they offer classes since each teacher knows his or her students so well. This year I had the idea to overlap my group classes. Students in the second class simply join the first group for the last 15 minutes of class.

Here are some of the activities that I do during the 15-minute overlap:

1. Performance Time: Each month, some of the students will perform for the class. The class becomes an audience and has the chance to practice audience etiquette. Sometimes the class claps along to the beat or plays along on small percussion instruments. We have one choreographed dance for the Ecosaise in Book 2, and I'm planning for us to create our own choreography to use for Minuets. When the more advanced students perform, they are exposing the younger students to the repertoire that is to come. This can be very exciting and motivating for the beginners and their parents. Having a friendly place to practice performing makes it more normal for students and when there's a more formal recital, it is less stressful.

2. Mentorship Time: When I combine my teenager class of Book 4 students with my new beginner class, some of the time is spent in mentorship. The older students are paired up with the younger ones and they play the Book 1 pieces together. The teenagers can help the beginners learn a few new notes or review the pieces they already know.

3. Large Group Games: With a larger group, we can play some very enthusiastic games of “Name That Tune”, Rhythm Bingo, and at the December group classes – Christmas Bingo and “Pass the Parcel”.

4. Listening to Music/Watching YouTube Clips: If there is some music I'd like all my students to hear, I can use the overlap time to play it for them. It also works well for watching YouTube clips of performances.

I find that combining the groups for the above activities makes better use of the group class time, and allows my students and their parents the opportunity to get to know each other better. I think this change has been successful!

Rhonda McEachen, ESPS Teacher

WHY I PLAY PIANO

ESPS piano student Timothy Lu presented this speech as part of an elocution class at a festival last year. We thought his insight was well worth sharing!

Did you know that there are more piano players today, than ever before in the world? Also, currently the growth of new young pianists, emerging in countries like China is booming? In 2013 alone there were 5 million new young pianists in China. These figures indicate that playing the piano is still an attractive pastime today. Piano is a worthwhile life skill, yet many young people today fail to truly grasp its value and benefits. Today, I'm going to touch upon this important topic and speak about the benefits of playing piano, why this skill is worth all the work, and provide some tips for how to play piano better.

Being a piano player has been shown to provide young people with many benefits. For myself I have found playing the piano to help in my studies, as well as greatly increasing the sense of happiness and fulfillment in my life. In fact studies have shown that even in people over the age of 65, playing piano for as little as 4-5 months can actually change their brain structure and improve cognitive abilities! It can also improve other areas like hearing, memory, as well as fine motor control! In addition, it has also been shown that long term exposure to music can increase one's mental acuity and capacity.

The reason for many of these benefits is that every time you practice something, or learn something new, your brain strengthens old connections and forms new ones, no matter how old one is. It also creates myelin, which essentially makes your brain much faster, basically by forcing your neurons to teleport signals with stronger connections instead of just moving them along. A study conducted on expert musicians showed that their brains had significantly more of this myelin and denser myelin, especially in the fine motor skills areas and the auditory and visual centres than other people. This makes them faster and better at things that involve those sections of the brain, like typing and reaction times for sound and sight!

However, you might now be thinking "Why pick the piano? Why not another instrument? Well, first, the piano key is the basis of sound for every other instrument. Also, since the piano makes two unique sounds with both hands, which cultivates more areas of the brain than usual, as well as increasing focus. Finally, using both hands also has the benefit of being able to play the melody and the harmony at the same time. Clearly, the piano has many benefits for the brain and many advantages over other instruments.

Despite these many benefits, you will often hear kids complain, and say things like: "Why is playing piano even worth it." Well, as mentioned before, piano significantly improves and speeds up the brain. It also fine tunes your fine motor skills, stimulates your brain, and improves your perception of sound and sight. In addition, piano also provides for many young people important skills and can even be an important source for building strong character traits, which many employers view young people as lacking today. Examples of these positive characteristics include establishing a professional commitment to something, and following through even when you might not always want to. These skills translate well to education as well as later in a person's career. Speaking of jobs, playing the piano also develops an opportunity to perform, which helps develop confidence, which as everyone knows, is essential to success in life. Furthermore, the piano is basically an extension of the learning process, which can be seen in several studies linking piano performance to academic success. These attributes contribute to why playing the piano continues to be an impressive skill, which will help set young people apart from others in life.

