

My development as a Suzuki teacher

by Claudia Beltran Cubel

Although I started studying Suzuki philosophy only three years ago, I have experienced many changes as a person, as a teacher and as a pianist.

As a person

Studying in another country has helped me mature and learn to relate to people from other cultures with other languages and customs. It has led me to be more understanding and tolerant and to realise how much I can learn from the people around me. I have learnt to be generous and not to be afraid to ask, to be interested in what I do not know, and to give importance to the act of sharing with others what I can contribute and learning as much as possible from them.

As a teacher

It is as a teacher that I have experienced the most significant changes. Suzuki philosophy has helped me to focus on my way of teaching, to pay more attention to the interpretations of my students regarding not only sound but also gestures. I think much more about enjoyment as an incentive for motivating and engaging younger students. I wish to involve families much more and also to be more accessible and close to all of them.

To praise something, however small, in a very specific way, is something I have learned from the Suzuki approach. This is very present in my day-to-day life and something I am trying to improve, not only with my youngest students, but also with everyone in my daily life.

This grounding in Suzuki philosophy has given me enough self-confidence, resources and knowledge to speak authoritatively to parents and advise them. I always considered myself too young or insecure when teaching young children. A recurring question to myself was, how am I going to explain to this parent what to do with their child when I am not even a mother? As I have been reading, learning about, and working with the philosophy, I have gained confidence in what has worked for me and I have lost my fear of talking to parents and explaining to them what they should do with their children's practice at home, and how.

Above all, I have learned to be a more positive person, to try to see the good side of everything, to appreciate the small details and to feel more secure in the execution of my teaching activities.

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Claudia Beltran Cubel, during Suzuki training course, fourth from the left, sitting immediately behind Jenny Macmillan

As a pianist

As a pianist, Suzuki training has been a turning point in my career. My main objective when I started the training was to be able to teach the piano to young children in order to open up professional opportunities in that field. However, I must say that it has given me much more – from the answer to why I used to experience muscular tension, to examining every gesture or movement of my way of playing. Each detail has become immense, magnified and important. Equally, it has made it easier for me to learn to listen to myself, to feel the need to hear myself and to recognise what I think or feel in the music I'm playing.

Memorisation is also an issue that has changed the way I work. I do not think of it as an option, but as a necessity for those who want to be good interpreters and understand a work in the most complete, profound or transcendental way.

We start by memorising book 1. On the surface this seems very simple and to any other pianist who is not undertaking Suzuki training might seem to belittle their level. But how much technique and learning value these first pieces contain! Make a good finger tip, exercise your fingers and develop their independence, know the keyboard, audibly differentiate the sounds and begin to interpret phrases which are both simple but also full of musicality.

Add to that the discipline of children learning to present themselves at a concert – to introduce their piece, to bow – and to sit with beautiful posture. In fact, one should not underestimate but rather admire the large amount of instruction that young children receive.

As we proceed through the books, pieces that I once considered very easy I now realise are extremely difficult to interpret adequately. In general, not only have my own interpretations changed, but also the way I consider the approach I take with my students. Suzuki training has made me a much more demanding person.

Finally, studying and working with a Suzuki teacher who has introduced me to new techniques, new methodologies and new principles has made me question how I played in the past. Why was I not taught

certain techniques and why were others not explained to me? These are thoughts that have arisen as I discovered the meaning of sounds or gestures that I made previously without knowing why. How could I teach correctly if I did not even know the reasons for my own way of playing?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Suzuki approach has enriched me as a person favouring my development on a personal and social level; as a teacher I have evolved through recognising the importance in teaching aspects such as motivation, play, family, positive reinforcement, active listening; and as a pianist this has allowed me to acquire sensitivities that have enabled me to deepen my pianistic technique. Suzuki philosophy has permeated every facet of my life.

Claudia lives in Valencia, Spain, and travels to Cambridge, UK, three times a year for week-long Suzuki teacher training courses with Jenny Macmillan. Claudia is a level 1 Suzuki piano teacher, working towards levels 2 and 3.