

Working with children with

Girl with Down's syndrome

by Caroline Gowers

In the course of teaching, over a period of nearly 30 years, I have had the privilege of close contact with two children who had very severe learning disabilities. In both cases music became, probably, the most important thing in their lives.

The first child was Nick Shaw. He was born completely blind. His parents heard that I was a Suzuki teacher living in their neighbourhood and asked me to teach their older child, then aged four. Nick was at every lesson, in his carry cot. The book 1 piano recording became for him what a favourite teddy might be for another child. He heard it incessantly, and by the age of 11 months he was playing every tune in book 1 with his right thumb. What was amazing was that he played fluently and musically. This was the beginning of his musical development. [For continuation of Nick's musical development, see next article: Ed]

Nicola Beattie, the second child, was born with Down's Syndrome. She started learning the piano with Stephen Power, a Suzuki teacher then living near Peterborough, when she was nine. By that time she had had three months of observation and had listened to her book 1 recording morning and evening. She had also heard classical music of all sorts since birth and her mother noted that when she was a baby music always stopped her crying.

With Stephen she spent a whole year mastering the *Twinkle variations* and another year learning all the tunes in book 1 with her right hand. Stephen's early emphasis on balance (very difficult for her) and good tone has stood her in good stead ever since.

By the time I met her, at a Suzuki workshop, she could play all of book 1 hands together and she took enormous delight in this achievement. To me she seemed to be a shining example of Suzuki teaching and Dr Suzuki's philosophy that every child can succeed given the right environment. She spent much more time than most children listening to her recordings, she proceeded at her own pace with constant help and encouragement from her mother, and improved her playing by repeating all the pieces she knew over and over again. She loved, and still loves, performing.

I have been teaching her for about 12 years and it has been a most rewarding experience. Music is for her a means of communicating in a way that spoken language is not. She



Nicola Beattie and Caroline Gowers

Every child can succeed given the right environment

has a remarkable feeling for nuance and phrasing – the things that are so difficult to teach but seem to be absorbed by osmosis. We have struggled with technique and with rhythm but she has slowly and surely progressed and recently performed the slow movement of Mozart's Sonata K545 in a public concert, bringing tears to the eyes of many in the audience.

None of this could have been achieved without her mother, who insisted on regular and disciplined practice, repeating what was done in the lesson and following my instructions. She and Nicola took delight in each step mastered, constantly reviewed earlier pieces and steadily moved on at Nicola's pace.

Her ability to play the piano, her enjoyment of performing and her pleasure in the friendships she has formed within the "Suzuki family" have been a central part of her life and that of her parents. ■

■ Caroline Gowers studied piano and organ at the Royal College of Music. In 1979 she embarked on the BSI training course and followed this with three months in Japan at the Talent Education Institute. For some years she directed the piano teacher training course in London. She continues to be involved in teacher training and to teach privately at home.



Carey Beth Hockett

Autistic and blind boy

by Carey Beth Hockett

One of the most stimulating and enriching experiences of my teaching career has been working with a blind and autistic musical savant called Nick Shaw. Nick was able to play contrapuntal passages on the piano as soon as he could reach the keyboard. I met him when he was about four and taught him the cello from the age of five to 18.

When I was first asked to teach Nick, I explained that I had no special training for working with blind or autistic children.

However, I have always believed that every child is an individual with 'special needs'

and that our success as teachers depends on our ability to recognise and respond to those needs. We adhered to the main principles of the Suzuki approach with Nick:

- he 'observed' the lessons of another child for several months before he started learning himself;
- he learned by listening (of course!);
- his parents were actively involved, not only as facilitators of the home practice sessions, but also in helping me find ways to explain things to him;
- Nick had regular individual and group lessons and attended many courses.

My individual lessons with Nick usually had two main sections. In the WORK section I chose specific teaching points designed to help Nick to think and act in an organised, pre-defined and consistent way. These points included cellistic issues such as bowings, fingerings, articulation, dynamics and posture. In our early years, many points would be reinforced by a verbal instruction or a touching reminder. In later years, we came to rely very heavily on the minidisc recorder. Nick was not able to operate the machine by himself, but if we recorded

the right kinds of instructions, he could have a little more independence by either listening to or playing along with one or more tracks.

In the PLAY section of the lesson we did just that – played old pieces, played new pieces, improvised on one cello or two cellos or with one of us playing cello and the other playing piano. Once, when Nick was about 14 we came to

the PLAY section of his lesson and I asked him to go to the piano to accompany me. He found his way there with pleasure while I proposed that

we play Fauré's *Elégie*. The first of the great C minor church bell chords chimed out before he had even sat down on the bench. Somehow we arrived at the end of the piece and I asked Nick whether he had heard it many times. He said he had heard it once.

The most exciting aspect of working with Nick is the unabashed enthusiasm he shows when hearing and making music. We invited him to present a short solo concert at our summer school last year and when he finished he stood

up and told the audience that it was the BEST concert he had ever given and that he planned to give one next year too! Thank you, Nick, for reminding us that it is a great privilege to be a musician. ■

■ After graduating from the Eastman School of Music, Carey Beth Hockett was principal cellist of the Cayuga Chamber Orchestra in Ithaca, New York for 12 years. For the past 18 years she has lived in London where she teaches for the London Suzuki Group and in the Junior Department of the Royal Academy of Music. She has given numerous workshops for teachers and children across Europe and America.

Every child is an individual with 'special needs'



Nick Shaw