

# What is interesting about Suzuki?

by Jenny Macmillan



Dr Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) was a violinist, an educator, a philosopher, and a humanitarian. He saw an opportunity to enrich the lives of children through music. His approach to teaching combines oriental philosophy with a repertoire of European folk songs and classical pieces, as well as a sprinkling of common sense.

Suzuki himself taught the violin, and was actively doing so at his Institute at Matsumoto in Japan until his mid-nineties. The approach is still associated with the violin, although it is now used successfully by teachers of piano, viola, cello, double bass, guitar, flute, recorder, singing, organ and harp. 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. Making music need not be the preserve of a few precocious individuals.

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 book also reveals something of his oriental philosophy, which is concerned with educating the whole person through developing their musical ability: *A person with a fine and pure heart will find happiness*.

To us in the West, the most memorable image associated with Suzuki may be that of several hundred children massed on a stage playing

the folk song, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. This tune, and variations on it, is the first that all pupils learn. Such images cause us mixed emotions. We

may be filled with admiration for the extraordinary co-ordination between pupils of varying ages and abilities. But at the same time we are suspicious of the regimentation involved and wonder whether it encourages the flight of the individual spirit that music has the power to release.

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## Ten key principles of the Suzuki approach

Despite its apparent contradictions, the Suzuki approach has evolved into an effective system of teaching which, while it has much in common with conventional teaching, also has a number of key differences. These include the young age at which pupils start, the 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.

### Ten key principles of the Suzuki approach

Young start	Step-by-step mastery
Observation	Common repertoire
Parental involvement	Memory
Listening	Review
Demonstration	Group work

Suzuki showed that it was not only desirable, but also quite practical, to teach pupils from an early age – three or four. Before receiving tuition, children attend other pupils' lessons for several months and see for themselves how they are conducted. Children learn from their peers. They love to emulate what they see other children do. This observing – which in practice means colouring or drawing quietly in the room rather than being expected to watch intently – continues until their teens. Teachers plan lessons so pupils observe children who are a little older and a little more advanced and hear the pieces that lie just ahead of them. The pupil being taught, meanwhile, becomes used to concentrating on playing despite distractions, and loses – or rather never develops – that sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness playing in front of others.

Suzuki showed how beneficial it is to involve one of the parents, typically the mother. Parents need not be musicians. Carefully, parents are 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. They 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 performance rather than correcting notes and rhythms. 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.

A good relaxed posture for all instruments is emphasised. Young piano pupils, for example, use a footstool to improve their balance, rather than just dangling their legs from the piano stool. Pupils begin and end each lesson by bowing to their teacher, as a mark of respect. This also helps ensure pupils are giving their full attention when they start their lesson. Individual instrumental lessons are supported by group classes for pupils of similar ages and abilities, which are used to teach general musicianship, including early reading skills. As with learning a language, 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.

For any one instrument, all pupils learn a common repertoire, carefully selected by Suzuki and his colleagues to develop particular techniques, which takes them to grade 8 and beyond. Starting with the theme and variations based on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, they progress through various folk songs, minuets and sonatinas, to major works by the great classical composers including, for the piano, Bach's *Italian Concerto* and sonatas by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Most teachers also introduce supplementary pieces, according to the needs of each student. Long before reaching the end of the repertoire, pupils are no longer learning by demonstration but from the music. However, they continue to play pieces from memory. This enables them to concentrate on the performance of the music, rather than on playing a sequence of printed notes. Children have little difficulty doing this and it means they are able to play music anywhere and at any time. Pupils retain many of their old pieces and build up their own repertoire, continually returning to them to refine them as they themselves mature musically.

For parents observing children who are more advanced than their own, it is inspiring to see how playing quality progresses and how quickly pupils move through the repertoire. Because progress is so easily visible, because preparing pieces for group lessons and termly concerts motivates them to practise, and because the repertoire provides its own milestones, Suzuki pupils are generally not entered for the traditional graded examinations, although many teachers will do so if it seems appropriate. Indeed, most pupils wish to take grade 8 when they complete the repertoire. Along the way, pupils graduate at various levels through the Suzuki repertoire, performing solo and ensemble

items at graduation concerts. Other performing opportunities range from informal "lucky dip" performances in group lessons; casual gatherings of two or three Suzuki families at which each child plays one or two prepared pieces followed by a tea party; termly concerts arranged by the teacher, perhaps in liaison with another teacher of the same or another instrument; through to national Suzuki concerts at venues such as Symphony Hall, Birmingham, and the Royal Festival Hall. Children are encouraged to support each other, fostering an attitude of generosity and co-operation.

## The wider view

Suzuki started developing his ideas when teaching young children to play the violin immediately after the second world war. In the late fifties, his ideas were introduced to the USA. By the early seventies, Suzuki teaching had spread to Australia, New Zealand and Asia and, in Europe, to Belgium, Denmark, England and Ireland. Interestingly enough, the British Suzuki Institute was established in the same year that EPTA was founded: 1978. Suzuki teacher training courses in England were held at Benslow in Hitchin, initially for violin, with the first piano course in 1982. Currently 20 European countries have established Suzuki associations, with significant numbers of teachers in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden,

Poland, Italy and Germany. Numbers are growing in Finland, Spain, Holland and Belgium. Now, thousands of parents and teachers in over 40 countries worldwide nurture loving human beings through the Suzuki approach

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to education.

Suzuki's aim was to develop the whole child. He felt a need to help every child find the joy that comes through music-making. He didn't wish to turn all his students into professional musicians, but to unlock each child's potential and to develop their sensitivity as human beings by developing their musical ability.

Suzuki's approach to instrumental teaching has a circle of adherents who are deeply committed both to his teaching methods and to his underlying philosophy of education. As knowledge and understanding of the approach and its advantages become more widespread, as more teachers train and apply the principles, and as musicians who learned this way begin teaching and performing, there is little doubt that it will move beyond this limited circle and have an even larger impact than it has had to date. Many of Suzuki's principles deserve to become mainstream. Meanwhile, any parent fortunate enough to have a child learning by this approach is almost certain to be rewarded by seeing the child make extraordinary progress, gain in confidence and self-esteem and, in the words of Suzuki himself, become a person with a fine and pure heart who finds happiness.

Further information about the British Suzuki Institute is given on [www.britishsuzuki.com](http://www.britishsuzuki.com) ■

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