

The Listening Cycle: A Lesson for Parents and Teachers

By Joseph McSpadden

Often in our Suzuki activities we look for ways to remedy problems that could have been prevented in the first place if we had only taken Dr. Suzuki at his word. We search for "gimmicks" to motivate kids, a kind of remedial medicine, while Dr. Suzuki came up with the preventive medicine years ago. His "cure" is listening. And it works!

Yet many of us don't seem to understand what Dr. Suzuki means by listening. Perhaps we simply don't believe him. We Americans are very slow to accept ideas. In a sense, that is good. It is one of our strengths. We question and don't just accept everything at face value. On the other hand, it sometimes stands in our way. There are some things that must first be tried on faith. If we are not willing to have that faith, we can very seriously stand in our own way. Suzuki takes faith. I learned almost ten years ago to trust in his experience and wisdom. It has been proven to me every day that the man knows what he is talking about.

In teacher training class this week we were discussing self-motivation. Motivation, to me, is part of a whole cycle of causes and effects. To illustrate this, I drew on the board a wheel. At the top of the wheel I wrote "motivation". To the right I put "practice," and this is where the cycle starts. Practice leads to "ability." We all know this. It is true whether you are a Suzuki student or not, and whether you listen or not. Many students, say in the public school programs, do not have the listening background, but still develop ability. Some develop the ability to play well. Most develop the ability to play poorly.

I thought if a student practiced correctly and received a reasonable amount of encouragement he would be motivated to practice more. It didn't

happen. I worried about this for a long time before asking myself "Just what is self-motivation?" Many answers came to mind, but among them were always self-esteem, pride in one's achievement, and confidence. Confidence! Do you know anyone who is internally motivated to do something who is not confident about what he is doing? Do you enjoy doing things you are not confident about? I have found in my students that, invariably, the ones who are motivated, who practice, who do what they are asked without hesitation, are the ones who have laid such a solid foundation that they are absolutely confident about what they are doing. These are the ones who will pick up their fiddles at the drop of a hat and play for anybody, and do it well, besides.

From where does such confidence come? First, you have to know your subject. If you don't know what you are trying to do, what your goal is, you cannot be confident in trying to achieve it. In music our confidence comes from listening to music, repeatedly, to the point of internalization. Listening until we can remember is not enough. We must listen until we can't forget!

Occasionally, when I suspect that a student has not been listening enough, I tell him to go to the blackboard and draw a "heffalump." Naturally, he gives me a puzzled look. So I get more insistent and say, "Come on, draw me a heffalump." About this time the kid starts to get worried; I may even get a little more insistent. But obviously, the poor child can't draw a "heffalump" because he doesn't know what one looks like. So I point out to the parents that when their son tries to play a piece of music without knowing what the piece is supposed to sound like, he will have no more confidence in what he is doing than he had in trying to draw the "heffalump." His playing would be sheer guesswork. Without listening, what the kids are doing (what we are expecting them to do), is guesswork. That really isn't fair.

Upon discovery of the importance of motivation of listening--inspired confidence, we realize that

without listening, the kids' wheels aren't even turning. Listening is the hub of the wheel, the power source, the focal point from which the energy is spread to the other parts of the wheel. It is the point to which the wheel returns for support and strength from stress encountered. Through the motive power of listening, the wheel, with each completion of a cycle, gains momentum. Each new cycle will be performed on a higher level than the one before. The heights this spiral can reach are magnificent to contemplate.

While many forms of listening can (and should) be used in the Suzuki method, listening to good examples is essential. It is critical that children hear good examples of what they are going to play, as well as other good music. There is a student I know, whose mother (from the very beginning) firmly asserted that she did not believe "this business about listening." Some teachers would have told her to forget it and go find a traditional teacher. But this child's teacher shares my philosophy that one should never give up on a parent, and certainly not give up on a child. This student always had a struggle. He practiced a great deal, often two hours a day, but did not listen. Consequently, his intonation was atrocious. The child could no more hear the correct intonation than he could fly. Yet he practiced! But what he heard day after day was himself. He had no good example to follow. So his playing got worse instead of better because of the bad example he had heard the day before. Finally, the mother asked, "Do you really think it's the listening?" She was convinced to try Dr. Suzuki's way and within one week miracles happened. By the next lesson the child's intonation, though not perfect, was incredibly improved. More importantly, the boy had a big grin on his face. The mother was smiling, too. Fortunately, this situation was turned around. It is a pity, the child had to suffer so long from the frustration of trying to accomplish something without knowing what he was after.

How much listening is enough? Dr. Suzuki urges

as much repetition as possible - fifty times a day at least--and I think he is right. Once, during a new Suzuki parents' class, something that had puzzled me for years came to mind. When I was in high school all of my classmates went around singing the top ten songs. They knew all the words as well as the tunes. Now I could manage the tunes fairly well, but could never learn the words. To this day I can't. For every song I know at all, I know one line and that's it. I used to wonder why everyone else could do it and not me. In this class, I suddenly recalled that my schoolmates had their radios (to which they listened a good part of the day) tuned to the stations that were playing these songs. Moreover, the disc jockeys were paid to play these same songs over and over, because the record companies know that people like what they are familiar with and will go out and buy the record so they can hear it some more. I didn't listen to pop music, so I didn't learn it. All that Suzuki is asking is that we surround the children with good music, music that will inspire and ennoble them. The more they hear it, the more they will love it. If you have them listen only once or twice a day, it isn't going to work. It has to more.

