

The Suzuki Approach

Excerpted from article by Libby Dixon and Molly Johnson

The Suzuki approach, based on the so-called “mother tongue method”, differs from traditional methods of teaching instrumental music because it typically involves the student at a very early age, thus necessitating much participation on the part of the parent in the role of home teacher. Some of the basic principles and ingredients of the Suzuki approach are:

1 Begin as early as possible. Dr. Suzuki recommended that ability development begin at birth. Formal training may be started by age 3, ideally age 4 or 5.

2 Move in small steps so the child can master the material with a total sense of success, thereby building on his/her confidence and enthusiasm for learning. Each child progresses at his/her own pace.

3 Either one or both parents attends all lessons so that he/she understands the learning process, and can feel secure when working with the child as home teacher. To this end, it is helpful for the parent to receive initial instruction in correct playing posture and all of the beginning steps, even including the playing of a simple piece. The most important single ingredient for success is the parent’s willingness to devote regular time to work closely with the child and the teacher.

4 Daily listening to recordings of the Suzuki repertoire, as well as good music in general, is the nucleus of the Suzuki approach. The more the student listens to his/her recordings the more quickly he/she learns. This approach derives from the way all typical children learn to speak their native language.

5 Postpone music reading until the child’s aural and instrumental skills are well-established, just as we teach children to read a language only after they can speak. This enables the main focus of the teacher’s and student’s attention to be on the sound: beautiful tone, accurate intonation, and musical phrasing. These elements then become a basic part of the student’s earliest training.

6 Follow the Suzuki repertoire sequence, for the most part. Each piece becomes a building block for the careful development of technique. Equally important is the strong motivation this standardized repertoire provides; students want to play what they hear other students play. Constant repetition of the old pieces in a student’s repertoire is the secret of the performing ability of Suzuki students.

7 Create in lessons and home practice an enjoyable learning environment, so that much of the child’s motivation comes from enthusiasm for learning and desire to please. When working with children we should remember Dr. Suzuki’s exhortation that we must “come down to their physical limitations and up to their sense of wonder and awe”.

8 Group lessons, in addition to private lessons, and observation of other students’ lessons are valuable aids to motivation. The child learns from peers possibly more than he does from his adult teacher directly – children love to do what they see other children do.

9 Foster an attitude of cooperation rather than competition among students, of supportiveness for each other’s accomplishments.

10 Developing the Whole Child The Suzuki approach deals with much more than teaching a child how to play an instrument. It seeks to develop the whole child, to help unfold his natural potential to learn and become a good and happy person. The purpose of Suzuki training is not to produce great artists, but to help every child to find the joy that comes through music-making. Through the Suzuki growing process, children thrive in a total environment of support; they develop confidence and self-esteem, determination to try difficult things, self-discipline and concentration, as well as a lasting enjoyment of music, and the sensitivity and skill for making music.