

# Controversial aspects of the Suzuki approach

Sharon Mark interviews Anne Turner about introducing Suzuki piano to Britain and considers some controversial aspects of Suzuki philosophy in the light of recent articles in *Piano Professional*



Sharon Mark



Dr Suzuki and Anne Turner in 1990

## 1 How did you get involved with the Suzuki approach?

My husband worked for the Bank of England and, as his wife, I was occasionally allowed to accompany him on his travels to the Far East. Whilst he was working with the Bank of Japan, I was taken to see a Suzuki concert in Tokyo. At this stage I was a conventional piano

teacher and I'd never seen anything like it in my life – confident, competent and happy children aged four to six demonstrating a mastery of skills. When I returned to London, I hunted in the hope of finding Suzuki piano teaching in Britain – but there was nothing. However, a pupil of mine was in touch with Felicity Lipman, a very fine Suzuki violin teacher in London. I went to observe Felicity teach and was so impressed that I applied for, and was granted, a Churchill Fellowship. This enabled me to go to Japan for three months to observe this approach to music education. I came back to London and, standing on a pavement in Golders Green, Felicity and I decided to establish a British Suzuki Institute.

## 2 Suzuki said that *ability can be developed by training*. However, it's not unusual to hear a (conventional) teacher or parent blame a child's shortcomings on their lack of musical ability or their character.

Dr Suzuki believed that talent has to be developed; what a child becomes depends on how that child is educated. He observed how children assimilate the intricacies of their own language and his theory was that many other skills and knowledge could be learned if presented in the same way – through observation, imitation and repetition. We'll take anyone – there's no audition, except to talk to the parent and explain that it's going to be hard work!

## Nature versus nurture

Carol Woods, contributing in the September 2006 issue of *Piano Professional* to the contentious nature versus nurture debate, revealed that opposing views exist in research literature as to whether musical ability is innate or learned. In essence, however, her article encourages readers of *PP* to consider the potential of all pupils, not merely the very small number [of pupils] ... genetically set up with an unusually generous number of neural connections [for whom] musical thinking will happen naturally (Harris, 2001 cited in Woods) since there is evidence to suggest that a musically rich environment may help to shape and promote musical ability (Woods). Is it possible that we dub some pupils "unmusical" simply because we make learning an instrument difficult (Chappell) in the first place?

Thompson and Lehmann (cited in Williamson, 2005) have observed how differences between individuals' sight reading and improvising abilities are often ascribed to variations in innate disposition. The authors proceed to describe this apathetic view as regrettable since research findings, spanning 25 years, clearly indicate that both sight reading and improvising are amenable to enhancement through structured training. Indeed Stephen Baron, writing about the Colourkeys approach, refers to how children often feel at ease with the concepts of improvisation.

Harris (2001, cited in Woods) leads us to consider our responsibility as teachers: nature must be supported by nurture ... effective teaching can help to cause the pupil to make the necessary mental connections and relationships to help bring about the development of true musical thinking.

SM

## 3 Are there parents who are not suited to the Suzuki approach?

Where parents are sceptical, I get them to observe lessons

► for several weeks. Then they begin to see what's in it. They see that hard work produces excellent results. And they see that it is not necessary for parents to be musical. Non-Suzuki teachers are often horrified at the idea of parents sitting in on lessons. Generally criticism about the Suzuki approach comes from non-Suzuki teachers who don't come and watch.

### Parental involvement

**Carol Woods** refers to the important role that parents play in shaping their children's musical behaviour. However, the question of exactly *how* to get (often busy) parents involved is an issue which causes uncertainty in the profession. The issue (seemingly) becomes stickier still when we decide to *introduce a different focus* (**Anderson**) such as encouraging exploration at the keyboard which is *usually dismissed as "messing around"* (**Anderson**) despite the heuristic value of this kind of learning.

**Elza Lusher** considered the demands of today's *result-centred society ... [and having to] adapt to the demands of parents*. However the problem is that, if we hold our pupils accountable only for results and achievements, it is very difficult to teach the whole child. **Sally Chappell**'s musings included the following question: *Do we formalise all our pupils' musical experiences too much?* As piano teachers in the UK, how can we convince parents (and pupils) that it's real learning – discovery, exploration and curiosity – that matters most?

Indeed, research findings peppered throughout the September issue of *PP* suggest that real learning stands a chance if we challenge conventional learning practices, such as *the way in which notation tends to dominate the entire learning process* (**Anderson**). Being able to provide reasons which support our chosen teaching approach and bringing parents in on the process is central. As much as our role is to facilitate musical learning for children, we also need to consider our responsibility in educating parents. SM

### 4 The concept of mentoring is now considered an essential element of CPD. If *PP* readers are interested in observing a Suzuki piano teacher, how can they go about it?

Details of Suzuki teachers are on the BSI website [www.britishtsuzuki.com](http://www.britishtsuzuki.com) and Suzuki teachers should be happy to have other teachers observe their lessons.

