

The Suzuki Approach: Myths and Magic

by Jenny Macmillan

I consider myself a Suzuki teacher above being a piano teacher. There is no audition for children to join a Suzuki studio, so we take many children who might not be accepted by traditional teachers. I believe many of our pupils would quickly be dropped by traditional teachers when it becomes apparent that they seem to have no special aptitude for learning a musical instrument. And yet, many of our pupils become fine young musicians. More importantly, all our pupils (and also their parents) learn perseverance and develop stamina. How this happens is part of the magic of the Suzuki approach.

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki was a violinist from Japan who realised that all typically developing children learn their mother tongue by listening, copying and repeating. He applied these principles to his violin teaching and, later, to other instruments and even to other subjects at primary school.

Important in Suzuki philosophy are the ideas that:

- Every child has the potential to develop skills
- Each child progresses at their own speed
- Parents are fully involved
- We focus on technical ability to make a beautiful sound from the beginning
- We use a common repertoire

Children hear their mother tongue before they are even born. The earlier they begin to listen to music, the more natural they will find it to express themselves in an artistic way. When very young, children learn best through their senses – they are like sponges and absorb all that is around them. Just as Dr. Suzuki didn't set out to form musicians but rather to enrich children's lives, so many parents are attracted to the philosophy for the same reason.

Enthusiasts for the method, as I am, are convinced that its results are nothing short of magical but like other 'methods' it has attracted criticisms. In this article, I want to examine some of these and show that they are actually myths rather than facts.

The myth of poor sight-reading skills

There is a belief that Suzuki children don't learn to read music because they learn by ear – that the Suzuki approach relies primarily on rote learning and memorisation, with less emphasis on understanding the underlying musical concepts. Dr. Suzuki discouraged note reading for very young children (ages 3 and 4) because they learn through their senses – through listening and watching and feeling – rather than their intellect and, in the early stages, he wanted them to listen carefully to the sounds they produced.

Suzuki-trained children in Japan reached advanced levels of violin playing when very young (age 5 or 6). Dr. Suzuki thought it was inappropriate for them to learn to read the score at that young age. Also, in the mid-20th century in Japan, children learned to read music at school, so it was not necessary for Dr. Suzuki to specifically include the reading of music in his philosophy.

When the Suzuki approach spread to the West, initially the USA, teachers who had not been fully trained in its philosophy thought Suzuki children shouldn't learn to read, even when older. This was a mistake. Mrs Haruko Kataoka, who was instrumental in devising the Suzuki piano repertoire together with Dr. Suzuki, was rigorous in insisting young children should learn to read music at the piano. And nowadays Suzuki teachers are trained to understand that learning to read music is, of course, an important part of musical education.

As soon as children start their individual Suzuki piano lessons, they will join a group lesson with other children of similar age and stage for musicianship games – learning, in effect, the early stages of reading music – playing games with flashcards, rhythm and listening games, singing and moving to music. Good instructors teach written theory, too, when children are ready for it – perhaps around the age of 6. As with learning their mother tongue – first listen, then speak, then read,



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so the same with music – first listen to the sounds, then develop the technique to play, then learn to read the score. If a child focuses on reading the notes in the early stages, it's not possible to focus on the sound and the technique – one thing at a time is better.

We teach each aspect of musicianship when the child is ready for it. This means a child aged 10 or 12 may be performing Bach minuets, Clementi sonatas and even a simple Beethoven sonata very musically. However, in common with most children of that age (who may have been learning non-Suzuki for three or four years), their sight-reading skills are still at an early stage. Because their ears are very well developed, and because they are learning to practise well, in their early teens their reading abilities usually improve rapidly to catch up with their musical abilities. This is a benefit of sound before symbol – reading is delayed until the child is ready for it, but the magic is it then develops quickly.

