

Helping Suzuki Students Learn to Read Music

By Katherine Baird

A criticism often cited of the Suzuki method is that Suzuki students are not strong readers. Historically this has been a fair accusation, but one that arguably most Suzuki-trained teachers have worked hard to dispel in the past three decades. The best music teachers recognize that fostering all musicianship skills equally helps develop well-rounded musicians. We know that students who learn to read well can participate in other music classes such as chamber music and orchestra, which is inspiring, motivating, and creates opportunities for community and friendship!

Here are some tips on how to help beginning Suzuki readers learn how to read, a sort of home-practice guide for Suzuki “home teachers” (my name for the caregiver who attends the weekly lesson and practices with the student).

Note: each Suzuki teacher determines when a student is ready to learn to read. If your private teacher has not discussed when they introduce note-reading, you should check with them.

It is important for Suzuki home teachers to understand that learning how to read music is as much a skill as learning how to play the instrument itself. Therefore, time needs to be dedicated on a daily basis to developing this skill. Set aside 5-10 minutes each day to focus on note-reading.

Another point to keep in mind is that, in order to integrate full comprehension of note-reading, students need to learn from several perspectives:

- The note name on the staff
- The note name on the instrument
- The sound of the note.

This creates a three-way relationship between eye, ear, and body. With this goal in mind, we can make learning to read music a diverse and engaging activity, and we all know that the more enjoyable something is, the more a student will want to do it, hence a positive reinforcement loop!

For beginning cello student reader I usually use Volume I of *I Can Read Music* by Joanne Martin. I like this because A) it separates pitch from rhythm (one page for pitch only, written in quarter note rhythm) and one page for rhythm, all on open D string. This approach is extremely methodical and gives students many opportunities to practice permutations of notes before adding a new one. For example, cello students learn open D string and E (no fingers for D and first finger for E), drilling those two notes in many combinations before adding one more, F sharp (which is third finger on the D string). While it risks monotony, I find that by asking students to practice in two other ways is helpful and maintains engagement: One is to have them name the notes, and the other is to sing them (with my help for pitch if needed).

Then we spend time on the rhythm page. We say, then clap, then bow the rhythm on the D string. I find comprehension of rhythm to be so closely tied to speech that saying the rhythm is very helpful. With my background in Kodály education I use “Ta” (quarter note), “Titi” (two eighth

notes) and various other words for each type of rhythm. Teachers use all kinds of different words so whatever works for one is fine as long as one is consistent. Some teachers use fruits or vegetables or colors.

Another kinesthetic way to work on rhythm is to assign a different action to each rhythm. For example, step your feet for quarter notes, clap the eighth notes, and pat hands on legs for sixteenth notes. In my experience this step is best reserved for students who have become quite familiar with different rhythms, as this can be confusing for new readers. It is a good group activity.

Another book I've had success with is *Unitunes, A Fundamental Music Reading Supplement for String Players* by Carol Nunez. This book moves a little more quickly than *I Can Read Music* and is sometimes more appropriate for older students.

Sometimes I'll choose one "Mystery Line": I play a line and they figure out which one it is.

Another strategy is to take turns playing one measure or two measures, without missing a beat (teacher plays one measure, student plays the next, etc.). This can also be done with note-naming and singing notes.

Finally, I have my students learn from the *I Can Read* book using a metronome, a brilliant idea taken from colleague Dr. Kate Jones, a Suzuki string bass teacher-trainer. Because the pitch exercises are all quarter notes, this is an easy and manageable introduction for students to using the metronome. Start them early!

Some teachers may use materials that include writing notes on the staff. I think this is a wonderful idea, as it reinforces visually and kinesthetically note names and rhythms. That is a next step for me with my own students!