

What is the Suzuki Method?

Background

The Suzuki method is an approach to music education and to the development of ability in young children. Pioneered by Shin'ichi Suzuki in Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War, one of the central tenets of its philosophy is that 'all children, without exception, flourish in response to skilful teaching' and that they are 'born equipped with that potential' (1). Specifically, they have already received a natural training in how to speak their own language - via the '*mother-tongue educational method*', (2) which is how Suzuki describes the means whereby all young children acquire language naturally, as they develop from birth. This process, Suzuki felt, could be applied to other forms of learning. The *Talent Education Movement* - today spread all over the world, grew both from Suzuki's curiosity as to how children learn, and from his own personal wish to '*know the secret behind the human creation of art*' (3). While employed in his father's violin factory, Suzuki had been inspired by a recording of Mischa Elman playing Schubert's *Ave Maria*. A late starter on the violin at age 17 and initially self-taught, Suzuki was deeply drawn to music - but doubtful about his capacity as a performer. However, he was determined to cultivate himself step by step, '*even if I had no talent*' (4). After years of difficult study and eventually noticing signs of ability in himself, he felt confidently able to state that musical ability was something that could be developed through the environment, and was not innate only in some individuals. And so began Suzuki's long quest for more appropriate ways to foster talent, and the development of the philosophy which continues to underpin the Suzuki method as we know it today.

The development of the philosophy

At the age of 17 and brought up with strong moral and religious values and work ethic, Suzuki became greatly influenced by the writings of Tolstoy - whom he felt was saying, *'The voice of one's conscience is the voice of God'* (5) - and as a result, resolved *'to commit myself to whatever might be presented to me in a given moment'* (6). During this period of time, on the way home from business school - he would often play with the neighbourhood children. This, he came to realise, was a useful learning opportunity for him: *'I longed to keep alive within me the innocent human posture I observed in those children'* (7). As expressed in *Nurtured by Love*, Suzuki felt that his life's work of *Talent Education* began at that point. With the background of world war and mindful that *'many of the world's beautiful children turn out to be adults who harbour suspicion, distrust, injustice, hatred, strife, unhappiness and darkness'* (9) - and believing that current educational strategies were flawed, Suzuki asked the question: *'Is it simply impossible to help them retain their beautiful hearts as they mature(d) into adulthood?'*(10)

Suzuki's desire to improve the educational system was further reinforced when, convalescing after having been at the brink of death due to illness and the privations of war, he took the opportunity to develop his arithmetical skills, and devised a successful system which would later become widespread in schools all over Japan. This system - based on Suzuki's experimentation thus far, would - he resolved - be applied in his teaching as part of *Talent Education*. Moreover, Suzuki went on to state, *'I have in mind an educational approach that produces not a single dropout, a pedagogy that is based on love, which is nothing other than the inherent desire of every human being to absorb the true, the good, and the beautiful...'*(10). In this, Suzuki was influenced by Einstein - with whom he spent time while training in Germany - and who himself was an accomplished violinist. Suzuki took seriously Einstein's assertion that *'all human beings are the same'* (11). He then did not see why he could not *'raise these children as human beings who similarly possess a refined sensibility, modesty and profound love for humanity'* (12).

Thus, *Talent Education*, in Suzuki's eyes, was as much about developing character, as musical ability. Just as importantly, musical training was a training for life: *'anyone who has cultivated her musical ability to a high degree of accomplishment will demonstrate equally outstanding ability in whatever field she chooses to enter'* (13)

Creating talent

So, how can musical ability be created in young children? Suzuki stated that talent must be fostered, not taught. Just as a child learns to speak its mother tongue under the right conditions, though without any 'teaching' as such - so we can provide the appropriate environment to enable a child to learn to play a musical instrument, fostering the growth of the ability already present within the child. So, we start from the premise of *'everyone has a sprout of talent'* (14), and we go about nurturing this talent in a variety of ways:

An early start

Just as children start learning their language right from birth from constant exposure to the human voice, so with the Suzuki method, they begin their musical training in the same way. Being exposed to beautiful music as early as possible from birth onwards, a child starts to absorb the music that will later be played, in much the same way as speaking comes after understanding. After a period of observation of lessons and playing games, children can start to play an instrument from as young as 3 years of age, though many start at 4 or 5. Of course it is never too late to learn a musical instrument, but Suzuki points out that in comparison to adults, who will need much more training to reach the same level of ability, *'small children do not learn by will power; they learn as a natural function of growth'* (15). At this formative time, therefore, it makes perfect sense to take great care in the cultivation of the child's natural abilities. In his writings, Suzuki uses the analogy of a plant seedling - *'unless the seedlings are well cared for, beautiful flowers cannot be expected'*. He goes on to

state his belief that parents are wholly accountable for how their children turn out: *'nobody has the responsibility for bringing up a child to be a fine person except the parents of that child (16)'*.