### 5 How do Suzuki piano teachers structure learning?

Initially, for several months at least, pupils listen to music – recordings of the music they will learn in the early stages, and plenty of other good music. They will observe other young children's lessons for several months. Once the language and sound of music is in their ears, they commence their own lessons. From the first lesson they are taught to listen for a good sound; they are taught posture and technique – how to produce that sound – which is then combined with the music so that they're putting those good sounds into context. Once technique is well developed, reading skills are practised regularly and considerable emphasis is placed on ensemble playing by overlapping pupils' lessons and in group lessons. Individual lessons are supported by group lessons, continued

observation of other pupils' lessons, and listening at home to a wide variety of music.

### 6 Group teaching is a key area for scepticism amongst conventional teachers. Why is this a vital aspect of Suzuki teaching?

It's important to realise that group teaching is not instead of individual lessons, but an added dimension with potential for learning that the one-to-one experience does not offer. There is such a considerable role to be played by social factors on children's developing musicality. Apart from the fact that children love meeting other children and much enjoy making music together, group lessons provide wonderful opportunities for cross learning and developing conceptual understanding through group musical activities.

### Group aspect

**Sally Chappell** suggests that *greater consideration should be given to the importance and influence of communal music-making*. Her collated findings on music education systems in South Africa, Hungary and Cuba report that music-making opportunities in group context is *an important factor in musical development ... aids enjoyment, motivation and can give young beginners an understanding of what makes learning an instrument so great*. Meanwhile **Stephen Baron** observes that, in shared lesson situations, children can access *considerable gains in musicianship* without any loss of progress. SM

### 7 Many children appear to drop instrumental learning as they make the transition from primary to secondary education. Is this an issue with Suzuki pupils?

The fact that deep and lasting friendships are made in the teacher's own group and at parties after pupils' concerts and workshops is significant. Because the family is involved, music-making becomes a way of life for the children. So Suzuki pupils don't find music lessons lonely. When they become competent musicians, having developed their skills through their own hard work, they get much pleasure from their music-making. Indeed, we all enjoy doing what we are good at. For these reasons, few tend to drop out.

### 8 Does competition become a problem with the 'community' nature of Suzuki teaching?

When people asked Dr Suzuki what he was, what he stood for, he replied: *first I'm a humanitarian, second I'm an educator, and third I'm a musician*. We're not just teaching our pupils how to play an instrument but rather a diverse range of life-skills. Hard work leads children to acquire the discipline to improve progressively, and this feeds through to other subjects. Developing interaction between the pupils is seen as integral to the process of learning – instead of competitiveness we emphasise co-operation.

### 9 Suzuki children learn to play before learning to read music. Are they hindered by delaying learning to read?

All children learn to speak their language before reading and writing; they observe, they imitate, and they repeat. By focusing on the sound before introducing the symbol, through demonstration, imitation and repetition, children can develop

aural perception and memory. By the time children start reading, they have a firm grasp of keyboard geography which means that notation is associated with *where* the note is – not merely the letter name. This, along with the fact that pupils can hear an aural representation of the notation before they play, has enormous significance where sight reading skills are concerned. The process is musical rather than mechanical.

### Sound before symbol

**Sue Anderson**, revisiting the concept of 'sound before symbol', suggests that instrumental teachers' approach to the learning process tends to be dominated by notation *right from the first lesson* despite a *growing body of evidence [which indicates] ... that students thrive musically in all ways when playing by ear precedes learning with notation.*

Somehow I think that **Anderson** hits the nail on the head when she refers to instrumental teachers' *great anxiety and fear* when faced with the challenge of how to go about teaching beginner instrumentalists without the aid of a tutor book. It's true to say that we tend to teach as we ourselves have been taught.

Personally speaking, when I tried to defend my argument for introducing beginner pianists to notation from the first lesson, after being introduced to the concept of 'sound before symbol', my reasoning crumbled and I started to

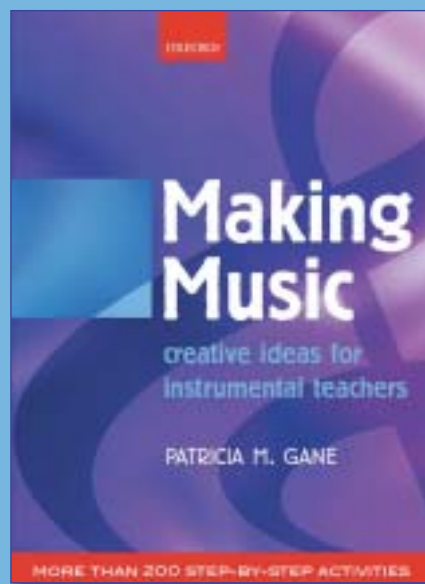
recognise the *scope for messages to get scrambled (Anderson)*. Exploring the concept of how to teach the sound before the symbol has been scary, yet incredibly exciting and ultimately rewarding, *influenc[ing] students' enjoyment, motivation and musicianship (Chappell)*.

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### References

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