



## ‘Everyone can play’

The Suzuki method has helped thousands of musicians, including pianists, to play at a high standard from a very young age. **Carenza Hugh-Jones** finds out how it works

**T**hink of the Suzuki method and chances are you’re picturing a room of tiny violinists, barely bigger than their violins, sawing out *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* in perfect unison. Although the method is most commonly associated with the violin and other string instruments – probably because the founder

Dr Shinichi Suzuki was himself a violinist – it is now successfully used for teaching numerous instruments, including the piano.

Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) began developing his ideas for a particular method of teaching after the Second World War, when he was involved in setting up a music school in Matsumoto, Japan. A violinist, philosopher and humanitarian, he saw music as a way of enriching the lives of children. One of his main beliefs was that every child has the ability to make music, if they have appropriate training and are nurtured in a supportive learning environment. Music needn’t be the reserve of an exclusive few: ‘Talent is no accident of birth... the right environment can change a person with undeveloped ability into a talented one.’ His approach also stressed that musical ability isn’t simply inherited, or just a lucky collision in the genes; it is something to be learned and developed with work and practice, like numerous other life skills.

The Suzuki method also combines aspects of Asian philosophy, which is concerned with educating and nurturing a child’s

character through music. Suzuki explained: ‘I want to make good citizens. If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth and learns to play it himself, he develops sensitivity, discipline and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart.’

Suzuki’s goal was not simply to create musicians, but also to enhance and develop the personality of each child. Music lessons give students improved self-discipline, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as developing an increased sensitivity through musical instruction. Taken all together, this improved awareness and understanding hopefully leads to a better, more enriched life – or, as Suzuki put it, ‘A person with a fine and pure heart will find happiness.’

It was while Suzuki was teaching in Germany in his twenties that he noticed how easily children were learning their native language, while he, as an adult, was struggling to learn it. It was, he decided, all related to the child’s environment. Children learn language through constant repetition and imitation, as well as exposure to hearing it spoken all around them. They imitate what they hear being spoken by others, they repeat words and phrases over and over again – and are usually enthusiastically praised by their parents when a new word is learned, or an old one pronounced correctly. It is the perfect learning environment and so, Suzuki reasoned, the same principles could be applied to learning any subject – including music. Just as a child learns to speak its



own language fluently, so it can learn to play a musical instrument using the same set of theories.

This teaching method was successfully applied to the violin, and Suzuki was soon teaching accomplished young violinists in Matsumoto. In the mid-1950s, Haruko Kataoka, the accompanist for Suzuki's violin classes, began to research a way of teaching the piano according to the same principles, and with Suzuki's guidance began to develop a Suzuki teaching method for the piano, which proved very successful with young children. This Suzuki piano method eventually came over to England in the early 1970s, after music teacher Anne Turner came across the method while accompanying her husband on a business trip to Japan. After studying the method in Japan for three months, Turner decided to set up an organisation to promote Suzuki's principles, and so founded the British Suzuki Institute in 1978.

### Early risers

The individual principles of the Suzuki method aren't enormously different from aspects of conventional piano teaching, but it is when they are taken as a whole that the method becomes distinctive. One of the first principles of the Suzuki method is starting to learn at a young age. (Suzuki devised his method specifically for children, so few adults start learning using the method.) Like learning a new language, children find it easier to learn new skills, and indeed a corresponding new musical language, when they are younger. It was this aspect that drew Rebecca Yirrell towards the Suzuki method when deciding to start her son off on piano lessons at the age of four. 'I really like the idea that children can start young; most conventional teachers say you have to come back when the child is seven or eight,' she says. 'I only have one child and I thought I have the time, so I wanted to crack him off with it quite early before everything else jumped in like school and cubs and things.'

Suzuki piano teacher Jenny Macmillan agrees it's more productive to start younger. 'When the child is young they are

much more malleable in some ways. It's much better to start when the parent has control of what the child eats, what time the child has a bath, what time the child does its music practice – you just get into a routine where music gets put into the normal daily routine in the way that it wouldn't be possible with a much older child.' Indeed, after only a year's piano lessons, Yirrell has noticed her son's change in attitude towards the instrument. 'There were times at the beginning when I wondered if we'd bitten off more than he could chew, but the piano has become part of his life now. He doesn't question it as much. And interestingly enough, if

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any of his friends who don't play the piano come to play, within minutes he's at the piano and playing his pieces to them – he's just really proud of what he can do.'

Before the child even sits at the keyboard, however, Suzuki teachers encourage the children, and their parents, to listen to music at home. By immersing the child in music from a very young age, children will pick up the sound, and language, of music and will hopefully emulate this sense of musicality at the piano. Once the child is having lessons, parents are similarly encouraged to help their children listen to the pieces they are learning, says Yirrell. 'You get given a CD which you listen to in the car, at home, wherever, so you both hear the pieces the child is learning all the time. You just hope the music gradually sinks in.' ▶

Opposite page, top left: Dr Suzuki with Anne Turner, who brought Suzuki piano to the UK, at the International Suzuki Conference in St Andrews, Scotland, 1990



Macmillan can't emphasise the importance of listening enough. 'It's all listening, listening, listening at first,' she says. 'In other methods, listening to the real music isn't emphasised at all, which to me is a bit like saying to the child, "Okay, we're going to learn some French now. We won't go to France, we won't put on recordings of anyone speaking French, we're just going to get this book and it has it all in". What a pathetic way to learn! You're just hampering yourself to learning the language – and it's the same with music. If you don't make a big thing about listening to music, then how does the child know what it's meant to sound like?'

