

Notes from a Suzuki family -

by Amanda Wauchope (mother)

Apart from the notion that a “well-rounded education” should include some music, we had no grand plan for our children. Yet, at ages ten and 12, both children are serious about their music, play two instruments each, have a wonderful repertoire of pieces – all played from memory – and play with friends in quartets and trios!

What’s more, although my husband and I both achieved only the first few grades on the piano, and cannot play any other instrument, we help our kids daily with their practice, and this is key to their learning. We help with sight reading, scales, technical exercises, new pieces, repertoire – not just on the piano, but on the violin and cello too, yet we’ve never played a stringed instrument!

It is because of the Suzuki approach that these things are happening. We have been involved with Suzuki for over five years now, and consider it to be among the most important decisions we have made – yet we tried hard to *avoid* it when it was recommended to us!

When we first moved from Australia to England in 2000, we looked for a piano teacher for our five-year-old daughter Alyssa, who had enjoyed some group keyboard classes in Melbourne. Consistently we were told to wait until she was seven, that only a “Suzuki teacher” would take on such a young child. We were disappointed because Alyssa had learned a lot during her keyboard lessons, and we wanted to maintain the momentum. The “Suzuki” suggestion sounded like some kind of sect, so we continued to search for a mainstream teacher. However, after months of dead-ends, we decided to take a closer look.

After observing some other students’ lessons, we saw immediately that here was a wonderful opportunity. The environment was family-friendly, full of people (parents, siblings, other families), yet calm, with a structured approach to learning. The lesson was not limited to the teacher and child – the parent took notes, the teacher made sure that both child and parent understood each lesson point, and occasionally she would involve other observers. Teacher expectation seemed to be high, but within reach. All pieces, even elementary ones, were developed to a high musical level, and were expected to be held at about that level for months afterwards. Weak areas were gently revised until (and after!) the child mastered them. Support seemed to be total. We learned that parents were expected to work at home daily with the children, and to communicate with the teacher if there were difficulties. Parents were expected to provide a “rich, musical environment” – to play recordings, attend concerts, and encourage performance wherever possible, and the teacher would advise and recommend. Children were happy, confident and produced pleasing sounds. Parents were superlatively positive.

We took the plunge, and started our lessons.

Immediately we had to make some changes – we upgraded our piano, we introduced routine practice times (otherwise kids and even parents! would balk); we woke up earlier so that practice was finished almost before anyone noticed; we learned ways to motivate the children to work on tiny details. And little by little, the children progressed. A new piece one week would soon become a “repertoire piece”; these would mature and develop a level of excellence, until one day all the pieces in the first book were musically mature enough to be played as a recital, from memory. This was astonishing, but was also the Suzuki norm!

Over time we attended recitals of all seven books. Every one of these concerts was like a gift: the musical quality was high, the events celebrated everyone’s efforts and families were rightly proud of their achievements. Early books gave comfort, later books were inspirational. The sense of the continuum was pervasive – although later books seemed impossible, we could see that we were inching our way along the path, as were other families, and so, perhaps, we too might one day reach these higher books. Several of the children have since completed all the Suzuki repertoire, and some have carried on to tertiary musical studies – we love to hear of their exploits.

The decision to study second instruments came about a year after the children started piano. Alyssa asked to learn violin at school, and she was followed a year or so later by Linden commencing cello. By now we knew of children who studied two (even three!) instruments. Despite our total ignorance of stringed instruments, we felt confident that we could help the children by applying the same general concepts from piano. Each week we would review the teacher’s notes, and each day we would work on the details. Both children progressed quite rapidly.

Eventually we decided to switch to Suzuki violin and cello teachers, because of the clear direction, the familiar process, the constant sense of achievement, and the community support.

And now our Suzuki approach is so familiar to us that we apply it to other areas. Linden is studying Chinese – he practises daily, and maintains his “repertoire” of characters. The children know that, to achieve excellence in anything, they need incremental steps, revision, support, and a long-term view. And also, they have found that poor performance has been almost directly related to less effort or less support.

This knowledge alone makes the Suzuki process invaluable, but as I write I can hear Alyssa playing the first movement of a Haydn piano sonata. It is gorgeous. On Sunday, with Alyssa playing violin and Linden playing cello, they will rehearse in a trio for a mini-concert to celebrate my family’s visit from Australia. How lucky we are to be a “Suzuki family”! ■

We tried hard to avoid Suzuki when it was recommended to us

(mother and daughter)

by Alyssa Ralph (daughter)



Amanda Wauchope and Alyssa Ralph

Hi! I'm Alyssa, I'm 12 years old, and I learn both the piano and violin by the Suzuki approach. I began Suzuki piano shortly after my family moved from Australia when I was six. My brother started a few months later, and even my parents had some lessons!

One day, after I had been learning piano for about a year, I asked if I could learn the violin – my school was offering

lessons. My parents agreed. I progressed fast because of all the things I'd learned with piano, and by year four, I was at the same level as the year sixes. I had 15 minute lessons each week, and I practised 15 to 30 minutes a day with my Mum helping me as much as she could.

