Suzuki - Myths and Magic

Jenny Macmillan

I was recently invited to write an article for Piano Professional, the journal of the European Piano Teachers' Association UK, addressing criticisms that are often directed towards the Suzuki approach. In it, I explain that many of the criticisms are no more than myths, and that the results of the highly logical process of Suzuki teaching are magical: every pupil is shown to have potential, all develop perseverance and stamina, and many become fine musicians. For this ESA Newsletter, I have edited my original article to be relevant to Suzuki teachers of all instruments, and also to reflect welcome and constructive comments from several Suzuki piano teachers and Suzuki parents.

The myth of poor sight-reading skills

There is a belief that Suzuki children don't learn to read music because they play by ear – that the Suzuki approach relies primarily on rote learning and memorisation. Dr Suzuki discouraged note reading at the instrument for very young children, because they learn through their senses – through hearing, listening, watching and feeling – rather than their intellect. He wanted them to listen carefully to the sounds they produced and create a beautiful tone.

Suzuki-trained children in Japan reached advanced levels of violin playing when very young. Also, in the mid 20th century in Japan, children learned to read music at school, so it was not necessary for Dr Suzuki to include the reading of music at the instrument in his philosophy. When the Suzuki approach spread to the West, teachers not fully trained in its philosophy thought Suzuki children shouldn't learn to read music even when older. There was a failure to differentiate between postponing music reading at the instrument versus introducing music reading concepts through activities away from the instrument.

Nowadays Suzuki teachers understand that learning to read music is essential. As soon as children start their individual instrumental lessons, they join group lessons with other children of similar age and level for musicianship games – learning, in effect, the early stages of reading music – playing games with flash cards, rhythm and listening games, singing and moving to music. Good instructors teach written theory, too, when children are ready for it – perhaps around the age of 6. As with learning their mother tongue – first listen, then speak, then read, so the same with music – first listen to the sounds, then develop the technique to play, then learn to read the score. Having the musical language first in the ear is an essential preparation for music reading. If focusing on reading the notes in the early stages, it is not possible to focus also on the sound and the technique.

We teach each aspect of musicianship when the child is ready. This means a young pianist aged 10 or 12 may be performing Bach minuets, Clementi sonatinas and even a simple Beethoven sonata very musically. However, in common with most children of that age (who may have been learning non-Suzuki for three or four years), their sight-reading skills are still at an early stage. Because their listening is very well developed, and because they are learning to practise well, in their early teens their reading abilities usually improve rapidly to catch up with their musical abilities. This is a benefit of sound before symbol – reading is delayed until the child is ready for it, but the magic is that it then develops quickly.

The myth that imitation produces unmusical, robotic playing

All Suzuki pupils follow a common repertoire. This means children can play together easily and, combined with a shared manner of playing, can make it appear as if their performances are mechanical. Some argue that pupils may become overly reliant on imitation rather than developing their own interpretative skills, leading to a lack of musical creativity and expression. However, one could say: imitation first, innovation second. It's much easier to become innovative if the basic techniques are in place first. And, particularly at the higher levels, Suzuki teachers actively seek to nurture musical creativity rather than mere imitation.

Suzuki children learn through their hearing – by listening regularly to the music they are studying. In the early stages, there is much demonstration by the teacher of the sound required and the movements needed to produce that sound. The child will copy the sounds and movements. Young children are soon able to pick out the notes of the next piece for themselves, but they will continue to watch and listen to the teacher's demonstrations. As children grow older, they will develop their sensitivity of touch and quality of tone. There will be more discussion of the theory and how to play with style and character. Well-taught Suzuki students learn to listen well and to play musically, artistically and creatively.

Listening to recordings has been a source of criticism on the grounds that it discourages individual interpretation of the score. However, even the ABRSM now produces recordings of examination pieces, so clearly this Suzuki practice has become mainstream. At the intermediate and higher levels, Suzuki teachers recommend pupils listen to several different performances of each piece they are learning, and to other pieces by the composers they are studying, so as to raise their sensitivity and awareness of alternative interpretations and to develop their own creative responses.

Suzuki instrumental repertoire

The Suzuki repertoire has been criticised for its limitations. But for each instrument it has been carefully chosen by panels of highly experienced musicians to introduce technical and musical issues in a progressive way from the simple to the more sophisticated. There are many advantages, not least that teachers are fully familiar with the repertoire for their instrument and can therefore concentrate on teaching each child rather than having to focus on the score. Also pupils are easily able to participate in group music making. Good teachers will assign additional non-Suzuki music as appropriate, such as traditional regional music and ensembles. This broadens pupils' exposure to different musical styles and develops their reading skills.

In the case of the piano repertoire, when it was selected in the late 1960s there was an emphasis on music from the baroque and classical periods because, in Japan, young children with small hands who were not yet ready emotionally for romantic music were playing at a high level. However, in the early 2000s, the repertoire was broadened significantly, and now includes music by composers such as Chopin, Debussy, Bartok and Villa-Lobos. Advanced level children listen to performances by the finest musicians.

It is important to be aware that the Suzuki approach is not the repertoire! Unfortunately some teachers follow the Suzuki repertoire without having undertaken Suzuki training or understanding the principles and philosophy. Others state: 'I teach Suzuki but I also teach other method books'. Cases such as these have, unfortunately, detracted from the reputation of the approach.