The myth that imitation produces unmusical, robotic playing

All Suzuki pupils follow a common repertoire which progresses from simple folk songs, Bach minuets, Clementi sonatas, sonatas by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, to the Italian Concerto. This means that children can play together easily and, combined with a shared manner of playing, can make it appear as if their performances are mechanical. Some argue that pupils may become overly reliant on imitation rather than developing their own interpretative skills, leading to a lack of musical creativity and expression. However, one could say: imitation first, innovation second. It's easier to become innovative if the basic techniques are in place first.

Suzuki children learn through their hearing – by listening repeatedly to the music they are learning. In the early stages, there is much demonstration by the teacher of the sound required and the movements (technique) needed to produce that sound. The child will copy the sounds and the movements. Young children are soon able to pick out the notes of the next piece for themselves, but they will continue to watch and listen to the teacher's demonstration of movements and sounds. As children get older, there will be more discussion of the theory and how to play with style and character. Well-taught Suzuki students learn to listen well and play musically and artistically.

Suzuki children are strongly encouraged to listen to recordings of the music they are learning, so they become fully familiar with the sounds they are trying to create. In the past, this has been a source of criticism on the grounds that it discourages individual interpretation of the score. However, even the ABRSM now makes recordings available of examination pieces, so clearly this Suzuki practice has become mainstream. At the intermediate and higher levels, Suzuki teachers recommend pupils listen to several different performances of each piece they are learning, and to other pieces by the composers they are studying.

Criticisms of limitations of the Suzuki repertoire

The Suzuki repertoire has been carefully chosen by a panel of highly-experienced musicians to introduce technical and musical issues in a progressive way from the simple to the more sophisticated. There are many advantages, not least that teachers are fully familiar with the repertoire and can therefore concentrate on teaching each child rather than having to focus on the score itself. Also, pupils are easily able to participate in group music-making. All Suzuki pupils follow this repertoire, though good teachers will include non-Suzuki repertoire as appropriate, including duets and trios, and will give pupils choice of repertoire as they become more advanced.

When the piano repertoire was selected in the late 1960s there was an emphasis on music from the baroque and classical periods because, in Japan, young children with small hands who were not yet ready emotionally for romantic music were playing at a high level. However, in the early 2000s, the repertoire was broadened significantly, and now includes music by composers such as Chopin, Debussy, Bartók and Villa-Lobos. Although some of the earlier recorded performances of Suzuki repertoire were not considered to be of high

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quality, more recent recordings are much improved and, of course, at an advanced level, children listen to performances by the finest pianists.

It is unfortunate that some teachers follow the Suzuki repertoire without having undertaken Suzuki training or understanding how to teach in accordance with the principles and philosophy, and this has detracted from the reputation of the approach.

‘Suzuki children are all taught in groups’ – another myth!

There is a myth – a misunderstanding – that Suzuki children are taught only in groups. Actually, most Suzuki children receive weekly individual lessons (very occasionally, in schools, it is possible for two or three children to share a lesson, but each still receives individual attention). Because of the common repertoire, it is possible for children to play in groups, and this may happen weekly or monthly, and also at Suzuki workshops.

Children love learning together – meeting other children, playing musical games and making music together. So, in addition to their weekly individual lessons, Suzuki children attend group lessons. These lessons help develop musicianship, coordination, listening, reading and social skills. Individual lessons for children around the same level are often timetabled consecutively so they may observe or participate in each other’s lessons.

Excessive pressure and competition among pupils

Those unfamiliar with the Suzuki approach may feel there will be excessive pressure and competition among pupils and parents, as children are all working on the same repertoire.

From the very beginning, children attend group musicianship classes which promote mutual support and co-operation. Children are encouraged to work together by regularly preparing ensembles (for instance duets, trios, double trios), and parents liaise when planning their children’s book recitals and other events. Typically, every concert is followed by a party to which families contribute refreshments. Children attend Suzuki workshops

and make new friends. The magic is that many Suzuki children (and parents, too) become close friends who maintain contact long after they have left the Suzuki studio.

