

## 2: Four Suzuki Myths examined

*In the first article in her new series about the Suzuki approach to learning music, **Jenny Macmillan** described the main principles of the method. Relatively little has been published about the approach, and several myths have grown up about it which, in this article, she examines and dispels*



### **Talent or ability, nature or nurture?**

Many people believe that Shinichi Suzuki thought musical talent could be developed in all children. There are two issues here. One is the definition of the word talent, as compared with ability. The other is the question of nature versus nurture.

Dictionary definitions are not clear on the difference between talent and ability. However, the term 'natural musical talent' has been shown in a research study<sup>1</sup> to be understood by many music teachers to mean 'an innate aptitude for music – that which is not taught'. A high percentage of teachers interviewed in the same study believe that 'whilst musical *ability* could be learned, some of their pupils... had a natural

*talent* for music which had not been learned'.

They feel you can develop ability, but you cannot acquire talent.

Indeed, Suzuki himself makes it clear that his use of the expression 'talent education' is misleading<sup>2</sup>. 'I used the word in the sense that talent is something to be nurtured, but, since it's inconvenient if we are misunderstood, in the future I would like to eliminate the word talent and simply call it education.' Suzuki reaffirms 'I just used the word talent education in my own way, and maybe I should say ability'. So I think we can be clear that Suzuki was referring to ability and not talent when he claimed that most children could learn to play a musical instrument competently in the same way that

they can learn to speak their mother tongue.

The nurture/nature debate has raged within and beyond the music sphere for decades, and it is not going to stop now. However, extensive research by Sloboda and his colleagues<sup>3</sup> in the 1990s was able to dispel one widespread myth about musical excellence – that high levels of musical accomplishment are necessarily rare. Sloboda found that, typically, in the early stages of learning, high-achieving musicians received tuition from friendly but highly professional teachers combined with high levels of support from their parents; they also spent more time practising.

Half a century earlier, Suzuki had come to exactly the same conclusion – that, for many people, high musical achievement was a realistic prospect. He showed with hundreds of his own students that effective teaching and a supportive home environment can produce superb musical results.

All professional musicians have spent hours and hours over many years practising their instruments. At the same time, many who are successful feel they are special and have some exceptional talent not given to ordinary people. This idea may have been instilled in them from an early age to encourage their practising endeavours. Those who are highly successful are generally considered to have been born with some extra innate musical talent, and this may well be true for artists at the top of the profession.

The myth that Suzuki could develop talent in all children has come about through misunderstanding. The view that musical ability is rare is gradually changing as research catches up with Suzuki's intuition. Teachers and parents are beginning to appreciate that, with appropriate training and environment, musical ability can be developed so that children can reach their full potential.

### **Involving parents**

The second myth I want to examine is that it is unnecessary, harmful and perhaps even impossible to involve parents in children's instrumental learning.

Fifty years ago, parents rarely went into schools. Today, parents often see their children's teachers and are asked to help with reading, spellings, multiplication tables and project homework.

The Plowden Report of 40 years ago was a

starting point in the process of involving parents, with subsequent researchers<sup>5</sup> emphasising that 'It has been proved that parental involvement improves children's school performance'. In a major research project in instrumental learning, Davidson, Sloboda & Howe<sup>5</sup> found that the highest achieving children had received the most support from their parents up to the age of 11. They believe that high levels of musical attainment are most likely unattainable without such supportive parental involvement.

Again, Suzuki was ahead of his time. He was asking for parental involvement half a century ago. Then, it was unusual. Now, increasingly, it is becoming accepted by schools, teachers and parents that parents are central to children's learning. Suzuki teachers are trained to discuss the issue with parents. Once convinced of their vital role, parents generally manage to find time in their busy lives to assist their children, even when working and with a large family. Traditional instrumental teachers often say they would not want parents involved<sup>6</sup>, which usually means they do not know how to involve parents constructively. With training, they would learn how to make good use of parents' natural wishes to provide the best education for their children.

The idea that it is unnecessary, harmful or impossible to involve parents in children's learning is outdated.

### Group or individual lessons

The third myth is that the Suzuki approach is a group teaching method. Many people have seen video footage from the Sixties of large groups of Suzuki-trained Japanese children playing the violin in unison and they feel the approach teaches them to play mechanically rather than musically.

It is possible for large groups of Suzuki children to perform in unison because they all learn the same core repertoire for their instrument. In some respects, this is like playing in a large section in an orchestra. But this is not what the Suzuki approach is about. Children also perform solo.