'Suzuki children are all taught in groups' – another myth!

There is a myth – a misunderstanding – that Suzuki children are taught only in

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groups. Actually most Suzuki children receive weekly individual lessons. Thanks to the common repertoire, it is possible for children to play in groups, and this may happen weekly or monthly, and also at Suzuki workshops. Children love learning together – meeting other children, playing musical games and making music together. These lessons help develop musicianship, co-ordination, listening, reading and social skills. Individual lessons for children around the same level are often timetabled consecutively so they may observe or participate in each others' lessons.

Excessive pressure and competition among pupils

Those unfamiliar with the Suzuki approach may feel there is excessive pressure and competition among pupils and parents, as children are all working on the same repertoire. Critics may also argue that Suzuki children are pushed into intensive musical training at a young age, potentially limiting their exposure to other experiences.

From the very beginning, group musicianship classes promote mutual support and co-operation. Children are encouraged to work together by regularly preparing ensembles, and parents liaise when planning their children's book recitals. Typically, every concert is followed by a party to which families contribute refreshments. Children attend Suzuki workshops and make new friends. The magic is that many Suzuki children (and parents, too) become close friends who maintain contact long after they have left the Suzuki studio.

Of course, some children progress faster than others, because everyone's circumstances are different. Suzuki teachers are well aware of each pupil's own pace and interests, and are flexible in adapting their teaching accordingly. In my experience, children who progress less fast are inspired by those moving faster – this often motivates them to work harder. It is also the case that some of those progressing through the repertoire less fast may be playing more musically than those speeding through – and their beautiful tone and musicianship will be admired by all in the studio.

Through their intensive Suzuki training, children learn persistence, dedication and self-discipline. These are valuable life skills which they apply to their other studies. They learn that focused work leads to achievement. Far from limiting their experiences, their musical training enhances their understanding. Dr Suzuki said: 'Character first, ability second' – he believed children could develop fine, strong, determined characters through studying music.

The role of parental input

Compared with the traditional level of engagement, Suzuki parents are much more closely involved in pupils' lessons and in supporting children at home in their practice. They are also encouraged to create a musical home environment which includes listening to music and attending concerts. Some critics argue that the high levels of support can create an over-reliance on parental guidance and hinder a child's ability to develop independent learning skills. It may also be the case that the level of parental involvement and the time and effort required appear overwhelming to some families.

Prospective new Suzuki families are invited to observe lessons for several weeks. The parents begin to understand – they see the positive attitude, commitment and hard work, and the excellent results and progress. They see it is not necessary for parents to have prior musical knowledge. All parents want the best for their children, and many become convinced that they wish their children to learn through the Suzuki approach. New Suzuki parents receive initial parent education, including lessons at the instrument to learn early repertoire and techniques for themselves.

Parents realise this is the way children learn best – immersed in a nurturing musical environment. The foundations of success are based on starting at a very young age with an expert teacher and parental guidance, together with daily listening to recordings of the music they are learning. Children are motivated by their own curiosity, and by their teacher's and their parent's enthusiasm and love. Parental participation is a cornerstone of the approach and contributes to a strong bond between parents and children. Time spent together during music practice is not a chore but a creative process which is valuable in its own right. Suzuki teachers give parents advice on how to encourage their children and motivate them to practise. As children develop skills in listening, instrumental technique and practice methods (often around the age of 11 – as they start secondary school), they become independent of their parents and want to make music on their own. This phase, too, is rewarding for children, parents and teachers alike.

The magic of the Suzuki approach

Let me conclude by noting some of the benefits of the Suzuki approach.

All children have the potential to make good progress on a musical instrument if their parents can access a Suzuki teacher with vacancies. With the support of their teacher and family, all are able to develop their musical skills. Some will progress further than others, but all will benefit from this approach to learning. Children learn to listen carefully and acquire excellent technique to produce good sounds. As they maintain and review their past repertoire, they improve their musical and technical skills yet further, which gives them both the confidence and the tools to master more difficult pieces.

Almost all children go through periods of finding it difficult to study their instrument. With Suzuki, however, the drop-out rate is very low because of the commitment of the whole family from the beginning. Children continue with their lessons also because they become quite advanced when still young, so by the time they reach the age of 11 or 12 and have transferred to secondary school, they are proficient on their instrument and able to share the joy of playing competently and confidently with other young musicians in ensembles. This is a time when many traditionally-taught children choose to stop lessons, as found in a large survey of young people and music participation undertaken at Keele University and as implied by the numbers of pupils taking the various grade exams of the UK examination boards, which decline substantially with each rising grade.

Training

Europe has a rigorous training system for Suzuki teachers. Potential new trainees are expected to have a degree in their chosen instrument. Suzuki training courses are demanding but fascinating, requiring extensive study of how to teach and play the repertoire together with a deep understanding of the philosophy. The magic is that the best Suzuki teachers send pupils regularly to the junior departments of the major music conservatoires.

Generally, criticism of the Suzuki approach comes from those who have never observed lessons. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all Suzuki teachers could become ambassadors for the Suzuki approach – engaging non-Suzuki teachers in conversation, inviting them into your studio to observe lessons, and encouraging them to attend your pupils' concerts!