

# Suzuki for Piano

## 8. Training to become a Suzuki teacher



In the final article of her series, **Jenny MacMillan** describes the comprehensive training required of Suzuki teachers

Teachers are trained to be positive and encouraging in individual lessons, keeping an appropriate balance between studying new material and maintaining and improving past repertoire, developing both musicality and technique. Short and long term goals keep children on track; regular performances, both formal and informal, raise the standard of playing. Teachers learn to help parents use their imagination during their children's practice sessions, allowing time for fun as well as for focused, specific work. Listening daily to good music (live when possible) can inspire the whole family, and attending music courses together can provide a huge stimulus for all involved.

Suzuki children have weekly individual lessons but also attend monthly group classes. For pianists there may be five or six children of similar ages and stages in a class. Group lessons should be fun, and trainees learn how to use musical games, clapping games, singing games, games with flash cards, lucky dips and ensemble activities to foster children's aural, theory, reading, performing and ensemble skills. Feeling part of a lively musical group is an important motivational factor for both children and their parents.

Suzuki philosophy and child development are also discussed during training. Trainees study the music of the Suzuki repertoire in detail, focusing on the technique and tone production required to teach very young children. As Paul Harris admirably points out in his book *Teaching Beginners* (Faber Music), good posture is essential for the technical mastery of an instrument. From the very first lesson, Suzuki teachers focus on posture, ensuring that young pianists are sitting at the right height and have their feet supported on a footstool. Great emphasis is placed on finding and maintaining a good hand shape and appropriate finger and arm movements. The training course is very thorough, including discussion of ideas on

**A**S I hope to have conveyed in the seven previous articles, the Suzuki approach is a highly-effective way of teaching the piano. It is fairly intense but also a lot of fun and tremendously rewarding for child, parent and teacher. Its success relies on the rigorous training that Suzuki teachers receive.

### WHAT DOES THE TRAINING COURSE TEACH?

The course instructs trainees how to teach children from the age of about three through to teenagers. A new element for most trainees is learning how to work with very young children, who need short lessons in which appropriate musical games and activities are changed frequently. Another key element of the Suzuki approach, one that is vital to working with very young children, is the involvement of parents; trainees discover how to work with, involve and motivate them.

Suzuki trainees learn to conduct individual lessons while parents watch and take notes to help with home practice. They

are taught to encourage children to listen carefully to the sounds they produce and to pay close attention to how those sounds are produced. In the early stages, Suzuki teachers give 'one-point lessons', during which the focus throughout is on one point, whether it be improved posture, keeping the hand balanced by playing near the black notes, or listening for a good legato between repeated notes. Suzuki teachers don't teach notes – they teach children to produce and listen for beautiful sounds. They do, however, teach children how to practise – very young children, with their parents watching, are shown how to repeat short sections of music effectively, always listening carefully to the sounds. By working thoroughly on the same one point when practising at home, Suzuki children can gradually achieve technical and musical mastery. As progress is made, individual musical interpretation is emphasised.

Motivation is an important aspect of Suzuki training, as children and parents both need to feel excited about music-making.

teaching theory, aural, scales and reading. Past trainee Gill Gordon described the London course (in an article on Suzuki training in the January 2007 issue of EPTA's *Piano Professional* magazine) as 'the most comprehensive piano teacher training programme I have come across'.

### HOW IS THE COURSE TAUGHT?

The Suzuki piano repertoire ranges from simple folk songs, minuets and sonatinas to Bach's Italian Concerto. The original repertoire consisted mainly of baroque and classical music, mostly Germanic; it is now being revised, with many romantic and 20th-century pieces from different countries and periods being added. Trainees learn to perform and teach the complete repertoire, receiving individual piano lessons in the form of masterclasses and discovering the music's teaching points in repertoire classes. They observe the trainers teaching children, teach children with feedback from the trainers, and practise teaching each other under supervision. There are talks and discussions, and trainees perform concerts for each other. These can be quite scary, especially for those more naturally inclined towards teaching than performing, but there are plenty of other friendly trainees with whom to share any fears – trainees become very supportive of each other!

