

Group Lessons in the Context of a “Modified Suzuki” Program

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Group lessons and private lessons can be complimentary and interdependent, each reinforcing the other. Each is suited to unique issues, some of which are addressed exclusively in that situation.

The function of the **private lesson**:

- Develop individual technique and musicianship through scales, etudes, and solo repertoire
- Prepare for solo performance
- Work individually on group repertoire

The function of the **group lesson**:

- Teach ensemble skills in preparation for group performances
- Provide solo performance opportunities in a masterclass format
- Monitor and reinforce technique introduced in the private lesson
- Teach music reading, theory, and ear training concepts and skills
- Provide a social outlet within a musical context

Ensemble skills

Ensemble playing is very important and cannot be addressed in the private lesson. The basic skills of playing together and in tune’ matching styles, phrasing and character; and blending tone for a unified “group sound” can be introduced very early. In the process of building and refining those skills...

- Students are given opportunity for feedback which strengthens their listening skills and challenges their perceptions
- Students interact with the leader and others through musical relays and by working on spots in the music individually and in small groups
- Expressiveness with the whole body and leadership skills such as cueing are developed

Students who have been trained this way readily transfer their skills to either an orchestra or chamber music setting and are often strong leaders.

Solo performance opportunities

Performance for peers on a regular basis is a unique advantage of weekly group lessons. Solos are performed with piano accompaniment after they have been memorized.

- Youngest students are allowed to choose on the spot what they will play
- Students in the middle of Suzuki Bk I through Bk III discuss with their private teacher and prepare for performance in group
- Students in Suzuki Bk. IV through advanced stages must rehearse with piano outside of the group lesson prior to playing in group
- Students at the most advanced level also have a lesson with piano before playing for group

- Leading up to solo recitals students are required to play in group at least two times prior to the recital

As in any masterclass situation students are critiqued by the teacher. Older students may be asked to participate in making comments. In this case it is good to ask students to offer one thing they liked and one suggestion for improvement.

There is usually time to go over spots, practice cueing the pianist or even time for a second run through.

Performing is a skill in itself and the only way to practice it is by performing. Students need to practice strategies for coping with memory slips, lack of concentration, playing with accompaniment, being expressive under pressure, and of course just coping with general performance anxiety.

If students are given performance opportunities beginning at a relatively young age, on a regular basis, most learn to feel comfortable performing and many actually enjoy it.

Music reading, theory, and ear training

Ten to twenty minutes of each group lesson is an enjoyable and efficient way to cover a good deal of theory and music reading skills. Some basic long-term goals are to help students:

- Develop a sense of pulse
- Read rhythms easily and accurately
- Read written pitches
- Sing and recognize scales and arpeggios
- Sing and recognize intervals
- Identify intervals on the instrument and in repertoire
- Recognize basic chord qualities
- Understand chord construction
- Analyze simple forms
- Analyze and interpret phrase structure
- Identify major and minor key signatures and understand the relationships of major to relative and parallel minor
- Work with tempo, dynamic, and other musical vocabulary
- Identify and use musical symbols

There are many well developed theory/reading materials for young string students which can be used to design your own approach, if you have well-defined goals.

The Group as social outlet

Group lessons provide motivation and camaraderie. Students challenge each other in ways the teacher cannot. Working toward common performance goals and supporting each other's individual playing becomes important to students in their group lessons. As a teacher you will feel the energy and enthusiasm many of them bring to group each week. That special energy is contagious and results in a wonderful sense of pride and love of music that is a great reward for students and teacher alike.

