



Building a strong foundation from the start

By Pippa Macmillan

Working with students who have developed a good technique and who listen carefully to their playing is always rewarding. They are able to respond to suggestions to enhance musical playing, and will take pleasure in their skill and ongoing achievements. However, to reach that stage requires careful attention to detail, and to learn how to practise effectively. This requires teachers to have a range of ideas and resources to hand to encourage the development of these skills.

Building a strong technical foundation in a sequential and engaging manner is one of the biggest challenges facing string teachers who teach beginners. The necessity to work in this way right from the start is not taught in any formal way to music undergraduates, or string teachers in general unless they have undergone specific specialised training. Teachers need to be able to draw on a wide variety of games to develop basic technique, as children respond differently and what works for one child may not work for another.

During her 35-year teaching career my daughter's first violin teacher, Sharron Beamer, devised many games and strategies to build the disparate skills needed to play the violin with excellent technique and she gained further inspiration from observing other teachers. Having worked with a number of children who required remedial work, she also devised solutions to counteract and correct poor technique. For many years teachers have been asking Sharron to document her teaching ideas,

and this has now come to fruition. As Sharron says, "there isn't 'one way' of teaching and one needs different ways with different students. I just want to provide an outline demonstrating a logical sequence of the different ingredients that 'must' be taught if a child is to play well."

We are delighted that this film is now available at www.beamerviolin.com. Viewers pay a modest once-only lifetime payment to gain access to over three hours of footage of Sharron working with two students: my daughter, Lyra, and a more advanced pupil, Harry. The aim of this project is to bring Sharron's ideas, games and tricks for teaching beginner violin pupils to a wide audience, and document her well-tested ideas for future generations of teachers and pupils. A clear step-by-step progression is demonstrated, taking a child from total beginner to fluent player. This is especially useful both for inexperienced teachers, and for those looking for fresh ideas to supplement their teaching. Some teachers may feel confident guiding pupils through the graded exams, but be inexperienced in how to teach complete beginners, to travel on that all-important journey with pupils, from the very start up until Grade 1 and beyond.

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Sharron began learning the violin as an adult in her mid-thirties. This gave her the opportunity to consider each stage of learning from the perspective of an adult beginner. I can't remember the trials and challenges of the early stages of learning to play an instrument, having started the piano at 3 and the cello at 6. However, Sharron has methodically considered every aspect of how to build technique, and tried out her ideas on hundreds of children. She studied with the violinist and educator Shinichi Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1987-88, becoming good friends with Dr and Mrs Suzuki, who stayed with her in London when they travelled to the UK.



The Suzuki approach to learning an instrument has similarities with folk music and jazz, in that it is aural-based for learning the melodies, at least until the technique is well established.

About the Suzuki approach

Dr Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) was a violinist, educator, philosopher, and humanitarian who saw an opportunity to enrich the lives of children through music. He called his method the Mother Tongue approach. Noting how rapidly children learn to speak their own language – through constant exposure, imitation, repetition and parental praise – he realised the same approach could be used for learning music. He reasoned that every child has the ability to make music if given the appropriate training and learning environment. His best known account of how he devised and refined the approach, and some of the results achieved by his pupils, is to be found in his book *Nurtured by Love*, first published in 1969. In it he explains his belief that musical talent is not inherited or inborn, but has to be learned and developed.



The Suzuki approach has evolved into an effective system of teaching, with a number of aspects that differentiate it from other methods of teaching: the young age at which pupils start; observation of other pupils' lessons; parental involvement; extensive listening to music; learning from demonstration; step-by-step mastery of each technique; use of a common repertoire; playing from memory; reviewing old pieces; and group work to complement individual lessons.

While these may differ from approaches that other teachers use, the goal of having a pupil who can play with ease and fluency, a confident tone, secure intonation, and an understanding of style, is common for all teachers.

Step-by-step mastery of each stage of violin playing is absolutely essential to build a secure foundation. There are no shortcuts, and although the journey for every student will be different, there is a basic set of skills that must be mastered by everyone. As Daniel Coyle says in *The Little Book of Talent*, "To develop reliable hard skill, you need to connect the right wires in your brain. In this, it helps to be careful, slow, and keenly attuned to errors." He goes on to describe early Suzuki music lessons, "Each fundamental, no matter how humble-seeming, is introduced as a precise skill of huge importance (which of course, it really is), taught via a series of vivid images, and worked on over and over until it is mastered. The vital pieces are built, repetition by careful repetition."

Sharron believes that all lessons, but especially the first lesson, must be not only purposeful but also totally non-threatening and achievable. Never frighten a child by making them think they are going to be asked to do something at which they might fail. That is the importance of breaking down each skill down into small achievable steps, making them as fun as possible and encouraging the child to feel confident and successful. A child that feels confident and successful will become confident and successful.

