

PLAYING BY EAR IN THE SUZUKI METHOD:
SUPPORTING EVIDENCE AND CONCERNS IN THE CONTEXT OF PIANO PLAYING

Gilles Comeau

School of Music, University of Ottawa

Abstract

The Suzuki method is based on the assumption that the most natural way to learn music is through repetitive listening and ear-playing. The idea that children should learn to play by ear instead of relying on note reading when they start music lessons is not new and has been promoted by many prominent musicians from François Couperin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century to Abby Whiteside and Marc Durand in the 20th. However, Shinichi Suzuki was instrumental in spreading ear playing to thousands of beginning music students all over the world. Considering the popularity of this method, should there be concerns about the real impact of such a teaching approach?

A review of existing theoretical and empirical literature shows strong evidence supporting the benefits of being introduced to the instrument through ear playing. Mainswaring, who compared musical and linguistic skills, and Kochetvitsky, who studied the structure and function of the central nervous system, both demonstrated the importance of a strong association between the auditory stimulus and the motor action (pressing a key) before the visual stimuli of note reading is introduced. More recently, McPherson and Gabrielsson have argued that ear-hand coordination skills should be strongly in place before note reading is taught.

In spite of such strong support for ear playing, the Suzuki method often faces two common criticisms. There is concern that a focus on listening and ear playing might not develop good aural skills, since the association of a syllable name to each tonal and rhythmic element is often perceived as a key element of good ear training abilities. So far there is no evidence that, in students who learn to play by ear, internal aural representation will be activated when music notation is later introduced. In addition, many have formulated concerns that students will develop poor reading skills in the absence of note reading in the early stages of learning. However, a review of existing empirical research clearly suggests that there is no reason to be concerned. Studies of the impact of an ear-playing approach have shown no negative effect on reading ability once notation is introduced; in fact, there is some evidence that starting with ear-playing can contribute to better sight reading skills.