Of course, some children progress faster than others, because everyone’s circumstances are different. Those who progress less fast are inspired by those moving faster – this often motivates them to work harder than if there were no advanced role models for them to follow. It is also the case that some of those progressing through the repertoire less quickly may be playing more musically than those speeding through – and their beautiful tone and musicianship will be admired by all in the studio.

The role of parental input

Compared with the traditional level of engagement, Suzuki parents are much more closely involved in pupils’ lessons and in supporting children at home in their practice. They are also encouraged to create a musical home environment which includes listening to music and attending concerts. Some critics argue that the high levels of support can create an over-reliance on parental guidance and hinder a child’s ability to develop independent learning skills.



Prospective new Suzuki families are invited to observe lessons for several weeks. The parents begin to understand – they see the positive attitude, commitment, hard work, and excellent results and progress. They see it is not necessary for parents to have prior musical knowledge. All parents want the best for their children, and many become convinced they wish their children to learn through the Suzuki approach. New Suzuki parents receive initial parent education, including lessons at the piano to learn early repertoire and techniques for themselves.

Parents realise this is the way children learn best – with an older or more experienced person guiding the way. Starting at a very young age (ideally 3 or 4) with parental guidance, listening daily to recordings of the music they are learning, is the foundation of the success of the Suzuki approach. Children are motivated by their own curiosity, and by their teacher’s and their parent’s



enthusiasm and love. As children develop skills in listening, technique and practice methods (often around the age of 11 – as they go to secondary school), gradually they become independent of their parents and want to do their music on their own, which is rewarding for children, parents and teachers alike.

The magic of the Suzuki approach

Let me conclude by noting some of the benefits of the Suzuki approach.

Many children who would not pass an audition to start learning an instrument, or who lack the ability to concentrate and practise on their own, are able to make good progress on a musical instrument if their parents can access a Suzuki teacher with vacancies. With the support of their teacher and a parent, all children are able to develop their musical skills to a high level. Some will progress further than others, but even those with dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, ADHD and so on, can learn to play well and will benefit from this approach to learning. Children learn to listen carefully; they acquire excellent technique to produce good sounds. The repertoire is precisely graded and children polish and refine each piece as they learn it. They are happy to perform from memory and in front of others. As they maintain and review their past repertoire, they improve their musical and technical skills further, which gives them the tools to master more difficult repertoire. Most importantly, they learn perseverance, persistence, determination and self-discipline – skills which they apply to their other studies. They learn that hard work leads to achievement.

The drop-out rate is very low because of the commitment of the whole family right from the beginning. Children stick with their lessons because they become quite advanced when still young, so by the time they reach the age of 11 or 12 and have transferred to secondary school (the time many traditionally-taught children choose to stop lessons), they are proficient on their instrument and able to play in ensembles – and everyone loves doing what they do well, especially when they can do it with other children.

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Character first,
ability second

Almost all children go through periods of finding it difficult to study their instrument. After all, practising to improve almost always involves failure – we never quite achieve the level of playing we would like – every day we hope to do better, but our goal always seems just out of reach. With the support of their teacher and parent, Suzuki children develop the perseverance and stamina to continue despite setbacks. Dr. Suzuki said: “Character first, ability second” – he believed children could develop fine, strong, determined characters through studying music.

Training

Globally, Europe has the most rigorous training system for Suzuki teachers. In order to join the course, potential new trainees are expected to have a degree in their chosen instrument. The Suzuki training course itself is demanding but fascinating, requiring extensive study of how to teach and play the repertoire together with a deep understanding of the philosophy.

There is a huge shortage of Suzuki teachers. Suzuki teachers in Europe have studied at length and in depth how to teach music. The magic is that the best of them send pupils regularly to the junior departments of the major music conservatoires. If you would like to find out more about training to be a Suzuki teacher, do look on the website of the European Suzuki Association (www.europeansuzuki.org) for details of teachers in your area – most will be willing for you to observe lessons in their studio.

Generally, criticism of the Suzuki approach comes from those who have never observed lessons. If you still have reservations, I would encourage you to investigate further – observe some Suzuki lessons.



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