Finally, I would like to share some tips on how to practice more efficiently. Absolutely the biggest mistake that people make is that they are just not practicing enough. I know that kids find it boring to practice, but this is by far most important tip to remember if you want to obtain all the benefits from playing piano. Ask yourself: will you truly be able to get better if you don't practice? Also it may be hard for some people, but playing in front of people is also actually very important. Even if you don't like performing in public, perform for family and friends as it will give you something to work towards, and build that sense of commitment and dedication. Lastly, don't look at your mistakes as dreadful failures, but instead as a gentle reminder that practice makes perfect. These tips will help anyone who wants to play the piano, and help them experience this instruments numerous benefits.

Ultimately, I think that playing the piano has had an essential role in my life, and I think it will continue to do so for a long time after this. Playing the piano has been shown to have numerous scientific and personal benefits. Hopefully, everyone here today will realise the importance of playing an instrument, through their many positive effects, the character developed through perseverance, and finally some keys for success.

Timothy Lu, ESPS Student

COMING SOON: SPRING FESTIVAL

On April 22, ESPS invites students to participate in the Spring Festival, our annual event that offers students the chance to perform a polished piece in a non-competitive format for adjudicators. This year, we are pleased to welcome Joseph Fridman, Lana Ramsay and Pat Huck to Edmonton to work with ESPS students. Your teacher will provide you with your child's schedule shortly.

CONGRATULATIONS MARCH GRADUATES

Congratulations to the following students for their hard work and well-deserved graduations:

Volume 1

Eden Clarke
Erin Gabrielle Delos Santos
Skye Ding
Munachiso Ezeonyeasi
Halleluya Gifford
Hannah Ann Kim
Mia Luo
Elliott Melvin

Volume 3

Rhys Guillaume
Lauren Huang

Volume 4

Clara Chen
Jane Chen
Erika Dyck
Kianna Flores
Timothy Lu
Dan Zhang

Volume 5

Ksenia Pankratyeva

"Perhaps it is music that will save the world."

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki

TAKE A BOW!

Do you know why we bow in a Suzuki music lesson or in a recital?

In European history, bowing was common at royal courts. It was a gesture that showed deep respect for someone, especially to members of a royal family. In Asian history, people bowed to each other everyday to show respect, say 'thank you', greet and say 'goodbye', apologize and to show appreciation. Bowing is still done today in some countries, especially in Japan where Dr. Suzuki lived.

In a Suzuki music lesson, a student bows to a teacher to show respect and appreciation as a way of saying 'thank you for teaching me today's lesson'. The teacher returns the respectful bow as a way of saying, 'thank you for playing'. It designates the beginning and ending of a lesson. The lesson bow is also a great tool for learning balance and focus.

In a typical Suzuki performance, the student bows to the audience before playing a piece and again after the performance is done. This is to show respect to the audience, 'thanking' them for coming to the recital and for clapping afterwards. A recital would not be possible without a listening audience!

Every teacher has his or her own way of teaching a bow but this is what I was taught:

- Place your feet together and put your hands along the sides of your legs.
- Bend down from your waist, keeping your back straight.
- Bend your elbows rather than sliding your hands down.
- Look at your feet and count to three.
- Stand up straight and smile at your teacher or at the audience.

You, your teacher and the audience deserve each other's respect so 'take a bow'!

Gail Olmstead, ESPS Teacher

2016/2017 EVENTS CALENDAR

April 22, 2017 Spring Festival at Suzuki Charter School

May 7, 2017 Group Concerts at Suzuki Charter School

1:00 Group Classes of: Nancy, Tim, Rhonda, Melanie, Heather, and Alla

3:00 Group Classes of: Ruth, Ken, Eleanor, Regine, Tess, Gail, and Brad

June 3,4,10 & 11, 2017 June Recitals at Convocation Hall, University of Alberta

June 18, 2017 Graduation Ceremony at Muttart Hall, MacEwan University

July 17-21, 2017 River City Suzuki Piano Institute – Volume 4 Experience