There are five levels of examinations to attain the internationally-recognised Diploma of the European Suzuki Association (DipESA). Teachers are allowed to call themselves Suzuki teachers when they have passed level 1, and are accredited by the British Suzuki Institute after passing level 3. It is common for trainees to achieve one level a year. Each year the course involves five weekends, plus a week at Easter and another week over the summer. Some of the training takes place during Suzuki children's workshops; some philosophy discussions take place together with violin and cello trainees while other training is piano specific.

The Suzuki piano teacher training course in London is highly regarded worldwide; trainees have often travelled from abroad to attend. Whereas many countries have only one piano teacher trainer, England has a dozen, all of whom are invited in turn to teach on the course. Their various interests, specialisms and experiences ensure great depth and variety for trainees. Piano teacher training courses in the British Isles are also run in Scotland (Edinburgh) and Ireland (Galway).

Trainees are expected to read widely about Suzuki and other approaches to teaching, and also related subjects such as

child psychology. For each level there are written assignments; these are closely related to developing the skills required to teach young children. Typical assignments include outlining the steps required to set up a Suzuki programme; describing Suzuki techniques as they develop through the repertoire; giving an outline for teaching theory; making a list of music reading material; drawing up a plan for group lessons; preparing a list of supplementary music; and discussing the role of the Suzuki parent, showing how this changes as the child gets older and progresses through the repertoire. Trainees are also asked to evaluate their own teaching experience with young Suzuki pupils. For each practical exam, trainees must be able to perform the complete repertoire for their level, give a lesson to a child with the parent present, and answer questions about teaching by the Suzuki approach.

There is a great shortage of trained Suzuki teachers; most Suzuki teachers have parents clamouring for lessons. Gill Gordon describes the course as 'a personal journey which has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life'.

### WHO BECOMES A SUZUKI TEACHER?

Ideally, Suzuki piano trainees already have or are working towards a diploma in piano performance or teaching. In some circumstances, those who are less qualified as pianists but have significant teaching experience may be accepted onto the course. Generally it is best if trainees already have experience of teaching, although it is increasingly the case that young musicians who were Suzuki children are choosing to train in their early 20s as Suzuki teachers. There is a minimum age limit of 18, but otherwise people of all ages follow the training course.

Unfortunately there are many teachers who wrongly advertise themselves as 'Suzuki' and

give the approach an unwarranted bad name. For instance, they believe Suzuki teachers don't teach children to read music, which is not true; Suzuki teachers are fully aware of the importance of learning to read. In fact, Suzuki teachers who don't teach reading are almost certainly not trained Suzuki teachers, and one should question their other 'Suzuki' teaching ideas! Using the Suzuki repertoire does not make anyone a Suzuki teacher. The important thing is the way in which each piece is taught as part of a whole approach.

Whether or not teachers choose to pursue the Suzuki training course, the approach has many strengths which could be incorporated into more traditional patterns of piano teaching. These include encouraging parents to play recordings of good music for their children, inviting parents to attend lessons, working on posture and technique, using a footstool for balance and posture, suggesting children build a repertoire of favourite pieces that they can play from memory, or timetabling occasional group classes in addition to regular individual lessons.

I hope you have been inspired by some of the ideas discussed in this series of articles. Dr Shinichi Suzuki had many wonderful ideas that I would like to see more widely followed, and I am quite sure he would be in favour of them being made available to as many teachers as possible. To find out more about the approach and training, contact the British Suzuki Institute through their website ([www.britishsuzuki.org.uk](http://www.britishsuzuki.org.uk)) or, for Scotland and Ireland, email Mary McCarthy ([mary\\_r\\_mccarthy2003@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mary_r_mccarthy2003@yahoo.co.uk)).



**Jenny MacMillan** is a Suzuki piano teacher in Cambridge, and a European Suzuki Association trainer, with an MA in Psychology for Musicians. She gives lecture/demonstrations nationwide on the Suzuki approach, and on ideas for piano teaching and group lessons. Her articles on a range of topics appear on [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk)



Jenny Macmillan (far left) and Mary McCarthy (front row, centre) with trainees on the Galway course