

# Teacher to the World

Jenny Macmillan reflects on a 20th-century phenomenon

It may seem strange to open this series on great piano teachers by featuring Shinichi Suzuki (1899-1998), who neither played nor taught the piano. His significance is to have devised a teaching approach for the violin so successful that his assistants adapted it to suit the piano. In the last 50 years it has matured and is now used across the globe.

His approach is based on the realisation that virtually all children learn to speak their mother tongue, and that they learn it in a completely easy and natural way. He examined the way they learn – through listening, copying and repeating, accompanied by parental praise and enthusiasm – and reasoned the same approach could be used for learning to play a musical instrument. He firmly believed that ‘advanced ability can be nurtured in any child’.

Suzuki was born in Nagoya, Japan. His father had founded the world’s first and largest violin factory. At that time there was no tradition of classical music in Japan and, as a boy, Shinichi simply thought of these violins as toys. It was only at 17 that he started to play the violin, having been inspired by a recording by Mischa Elman. In his twenties Suzuki spent eight years in Germany, where he studied violin with Karl Klingler, a pupil of Joachim, and was strongly influenced by Western culture. He was befriended by Albert Einstein, and met and married the singer Waltraud Prange.

On their return to Japan in 1929, Suzuki spent several years teaching violin, mostly to conservatoire students, and performing in a string quartet with three of his brothers. A few years later, he was asked to teach a four-year-old boy. One day, searching for a way to teach such a young child, he was struck by the realisation that ‘all Japanese children learn to speak Japanese’ and was inspired to apply the same principles to music education. Over the next few years, he analysed and developed his ‘mother tongue’ ideas. After the war, and now in his mid-forties, he was invited to direct a new music school near Matsumoto. He accepted, on the condition that he be allowed to put his own ideas into practice. After the devastation of the war, he felt that his life’s work should be to bring joy to the lives of all children by expanding their abilities through playing the violin.

Suzuki pupils start learning an instrument at a very young age, often three or four. Before lessons start, they listen daily to recordings of the music they will learn in their first months of lessons as well as to plenty of other music. They observe lessons of other young pupils so they and their parents know what is expected of them. This listening and observation continues when their own lessons start. Parents are closely involved with all aspects of their children’s learning – playing recordings at home, taking notes during lessons, and guiding practices.

In lessons, teachers demonstrate the sounds and movements required, and the child copies these with a view to repeating them at home. Each technical and musical problem is mastered before moving on to the next piece, so children develop a library of skills which can be transferred from one piece to the next. From the very first lesson, there is a strong emphasis on listening, posture and tone.

For each instrument there is a carefully constructed core repertoire, each piece introducing one or two new difficulties while developing existing skills. Teachers add extra pieces according to the needs of each student. Pupils retain a large repertoire of past pieces which they play from memory and to which they continually return in order to learn to play them more musically. In addition to weekly

individual lessons, pupils attend regular group musicianship classes which develop reading and ensemble skills.

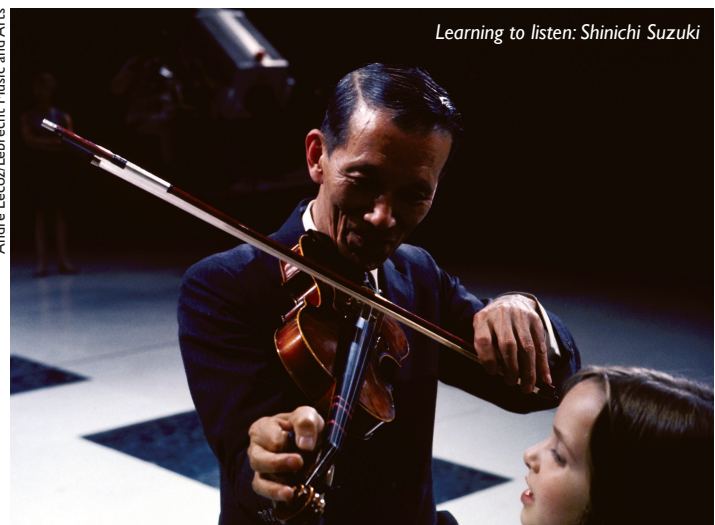
Within a few years, Suzuki’s students were amazing listeners with their abilities, and other teachers came to study with him. In 1956, a skilled young pianist named Haruko Kataoka (1927-2004) came to Matsumoto to accompany Suzuki’s students and to observe classes. She visited the Suzukis almost daily and, adopting the philosophy of his teaching approach, devised a way of playing the piano, and a core repertoire, which proved successful with very young children.

Suzuki’s teaching approach is held in high esteem by his followers. At the same time, strict adherence by many who teach according to his methods can verge on the obsessive. Fear, perhaps, that his principles may be diluted, has resulted in a kind of secrecy about the approach he devised, and a resistance to open debate. This is unfortunate because successful pupils are often reluctant to announce themselves as students who have benefited from the approach. In turn, Suzuki’s achievements are not nearly as widely recognised outside the movement as they deserve to be. Worse still, teachers untrained in the approach use the repertoire and the name without understanding the teaching philosophy behind it. Some even appear to believe that they should not teach their pupils to read music.

These kinds of misunderstandings are perpetuated by the shortage of openly available descriptions of Suzuki’s approach and his underlying principles. While Suzuki himself wrote two books, *Nurtured by Love* and *Ability Development from Age Zero*, neither sets out succinctly how to teach a musical instrument. Instead they express his oriental philosophy and emphasise teaching the whole person.

There can be no doubt that Suzuki’s approach is very successful in promoting good study habits in children and in producing highly skilled musicians. But it is important to realise that he did not develop his approach in order to produce professional musicians. After his experience of living in Japan during the second world war, he devised his teaching approach as a philosophy for living, to help children fulfil their capabilities as human beings. ‘Teaching music is not my main purpose. I want to make good citizens, noble human beings. If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth, he develops sensitivity, discipline and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart.’

Andre Lecoz/Lebrecht Music and Arts



Learning to listen: Shinichi Suzuki