Unpacking the violin and naming the parts of the violin and bow are useful activities for the first lesson. Learning the feet placement for playing position and rest position sets the stage for a balanced body position for healthy posture. Placing the violin under the chin without tension is an absolutely crucial step to master, yet it takes children many repetitions to learn to place the instrument correctly, and thus a variety of games needs to be at the fingertips of teachers. Developing a balanced bow hold that is strong and secure yet soft and flexible takes time, and the more games that can be played before putting the bow on the string, the more time there is to develop success.

Maintaining a good bow hold and relaxed posture with the violin is challenging, and requires constant attention. Suzuki violin teacher Edward Kreitman recommends thinking of teaching in 'layers'. First learn a skill, such as holding a bow, then continue to do that while adding a new skill, such as playing open strings. If the bow hold worsens, it's clear that more work is needed to be done on the bow hold by itself. If the basics aren't constantly prioritised, they quickly deteriorate, requiring time-consuming remedial work at a later stage.

Sharron continues through the film, explaining how she introduces the thumb action on the bow necessary for getting weight into the string, which develops into a game where the pupil catches fish from a pond with a magnet on the bow, using the newly-developed thumb action to bring the fish out of the water. Repetition is key to skill development, and in many of these activities children don't even realise that they are repeating skills over and over again, strengthening muscles, as they are absorbed by the game. Watering the singing flower with the bow repeats the same action, but with a different element of fun for the child!

Other activities include bird pecks with the left hand fingers to develop dexterity and strength, a story for the right hand fingers to understand their roles on the bow, and opening

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and closing the 'door' (right arm) to introduce the swinging motion necessary for the bow arm. Placing the bow on the string is an important step that requires preparation, and Sharron has more useful tips for this. String crossing is another skill to be mastered before the bow and left hand fingers are put together, and Sharron uses the numbers on a clock to explain the different bow angles needed for the different strings.

Simple yet enticing images such as butterflies, waterfalls and rainbows are used to help children understand the shapes needed for their arms and fingers. One of my personal favourites is the 'cranberry game': the pupil places their left hand fingers correctly on the fingerboard, the fingers acting like table tops.

Sharron places a dried cranberry on each finger, and counts to 10 while the child maintains their finger shapes. For a more advanced game, the pupil begins the same way and counts to 10, then lifts their fingers off the string, swings their elbow under and moves the fingers to a lower string, without letting the cranberries fall off! This teaches the pupil the importance of having the whole arm take the fingers to a lower string.

Every technical point must be repeated and corrected until it becomes reasonably 'fixed'. This is an ongoing necessity. Every technique can continue to be improved, and refinement continues throughout a student's musical journey.

Another section of the website is dedicated to troubleshooting on the violin. Sharron explains that “I don’t correct the child. I correct the thumb, the elbow, the head, etc. Child, teacher and parent are a supportive team teaching the various parts of the body what to do.” These practical ideas for common problems cover topics such as posture and the chinrest, avoiding tension, correcting a twist or sag, knee and back posture arising from a lack of core strength, even weight distribution on two feet, left hand finger and thumb problems, bow hold tips, right hand thumb and little finger action, and the bow arm. These days there are many aids available to encourage good technique that can be purchased from specialists websites, but long matchsticks and Blutack make effective “bow police” when attached to the violin, helping children maintain a straight bow to avoid knocking over one of the policemen. Other tactile props are used, to help the child develop a concrete understanding of abstract concepts.

Suzuki showed how beneficial it is to involve one of the parents. Parents need not be musicians, but they are carefully taught how to help their children at home. Parents attend lessons and make detailed notes about what needs to be practised, and how, so each step is thoroughly mastered. The benefits of having parents attend lessons have been well-documented, and for the majority of private teachers, this is always an option. Parents are taught to give plenty of encouragement while supervising daily practices. In this way, pupils are well prepared for each lesson, so lessons are spent refining and polishing the pieces rather than correcting notes and rhythms. This is referred to as the Suzuki ‘triangle’, with teacher, parent and pupil working together as a team. Parents are also expected to help their children listen to music in general and to the pieces being learned in particular. So from the earliest possible age, children are exposed to the sounds of music – the language of music. With these sounds in their heads, it becomes easier for them to play musically at their instrument.

As with learning a language, in Suzuki lessons very young pupils learn by listening and from demonstration, not by playing from printed music. When they can play fluently, producing a beautiful sound with a good technique, they learn to read music, in the same way that children learn first to speak and then to read their own language. Learning to read music isn’t a focus in this film, although there is a video demonstrating reading games that Sharron uses, including a unique way of teaching key signatures. Sharron believes, as most Suzuki-trained teachers do, that beginners should be well set up before any reading is introduced (though reading games away from the instrument are valuable right from the start).

It’s been demonstrated by many: correct repetition creates talent. How many correct repetitions needed varies from person to person. Sharron’s talent is in encouraging the children to build technique correctly and precisely, and in making the process enjoyable for both child and teacher – the delight and engagement is clearly visible in the videos. Developing good technique leads to a love of music. Lyra and Harry are fortunate to have had the amazing influence of Sharron in their early years. Sharron strongly believes that repetition creates character, and quotes a Buddhist saying, “Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny.”

Please visit

www.beamerviolin.com to learn more.

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