



Dr. Shinichi Suzuki greeting a student

Social Harmony

The enduring strength
of Shinichi Suzuki's legacy

By Thomas May





A quarter century has passed since the death of Shinichi Suzuki, yet the global success story of his namesake method shows no sign of fading away. A *New York Times* obituary in 1998 described the Suzuki Method as “a world-wide phenomenon, with 400,000 students at any one time in 34 countries.” More or less the same pattern has continued into the 21st century, according to the Matsumoto-based Talent Education Research Institute that Suzuki founded in 1948.

Indeed, Suzuki's vision—that providing children with the tools to foster their natural creativity and ability to communicate holds the promise of encouraging future social harmony—seems more resonant than ever in this era of intensifying polarization. “If every child is educated, then you can save the world,” as Suzuki put it, with character-

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istic idealism, in a talk while visiting the United States in 1976.

“What Suzuki is really about is not producing prodigies but developing loving, caring, sensitive human beings through the discipline of music,” says Patricia D’Ercole, past chair of the Suzuki Association board of directors and a Suzuki violin teacher and teacher trainer since the 1970s. Traditionally trained on the instrument, she was encouraged after receiving her bachelor’s degree to visit the American Suzuki Institute at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, where she would later establish herself as one of the world’s leading exponents of the method.

Seeing Suzuki’s ideas in action was a road-to-Damascus moment for D’Ercole. She recalls realizing that her post-Vietnam War idealism “about trying to leave the world a better place” and her passion for teaching music converged in what she was discovering about Suzuki’s philosophy. “Looking at what he’d done for string playing in the United States, I began to identify with him,” D’Ercole says. “I vowed that even though I may not be the best player, I was going to be the best teacher I could be.”

D’Ercole’s experience chimes with one of the main points the Tokyo-born historian Eri Hotta makes in her elegant new biography, *Suzuki: The Man and His Dream to Teach the Children of the World* (Belknap Press). Hotta shows how his method was grounded in a philosophy extending far beyond violin training techniques. To Suzuki, she writes, “the achievement of a certain level of mastery on the violin was only an example—albeit a powerful one—of what any and all children could accomplish with proper guidance from an early age.” As Suzuki himself remarked: “This method is not education of the violin. It is education by the violin.”

In Search of the True Meaning of Art

Suzuki’s own education as a violinist was belated. Born in the port city of Nagoya in 1898, he did not benefit from the early guidance and encouragement that are the foundation of his method—even though the family business happened to revolve around violins. Suzuki came of age at the end of the Meiji era, the period when Western music—along with scientific, political, and social ideologies—was rapidly being embraced in Japan.

Masakichi Suzuki, his father, founded what became the largest violin-making factory in the nation. Young Suzuki observed the mechanics of crafting an instrument with fascination and, along with his many siblings, was allowed to help out—an activity he found especially enjoyable. But the incentive to learn to play the violin did not emerge until his later teen years, when the family acquired a hand-wound gramophone, and Suzuki encountered Mischa Elman’s recording of Schubert’s *Ave Maria*. Having until then regarded the violin as little more than a “toy,” he recalled that the violinist’s “beauty of tone . . . opened my eyes to music.” This was “the first step in my search for the true meaning of art.”

Suzuki attempted to teach himself to play by imitating Elman recordings and then spent most of the 1920s in Weimar Republic Germany studying violin. During these years, he also met his wife, Waltraud Prange, and made the first recording by a Japanese violinist of Western classical repertoire to be sold internationally: an account of the Franck Sonata made for Deutsche Grammophon.

After returning to Japan with his new wife, Suzuki devoted himself to performing—he formed a string quartet with his brothers—and also began focusing on approaches to teaching young children. His experiments in pedagogy, during which he developed the famous Suzuki repertoire that would later appear in a series of ten books, unfolded during the volatile years leading up to World War II. Just two months before Pearl Harbor, he published the first treatise that laid out the core ideas of what would become known as the Suzuki Method.

