

1: First principles

*Most of us are familiar with the Suzuki approach to violin teaching, but there is less awareness that it has also proved to be an effective introduction to the piano. In the first of an eight-part series of articles, **Jenny Macmillan** outlines the basic principles of Suzuki musicianship and how they can be applied to piano studies*



Sit up straight: Good posture is fundamental to the Suzuki approach

If you've ever thought at all about the Suzuki teaching method, you may have wondered how it could work for piano. You may have in your mind a picture of hundreds of small children playing the violin together in unison, and feel the same approach would be inappropriate for the piano. In this article I hope to show that the Suzuki approach is an excellent one for introducing children to the piano.

Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) experimented with his new ideas for teaching immediately after the second world war when he was asked to set up a music school in Matsumoto in Japan. While living in Germany for eight years in his twenties, he noted how easily babies learned to speak their native tongue while he, as an adult, struggled to learn it. He identified the element that made their learning process so easy and painless: environment.

Environment

Children hear language constantly around them, they imitate what they hear, they repeat words and phrases again and again, and they receive enthusiastic praise from their parents. This environment, reasoned the young Suzuki, creates the perfect learning situation. And in the same way that it works successfully for language, he concluded it could work successfully for many other subjects, including music. His discovery was that, just as virtually all children learn to speak their own language fluently, almost all can learn to play a musical instrument competently – if provided with an appropriate learning environment. Suzuki himself was a violinist, so he initially devised his approach for the violin.

His results from working with very young children from the age of about three were phenomenal. He trained other teachers, and hundreds of children in Matsumoto were successfully learning to play the violin. He strongly believed that not only were these children learning to play a musical instrument but, through the violin, they were developing their characters as human beings. Through their musical studies, they were developing self-discipline and self-esteem, as well as powers of concentration, listening and memory. By refining their musical sensitivity, they became more sensitive as people. He was not trying to turn his students into professional musicians, simply enabling children to develop to their full potential.

After Suzuki had been teaching violin at Matsumoto for about ten years, a skilled pianist named Haruko Kataoka came to study with him. While accompanying Suzuki's pupils during lessons, Kataoka observed his teaching. She visited Suzuki's house daily and learned about the philosophy of his teaching approach. Gradually, with Suzuki's guidance, she applied the philosophy to the piano and devised a way of playing the piano, and a repertoire, which proved to be successful with very young children.

Posture and tone

Suzuki's teaching was based on two elements: posture and tone. From the very first lesson, he worked on posture with each child. Without good posture, he reasoned, good tone cannot be produced. And in every lesson he would ask

pupils to listen intensely to the sound they were producing – to their tone. These two basic elements of Suzuki's teaching could be transferred to the piano. Indeed now the Suzuki approach is successfully used also to teach viola, cello, double bass, guitar, flute, recorder, singing, organ and harp.

Philosophy

What is it that lies behind Suzuki's teaching which enabled him to focus on posture and tone in lessons and which enabled the children to make such amazing progress?

His philosophy is a way of teaching, a way of learning. In theory, any carefully-chosen repertoire could be used. Suzuki's repertoire for various instruments works extremely well, and there are benefits to all children following the same repertoire. In theory, too, any technique could be used alongside Suzuki's philosophy. However, Suzuki and his colleagues have experimented and identified posture and body movements which allow young children to perform with the greatest natural ease to bring out their musicality. Obviously, all teachers adapt his techniques in the light of their own experiences and requirements, but the basic ideas are taught, understood and assimilated on Suzuki teacher training courses.

Key principles

Let us now look at the principles behind Suzuki's teaching which facilitate children's outstanding progress. Every Suzuki teacher would formulate their own list of principles. Mine apply as much to learning language as to learning an instrument. After all, Suzuki named his approach the 'mother tongue approach'.