Parental involvement

An important feature of the Suzuki method is what is often referred to as *'The Triangle'* of child, parent and teacher. Until the pupil is old enough to practice on their own, the close involvement of at least one parent is considered vital. This includes bringing the child to observe lessons and learning the instrument themselves for a period of time so as to understand how to help the child. They become the 'Home Teacher', supervising the pupil's daily practice and ensuring that they listen to recordings of the repertoire. In the early stages, a young child will observe their parent being taught, and they will already be learning by osmosis as they become familiar with the tunes and the routine. There will also be instruction given to the parent on starting to pay attention to the child's posture at home, and fun games to be played both as preparatory to playing the instrument, and to foster the bond between parent and child. Suzuki states, *' an unlimited amount of ability can develop when parent and child are having fun together'* (17). In this way, the child's learning experience will be made as pleasurable as possible, and the discipline of learning an instrument easier to maintain. More time can be taken to establish the basics of posture and technique, thus providing a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

Building a solid foundation

All the teaching techniques in the Suzuki method are designed to reflect aspects of natural language acquisition:

- Daily listening to recordings of pieces the pupil is learning. This starts even before the child begins learning the instrument, so as to

internalise the melodies. After all, before a child learns to speak, it hears and understands.

- Aural learning, imitation and memorisation of pieces. This arises naturally from the daily listening. It also has benefits in that children who have not yet learnt to read words or notes can learn to play the music. When note-reading is delayed, the pupil is also freed to be able to concentrate more on both technique and self-expression.
- Daily practice - Suzuki famously said, '*only practice on the days you eat!*' (18) After several years of parental supervision, the child will eventually internalise this habit and be able to practice on their own. Practising should become as natural a part of daily life as speaking is. For this to happen, special time has to be put aside.
- Teacher and pupil bow to each other. A Japanese custom, this fulfils the purpose of clearly and calmly signalling the start and end of the lesson, and focusing attention on the work. Moreover, it signifies that both teacher and pupil have respect for each other.
- Repetition - of techniques, passages in pieces, posture and bow-hold exercises - until they become second nature. This is combined with self-reflection and perseverance, in order to improve whatever is being worked on. The constant repetition of new words, of course, also plays a big part in language acquisition.
- Strong attention is given to basic technique, posture and tone-production in the early stages, so as to set up good habits for life. The earlier this happens, the more natural the process will be - rather like learning a new language. Many teachers are now finding that with adults and older children, the Alexander Technique can help greatly in

promoting a positive use of the body to enable the pupil to get the best sound from their instrument, and avoid injury through poor use.

- A step-by-step approach. This reflects the very gradual process of language acquisition, and is especially relevant to very young children, since their attention span is shorter. They are also in no hurry to progress, and much more 'in the moment' - which is to their advantage, since a simple activity can be 'spun out' with fun variations in a 'single point lesson', and thus internalised more thoroughly.
- A routine lesson structure, which includes tuning; exercises on tone-production (tonalisations); a piece in progress; preparatory work for new pieces, and review of an old piece. Once learned, pieces are constantly reviewed so as to retain them in the memory, further refine them, and build up a repertoire that can be enjoyed and be confidently performed to an audience. Again, this reflects the way in which we learn and use our own language.
- A common repertoire. This provides a structure for teacher and pupil to follow. Each piece is designed to help teach or reinforce a particular style or technique and appears in logical order, building upon what has come before. There are 10 books, starting with Twinkle Twinkle Little Star variations, and ending with two concertos. Other pieces consist of baroque, folk and classical pieces, together with some pieces written by Suzuki himself. When children play the same piece together in group lessons, they both learn from each other and help each other.
- 'Graduation' from each book. In the Suzuki method, the child is not formally assessed to pass or fail, but submits a recording of pieces, which will be listened to and constructive criticism given. The graduation is an exciting moment as it signifies both that pieces have

been mastered to a high standard, and that progress has been made to the next stage, with new repertoire to be learnt.

