

The Student Practice Binder:
Getting It All Organized, Getting It All Done! 9/16

If you'd like to avoid having to read this entire article I wrote for the Suzuki Journal, check out the brief overview video at Youtube: search for Suzuki Lesson Organizational Binder in the Youtube search field.

I. Introduction

Teacher: “Did you remember to practice this special review piece?”

Parent/student: “Oh, somehow we missed that...”

Teacher: “How about this new ensemble piece?”

Parent/student: “Well...”

How many times have you heard this? Described below is an approach to organizing practice that has evolved in my studio over the years, some of it borrowed from other teachers I’ve met. If you take the time to set up this kind of system, it will accomplish the following for you:

- 1) unclutter and organize the students music
- 2) organize a students daily and once/week practice assignments
- 3) remove all excuses for the parent and student not knowing the totality of what must be practiced every week (we all know that the more advanced a student gets, the more there is to review)
- 4) provide accountability for the teacher to help them cover all the new points the student is studying, as well as know that all review material is “under the fingers”
- 5) place all teacher/parent record keeping in a format that is organized and is directly driving the approach to both weekly practice and the content of the weekly lesson. This allows the teacher to “shoot from the hip” when a student walks in for the weekly lesson, thus uncluttering and freeing up their mind to be more creative in the lesson.
- 6) help keep students on track with their listening and practice goals.
- 7) help you to keep it ALL under everyone's nose and keep it ALL at everyone fingertips!

II. Basic Set Up

All of my students own a simple 3 ring binder. Everything in the binder is 3 hole punched, so that nothing gets lost. Do not use the built in pockets on front and back covers for anything, and don’t let students use pocket inserts!

The binder is organized so that everything the student needs to do is clearly marked. All they have to do is open the binder and turn the pages from beginning to end, and they will have covered all of the new, review, and once/week assignments - all of the “plates we need to keep spinning” to keep the entire body of the student’s music constantly under their fingers. After the book is organized, the ever-recurring question from the teacher is “Did you turn the pages?” If some assignment gets neglected, they simply didn’t turn the pages.

III. Specific Materials Used

1) Assignment Sheets: 3 hole punched, 8.5 x 11 card stock paper (to keep them from ripping out of the binder if they end up being long term projects), and preferably colored to make them noticeable. They are inserted into the binder at special assignment spots, usually within the pages of the Suzuki Book, which is also hole punched and put in the binder. Each Assignment Sheet is titled with the piece this particular sheet refers to, and is lined so that the teacher or parent can date and write in the specific assignment for that piece for this week. The student receives a check mark on that assignment before the teacher writes in the next assignment for that piece, written underneath the previously dated assignment.

Besides directing practice, Assignment Sheets also represent a “running record” of when study of this piece began, and what has been studied on that piece. When a student “graduates” from the piece (technical and musical points have been mastered, and the piece moves onto the “review” list), the student ceremoniously tears out the Assignment Sheet and goes for 3 points in the waste basket! If the teacher wants to keep this piece as a special review piece, or a special “super polish piece” to be revisited every lesson, then a new Assignment Sheet can be placed by that piece.

The “When do you listen?” and “When do you practice?” Assignment Sheets are up front and represent “The Plan” for when listening and practice are to take place during the week. They are there for an easy reference for when this is not accomplished during the week; these plans may have to be changed. The critical point is: we not only have a plan, but it is written down.

2) Colored Sticky Tabs - Each Assignment Sheet, besides being made of colored card stock, is further marked with a sticky colored tabs

(available at grocery or office supply stores) to make them unavoidably obvious.

These colored tabs are generally not put on any special Assignment Sheets or checkoff lists which are at the very front of the students binder, but only those sheets inserted within the Suzuki books. If the student is “turning the pages” as a practice strategy, as they have been instructed to do, these particular Assignment Sheets collected at the front of the binder cannot be missed. The colored tabs are saved for those Assignment Sheets which have been placed within the Suzuki books by their respective pieces to be practiced.

3) Weekly Practice Calendar: this is a simple photocopy of this months calendar. If you follow the public school calendar for your program, just go on line and print off the calendar from the school system’s web site. These are a very useful motivator for the student and weekly reality check for all 3 sides of the Suzuki triangle.

Instead of just marking a check on the day that practice has been accomplished, the parent and child can elect to draw a face for how practice went. A face with a smile means a happy practice, a frown means a sad practice where there was struggle between the parent and child, and a face with a straight line for a mouth means it was somewhere in between. This allows an entry point for the teach to referee power struggles, as well as discuss specific practice strategies and routines with the parent and child for the purpose of “keeping the main thing the main thing” - promoting healthy parent-child relationships and nurturing the whole child. This face drawing also serves as an additional encouragement to be truthfully accountable to how much practice is being done (it is far too easy for the parent to simply write in a few checks on several random days just before the lesson!).

4) Flash Cards: 3x5 white cards, 3 hole punched, and they are never removed from the binder when they are practiced. If a commercially available set of cards is used, punch holes in these. Two or three sets of cards can be organized, kept in the 3 rings of the binder, at the very front of the binder. These are the first thing that the student sees when they open their binder.

5) Reading note cards checkoff lists: a) for the teacher, to know which note flash cards or which words or symbols have been introduced to the student. b) For the student, whose goal is to get all of these cards. There is a built in benefit to getting a new card from the teacher:

larger,

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laminated versions of these cards are used in flash card games almost weekly in the group lesson, and the more you know, the more you are able to participate.

6) Once/Week Tabs (each tab marking a separate day of the week): these are dividers that are put at the very back of the binder, with at least 8 sections: one for each day of the week, and a “No Practice Zone” at the end where the student stores a) current and old ensemble pieces for quick reference at group lesson time, or b) other materials not being currently studied or reviewed, but that need to be kept on hand.