Most Suzuki children receive weekly individual lessons. The best Suzuki teachers, as the best conventional teachers, encourage individual, characterful playing from each child.

As an addition to the individual lessons, most Suzuki teachers run group lessons at which general musicianship is covered, often in the form of games, to develop children's co-ordination, aural and reading skills, performing and ensemble skills.

It is simply wrong to presume that the Suzuki approach is a group teaching method. All Suzuki children receive individual or, sometimes, paired lessons at which their personal needs are carefully addressed.

### Learning to read

The last myth I want to examine is that Suzuki children do not learn to read music, or read only poorly.

It is true that initially Suzuki pupils, often aged three and four, learn to play by ear. They listen to recordings of the music they are to learn, and pick out the tunes on their instrument. Only when the basics of playing simple pieces with a good tone and good technique have been established do they learn to play from the music.

Traditionally, most classically trained musicians have learned from notation. Teachers tend to teach in the way they themselves learned. Therefore, they tend to teach using notation and are wary of other approaches. However, a fascinating article by Anderson<sup>7</sup> reviews research which advocates 'sound before symbol'. She points out that distinguished music teachers throughout history have recommended that playing by ear should take place before playing from notation. She argues that using notation too early or too exclusively may well restrict overall musical development.

There is a fear that pupils who initially learn by ear will never read as well as those who start by reading. However research quoted by Anderson shows that the reverse is actually true. Students who play by ear perform in all respects, including sight reading, as well as or better than those who learn from notation. They are significantly more likely to continue lessons, and they enjoy music more.

The eminent Suzuki teacher Caroline Fraser<sup>8</sup> explains that reading music is about recognising a written symbol, recalling a sound and reproducing it. First, children must listen to

plenty of music so that the sounds are in their ears. Then they need to develop their technical skills so they can produce appropriate musical sounds at their instrument. Finally, when they are introduced to reading a score, they already have the aural and technical skills to enable them to reproduce the symbols musically. This is exactly the same principle as a young child learning language naturally – first hear the language, then speak it, finally read it.

In many European countries, children are not expected to learn to read until the age of about seven. Children's eyes, especially boys', are typically not fully developed and ready to track words (or music) until the age of seven<sup>9</sup>. At that age, they learn to read language quickly and easily, usually within a term or two. They are very soon reading as fluently as children who started learning to read at the age of five. And they are reading without the psychological hurdle of years of initial struggle that many encounter.

It is true that, in the early years of Suzuki teaching, in the Fifties and Sixties, when there were few opportunities for children in Japan to play in orchestras or chamber music, reading skills were neglected. Also, untrained 'Suzuki' teachers seem to believe they should not teach pupils to read. Hence the impression that Suzuki children cannot sight-read. However, more recently, and in the West, trained Suzuki teachers are making an effort to develop their pupils' reading skills in the same way they develop their performing skills. The natural approach to learning to read music, based on learning to read language, produces excellent readers. Suzuki children may be in their early teens by the time their reading skills have caught up with their performing skills, but many become fine readers. It is no longer the case that they cannot read.

The next article in this series will cover the social aspect of the Suzuki approach in group lessons, workshops and concerts.

*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](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk).*

### References

1. Woods, C. (2006) Does 'Natural Talent' Exist? Part 1, *Piano Professional*, September 2006, pp31-32
2. Suzuki, S. (1982) *Where Love is Deep*. New Albany, Indiana: World-Wide Press, p111
3. Sloboda, J. & Davidson, J. (1996/2000) The young performing musician. In I. Deliege & J. Sloboda (eds) *Musical Beginnings*. Oxford: OUP, pp171-190
4. Long, R. (1986) *Developing Parental Involvement in Primary Schools*. London: Macmillan
5. Davidson, J.W., Sloboda, J.A. & Howe, M.J.A. (1995/1996, winter) The role of parents and teachers in the success and failure of instrumental learners. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 127, Special Issue: 15th ISME International Research Seminar: 40-44
6. Macmillan, J. (2003) *Learning the Piano: Teachers' attitudes to parental involvement*. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk/Articles.htm](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk/Articles.htm)
7. Anderson, S. Sound before Symbol revisited: an alternative approach, *Piano Professional*, September 2006, pp22-25
8. Fraser, C. Music reading in the Suzuki style, *Piano Professional*, January 2007, pp17-18
9. Sheil, M.L. (1985) *Eye before Ear or Ear before Eye?* NSW: Suzuki Talent Education Association of Australia