

Suzuki Bass comes to the UK

Pippa MacMillan, one of the first Suzuki-trained Bass teachers in the UK, shares her experiences gained on the training programme.

The Suzuki approach originated on the violin and quickly spread to cello and piano. As so often happens, the double bass lagged behind the other string instruments. Rodney Slatford and others investigated adapting the Suzuki approach for double bass in 1984, but chose to start the Yorke Mini-Bass project instead. Suzuki double bass was started in the US soon after this but until now it has been available only in America. In November 2008 the first ever European Suzuki double bass teacher training course was held in Denmark. Nine of us gathered there to be trained by experienced Suzuki double bass teacher Virginia Dixon from Chicago.

Dr Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) 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 that 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. There are a number of differences between the Suzuki approach and conventional teaching methods. These include the young age at which children 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.

Several problems arise when adapting the Suzuki approach to the double bass. It simply isn’t practical for a 3 or 4-year-old to start learning such a large instrument. Although smaller double basses can be found, the smallest double basses easily sourced (in the UK at least) are 1/10 size – suitable for a 6 or 7-year-old. Cello-basses (full-size cellos strung with bass guitar strings) are also used by some teachers. However there is no reason why a child cannot receive other musical training before getting their hands on a double bass, and a rich music-learning environment can still be created from birth. There are many early music groups for young children, including

those using Kodaly and Dalcroze methods. I am fortunate in that my own three young bass pupils all learn Suzuki piano with my mother, so they had already had extensive musical training before starting the double bass (two at the age of seven and one at the age of eight).

The other problem of course is that there are so many ways to play the double bass. Standing, sitting, German bow, French bow, different fingering systems – not to mention whether it’s best to use powder rosin or sticky rosin! On the teacher training course we were encouraged to learn to teach in the style with which we play – if we normally sit down to play, we should learn to teach our pupils to sit down. Consequently, Suzuki double bass is a very adaptable approach, moulding to fit the needs of children in different countries, where playing styles are different.

The Danish Suzuki Association together with the European Suzuki Association had organised the teacher training course at the music school in Albertslund, 20km outside the centre of Copenhagen. Over the four days of the first course we discussed Suzuki philosophy, early games designed to build basic skills for young children (and older ones too!) and how to teach the *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* theme and variations – the cornerstone of all Suzuki teaching.

So where does one start, faced with a new 7-year-old bass pupil? Certainly not with learning to read music – that is a separate skill. First, children must become comfortable with the instrument itself, whether standing or sitting. Many games can be played to develop good posture with the instrument and to gain a feeling of the whole instrument, for example by doing *ski jumps* (bringing both hands to the nut then sliding them down the fingerboard towards the bridge and plucking the strings when you get to the end of the fingerboard). Rhythm games help develop a sense of pulse, and singing helps train the ear. Virginia gave individual and group lessons to the pupils of one of the teacher trainees, Peter Strøm Skriver, so we were able to see many of the games we had been shown put into practice.



Pippa teaching bass to 8-year-old Lisa



Above: Playing group lesson games!



Left: Maintaining good bow holds

Below: Suzuki bass trainees

It was fascinating to meet the others on the course – from Denmark, England, France, Holland, Iceland, Italy and Switzerland. Three had done some training already with Virginia in the US, two were trained Suzuki cello teachers, some were Suzuki parents and some were coming to Suzuki for the first time. We ranged in age from 20 to 60, with some professional symphony orchestra players and some full-time teachers. This mix gave us a fantastic opportunity to learn a great deal from each other.

The second course, lasting six days, was held in March 2009. During this time we discussed all the pieces in the first three Suzuki repertoire books, as well as supplementary pieces that can be taught as necessary. The repertoire is carefully designed so that one new technique is introduced in each piece, whilst also consolidating techniques learnt in previous pieces. Due to the size of the instrument, it is difficult to find pieces that lie under the fingers on the double bass, and many of the pieces selected for the Suzuki double bass repertoire contain a lot of shifting, which some children struggle with. A number of pieces are common with the cello, violin and piano repertoire, but when transcribed for

the double bass are considerably more difficult than on the other instruments. Again we observed Virginia teaching Peter's pupils, and we also had to teach each other (with the 'pupils' acting as unruly children!). On each course we had our own individual lesson with Virginia, giving us a chance to work at our personal playing technique.

The third and final course, in November 2009, was a little hectic for me as I was rehearsing an opera in London at the same time. Nevertheless, with two trips to Denmark in six days, it all worked out! We were now able to consolidate what we had learnt over the year. Each of us taught Peter's pupils for the first time under the careful guidance of Virginia, who was incredibly supportive of us at every step of the way. The atmosphere was always sociable throughout the courses, and we all became great friends. It's wonderful to feel oneself within a community of teachers, able to share ideas and tips. By this point we had all been able to try out what we had learnt on the training courses back home with our own pupils, so we were able to ask questions, discuss what teaching techniques suited us, and gain ideas as to how to improve our own teaching.

At the end of this course, eight of us took our exams – either Level 1 (covering the first repertoire book) or Levels 1 and 2 (the first three repertoire books). Two European Suzuki cello teacher trainers had flown over to examine us along with Virginia in the first ever Suzuki double bass exams (they don't have exams in America), and everyone passed, to great relief! We now look forward to the next course, in 2011. ■

For more information about training to become a Suzuki double bass teacher, please contact the European Suzuki Association: esa@europeansuzuki.org.

Pippa Macmillan lives in London and is studying at the Royal Academy of Music. She teaches in Cambridge as part of the Cambridge Suzuki Group. www.pippamacmillan.co.uk

