

## Ready - Steady - Go : Preparing for the First Note

by Jenny Macmillan, ESA Piano Teacher Trainer

Your young pupil is sitting, or standing, with their instrument. You say which piece you'd like to hear - and they start playing. But .... aren't there a few steps before this in which they prepare themselves for the task ahead?

### In rest position:

- Are their feet in the correct position?
- Are they sitting or standing tall - strong in the small of their back (not slouching), head up (not bending forwards), shoulders down, elbows relaxed, pianists with both hands resting on lap? Are their arms, hands and fingers relaxed? For those standing, are their knees soft (not locked)?
- Are they sitting the correct distance from their instrument, or comfortably holding their instrument?

If yes, then they are ready to lift their hands to the keyboard, or lift the instrument to their mouth or shoulder, bow in correct position on or near the string, in preparation for playing their piece.

### Now, in playing position:

- Are they holding their instrument well? Again, check head, shoulders, elbows, arms, hands and fingers. Good posture is so important for producing quality tone.
- Have they prepared the correct fingers over the correct starting notes? Is the bow in the correct position on the string, and ready for the correct direction of movement? Wind players need to prepare the speed of the air and the shape of their lips.
- When they are physically prepared, are they also mentally prepared? Do they have the sounds, speed, rhythms, character of the music, in their minds? In lessons, the teacher may play an introduction to the piece; in practices, the child could sing or hum the beginning of the piece, either out loud or in their head.



*4-year-old ready to play at her first lesson*

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When all this preparation has been satisfactorily completed, I like to say 'ready and' (or, at home, the parent can say 'ready and') rhythmically and in time, for the child to start playing. Singers and wind players will take a breath on the "and", pianists will slightly stretch or lift the finger before the first note. We all take a metaphorical breath on the upbeat. Think of the conductor raising an arm for the first downbeat sound. I like 'ready and' because the 'and' has an upward feeling to it (ready and play). Or the teacher, having checked their pupil is truly ready, may play an introduction and expect the pupil to join in at the right time.

In Suzuki lessons, we spend a great deal of time working on the tone of the first note. If the sound of the first note is of high quality, it is likely the second note, too, will be good. Whereas if the first note has a poor sound, it is unlikely the second note will be better. So often in music, the first note sets the character of the piece; the first note draws the audience into the performance (or not). And the quality of the first sound is established by the manner in which that first note has been played - including the way the performer prepared for the note. It is of vital importance that great care is taken over the preparation for, and the sound of, the first note.

When I teach at Suzuki workshops, I find that few children are used to waiting for the 'ready and' before starting. So they start in a state of unpreparedness - they are handicapping themselves rather than giving themselves every possible opportunity to succeed in their performance.

I believe that most, if not all, Suzuki teacher trainers emphasise the essential nature of ensuring children take time to get ready before playing. But I suspect many teachers decide it takes too long and it's too difficult to insist on this routine every time before the child starts. Rest assured this is not the case.

As usual with the Suzuki approach, the early stages take a long, long time - this is where we patiently ensure the child is well prepared for future learning. If the child is always well set up before beginning a Twinkle variation or a piece in book 1 or book 2, and waits for the teacher or parent to say 'ready and', then much more effective learning can take place. In fact, in my view, a child who won't wait for 'ready and' is almost unteachable - they start without thinking, without fully engaging, and their playing is likely to be careless.

If a child is being accompanied or playing a duet, there is a very obvious reason for taking time - to ensure that the two musicians work as partners, as a co-ordinated team. So there may not be an actual 'ready and', but the two musicians will look at each other and the designated leader will wait until their partner is ready and will indicate when to start by breathing in or lifting a finger or bow or instrument.

Of course, eventually the teacher and parent no longer need to say the 'ready and' - because the child has developed the habit of always being well set up, and will always take a moment before starting in order to check everything for themselves. When that time comes will vary from child to child but, for pianists, it might be as they near the end of book 2. Some children may be ready when near the beginning of book 2. Some children, especially younger ones, will still need the ready and when in book 3 or even book 4. But for many months, and probably several years, children need to wait for a parent or teacher to say 'ready and' before they begin to play.

When children perform in concerts, taking time to ensure they get themselves prepared is part of the concert performance. And this is one of many reasons for ensuring our Suzuki pupils have frequent opportunities to perform to an audience.

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Please, teachers, do all insist your young pupils spend time preparing themselves and wait for you, or their parent, to say ready and. You, and they, will find their playing improves dramatically. Or, if you disagree, do email me and let's start a discussion - [jenny@jennymacmillan.co.uk](mailto:jenny@jennymacmillan.co.uk)