



Episode 57: Adding More Sparkle to Music Practice with Leslie Thackeray

Welcome to Episode 57!

It wasn't originally planned this way, but this week's interview is the perfect follow up to last week's conversation about using games in music practice because I had a conversation with Leslie Thackeray who is a violin teacher but also the owner of the Practice Shoppe which has so many great resources for making practice engaging and fun. I order from it personally all the time. - not an ad! - and find lots of inspiration from what Leslie has to offer there and I really loved this conversation with her about her journey as a musician, the parent of musicians and as a teacher. I hope you find this conversation helpful to relate to and full of helpful ideas as well!

Christine Goodner:

All right, so welcome everybody. I'm excited today to be talking to Leslie Thackeray and Leslie, I'm hoping you could start by introducing yourself a bit and let people know who you are and what you do in the world of music.

Leslie Thackeray:

Well, thanks for having me on. I am a Suzuki teacher and a Suzuki mom, and I was a Suzuki student, so I've done all that. So I just have a studio, a part-time studio, and I also own The Practice Shoppe, which is a business that sells teaching supplies, practicing supplies that make music practicing more fun and enjoyable.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, great. And we will talk a little bit more about The Practice Shoppe and making practice fun in this conversation because that's a shoppe that I am always recommending that this is not an ad, but go to this website and get these supplies. I just order things all the time myself when I need to change things up or send students there, so I love the work you're doing there and we'll definitely talk some about that as we go today. Yeah, since you've been on all sides in the Suzuki world, for those who don't know, we talk about the Suzuki triangle or the parent side and the teacher side and the student side, although we know it could be grandparents and other practice partners supporting us, but maybe whatever side of

that triangle you want to speak from. I wonder if you could just share your experience with practice and what have you learned along the way? What was easy and what was hard that you had to work your way through?

Leslie Thackeray:

I started lessons when I was about four. I don't even remember not ever playing the violin. That was just always been a part of my life, but I never really liked it. I never liked practicing actually. I liked that I played the violin and I liked that it made me unique among my friends and in my neighborhood and stuff like that. But I hated practicing and I don't have very many positive memories about practicing growing up, and I'm just kind of amazed actually that I kept with it and that now it's like my business and my life because it was just never something I like to do. However, when I became a mom, I noticed I saw all the challenges that come with practicing, which as a child you just aren't even thinking about. It's just your life. And I started, my daughter, well, she had a teacher, but we started lessons when she was three and it was fine for a while, and then it started getting really hard and I realized I need to find some ways to make it so it's not a battle every day.

And so I would create practice charts and things that we could use to motivate her when she was practicing, and this was back in the era of the blog, which I know there's blogs now, but this was the beginning of the blog era. And so I would just blog some ideas that I had just because I thought, well, if I'm struggling, other people are probably struggling as well. And that's not to say that from then on practicing was always wonderful and fun. I had other kids taking lessons and I had struggles with all of them, but I do remember, or I didn't like the feeling of not liking to practice even as a mom. And so I just really tried hard to make it so it was an enjoyable part of their life instead of something they really didn't like.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. I think it's so interesting how many people I talk to that kind of what they do in music now reflects what they wish they had when they were starting out themselves or working with their kids themselves. It's so interesting how we go to solve our own problems in the past in a way. Well, I guess one thing I'd like to say is I think it's great for parents and family members supporting young musicians listening to know that if practice is going poorly or is frustrating or your child doesn't like it or you don't like it, that you don't have to be stuck there. And there's a way to change that dynamic. It doesn't have to stay that all the time.

Leslie Thackeray:

And I think sometimes, at least I've noticed maybe with my students' parents, they think they can't do anything that I haven't explicitly said they can do, but that's not the case. Parents can, they're the practice partner at home and they can, not to say they should be teaching something other than what the teacher's teaching, but they don't have to wait for the teacher to give them a practice chart or wait for the teacher to tell them how to play a game to make it more fun. I think parents who take the initiative to kind of they know their child best, I think are going to be the most successful.

Christine Goodner:

Oh yeah. Thanks for saying that. I think the tasks that we assign as teachers, I hope that's being practiced, but how that gets accomplished or what you need to do to have your child do the task, I hope people are very creative and make it their own, and I think it's very hopeful to know if it's feeling like just a chore and no fun. Let's be creative. And for me as a teacher, if people have a question, am I doing the

wrong thing by X, Y, z and practice, then I just hope they ask me and I can clarify, for example, please don't go on to the next phrase and the piece we're working on, but yes, please use that game or please try this creative way of getting it done.