- **Young start** No-one doubts that it is easier to learn a new language when young than when older. The younger you start, the less likely you are to speak the new language with a 'foreign' accent. It is the same with music. Start young, with plenty of listening, and the music becomes a natural part of one's being.
- **Listening** If children never heard speech, they would not learn to speak. Conversely, when surrounded by a variety of speakers, children hear, copy, and repeat what they hear. They soon become fluent chatterboxes.
- **Observation** While babies are listening to people around them speaking, laughing, crying, they are also observing them, seeing how they behave. Later, they will tend to pick up similar traits.
- **Step-by-step mastery** Babies start uttering sounds which, to all but their devoted parents, are unintelligible. Their parents' praise and enthusiasm for their babyish efforts encourage them to continue this

process of learning. Through **repetition**, they become more skilled at mastering the sounds necessary for them to be understood. By the time they start school they are speaking fluently with reasonable diction, but they continue to repeat their ever-widening vocabulary, becoming more articulate with every repetition, and forming longer and more complex sentences.

- **Common repertoire** Children learn to speak the language they hear at home – the language of their parents. As their experience extends beyond the home, their vocabulary broadens, but they continue to share the same basic language with those in their environment.
- **Review** Without making an effort to reuse words they already know, children repeat words again and again. In this way, words and phrases become a natural part of each child's vocabulary, to be recalled at will.
- **Memory** When children are speaking their own language fluently, they will learn to read it. However, until then, they always speak 'from memory'. And even when they can read, they will normally speak the language 'by heart'.
- **Group work** Children learn well from their peers; they enjoy working together, and we all learn well when we are happily enjoying ourselves. Younger children admire and emulate older ones.
- **Parental involvement** Parents are crucial to creating a good learning environment for their children. We all want the best for our children, but we are mostly groping in the dark. With your first child you are a new, inexperienced parent. However highly skilled you may be in mathematics, engineering or catering, you will have little or no experience in bringing up children. Suzuki explored many different approaches and Suzuki teachers are able to guide parents how best to work with their children. Perhaps the most basic of these is to offer plenty of enthusiastic praise for their child's efforts. Parents are often able to transfer this guidance on musical matters to other instruments and academic/school subjects.

How Suzuki works

Put these principles together, apply them to the study of music rather than language, and you have Suzuki's philosophy. What works well for language also works successfully for music. What works for violin also works for piano and many other musical instruments.

Children start their own individual Suzuki music lessons at an early age – three or four is

ideal. Before then, they will have been surrounded with music. They will have heard plenty of good music in their homes; they will have observed young pupils' music lessons. When children start their own lessons, their parents will make notes during the lessons to help them supervise daily practice at home. Teachers will demonstrate the sounds and techniques, children will repeat them in lesson so they know what to do and what to listen for, and parents will encourage repetition at home so children master each step along the way.

Suzuki children listen to and learn a common core repertoire, although they will usually learn much supplementary material, too. The core repertoire for piano begins with simple folk songs, mostly in the five-finger hand position. It progresses through Bach and Mozart minuets, sonatinas by Clementi and Kuhlau, and movements from a Bach Partita, to sonatas by Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart, and ending with Bach's Italian Concerto. While it is true there is little romantic or twentieth century music, it is very suitable for young children with small hands and whose legs are not long enough to reach the pedals. Suzuki teachers are expected to introduce extra repertoire appropriate to each pupil's age and stage.

Suzuki children learn to play their pieces from memory, so they are entirely comfortable sitting down anywhere, anytime, to play for themselves or to perform. Their musicianship is developed mainly through their review pieces – earlier repertoire pieces which they revisit repeatedly, in order to develop a deeper understanding and to play them more musically.

In addition to weekly individual lessons, Suzuki children attend classes in small groups at which they develop their musicianship further. Whereas group violin activities can involve numerous musical games with their violins, group classes for pianists tend to be less instrument-based. Group activities develop children's co-ordination, aural and reading skills, performing and ensemble skills.

Ideas for group lessons will feature in the third article of this series, **Motivating young musicians through collaboration and games**. Parents' responsibilities and the family support system will be covered in the fourth article, **Inspiring parents with praise, enthusiasm and success**. But next month I shall tackle some of the controversial aspects of the Suzuki approach in **Four Suzuki Myths examined**.

Jenny Macmillan is a Suzuki piano teacher in Cambridge, and an ESA teacher trainer, with an MA in Psychology for Musicians. She gives lecture/demonstrations nationwide on the Suzuki approach, and on ideas for piano teaching and for group lessons. Her articles on a range of topics appear on www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.