

Suzuki Method

Dr Suzuki called his teaching method the mother-tongue approach, inspired by the fact that children so effortlessly learn to speak their native tongue. Prompted and encouraged by the parents' love and the family environment, the child responds and develops this most difficult of skills, that of intelligible speech.

When a child learns to speak, the following factors are at work:

Listening, motivation, repetition, step-by-step mastery, memory, vocabulary, parental involvement, love.

In the Suzuki approach each of these principles is used in the learning of an instrument.

Dr Suzuki closely follows the parallel with language learning and recommends that music should become an important part of the baby's environment from birth (or even before). When the infant's environment includes fine music as well as the sounds of the mother-tongue, it is understandable that the child will develop the ability to speak and to play a musical instrument (with technical guidance) before being required to read in either language. Formal lessons frequently begin as early as 3 years of age.

Once you decide to learn a musical instrument, you will be invited to come along and watch other children having lessons on the same instrument you have chosen. Some of these children will have just started, some may be quite advanced and will show you the kind of ability you will have once you have started to learn.

Your teacher and parents will ask you to listen to a tape or CD of the music you will be playing even before you have started to take formal lessons. This way you will already know what the music sounds like when you start to learn. You will also be expected to listen to recordings of classical music in general so that you can hear music played at its very best. This music you can choose yourself. There is no right or wrong answer. You may like the music of some composers and dislike the music of others. It's for you to decide.

Once you start lessons, one of your parents will be asked to come with you. They will take notes in the lesson and help you to practise at home. Your teacher will let you and your parents know what is to be practiced during the week. Don't worry, you don't have to practise every day. Suzuki himself said:

"Only practise on the days you eat!"

There are a number of precepts to the Suzuki Method that distinguish it from conventional music teaching. It is not that each of the individual precepts themselves are new. It is the totality of approach that distinguishes the Suzuki Method.

1. Early Beginnings. Although it is never too late to begin study via the Suzuki Method, lessons ideally start before the age of 5. So much development takes place in a child's early years, Suzuki did not believe these years should be ignored. He felt they should be cultivated with love and care.

2. Learning From Demonstration Students. Come to the teacher for their lessons to observe other children learning. This encourages children to aspire to the ability of others as well as accustoms them to playing in public from the very beginning.

3. Listening Students. Listen to the recording of the pieces they will play before they learn to play them. Suzuki felt that, just as in conventional schooling, books are introduced to children only after they have been speaking the language for several years, so written music should only be introduced to the music student once they have been playing for sufficient time. This develops a sophisticated ear for pitch and tone which enables a child to play with greater sensitivity.

4. Complete Mastery Students of the Suzuki Method. Stay learning a piece long after they have mastered the notes. They are taught to play from memory which is seen as the starting point for work on proper technique and musicality. They are encouraged to review old pieces where, unencumbered by having to learn new notes, they can work on new technical skills or merely reinforce and sharpen the skills they have already acquired.

5. Common Repertoire. All Suzuki Students learn and follow the same sequence of material. Each instrument has its own repertoire which has been designed to take a child from the very simplest piece (in the Suzuki Method this will be variations on 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star') to the Grade 8 level and beyond.

6. Group Practice. In addition to an individual music lesson, Suzuki students learn in larger groups. Ideally, they would attend a group lesson once a week. Here children benefit from the social aspects of playing together, learn from the different, sometimes higher, abilities of others and benefit from the freedom of releasing their own individual sound into a larger whole.

7. Playing in Public. Not only do the children become used to playing in public by having their individual lessons observed, they also are given the opportunity to play in concerts organised by their teacher or, on a larger scale, at one of the regional or national concerts organised by their regional group or the national organisation. The Suzuki student's music is not, therefore, of restrictive benefit to them. In overcoming any fear of performance, the Suzuki student can use their ability to enrich the lives of others.

8. Parental Involvement. Parents have an active role in the Suzuki Method. Rather than being seen as a liability and kept out of lessons, parents are expected to attend lessons, to take notes and to practise with their children, most fully in the early years. It is not necessary for a parent to be able to play the instrument themselves. The teacher will show them all they need to know in order to help their child. Indeed, many parents have been so inspired helping their children, they have taken up music study themselves.

9. Practice. Children learn to speak their language competently because they speak it every day. So music should be practised every day. Of course, this kind of commitment is difficult to make and Suzuki understood this. He therefore said: "Only practise on the days you eat."

10. Trained Teachers. The Suzuki Teacher is not merely able to play an instrument, they have been trained to TEACH. Teachers learn and are expected to perform the Suzuki repertoire as well as a number of other pieces. They are also taught in such areas as child development and psychology and dealing with learning difficulties.

11. Love. Suzuki wrote an account about his teaching method, how he developed it and some of the results achieved by his pupils. He entitled it "Nurtured By Love." Nurtured – because Suzuki believed that musical ability lies in all children. He did not believe he was imposing a skill upon a child; he was, rather, guiding them to manifest what they already possessed. Love – because Suzuki music teaching is not about breeding musicians or inculcating skills in children. It is about the amazing results that can be achieved when understanding, sensitivity and discipline are brought together in a single field of study. The glue that binds these various elements together is, Suzuki believed, love.