Leslie Thackeray:

Yeah, exactly.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, having those conversations with your teacher is really smart if you feel hesitant or because I do appreciate a healthy respect for what the teacher's doing and not overstepping that I can understand what we want to balance, but open communication I think helps so much.

Leslie Thackeray:

For example, when I assign review as a Suzuki method, it is a huge part of the new Suzuki method, but I don't necessarily have time to come up with a fun review game every week for every student. But I know that a lot of times that can be the part of practice that can be a game or can be fun. And so I hope just some of the stuff that I can provide on my website can help spark some creativity for the parents to do something with what they've been given by their teacher.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. Why don't we talk about some of that now, some of the review games, for example, I've ordered dice from your website that has, again, as it says Suzuki teacher, the names of different pieces for different books. That is a very fun way to change things up. Also, there's some dice with the twinkle rhythms on it that can be really fun for the students that are doing that. If people are trying to think about where to start or what resources to look for on your website, what else would you recommend for review?

Leslie Thackeray:

I think one of the most successful games is the easiest is the bingo game. And I have some bingo charts that are specific and have pre-printed names of songs or whatever. Not everyone's always practicing the same songs, even if they are doing Suzuki, sometimes there's extra songs or you're in a different level. But this was the most successful game for my daughter. It lasted two weeks, which is a long time for these games. I just got a blank bingo chart and I put all the things she needed to practice on the chart and then well, it's like I filled out a blank one and then I cut it up and those were the pieces, and then she would just pick 'em and that's what she would practice. And then put a little smarty on that box. And when we got bingo, we were done with practicing and it takes kind of like you do it more than five, you can't get bingo in five turns. It takes, you get most of it done. And then she also got that little treat of little smarties or something after that was such a revolutionary week or two when we practiced that way. But there's also other things.

Kids love a fishing game, so I like having a fishing, magnetic fishing pole and you can put stuff on cards and put a little paperclip where I have these little practice chips that are magnetic. You can pick up anything. I just like the visual. If it adds something to a sense, if it's a visual theme or something they can touch or feel or do or move cards that will tell you how to do something. So when you're playing a piece, you're not just standing there playing it. Maybe like a review piece, maybe you're doing something different, playing it with a giant smile on your face or with one of your feet up in the air or lying down in your back. So stuff like that can help make it kind of a little game for kids.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, I think when I give advice about practice games, keeping it simple is very helpful and having the rules laid out clearly. So I like a lot of your resources that are printables. We don't have to come up with it or reinvent the wheel as the adult practicing with the music student. It gives some guidance. I think That's great. So hopefully that'll prompt some people looking for these ideas to dig in and see what you have there. We can add some links in the show notes for people to find too. Those resources can be really helpful. Let's go back for a minute to when you were younger. What do you think kept you going when you didn't like practice? Do you have a sense of what made you continue on with it that it felt like a piece of your identity?

Leslie Thackeray:

Well, when you have a performance, then you really need to practice to get ready for it. My teacher was really great at having recitals more than just a yearly solo recital, but we had a lot of group recitals, part of a performing group and stuff like that. And I would say you just, when you have to be ready for something, when you have an end, you need to be prepared for the end. If there's nothing to be working toward, then it's hard to keep motivated. So I try to have pretty consistent recitals, but there's also times right after a recital when we're not working specifically toward a recital, and a lot of times I'll try to have a challenge within my studio or something where there's an end, something they're working toward and that makes it practicing relevant. So you have to be preparing for something or moving towards something.

Christine Goodner:

I think that's such a great point. Sometimes motivation comes from a short-term goals in a way that you're talking about that feels tangible, and I love that you do all of those. I do some similar things in my studio. I think that's really important. And also if you're listening and your teacher, these are the things that I always tell people, you don't have to ask my permission to play a concert for grandma on FaceTime or play at the farmer's market if they allow it and bus outside or whatever it is. Sometimes if you see that your child really needs performance opportunities, I hope people will create some for them.

Leslie Thackeray:

Even just practicing goals, like a hundred days of practice in a row, that's really hard to do for most people. And so if that's too hard, you could make it smaller, a 30 day challenge or something like that. But then it's the same kind of thing. You may not be working toward a recital, but you're working towards something. You have a goal, you have an ending to the reason why you're doing what you're doing.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Yeah, I think that's great. That's great advice. I think as adults, I mean, I know for myself sometimes I've been trying to do more weight training, for example, and I love having done it, but getting started is very hard for me, and so I make little challenges for myself. Okay, not after nine times I'm buying a latte or getting the workout gear I need.

Leslie Thackeray:

Nice.

