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Introduction

I never intended to become a private piano teacher. Did you? If you are like me, you experienced many unexpected twists and turns in your life that led to your current vocation.

Trained as a performer and a music therapist, I was passionate about using music and other creative arts to help children in pain. Along the journey, I studied the Suzuki Method as part of my graduate training. I found it interesting but not relevant to my work in a children's hospital with chronically and terminally ill patients. I mentally filed it away.

But then when I became a new mother I remembered the Suzuki Method. I also remembered those piano pedagogy and music education courses. I chose to stay home with my daughter and wanted to teach her the joy of making music. I then began teaching other people's children in our home, and soon I was teaching children with special needs. I had come full circle. This adventure resulted in a book I wrote ten years ago for parents about music education in the home.

The book you are holding is not for parents. This book is a baton that I am handing to teachers. After parenting three children and planning classes for almost twenty years, I found group classes to be the core of my piano program. I hope to save you hours of groundwork and inspire you to use these ideas as a springboard for your own creative planning. Because I am a Suzuki piano teacher, you will find this program based on the Suzuki philosophy, but the ideas are applicable to any piano program. Once you begin the brainstorming process, your own ideas will flow and explode.

This is not a research book but is intended to be practical. It is designed as an interactive book, with questions that allow you to reflect on your own experience, and room to make notes and brainstorm about planning your group classes. Inserted between the chapters, you will find mental energizers, unusual insights into composers' family relationships, and information about composers' lives as students and teachers. These inserts will provide mental breaks between the material. I hope that this book will be a brain compatible experience for you.

The intent of this volume is to offer supplementary material and is no substitute for learning and polishing serious piano literature, the core experience of any piano program. This book should not be misunderstood as a group program with multiple keyboards. The one-on-one private lesson is the most effective way to teach students, and the group class is the celebration of shared learning. Nor is this a theory program. For those needs, I recommend Michiko Yurko's excellent books and games, such as Music Mind Games, which are assets to any piano program and can be incorporated into group class activities.

101 Ideas for Piano Group Class is divided into three sections. Part I lays the foundation for an educational philosophy. Part II focuses on ideas for piano group class. Part III discusses inclusion in practice and teaching piano students with special needs. Part II offers you practical, fun tools for planning your curriculum, while Part III encourages you to expand your music community with students of all ages and abilities. The two objectives are intertwined. Every student has unique needs and can thrive in a safe, nurturing music community.

When I was in graduate school, my music history professor would begin his Baroque music class by giving us problem-solving puzzles that had absolutely nothing to do with music. Finally we asked him why he tortured us with these mind games, and he answered as follows: "The most important thing I can teach you is to think outside the box, to see problems in a new way, and creatively solve them. Never approach a task in the same way just because that's how you've always done it. THINK. My hope is that you will become innovative teachers and creative problem solvers."

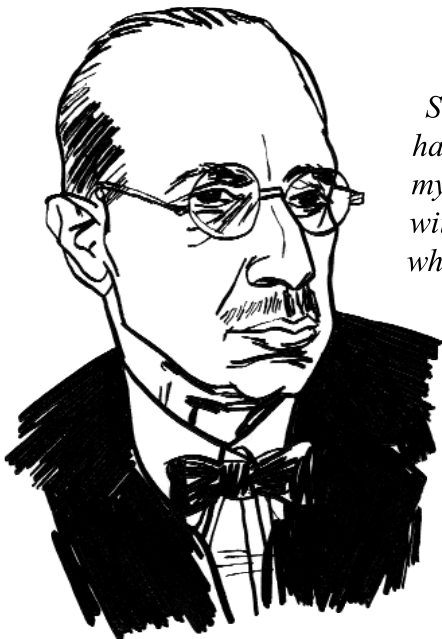
I also invite you to think outside the box – to think in new, creative ways about traditional challenges. I invite you to take your students on the adventure of creating a music community to celebrate the joy of music making.

Did you know?



Schoenberg

Schoenberg was a self-taught musician with little formal training. He was worshipped by his students, which included Berg and Webern. Schoenberg was a demanding teacher but developed close relationships with his students that lasted a lifetime. He wanted his students to use their own imaginations and not to copy rote exercises. Schoenberg believed that students were best educated through creative activity.



Stravinsky

Stravinsky was compulsive about his tidy work habits. He said, "The piano itself is the center of my musical discoveries." Though he struggled with the public's misunderstanding of his works, which included riots at some of his premieres, he ironically found Schoenberg's compositions to be unintelligible to him.

Chapter 1

Building a Music Community: Principles of Cooperative Learning

Without the social and emotional context, there is no learning that can take place. The child has to feel safe. And if children do not feel safe, they can't absorb the cognitive lessons.

—Mona Hajjar Halaby

Cooperation—not competition—is one of the key principles of the Suzuki Method. Also, group classes are as important as individual private lessons. Violin group classes are well established, but it is a little more challenging to develop piano group classes.

The piano is different from any other instrument during the learning phase. While instrumentalists can play in bands and orchestras and vocalists can sing in choirs, pianists do not generally practice in groups. Practicing alone can be an isolating experience, which fits very few personalities.

Nevertheless, I contend that the “plight of the solo pianist” is a self-perpetuating myth. My daughter’s violin teacher shared with me that her own daughter wanted to study the piano instead of the violin and wondered, “But what can she possibly do with that skill?” The teacher had played in orchestras throughout her life and saw piano study as a waste of time. Her view is all too common.

Relevancy is the key to education and inspiring students. Students want to learn a new skill when they see that it is relevant and useful in daily life. Learning must have a clear purpose and immediate application.

As we pianists know, playing the piano can be a relevant and social experience. We accompany choirs, vocalists, and instrumentalists. We play in ensembles, pit orchestras, and jazz bands. We accompany talent shows and sing-alongs. Countless musicians are always looking for a good accompanist. The opportunities are limitless.

Yet the piano is a difficult instrument to master. Pianists do not enjoy many social benefits (not to mention the extra money – something very relevant for young people) until they have advanced skills. How do we bridge the gap? How do we make music making relevant for beginning and intermediate pianists? The answer is to bring the group experience to students that is tailored to their level.

A regular piano group class offers students the opportunity to share with one another and enjoy making music as a group. Competition of any kind is inappropriate. Learning together – cooperation – is the goal. Webster’s dictionary defines cooperation as association with others for mutual benefit. Even more important than cooperation is celebration. The goal is to develop a passion for music making in our students.

Music educators and music therapists usually have a solid background in educational theory. As music majors, pianists are seldom required to take education classes. Beyond piano pedagogy classes (which too often focus on technical skills and methods), piano teachers are often unfamiliar with the theory of how children and adults effectively learn, the principles of cooperative learning, brain-compatibility theory, and other critical information.

We commit a great disservice to the Suzuki tradition when we focus on Suzuki Method books and recordings without fully understanding his teaching philosophy. The Suzuki Method is applicable to any field of study. Suzuki was one of the most innovative educators of the past century, instinctively incorporating the most current learning principles, including the group process. Suzuki’s goal was to develop “beautiful hearts” in children. Did you know that Suzuki often asked his students at the end of their lessons to report an act of kindness that they had performed during the week? That is “performance” with heart. For Suzuki, developing positive character traits was as important as developing musical skills.

The goal is thus to build a thriving music community that nurtures caring connections between its members.