- Regular group lessons, playing in unison, concerts and performance opportunities. Emphasis is placed on performance from the early stages. This fosters both confidence and enjoyment, as pupils play both in unison with their peers, and in solo performances to each other and to the public at larger events. In this way, they also learn the skills of teamwork and cooperation, and feel part of a large community of musicians.
- Properly trained teachers. Anyone can potentially set up as a music teacher. Suzuki teachers, on the other hand, undergo years of training, in techniques and musicianship specific to their instrument. They are expected to memorise and perform repertoire, in order to be able to demonstrate pieces to students, and receive a thorough overhaul of their own technique so as to be a good role model. In addition, they learn child psychology, and teaching techniques specific to the needs of young children.

A positive learning environment

Suzuki places great emphasis on nurturing a loving bond between parent and child: *'the love a parent feels for his children is the kind of love that appeals to life. Children sense our expressions strongly'* (19). Teacher and parent cultivate a friendly and motivating manner towards the pupil, and abundant praise is given for effort and progress. As mentioned previously, tasks are made as fun as possible, as *'tasks which are done happily are internalised and in this manner talent is grown carefully. This is the secret for parents and teachers regarding education'* (20). Suzuki also felt strongly that an angry atmosphere should have no place in education: *'Anger causes much stress. Laughing and dissolving the stress at home is a better provision for*

tomorrow than building up stress through needless anger' (21). He offers this advice for parents with children whose behaviour they find challenging: 'Once a day go into a room alone and...say, "I hope that this child is happy and healthy all of his life"... then...look at the face of your child again. It will seem to have changed'. Suzuki also stated he felt parents and teachers should keep in their minds that ultimately, we are all seeking for 'truth, goodness, beauty and love' (22). He considered this to be a fundamental starting point in the development of talent.

Common criticisms

First impressions of the Suzuki approach can be misleading. Common criticisms (23) include:

- Memorisation of music means that students never learn to sight-read. This is indeed not the case at all - though exactly when notation is introduced would be down to the individual teacher - the idea being that a child must first achieve a solid foundation in technical competence.
- The Suzuki method trains children to be professional musicians

Though many Suzuki students have gone on to become professional musicians, Suzuki made it very clear that his goal was not to 'produce musicians'. He stated the following: *'I am not engaged in Talent Education in order to produce musicians, nor do the children participate because they want to become musicians. But anyone who has cultivated her musical ability to a high degree of accomplishment will demonstrate equally outstanding ability in whatever other field she chooses to enter' (24).*

- The Suzuki method is all about playing the same music, in the same way, together in groups

All Suzuki students have individual lessons. Although there is a common repertoire, pupils are respected as individuals, and learning with the Suzuki method does not preclude the exploration of other repertoire. Regular group lessons are intended for the purpose of support, socialisation, and fun.

The 21st Century - Conclusion

How relevant is the Suzuki method to today's students? There has been a lot of fascinating and also bitter and confrontational debate on this subject (25) and (26). Of course, Suzuki was indeed a product of his upbringing, his culture and his time, and it is only right that we should be constantly evaluating the method, our attitude towards it, and our way of teaching it - so that things continue to evolve in a positive way. My own view is that the Suzuki method contains a basic combination of ingredients which taken as a balanced whole, provide a very good foundation for learning and can be continue to be built upon. Further developments could involve, for example: evaluating the repertoire for suitability for individual instruments and today's eclectic musical climate; the addition of chamber music; helping students to hear and play harmony, perhaps compose and improvise. Also, at the end of the day, the successful use of any method will, surely, be down to this: '*It really depends on the teacher*'.

Bibliography

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Alfred Music Publishing Co. Inc.

SUZUKI, S (1969) - Translated Revised Edition 1981) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Alfred Publishing Co. Inc.

Quotations

- (1) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Prologue, p 6
- (2) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Prologue, p 8
- (3) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 46
- (4) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 46
- (5) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 79
- (6) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 5, p 88
- (7) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 81
- (8) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 81
- (9) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 3, p 81
- (10) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 4, p 71
- (11) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 4, p 71
- (12) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 4, p 71
- (13) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 4, p 71
- (14) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 1 p 3
- (15) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 6 p 56
- (16) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 8 p 77
- (17) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 2 p 21
- (18) British Suzuki Institute website
- (19) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 6 p 57
- (20) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 2 p 21
- (21) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 5 p 49
- (22) SUZUKI, S (1969) - *Ability Development from Age Zero* Chapter 7 p 71
- (23) British Suzuki Institute website
- (24) SUZUKI, S (1966) - *Nurtured by Love* Chapter 5 p 100
- (25) <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/was-suzuki-method-formulated-as-cult.html>
- (26) <http://christianhowes.com/2013/03/11/why-the-suzuki-method-is-important-and-irreplaceable> (video).