Christine Goodner:

I think it's just human nature to have some people, myself included, obviously just need that goal to work towards and helping our kids discover that is actually very powerful. They have that for life then. Yeah, I love it. Well, great. And then when you're working with your own children, do you feel like those same sort of things motivated them to keep going? I assume so since you're doing it in your studio.

Leslie Thackeray:

So I actually, I don't practice with my kids anymore. I've graduated so that's nice (laughs)

Christine Goodner:

Congrats.

Leslie Thackeray:

But yeah, so I would always just try to have something and then the teachers, my kids' own kids have, in fact, their teacher was my teacher, so they have kind of the same kind of performance opportunities and stuff like that, but there was always something, a chart. One time I had made, it was like a graph just on Excel or table on Word or something, and I put every piece that they needed for whatever recital or it was review or something, and I put 30 boxes after it. And that was our goal. Let's see if we can fill up this whole chart. That means you have to play everything 30 times. And we didn't have to play everything every day. And some days we would play, especially if it was a working, we needed to practice performing it. We play it more than once a day. But that was the goal, and that was when that chart was full. That was a big accomplishment. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Thanks. I think it's fun to hear how many ideas we can share with people so they can you make them their own. Well, we mentioned the practice shoppe, which own and run, and I just wonder what got you into starting that business and what's your hope that it, we've talked a little bit about this, but what is your hope that it gives to teachers and families of music students?

Leslie Thackeray:

Yeah. Well, one thing, my daughter's teacher would always say, it was like, you need to do this 25 times or just these little preview spots or whatever. And I have a three or 4-year-old and I just wanted something that they could see, and there was this little abacus bead counter thing for sale on the line somewhere, but it was more than I wanted to pay. It was kind of expensive. So I asked my husband, who's kind of a handy guy, and I said, will you make one of these for me? And he's like, he was all for it. But the thing is, is that when you make one, you can't just get a tiny block. You have to get the big long piece of wood and you can't just get 10 beads, you have to get a box of a hundred or whatever. So anyway, we had all this extra supply, so I made some extras and I just kind of sent an email out to some of my friends and my teacher friends and they loved it, sold out right away and we had to just get more, and then it just took off from there.

I Sold these at institute. So this is something, I have another variation that's more straight that will stick on a stand, but this is something I use all the time. And I used to use it all the time in practicing, and I use it with my own students. It's the bead counter because I think the most efficient way to practice is to break things down into small spots and play them over and over and over again. And the speed counter is the best way to just be like, okay, let's do it 10 times or 20 times or five times multicolored. And that's

just, I don't know. That's why I got started and it just kind of grew from there. But it's also just a really important part of practicing that I really try to emphasize that can be tedious if you make it tedious, but doesn't have to be.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, I love that. I do think that's how I first found out about your shoppe as somebody recommended the bead counter.

Leslie Thackeray:

Oh yeah,

Christine Goodner:

That makes sense. That makes sense. Yeah, I love that giving, even that little break to go move the bead sort of helps students with the tolerance for the repetitions, which could be so hard.

Leslie Thackeray:

Yeah. Well, and my students are so used to, I just have one right on my stand and I'll just be like, okay, why don't you pay this little measure? And then I just start moving it. I don't even have to say anything. They're just like, okay, got to keep doing it. But they know it's only 10 times and then they almost always compliment them and kind of try to have them reflect on how much easier it was on the ninth and 10th time than it was in the first and second time so that it gets easier when you practice it.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, we do hope that connection gets made in the brain for sure. Yeah, that repetition is so important. So that is definitely something if you're a family member practicing with a young student, it's not just something a teacher can do, but you can if you get one of those bead counters and try that at home, sometimes that really helps. And some students I found in my studio are just very goal oriented. They just love accomplishing all the beads being moved and others, it's just helping us track together or the adults tracking with it. But yeah, it can be very powerful. Well, I know one thing we were talking about too is how do we make practice more interesting and fun, including scales and other exercises and how that's a passion of yours. I wonder if you could talk more about that.

Leslie Thackeray:

Skills are, I love scales, but it's funny because they're not very fun most of the time for some people, but there's just so much you can learn with scales. They're learning their fingering for different keys, but they also can practice bowing and just so many technique things. I just try to have, I don't know, just kind of like we were saying before, a reason to do the scales every once in a while have a little challenge. One year I did this thing in October, spooky, scary, scaly month, and I had this chart and had a whole bunch of spiders on it, and every time they played a scale they could fill in one of the mountain. The goal was to finish it in October. I also have, I put together a scale book full of just really basic book one level scales. Some people really need the visual of seeing a scale, more of the older students.

