

Listen, sing it, find it, play it...Ditto! **("By ear" is different from "by rote")**

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Listen to a piece of music again and again, enough times, sing along with it, find the notes on your instrument, play it. It's memorized from the start. KEEP playing it to keep it alive in your repertoire as you add new pieces. As you keep playing it, it will become more expressive, and it will help the learning of new pieces. And keep listening to it once you can play it. This is Suzuki Method learning and playing, Mother Tongue learning. The ear-singing-hand-instrument connections will become more sure and more fluid.

If you haven't heard it before, then watch someone play it, then copy it, you are learning "by rote". Imagine a baby trying to learn to speak English "by rote" without hearing English.

Children can develop the ability to play a piece of music after having heard it. Without being shown. Without a book. Just hear it, sing it in your head or aloud (either after or simultaneously), then play it. They remember it. They memorize it.

We can give the gift of this ability development to every child, even to adults, and ourselves. How?

We promote this process when we freely imitate sounds in the environment....notes and rhythms of birds, dripping rain, cats, dogs, cries, howling wind, bells, phones, sirens, beeps, appliance hums, car horns, alert to any sound...We activate the listening ear-brain-sound imitation instinct in humans which makes us learn our mother tongue. Every person has a voice to use, and a right to use it to sing and hum!

How to learn our pieces by ear?

Listen to one piece enough times. Program the CD player to repeat. Listen daily for hours. It may take weeks, months or years to develop the ability. Babies (whose parents had parents who repeatedly sang to them) whose parents have been singing the same songs for them since prenatal life develop this ability early. At any age, we can start to grow this natural potential ability, just by repeated listening to one piece until we "get it".

With each new piece we learn this way, our ability to learn this way grows. Then we may need less listening repetitions than for the early pieces' many listening repetitions, their endless repetitions. After this ability to listen is well developed, pieces can be learned with fewer listening repetitions. This is playing "by ear".

If children are allowed to try to find their new pieces on their own, trial and error, they'll figure out how their instruments work. They'll notice which sounds come from which spot on the instrument. They'll remember how to get that sound again when they want to play songs they have in their heads.

When children are allowed to "improvise", to "play around", they figure out more and more, make up their own music, compose. We can dignify this process by describing to them what they are naturally doing: "This is good! This is improvising music. This is composing your own music!" "That's transposed into a new key!"

You can introduce music theory by describing what they're doing in their learned pieces and their improvisations. "That's stepwise motion up. That's skipping down. That's a two-note chord. That's

an octave up, from Middle C to Treble C. "That's four little notes going to a long note...sixteenth notes to a whole note".

Sometimes parents have to be assured that this is good, this natural process of "messaging around" on the instrument. I've seen parents stop their children from this important exploration, and I've asked them instead to be happy with, respect, and encourage this natural impulse to learn for ourselves. It's like babies babbling. It's part of the process of figuring out a system. Kids naturally want to do it for themselves and learn deeply this way.

Speech is eventually improvised, not just imitated, and music playing can be too, if we allow and encourage the process.

Dr. Shin'ichi Suzuki's idea is to let children learn music by the "Mother Tongue" Method. In 1976, when I was living in Matsumoto, Japan to observe at his Talent Education (Ability Development) Institute at 3-10-3 Fukashi, I asked him a question, which he immediately answered with enthusiasm. I remember that we were both outside the front door to the school.

I told him I'd been wondering about applying to Suzuki Method teaching the fact that when we speak our mother tongue fluently, we are improvising. We are not just imitating previously memorized phrases, sentences, paragraphs.

I asked Dr. Suzuki whether in teaching his method we should encourage improvisation. He said yes, go ahead, do it!

I felt intimidated by his giving me this mission. Improvising at my instrument (piano) had not been part of any of my education. But I keep my eyes and ears open with children at the piano, and see that it comes naturally from our lessons. Especially when we let children keep playing all their "old" pieces forever. The patterns in those pieces become second nature and are resources to be used in new ways.

I find that students who are working toward their Book One concert, and therefore keeping playing every piece, become so comfortable with all the accompaniment patterns and keys that they can switch them around as a fun thing to do, and vary their pieces creatively. For their recitals and concerts, they still do know what the set way on the recording is, as long as we continue daily to play their model recordings.

Learning "by ear", with freedom to explore the instrument, gives students independence to play what they hear, and express themselves even further through their own improvisation and composition. Their playing can become fluent, as in speaking their mother tongue.