I did grades 1 to 3, but by year five I started to get bored because I only ever worked on my three exam pieces. My motivation and exam results slowly dropped. My Mum and I decided that I could stop violin at the end of the year, but gradually I realised that I didn't want to stop – I was quite good at it, and playing was fun. That was when my Mum suggested that we could switch to Suzuki violin.

I felt sorry for the kids at school. Most quit by the end of year six. They didn't seem to know how to practise, and their Mums didn't know how to help them. A ten minute practice on the morning of their lesson was not enough! Also, the teacher wanted us to be positive and enthusiastic but she rarely gave out praise. I think fewer children would have quit if they had been proud of their achievements.

For about two years now I've been doing two Suzuki instruments. Although I practise for a total of an hour and a half each day, I love everything about it – playing from memory, having loads of repertoire, having good one hour lessons, and playing in masses of concerts. I love attending workshops, having lots of Suzuki friends, playing together for fun, being able to read new music, and feeling that it's one

big family group. But most of all, I love the fact that, in Suzuki, practising becomes "what you do", like eating or sleeping; you just "have" to do it. I do find, though,

that sometimes my whole week is taken up by homework, music and dancing (I do a lot of dancing).

I want to do grade 8 (and maybe more!) in both instruments. I've no idea where all this music will lead, but I start the drums next term – I can't wait! ■

**I love the feeling that it's
one big family group**

Quality piano restoration



Restored pianos for sale



**BARRY
CARADINE**
PIANO SPECIALIST



Tel: 01787 312231
Fax: 01787 310006

Nationwide service work by Bösendorfer trained technicians

UNIT 3B • BULL LANE IND. EST. • ACTON • SUDBURY • SUFFOLK • CO10 0BD. www.caradine.co.uk barry@caradine.co.uk

Notes from a Suzuki *parent*

by Debbie Collison

Isabel is seven years old and is in her fourth term of Suzuki piano lessons. I have two teenagers who play various instruments, but this is our first experience of Suzuki lessons. On meeting our teacher it immediately became clear that I was being asked for a different kind of involvement in Isabel's learning. One aspect of this was that I would need to have piano lessons to experience the Suzuki approach first hand.

I eagerly anticipated my first piano lesson. Our teacher is very good at putting her pupils at ease, yet I still found myself becoming tense as I sat down at the piano. When playing for the teacher (or for a parent) one feels exposed. I realised that the way to keep the satisfaction coming is to define success in small, achievable goals. For example could I keep a relaxed hand for one phrase of *Twinkle*?

There were frustrations.

Does the following scenario ring any bells? After working diligently on a piece with your child all week they achieve their practice goals at home, only to fall apart in the lesson. This became a familiar pattern, only now I was the child! When the same thing happens to Isabel, I can sympathise with her disappointment.

When Isabel learns a new piece, she already has the notes in her head from listening to recordings. This means that the first time she plays a piece at a lesson, she knows it well enough to allow her teacher to focus on finer points of technique and expression. While Isabel is learning to play a piece hands separately, she can play the left hand while I play the right hand or vice versa. When she puts both hands together she already has a good idea of how they fit.

The same approach works well with duets. Isabel enjoys it when I mess about with the tempo and put in wrong notes (sometimes deliberately), emulating the worst that might

I have a genuine admiration for what Isabel achieves on the piano



Debbie Collison and Isabel

happen when two children play together. She has become very good at staying with me, however much I maul my part. This game is even funnier the other way round, and Isabel often succeeds in losing me completely.

I have a genuine admiration for what Isabel achieves on the piano because I know how difficult it can be. I understand what Isabel is aiming for with each piece, and this means we can celebrate her micro-achievements together. This all sounds very positive – but of course there are times when one or other of us ends up getting cross or sulking.

While writing this I asked Isabel if she wanted to say anything about our practices. She kindly said she wouldn't mention that I'm not quite as good a pianist as she is! Her printable comment was: *Playing with Mum is fun. It would take a lot longer if I had to work everything out by myself.* ■



Tobin System of Musical Education Become an associated teacher

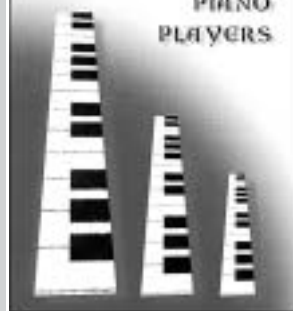
The Old Malt House, Hertfordshire CM21 9AX
Tel: 01279 726625

www.tobinmusic.co.uk

Courses held all year round including
Infant/Primary/Secondary classroom teaching.
Piano, Classical Guitar,
Recorder & simple composition.

For information phone
or email candida@tobinmusic.co.uk

NOTEBOOK FOR PIANO PLAYERS



Communicate
more effectively
with your students!

Use the new
Practice Notebook
researched and designed
by teachers with
student-centred teaching
in mind.

A5 size, spiral-bound,
40 lesson pages, extra
features.

Available from
Liz Gibson 0141-423 0548
eagibson@tiscali.co.uk