Parents plagued by hectic schedules often forget to turn on the tape each day. We depend on parents to do this; often the results are inconsistent. Last year, our school started a violin instruction program for orthopedically-handicapped children at the Easter Seal Society. One of the first obstacles we encountered was to figure out a way for the children to listen regularly. They live and attend school at the Society and do not have the parents there to turn on the tapes. Our solution has been a simple but effective one. Each child's recorder is connected to a light timer. This can be set to go on up to twelve times a day for an hour. (The timers work only with endless cassettes.) The timers are set for 6:30 a.m., noon, and 8:30 p.m. In addition, the children listen to the Book I tape during lunch and rest periods. The results have been excellent. The children have asked that we increase the amount of time programmed so that they can

listen more! I seriously urge all parents to try using timers

If you expose the children to saturated listening from the beginning, later they will learn their songs much faster with fewer listenings. Their listening ability will have developed to the point where they can perceive not only the basics, but also the intricacies and subtleties of the sounds very quickly.

There is a little girl in our program who comes from what is usually called a disadvantaged family. (I will let you judge that from what follows.) Her parents admit they are not particularly well-educated in the formal sense. Yet when they came to me they said, "We want our children to grow up in a cultured environment." They have done to the letter what I have asked. They have had great faith. They and the children listen several times daily, and both parents come to the lessons. In nine months the child was playing Minuet II very well. From "Lightly Row" on, I have never had to teach her a song. Nor have I had to teach her bowings or slurs. She has already developed her ear to such a point that she hears these things.

While she was working on "Lightly Row", she came in one day and said. "Mr. McSpadden, I have a surprise for you." Did she ever! She then played "Song of the Wind" perfectly! I didn't have anything to say. The sound was good, the string crossings, even the bow lifts were there. (I nearly fainted when she did the bow lifts. Her parents didn't know that was what she was supposed to do. She just heard it.)

As important as listening to good examples is listening to oneself. Much of our time should be spent helping the child hear himself. To develop his aural feedback system, if a child has internalized the music he is to play through repeated listenings, when reproducing that music on his instrument he will match the output of the instrument to the sound he has literally "in mind ." If the output of the instrument *does* not match the

desired sound, the input is altered until the desired match is achieved.

Many distractions can disrupt the effectiveness of this feedback system. We must help the children learn to block out peripheral stimuli, to concentrate. A simple test of whether your children are fighting feedback interference is to have them play in a totally darkened room. It is amazing how ensemble and intonation improve. The kids really listen to themselves because their aural feedback is not receiving interference from visual stimuli.

Children compare new sounds with familiar sounds from their environment Oriental music, for example, sounds strange to us only because it is not a regular part of our environment. Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms can be equally foreign to a child whose environment does include them. I have a wonderful example of a child's comparing a new sound to a familiar one. There is an eight-year-old in our program who has a knack for colorful description. One day he heard me using vibrato, was enthralled by the sound, but didn't know what to call it. So he grabbed my arm and shouted, "Hey, hey, What's that—that thing that sounds like my brother singing into the fan?"

One obvious source of feedback for the student, monitoring his own playing on tape, is often overlooked by parents and teachers, Yet, if a child gets accustomed to doing this, when he has to record and submit a graduation tape, it will not be a traumatic experience. Such taping is a valuable means of self-evaluation.

Parents should also tape every lesson and play it back as a guide in the home practice. Such tapes can put quick end to any arguments over what the teacher actually said. To avoid wasting time with extraneous matter, you can edit as you record. One parent in my program consistently tapes lessons. When I start to ramble she pushes the pause button. It's a little ego-deflating, but very effective in controlling my rambling.

There is a third form of listening to which the child must be educated--listening to the teacher and parent. This may seem terribly obvious. However, I have observed that there is a strange connection between the eyes and the ears. When the eyes aren't listening the ears often aren't either. Think about it --how often do the children look at you when you are talking? Do they really hear what you are saying? Perhaps much frustration and anger could be spared if we communicated as much with our eyes as our mouths. Many of the currently popular books on how to succeed stress the importance of eye contact. Shouldn't we start this training very early?

There is a two-year-old in our program who has an attention span of two seconds or less. It was immediately obvious that before anything violinistic could be accomplished in the lesson, the child's concentration span would have to be longer. We had two options; wait until the child was older (and waste valuable months), or help him improve his concentration. We chose the latter.

This child has what I call a "darting eye". So, at his first lesson we did nothing but this: when he looked into my eyes, I talked; as soon as he looked away, I stopped - in the middle of a word - just absolutely stopped talking. When he looked back I talked again, resuming where I had left off. As soon as he looked away (it might be half a word later) I stopped. Within a few minutes he started to get the idea that if he didn't look at me, I wouldn't talk. Conversely, I did not understand him, pretended not to hear him, unless he looked into my eyes. We soon realized that there would be no communication unless we looked one another in the eye. I urged the parents to continue this discipline consistently at home. There was to be no aural communication without eye contact. In one week there was already enough involvement that we were able to successfully begin the violin instruction.

Dr. Suzuki reminds us that "There is no result

without cause." Good results come from good causes. Parents cause their children in every sense of the word. I am proud to be associated with a movement in which parents and teachers are working toward causing more beautiful human beings to people a world desperately in need of beauty and love.

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