

About the Suzuki Method

by *Miranda Hughes*

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As a young adult in pre-war Japan, Shinichi Suzuki made an astonishing observation: all children learn to speak their mother tongue fluently. No one else seemed to think this fact particularly surprising, because language learning had been happening quite naturally in human civilizations for eons. But to Suzuki, it illustrated the amazing potential of all children. He began working with very young children using his area of expertise, classical violin, applying his developing his theories about why language learning works so well. The success of his efforts was immediate.

After the devastation in Japan, which occurred during World War II, Suzuki moved to Matsumoto to build a music program concentrating on teaching music to very young children. He started teaching children the violin at ages much younger than traditional methods: in many cases as early as 2 or 3. He felt that by teaching youngsters music in the correct nurturing environment, he could help them grow into musicians with astonishing levels of ability, but more importantly, with beautiful spirits.

This, then, is the essence of the Suzuki Philosophy: that all children are born with profound potential ability, and that by nurturing that ability in the correct environment we will produce people with great spirits. Suzuki helped shift the entire paradigm of twentieth-century educational philosophy away from its focus on heredity and the idea of inborn talent, and towards a concern with environment. Perhaps more importantly, he injected his unique idealistic perspective: that the most important result of this change in educational strategies would not be in traditional measures of educational "success" (though that would certainly happen too), but in the development of wonderful human beings with mature and sensitive spirits.

The method itself applies Suzuki's philosophy to the day-to-day task of nurturing musical ability and the spiritual growth of the child. It works by fairly closely mimicking the way in which children naturally learn to speak.

Thus ideally education starts at birth, just as we talk to our infants from the day they are born. "*Ability development from age zero*," Suzuki was fond of saying. Before formal instruction on an instrument begins, the parents of the young child work to make music a part of the child's life. They play good, recorded music of all genres for their infant, and work to make rhythm and melody a part of daily existence.

Then, just prior to the time the child is beginning instruction on the instrument, a number of things happen. The child will begin receiving daily repetitive exposure to a recording of the specific repertoire he will be learning. He will also be encouraged to watch other children learning and playing their instruments, in private and group lesson environments or in more informal settings. And one of the parents will begin studying the chosen instrument and playing it in the home on a daily basis. This preparation builds the child's enthusiasm, begins the auditory learning and provides role models both within and outside the home.

The actual process of teaching the young child to play the instrument involves a trio of players: the child, the teacher and the "Suzuki parent". This is the parent who will teach the child at home on a daily basis, the one who has been learning the fundamentals of the instrument. People have likened this

three-way arrangement to a stool with three legs: if one leg is missing the whole structure will fall over.

Suzuki lessons are fun. Very small steps are presented in a playful and carefully thought-out way. The pre-schooler delights in the repetition which produces mastery of these early steps. The Suzuki parent works at home to provide a "home teaching" environment which mimics the lesson environment: using small achievable steps, positive rather than negative reinforcement, focusing on one thing at a time, using repetition and review to build and maintain mastery, providing a creative and enjoyable fun environment. In addition, group classes and the parent's own work on the instrument continue to provide role models and positive peer-group motivation. And continued listening to the repertoire makes note-learning an almost effortless task, without the need to teach note-reading to the preschooler.

As the student grows older and progresses on the instrument, Suzuki instruction gradually begins to look more like traditional methods of instruction. Students begin practising independently, attending lessons without the parent, they learn to read music notation, new steps become bigger and more complex, the lessons look more like work and less like play. However, the pedagogical principles remain: repetitive listening, the use of supportive encouragement, repetition and review, positive peer-group modeling, and so on.

And of course, the philosophical foundation remains. Every student has ability, every student is a worthy person, and through the study of music, every student can attain greatness as a human being.