

Aren't you Bored Teaching the Same Pieces?

by Martin Rüttimann, ESA Teacher Trainer, Violin, Switzerland

How often have we heard colleagues say “Aren't you getting tired teaching and listening to the same pieces over and over again?” Or “Isn't it boring to always teach the same pieces?”



When we speak about the repertoire, this comprises -

88 pieces for the Suzuki Violin School book 1-8
71 pieces for the Suzuki Cello School book 1-8
67 pieces for the Suzuki Flute School book 1-9
90 pieces for the Suzuki Piano School book 1-7
(Here one movement counts as “one piece”.)

So, having students on the whole range of the repertoire already gives you quite a variety of “pieces” which you hear during the week. However, that may not be the answer we were looking for - there is something more profound in the question itself.

What I first find interesting is that nobody would ask this question to a university professor who also would teach mostly a quite narrow range of “pieces”. In the case of violin there are the 3 Mozart concerti, 5-10 major romantic concerti and maybe five concerti from the 20th century you hear on a regular basis (Bartok, Prokoffiev, Shostakovich). Adding a Sonata for final recital from each area one would chose of the 20 mature Mozart sonatas or one of the 9 Beethoven Sonatas, one of the approx. 25 romantic sonatas and one of approx. 10 modern Sonatas (incl. Ravel and Debussy), to finish the recital you choose an encore (Sarasate, Wieniawsky, Kreisler etc) - let's say roughly another 50 pieces played regularly. As a total that is: 82 sonatas and concerti and another 50 encore pieces. As a total you would listen to about 130 pieces as a university professor, which is not much more than as a Suzuki violin teacher (especially if you add your book 9/10 students and your “out of book” students).

Still this comparison does not help us further. Having a look into another professional field, medical science: if you went to a doctor asking him how many different diseases he diagnosed over one week let's say in November, the answer might be: 10 had a high fever, 15 had the flu, 3 had a slight gastroenteritis, one child has broken his arm and 5 just came with out any disease (for us, those would be our students who did not practice but still show up in the lesson). So the variety of diseases to diagnose in a doctor's office is much less then our weekly repertoire we are listening to. Nobody would ask a doctor if he is bored to diagnose the same diseases over and over again. Why? Because we all think that each patient is a different person and has the right to get his own diagnosis, we acknowledge that a doctor does have a very important duty to fulfil because he helps people to recover and get better.

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Those analogies may get a smile to our colleagues asking “isn't it boring to teach the same pieces all the time” but in fact we are still far away from the essence, which lies in this question itself. We basically have to ask ourselves whether we teach “pieces” or we teach “children”. If we teach “pieces” those 80 or 90 pieces we listen to regularly can of course be a reason to search for another “method” to teach: if we teach “children” however, it won't ever be boring as we have new children all the time. Even the same child is a different one each week as they grow and are in a different mood all the time, as we teachers are too.

The main reasons for teaching a common repertoire are obvious for us but most likely it needs time to understand the deeper reasons for doing it when discovering the Suzuki Method™ first.

1. As “Suzuki teachers” we belong to a worldwide network of colleagues who are teaching along the same philosophy and with whom we share some “core values” in the teaching.
2. The standardised core repertoire enables our students to play instantly with other children from all over the world. Changing the bowings, the fingerings or the order of the pieces would not bring our students in a favourable position when joining a concert or workshop abroad.
3. Similar to the students who revise their pieces to bring those pieces to a higher level, we teachers also “revise” our teaching tools when teaching the same piece again and therefore bring our own teaching to a higher standard. In doing this for a very long time, it might be that we are becoming relatively good in what we do.

A violin teacher who discovered the Suzuki Method™ in the late 70's here in Europe and is still teaching this approach, would by now have taught the repertoire for nearly 40 years. Those Suzuki students from the late 70's and early 80's who became Suzuki teachers, would have listened, played and taught those pieces for more than 60 years by the time they will officially retire. For those the question will be even more fundamental whether those pieces bored them at any time during their 60 years of listening, playing and teaching them.

The answer I got from those teachers was also boring because it was always the same - “No. Never ever.” Would we get the same result with a different selection of pieces? I assume most likely yes. There must lay an intrinsic value in the selection of a repertoire which still attracts so many children and parents when listening to it for the first time. More than this however, I personally feel that over the years so many positive memories are connected to each piece - the success of a young child mastering a certain piece or passage entirely for the first time; a group of teenagers playing another piece with an unbelievable expression that all the audience is moved; one of the mass concerts playing all the graduation pieces; all the memories we have from concerts or our workshops, etc. etc. Whenever we listen or play those pieces again, unconsciously those memories are recalled and make our own playing automatically more beautiful because of those feelings.

To conclude, whether one considers it boring to teach “the same pieces” over and over again depends on the following:

1. Are you teaching “children” or are you teaching “pieces”?
2. Do you want to refine your teaching skills through “revision” or do you prefer to be entertained with different music (but actually facing the same basic problems as posture, intonation etc.)
3. Do you want to enjoy the full range of the Suzuki repertoire having students on each level or do you prefer “supplementing” the repertoire and therefore slowing down your students that they may never reach the upper books?

Listening to ourselves and playing the repertoire by ourselves on a regular basis (with or without CD) is the first step to start listening to ourselves and recognising a difference in our own playing - hopefully on a higher level each time we do.