

# Tuneful Teaching

**Cheryl Floyd, 2018 TBA Featured Clinician**

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When our son Weston was 4 years old, he started taking Suzuki piano lessons. This significant milestone had a tremendous impact on me and recalibrated my approach to teaching our youngest students. You see, core to the Suzuki philosophy is listening to and learning familiar melodies, repetition, learning w/others and parental engagement.

We dutifully listened to all of the “Twinkle” variations, “Go Tell Aunt Rhody,” “French Song,” and so on in the car going to and from school each day. He then learned to play those same pieces and many more on the piano. As time went on we attended many studio recitals with the other Suzuki students and Weston was always looking forward to learning the next piece in the book! It was all about playing songs and making music. The craft, the technique, and the rhythms were simply an expectation for achieving the ultimate goal and that goal being having fun and making music!

Because of these early Suzuki experiences I have come to believe that it is both essential and priceless for students to play familiar melodies that their parents, siblings, and friends recognize as soon as possible. Over time I concluded that it was important to me that when my students took their instruments home for the first time that they could play several tunes by rote. These needed to be songs that only use 3-5 notes. Some of the songs that have worked for me are: “Hot Cross Buns,” “Merrily We Roll Along,” “French Song,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “Lightly

Row, Shark Song” (Jaws), and, yes, sometimes even the bass line to “Louie, Louie!” To me this outcome became more important than meticulously learning expressionless lines from a book or mastering the perfect Concert F. In practice nearly all of this “tuneful learning” took place before the beginning book was ever opened. Even after instruction in the book began, I found it beneficial to continue some rote teaching.

Let’s look at it another way. Do you remember the first tune you ever learned on your instrument? I do! It was “Oats, Peas, Beans, and Barley Grow.” It was in the *Silver Burdett Beginning Band Method*. Why do I remember? Thank you to my teacher Vickie Cowles. She was a great singer, an equally competent saxophone player and she made playing songs fun. I also must confess that in 8th grade at Euless JH, my best friend and I wanted to drop choir. We loved band, but were no longer attracted to the choir class. But, then one day we came to choir class and our teacher passed out the Coca-Cola Song...you know “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing”. Guess what? We stayed for the rest of the year because we really wanted to learn that song!

Let’s face it. Young students are more likely to practice a tune than an exercise! Why? Its fun! They can relate to it. They can share it with others. In truth, familiar melodies are an integral part of the human experience.

They give us cultural identity and they are at the epicenter of our musical comfort zone.

A beauty of “tuneful teaching” is the fact that you can put it in the most convenient, “user friendly” key for each instrument. There is no need to be in lock step with everyone playing the same notes at the same time. Parallel fifths? No problem. Melodies in 3rds? Be my guest. Everyone is playing

a recognizable song. How cool is that!

There are other benefits that are only limited by your imagination and creativity. I had a reluctant private flute student who was struggling with the top octave of the F concert scale. It was always a challenge to get him to learn something. So, I taught him to play “Snake Charmer” using third octave D-E-F. He thought it was fun, he learned it and then could play the top octave of the F scale effortlessly. Through repetition of a melody, he acquired the skill to be successful!

**At the convention,  
Cheryl will present  
“Rehearsal  
Strategies for  
the Young and the  
Restless” on  
July 26 at 1:30 p.m.  
and “Picking Pieces  
for Picky People” on  
July 27 at 1:30 p.m.**

**She will also join  
with Richard Floyd,  
Frank Ticheli, and Dr.  
Tim Lautzenheiser  
to present  
“Kindred Spirits” on  
July 26 at 9:30 a.m.**

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Later he did tell me that I had “tricked him” into learning the scale...and perhaps that was true!

But what happens after that beginning band year? That’s when students go in to concert bands of one guise or another. The strategy has to evolve. There are full band arrangements to learn. There are concerts to prepare. So, not everyone gets to play the melody all of the time. But everyone should get to play the melody some of the time. Thus it is essential that we balance our repertoire so that everyone gets to share in the joy of “playing the tune.” Yes, even the low reeds and tubas should get their moment in the spotlight.

Without doubt this challenge is more relevant for music in the Grade I - II – III categories where low voices traditionally play a secondary, supportive role. If you don’t believe that to be true then compare the flute, clarinet, and alto saxophone or trumpet part to the low reed, third trombone or tuba part in the vast majority of the music you are working on. The expectations and musical interest is dramatically different. This necessitates us picking music more carefully and wisely.

But, in truth even this is not enough. Can we be more creative? There has to be a more focused effort on the “tuneful needs” of everyone. What can you do? Perhaps you are learning a piece that depends heavily on the upper

voices for melodic content. Consider writing out those “tuneful moments” for the lower voices. Let the tubas practice the trumpet theme. Not only will it be fun for them (after all those guys are probably friends) but also the tubas will have a deeper awareness of how their accompaniment in the band arrangement supports the melody.

Here is a wonderful example of what I’m talking about. A number of years ago, tuba virtuoso Patrick Sheridan came to Austin to perform with the Austin Symphonic Band. He later performed with us at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago. While here he shared an early memory from his musical career. It seems that when he brought his tuba and band music home for the first time and started to practice, his mother, a singer, said, “This is unacceptable!” She immediately purchased a book of bass vocal solo arias for her young tuba

player to practice, recognizing the importance of melody in the musical development of her son. At least for Pat the rest was history.

However you address it make sure that “tuneful teaching” is paramount and an essential component of your teaching priorities. If you want students to continue to love to play their instrument, practice faithfully and grow from the experience then I encourage you to feed them a diet richly nourished with tuneful expectations.

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*Cheryl Floyd celebrated her twenty-fifth year as Director of Bands at Hill Country Middle School in Austin, Texas in May 2017 and retired after 35 years as a middle school band director/music educator. Mrs. Floyd is recognized nationally for her educational and musical achievements at the middle school level. In 1990 her Austin Murchison Middle School Band was the recipient of the coveted Sudler Cup Award presented to exemplary middle school band programs by the John Philip Sousa Foundation. The Hill Country Middle School Band presented performances at The Midwest Clinic in 1998 and 2006, Music For All’s National Concert Band Festival in Indianapolis in 2012, as well as the Western International Band Clinic in Seattle in November 2014. Her bands have been a finalist in the TMEA Honor Band Competition on 12 occasions. Throughout her career she has maintained a keen interest in commissioning new works for concert band and has collaborated with numerous internationally recognized composers. Mrs. Floyd enjoys an active schedule as a guest conductor, adjudicator, clinician, and author throughout the U.S. with engagements in over 20 states. In 1998 she served as one of the first women guest conductor of the United States Navy band in Washington, DC. She routinely serves as a conductor on the University of Texas at Austin band camp faculty and other summer music faculties as well. In 2003, Mrs. Floyd was elected to the American Bandmasters Association. When elected she was only the fifth female member of this 225 member organization and the first middle school band director to be invited to ABA membership. Since 1985 Cheryl has served as co-principal flute with the Austin Symphonic Band. In 2016, Mrs. Floyd was named a Yamaha Master Educator, one of only 18 in the nation. Paramount in her life is her twenty-four year trombone performance graduate of the University of Texas in Austin, and a graduate of the Icon Collective Electronic Music program in Burbank, California.*