If you're young like three, four, and five, you can just probably do it by ear. But I have a lot of students that start when they're 10 or 11 or 12. And so I just have this little book. One thing that's a part of that book is I have all of one octave scales in first position, and that includes all of the skills. We don't ever play like F sharp major or something weird like that, but it's all about finger patterns. And one octave is

eight notes and that's two sets of four, and we have four fingers. And so it's just the same pattern twice no matter what the scale is. So I try to around the end of book one and book into book two have a little challenge where they try to play or learn all of the first position skills. And anyway, that's always kind of a fun challenge.

It is a challenge, but there's an ending and then they get the accomplishment of finishing that. And I have kind of an idea of a reward to give. I just kind of started this so there's something they can put on their violin case or something just so they know that they've accomplished it. And if anyone else had seen it, they would be able to say, oh yeah, I learned every scale in first position. So anyway, just something like that where it can be kind of a challenge or something that they can be working toward. And I also do all, I used to print out these books and stuff like practice books where they could record everything that they're doing, but I just do it on a Google doc now, and all of my students, there's a graph on there that has all of the two octave skills. And so every time they play it, I mark it off and when they did it, and it's just kind of fun that they can see, oh wow, I have learned a lot of skills. And then we have a three octave scale. So I think maybe I'm just a visual person and it's something I love to just track things. That's just something that's kind weird about me, I guess. But it helps me, and I think a lot of students appreciate it and parents too, just to see where we're going with skills. So

Christine Goodner:

I love that because skills can just feel sort of never ending, like you're saying. There's no clear beginning or end. You're just always doing scales, which is true. But I love that you're sort of marking various milestones along the way as a big accomplishment, so it feels like they've done something instead of this assignment never end. Do you have that scale book on your practice shoppe or that's just something that exists in your studio?

Leslie Thackeray:

Actually, I have the listing on the website and it just takes you to the Amazon link. It's just published by Amazon and there's a few pages that you can download if you want to see what it's like. And my goal is I really want to do a two octave scale book as well. It just takes so much time stuff together. So it'll happen. It'll happen someday. It's halfway there.

Christine Goodner:

I hear you there. Well, but it's really helpful as a teacher to have different ways to approach scales, like different book. I've gone through cycles of using different books for scales and Exactly. And when someone else takes the time to create it, which I realize does take a lot of time, that saves me time only so much I can do. So I love knowing that's out there. I will check that out for my students as well. I do think it's important to play all those scales that we don't play as often because they're not directly linked to a piece we're playing at the moment. How can families who are working with young musicians at home, for example, notice, oh, I think we need to insert some more fun into our practice. Do you have anything that you would say to families or maybe to your families in your own studio who may not realize on their own that practice needs to be more fun? Or maybe the parent loves checking things off and coloring in boxes or something visual and the student actually needs something a little more playful or game-like what would you say to families to look for

Leslie Thackeray:

When a student isn't enjoying themselves, that's when you know need to put a little bit more into it, more sparkle or fun. Not to say that they're going to be joyful the whole time they're practicing, but I did have

a student's dad come and talk to me the other day, and this is a really great student, always prepared. She comes her lessons with a smile on her face and talks to me, and you can tell she enjoys that she plays the violin. But the dad came up to me and was like, what can we do to get her to want to practice? And I was kind of like, she has a problem practicing. It doesn't seem like it. She's always prepared, but obviously there's something at home where she's probably grumbling or resisting. So I just think if there is all that resistance, that's when, what can we do?

And I suggested I have a plaque for the a hundred days of practice challenge. I said, well, why don't you see if she might be willing to try to get on this plaque? And we showed her the plaque and it's pretty cool in my studio for everyone to see forever. And so that was just the advice I gave them that day. But yeah, if it's becoming a struggle every day, that's when you can think about, okay, what can we change? Sometimes I think they have too much to practice. When I am filling out my little online chart with on my Google Doc, if it's more than one page, then I'm like, oh wow, I've really assigned them a lot of things. I need to maybe cut back. They don't have to do all these exercises, even though it would be so fabulous if they did. Sometimes just being like, let's just focus on a few things each week and just the pressure of not having so much time and so many things to practice might alleviate some of that stress or I don't know, just parent notes the child better than anyone, so can kind of gauge what's working and what's not working and what maybe needs to be changed to make it more enjoyable.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I like that because sometimes when something's hard work, it's hard to tell Are we having fun or are we supposed to be having fun? It seems like hard work. And so I like that gauge for resistance or maybe procrastinating getting started or complaining about practice at home. That would be one good way. Doesn't mean they have to be, I dunno, jumping up and down with joy every minute of the practice like you're saying. But yeah, are there just resisting doing it. I think that's a good gauge for sure.