Current assignments outside the Suzuki Curriculum (theory drills, special scales, ensemble repertoire) are kept at the very front of the students binder. When the teacher is satisfied that a skill has been mastered, it can be “retired” to one of these once/week tabs. If in a lesson it becomes evident that a student has forgotten one of these skills, the teacher pops the question ; “Have you been turning the pages? You have, but you’ve been skipping your once/week tabs? Well, lets take this lesson to just review all of the tabs!”. An old assignment from the tab section can also be moved temporarily back to the front of the binder until that skill has been re-mastered. Message to the student and parent: the review material is more important than the new material. The same strategy can of course be used when the teacher does a little probing and finds that there are a few review songs that are not under the fingers: “Well, today lets just do review songs...”.

These tabs are the second to the last thing the student does for their practicing routine - turn to today’s marker, and hit the few quick review skills there that are outside of the regular Suzuki repertoire. What is the last thing? Put the practice calendar at the very back of the book, after the tab section. This is a constant reminder to the student that they really haven’t practiced efficiently if they haven’t turned all of the pages in the binder.

IV. Summary: Organization of the Materials As They Appear in the Binder

As you read the following, imagine all of this set up in the binder, and the student and parent are flipping through the binder for their daily practice time. Students and parents just skip over the items marked with an asterisk. These are only there for reference in the private lesson, if necessary.

A. Order of Contents For Suzuki Pre-Twinkle/Book I Students

1) note reading flash cards (3 hole punched)

2) *Note Reading Flash Cards Checkoff List: this is a running record of which cards you have given the child. A quick check to make sure all the cards are there only requires a quick count of the cards, because the checkoff list also tells you how many cards should be there in total. If something is missing, the parent looks through the cards and checks the list to find the missing cards. To add or replace a card in the lesson, it is a simple matter to pull out previously punched blank cards and quickly draw a staff with a note, or a particular word whose definition needs to be remembered.

3) *”When do you listen?” Assignment Sheet

4) *”When do you practice?” Assignment Sheet

5) Musical Terms Checkoff List - This is a list of every musical term or symbol that the student will encounter in Book 1. The terms are listed according to where they are introduced in the repertoire. As you might imagine, Twinkle has the longest number of terms to become familiar with. Not included here are the individual notes on the staff - those are a separate set of cards, described in the category above.

A separate card for each of these terms can be made, but there are so many of them that they become too bulky. A list, with the symbol drawn, works better. A quick check of the student’s mastery of these symbols can be accomplished by just covering the answers on the page, and going down the list. There are many concepts on this list, so I usually only review them when a student is moving on to a new piece. Again, if the student is encountering these concepts on flash cards during the week in group, they will be motivated to keep moving forward on the list in order to better be able to participate in group class.

6) Special Pre-Twinkle Activities Assignment Sheet for this week, or else each activity is written out on a separate 3x5 card, placed on a separate ring of the binder (if the student is a pre-twinkler).

7) any other reading development materials

8) Suzuki Book I

9) Once/Week Tabs (each tab marking a separate day of the week)

10) Weekly Practice Calendar

B. Order of Contents for Suzuki Book 2 and Above Students

As students move through the books, the teacher can prepare a list of repertoire for a book that has been completed, with accompanying notes that state the weekly review strategy for that book. This might involve a) marking particular days of the week for each piece, which creates a once/week practice of each piece, b) an “even/odd” strategy. where the student plays the even numbered songs on even numbered calendar days, and odd songs on odd numbered days, or c) all songs every day, most often a strategy written on the Assignment Sheet placed by the contents of their current book.

1) note reading flash cards - for upper position notes, if the student is ready.

2) *Note Reading Flash Cards Checkoff List

3) *”When do you listen?” Assignment Sheet

4) *”When do you practice?” Assignment Sheet

5) Musical Terms Checkoff List - for the new terms, found in the upper books.

6) Special activities assignment sheets for this week: additional music theory skills, ensemble music, etc.

7) Reading Development Book, or any other reading development materials - if necessary, the binding on these books removed in order to 3 hole punch and put them in the 3 ring binder (at this point the child might need a wider binder)

8) Current Suzuki Book, old Suzuki Books kept at home. Repertoire lists of the old books are at the front of the binder, with review plans written on them (these pieces once/week, or every other day, etc.). Special review Assignment Sheets from some of this old repertoire might also be at the front of the binder. This is especially true for the Twinkle theme, which students often practice with very detailed tonalization refinements up through the first few books.

9) Once/Week Tabs (each tab marking a separate day of the week)

10) Weekly Practice Calendar

You of course will need fit all of the above to your own teaching style and convictions. (By the way, ending up the above with an even 10 things to do was pure dumb luck!)

V. Conclusion

The teacher should buy and have ready all of the materials above, including the binders. This reduces chaos and maintains visual uniformity among the group at concerts where ensemble music is being read. Don't count on your parents to provide the materials you need to keep yourself organized.

So what is the everlasting cry in my studio? TURN THE PAGES! This is not meant to turn practice into a totally teacher/parent dominated routine.

Give students the flexibility to jump in and mix up the assignments if they want to, but all assignments are to be done according to plan - either daily, several times weekly, or once per week. Turning pages also does not eliminate the integration of practice games and special rewards.

All of this may seem obsessive if you have only been teaching a short while. If so, put this article away, and after several years beating your head against the same few walls, take it out and read it again. You may find it now has your name on it! If you take the time bothering to gather these materials and to "front load" this kind of organizing of your teaching, you will be amazed at the benefits to the quality of your program, not to mention your general sanity!