This sense of emulation through listening continues throughout the child's development, because another important principle of Suzuki is that the children sit in and observe each other's piano lessons. The idea behind this is not only to show the parents and

Yirrell's son really benefits from this interaction, she says. 'Last week, for example, my son played with a boy who was much older – and much better – than him, but they were playing the same piece and the teacher was encouraging them both and making it fun. It gives them incentives. There's lots of interaction with your peer groups and other children, which just makes it fun.'

### Parent power

The role of the parent is an essential part of the Suzuki method. 'There are so many important things about Suzuki, but I think the role of the parent has to be one of the most important,' says Macmillan. As already seen, the parent's role begins even before the child sits at the piano, but once lessons are underway, the parent becomes essential, as they continue the learning process at home. Parents attend the child's piano lessons and make notes about what is being done, how it's being done, and why it's being done, so every developmental step is thoroughly covered, both at home and during the lessons. 'It's not just saying, "We need to practise 'Mary had a little lamb',"' says Macmillan, 'It's saying, "We need to practise bar one because we need a better sound in the right hand and we're going to do it this way, because the teacher will do it like that in the lesson." The parents are therefore responsible to keep the continuity of learning.'

However, parents don't need to be musical, or a pianist themselves to do this, says Macmillan; in fact, she adds, if they're not, it's almost better. 'I like to give the parents a few lessons before the child starts. I'm not teaching them as an adult, but am teaching them exactly what the child is going to do, so they can work with the child at home.' As the child gets older and more independent – usually around the time they go to secondary school – the parents gradually take a less prominent role in supervising practising. 'It varies enormously when a parent stops practising with their child,' says Macmillan, 'and it's quite a difficult stage to make it work comfortably.'

A further distinguishing factor of Suzuki piano lessons is that lessons don't involve printed music for several years. Like conventional schooling, where books are only introduced to children after they have been speaking the language for a few years, Suzuki felt that written music should only be given to students once they have been playing for a sufficient period. Playing by ear, he argued, gives the pupils a more sophisticated ear for pitch and tone. Instead, although students are introduced to the principles of reading music early on, work in the lessons is done by ear.

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children what sort of thing they can expect as the child gets older, but also the assumption that pupils will absorb general principles and a sense of musicality from what they see. It also has the benefit of encouraging younger children to aspire to the abilities of the others, while the child who is being observed becomes used to performing in front of others from the very start of their career. Suzuki children grow up as unself-conscious musicians, who are not embarrassed or nervous about performing in public.

Teachers will often plan individual lessons so they overlap between pupils, allowing pupils to hear each other learning, as well as playing and performing the pieces they themselves have, or will, be learning. They'll also often play together, says Macmillan. 'It's partly to get them motivated, because socially children love working together and doing things together, and it's partly musical, as it's so good to work together – particularly for pianists who are so used to being on their own. For example, I might get the one child playing one hand of a piece and the other child doing the other hand – they have to listen to each other, to get started together, to stay together, and play musically together.'

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Yirrell says that younger pupils learn from listening, repetition and demonstrations. 'There's a lot of repetition in terms of what they're playing,' she says. 'Every week they go and you think "blimey, this again", but they don't seem to mind. They do the same tune with different positions, over and over again. At the very beginning it seems there's a lot of emphasis on technique and posture, as well as several basic principles, such as when pupils bow to their teachers at the beginning and end of each lesson as a mark of respect.' This also helps to focus the child's attention on the lesson.

Once pupils are considered ready to use music, they all learn a common repertoire, carefully selected by Suzuki and his colleagues to develop particular techniques. There are currently seven books for piano, and, says Macmillan, 'it's a little miracle of planning the way the repertoire works extremely well – and the pieces are extremely good.' The repertoire includes sonatas by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and Bach's Italian Concerto. Once children have learned all this music, they are ready to tackle Grade 8 pieces successfully (Suzuki children don't usually take earlier grade exams).

Most teachers will also supplement the core repertoire with extra pieces, depending on the individual students. Suzuki pupils will learn to play the pieces from memory, so they can concentrate on the performance of the piece – and in a similar way, students are encouraged to keep practising their old pieces, so they can develop a deeper understanding of the music as they mature, and play them more musically.

A popular misconception about Suzuki teaching is that it's all about ensemble playing. Although playing with others is greatly encouraged, pupils also have regular individual lessons. 'Getting children together really encourages them to play together,' says Macmillan. 'There are a lot of Suzuki workshops and courses that children tend to attend – and there's a lot of playing together. Playing with others is considered incredibly important.'

This social aspect helps to develop a strong sense of a Suzuki community, with various workshops, courses and concerts – for parents and children alike – run throughout the year. However, admits Yirrell, this can be quite daunting at first. 'I didn't realise you have to become part of the club so much,' she says. 'I have to pay an annual membership, which I was a bit surprised about, you have to buy the CD, you have to buy the books – you just have to commit to the whole Suzuki method. It's a little community and you have to get on board, and it took me a little while to get my head around that. But now I get it. And from what I see, I like it.' ■