Leslie Thackeray:

And I think consistency is a huge motivator. So my students who have the consistency of practicing every day and even at the same time and even I have some students who we have their three exercises and then our lessons are identical each week and they thrive on that because they love to just finish their aude and get their scale and get the next one and move on. And other students, it's a little different. It's a thing every week or whatever. But I really think consistency is also one of the best ways to make it maybe not more fun but more successful.

Christine Goodner:

Well, and when we're playing complicated instruments, it is more fun if we feel like we're competent at it, even if it's That

Leslie Thackeray:

Is true. Yeah, it's definitely,

Christine Goodner:

If we're not consistent enough, it can just always feel impossibly hard, I think. So I know if I don't practice enough myself, then when I do practice it just my fingers feel clunky and I just don't like my sound. And there's just all these things that get rusty in a way that make it not fun. So I like that piece about consistency. I do hear from people that that's the thing that really makes it work for them is that

being consistent, which could look different. Some families, it's like every day at the same time is consistent. And for other people it's just every day. But it has to be different times. That's fine too.

Leslie Thackeray:

Exactly.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. If you're listening, I think thinking about how could you be more consistent or how can you start to add more consistency to your practice life and it is a little counterintuitive that that would help it be more fun for some people. Well, how can people get ahold of you or follow you if they're interested in connecting? After our conversation today,

Leslie Thackeray:

The practice shoppe is the practice shoppe.com and it's shoppe with A-S-H-O-P-P-E, kind of like reminiscent of a candy shoppe for musicians. I also want Instagram, and I'm a huge poster, but I will put stuff on there every once in a while. The same with Facebook, both just at the practice shoppe and all of my contact information on my website, it's directly to me. I'm not a big organization, I'm just me in my basement. So if the email on my website goes directly to me, Leslie, at the practice shoppe.com, and there might even be a phone number, which might be my cell phone that goes directly to me. I get a lot of phone calls about just different ideas and things like that. So I'm open to that. And of course if I'm teaching or busy, I don't answer. So that's how it is. Right.

Christine Goodner:

Great. And I hope people, if you have not checked out the practice shoppe yet, go and see all the resources there. So it is really valuable to have as teachers and families supporting young musicians just sometimes we just need a little creativity and coming out with what ourselves is just one too many things to do. So I love that. Well, I always love to leave people, leave listeners with a practice tip of for the week. So it can be something that's related to what we've already talked about, but what is something we can leave listeners with about their practice this week?

Leslie Thackeray:

I encourage people, unless you're already doing this, but to be most efficient in your practicing by just doing small spots over and over and then be done. You don't even have to play the whole piece of what I think you could probably get as much knowledge as you need throughout your daily practice just by doing small spots over and over. So challenge yourself to find two or three spots in your working piece or polishing piece or a new piece or whatever and find some way to count 10 times and just do it 10 times and see for yourself how you can improve just by doing something over and over like that. I

Christine Goodner:

Love that. Thanks. That's great advice. I think playing straight through is often not what I would hope is happening at home. I would love those little spots to be isolated and worked on. So yeah, and find one of those bead counters on practice shoppe for those of you who are interested. It'll be a great way to track that. Well, Leslie, thank you so much. A pleasure to talk to you and connect. I look forward to seeing you in person next time. I feel like we run into each other at conferences and things and it's always fun to see what you have

Leslie Thackeray:

You. So great to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Before we go today:

Here are three things I am taking away from this week's interview with Leslie Thackeray

1st: I could really relate to Leslie sharing that she liked that she played but didn't like to practice. I get asked about this alot "What if my child likes to play, but doesn't like to practice?" I think the answer to this is that it's super super normal, and also we can help (sometimes it's our teacher who will have ideas how) to make it easier for them or for them to see it as satisfying rather than only a chore.

Also, if your child has always loved practice - this is great too - there is a range of experiences and they are all ok.

2nd: If practice is a battle or there is a lot of resistance, it doesn't have to stay that way. There are ways to make it more fun, especially until the "I see practice as a satisfying, problem solving activity" kicks in.

3rd: It's helpful sometimes for projects related to practice to have a beginning and an end. Working towards something - like the scale challenge Leslie was sharing with us can make it feel like we have a finish line we are working towards. Of course if we make music for a lifetime there is not a finish line to that, but little projects along the way can be so motivating and help us see the progress we are making. Its a win-win all around.

I'd love to hear what you took away from this conversation!

Send me a message on Instagram - at SuzukiTriangle

Check out the resources at the Practice Shoppe - I will put a link to some of the resources Leslie mentioned in this episode in the show notes/article on my website.

Happy Practicing this week Time to Practice Community! I'll look forward to our next conversation.

*Transcript created by Rev.com