Cornerstones of the Method

While the world around him fell into an abyss of self-destructive nationalism and racism, Suzuki was refining a humanist philosophy based on principles of universality. He emphasized the potential shared by all children, asserting that environment supersedes genetic predisposition. Although he didn’t deny differences in innate abilities, Suzuki declared that there is “no such thing as a born genius.” This view, as Hotta describes it, holds that “talent is not a static, inborn quality, like, say, eye color” but “a

muscle that can be developed and strengthened regardless of genetics.”

The cornerstone of this philosophy was the belief that learning music should mimic the way in which children become fluent in a language. Just as children grow up with an ability to speak their mother tongue, the right sort of stimulation, above all at an early age, will enable them to acquire a high standard of skill with an instrument as challenging as the violin. The violin remained Suzuki’s focus, but the method could be applied not only to other instruments but indeed to other endeavors beyond music.

“The right sort of stimulation” is key. The Suzuki Method entails a focus on learning to listen and hence on playing by ear well before acquiring the ability to read music. Most crucially, it calls for close parental involvement and investment in the process. Group lessons are combined with private instruction to enhance Suzuki’s call for “a pervasive sense of inclusiveness and inventiveness, which bring elements of fun to otherwise tedious drilling of musical skills,” as Hotta explains.

An Effective Legacy

When Leila Josefowicz began learning violin at the age of three and a half, after her family moved to the Los Angeles area, it was via the Suzuki Method, with her parents learning alongside her. Her son recently took up the instrument, so she has been revisiting the method. “It’s been amazing to follow this process again,” says Josefowicz. “I’m in awe of the great teachers who work with players at such a young age. It’s so challenging just to get the violin into the right position.”

Josefowicz also admires the method’s effectiveness in helping young children understand the need to commit to long-range goals “where some days by nature are just easier or feel more fulfilling than other days.” She finds not much has changed in this regard since she started out: “Children learn that patience is a natural part of the process.” And an infallible incentive here, as Josefowicz recalls it, is the sheer fun of participating in the Suzuki Institute. “The process of practicing in general can be a very lonely or solitary experience. So this method of joining people together from the outset is invaluable.”

Anne Akiko Meyers believes Suzuki's ideas have proved especially effective because, at their core, they are "so easy and simple and accessible to everyone. That's the beauty of it. It doesn't matter where you come from, who you are, how tall or short you are. It just doesn't matter." Her mother, a painter who came from Tokyo, had moved to the middle of the Mojave Desert when her father accepted a faculty position at a college in Ridgecrest, California. She introduced the Suzuki Method to the community after reading his seminal explanation of his philosophy, published as *Nurtured by Love*.

"Suzuki's idea of music as a universal language that everyone can pick up really struck a chord with her," says Meyers, whose Suzuki instructor was Shirley Helmick. During family trips back and forth to Japan, Meyers developed friendships with peers learning the method there and had an opportunity to meet Suzuki himself at his institute in Matsumoto. A favorite memory

is of seeing him years later, in her early 20s, after a recital she had given in Matsumoto. "Suddenly I saw Dr. Suzuki waiting in the green room to say hello, and it all seemed to come full circle."

There were, to be sure, precedents to Suzuki's ideas, which have been compared to the zeitgeist of self-motivational educational techniques introduced by Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner. But his method resonated especially powerfully in postwar America—all the more so as it became reduced to a specific technique of education seeming to offer a quick, painless entrée into music. Hotta suggests that the method's very success, "which undoubtedly expanded opportunities for many a youngster," may in the process have led to a "homogenization of what was once fascinatingly varied."

Suzuki generated controversy from the start. D'Ercole sums up the main critiques that she encountered in her early years of teaching the method: "The fact that we were

teaching by ear, that the kids were just going to become little imitators of everything they heard before learning to read music, was one criticism that kept coming up. Also, people questioned how parents could help in a lesson, especially if they weren't musicians." But a sensitive teacher, D'Ercole points out, learns to adjust the timing of learning to read music so that the benefit of gaining confidence in playing in tune can be maximized. In fact, she adds, "Dr. Suzuki was the only one who could teach the 'Suzuki Method.' The rest of us teach our versions of it, because the world continues to change, and we keep evolving in our understanding."

Ultimately, the benefits of this philosophy expand beyond the realm of music to make a difference in communities, D'Ercole is convinced. "Even former students who don't go into a professional life in music carry that 'noble character' with them in whatever they're doing." ■

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