

“So you’re a Suzuki kid...”

(to read or not to read)

by Elizabeth Robinson

One of the most common urban myths about Suzuki method is that Suzuki kids don’t learn to read music – they do it all by ear. This view is often held by those who have not researched the method carefully but are happy to jump onto the cheap and easy band-wagon of criticism. This belief is however prevalent in the community and so it is appropriate for us to examine the facts and see if there is any basis for the beliefs. If the myth is true, then we teachers should work urgently to correct it.

Dr Shinichi Suzuki developed his teaching method based on the observation that children learn their mother tongue perfectly by constant exposure. He surmised that they could learn music the same way by immersing children in a rich auditory environment of fine music. This turned out to be correct and so Suzuki started teaching very young children – sometimes as young as 2 1/2 years old to play violin.

Suzuki continued the analogy of language/ reading acquisition right through. He observed that children learned to speak first, years before they started to read or write Japanese characters. So he allowed these early starters to progress quite a long way on their instruments before he introduced music note reading. For a child starting at age 2 1/2 or 3 years, they might even have reached book 4 before he introduced written notation.

This was most appropriate for children starting so young. But, as soon as these children had grasped their Japanese characters and were starting to read fluently– that is they had developed an understanding of the connection between symbols on a page having another meaning, he would introduce music reading.

There is ample evidence from Suzuki’s writings alone that indicate that Suzuki’s pupils were good music readers. The following excerpt from Suzuki’s autobiography *Nurtured by Love* (a must read for all Suzuki parents – order one now from your State Head Office) illustrates the reading ability that Suzuki expected and demanded of his older players:

One day a request came from the Matsumoto NHK broadcasting station for a radio performance. I thought this a good opportunity, and wanted them (Koji Toyoda and Kenji Kobayashi) to play the Vivaldi concerto for two violins. They had never played it before. I wanted to test the two boys and see how much they could remember. I gave the broadcasting station the name of the music, but did not tell Koji and Kenji until the morning of the preceding day.

*I called them from their room and **gave them the music**, telling them “This music has to be played tomorrow at one pm at a radio broadcast. It is rather sudden, but it will be a good exercise for you. You’d better start practicing right away.” Both were surprised, saying, “This is awful” and so on, but they took their respective **music books** and ran joyfully to their room. In a few moments I heard the tune of the concerto for two violins. When, after an hour and a half, I thought I would call their attention to certain points in the musical expression and went upstairs to their room, both of them played the first movement without looking at the notes.*

Notice that Suzuki did **not** hand the boys an audio recording! He handed the boys the music book. Suzuki's pupils played from memory not because they couldn't read the music, but because the book very quickly became superfluous – they didn't need it any more. Suzuki goes on to comment:

There was no sign of anxiety or uneasiness... Before they went to the broadcasting station the next day, I wanted to hear their performance. Both handed over their music books, which I took and put on the table, and then I listened to their playing. (It has always been our custom for the children to give the music books to the teacher before playing.)...

They went to the waiting car in high spirits. They had left the music books, of course, on the table. (As I have pointed out at another place in this book, I put great store on memory training. My students must know the music by heart and not refer to the written notes. Both these boys having been taught like this from childhood, it didn't even occur to them to take the music along.

When Suzuki says “they must not refer to the written notes,” he means that once they have studied the music in great detail, and have memorized the piece perfectly, they are not to play or perform with the music in front of them. Suzuki assumes that they will learn the piece from the music notation. Then having memorized it, they are freed up to focus on beautiful musical expression and fine tone.

Suzuki reminds us repeatedly of his emphasis on memory training. I believe the apparent lack of attention on how he taught them to read the music was because he was correcting what he saw as an imbalance. Before Suzuki, there was not so much emphasis on memory training. This was the new point that he introduced. But he did not throw out the traditional means of learning music – by reading the notes on the page. Of course the children would read the notation! – that went without saying – how else would they be able to play in ensembles or with international orchestras.

With any new movement or innovation, there is always massive emphasis to get the new point across. Focus on the new point alone, however, conveys a misleading lack of balance. Suzuki did not lack this balance himself. However some of his followers down the track may jeopardize their student's development by delaying note reading.

Teachers worldwide have taken the opportunity to visit Japan and had the privilege of studying under Suzuki. Many have enjoyed thrilling, stimulating months observing and studying and their teaching practice has been transformed by these study tours. The curious thing is this. One will say “Suzuki did it this way” and another “No, Suzuki did it that way.” The answer to this conundrum is that both are true. Suzuki's teaching was not rigid or static. He constantly experimented and tried new things. He was always changing, adapting and updating – doing whatever it took to play with a fine tone and to draw out the finest playing from his pupils.

If we are rigid and unthinking, and copy parrot- fashion something that Suzuki did once for one child, we run the risk of perpetuating the urban myth that *Suzuki kids don't read*. If we maintain a rigid belief like “Suzuki started note reading at book 4” then we will do a great disservice to many of our pupils. For example, if a child begins violin or piano at age 8 we would be very foolish to leave note reading until that child starts book 4. Like Suzuki, we must start note reading when it is most appropriate developmentally – that is, when the child has their ABC under control and is reading fluently. Clearly this occurs earlier for some children than others. If school reading is

delayed then we should not overburden a child with music notation. Once the child's reading is in hand, music reading begins.

As a mother of school age children, I know that some of our Suzuki children will come up against antagonism and skepticism from some music educators at school and in community orchestras when they hear that they are *Suzuki kids*. As a mother and as a Suzuki violin teacher, I like to make sure that my kids are better prepared than the 'traditional' kids when it comes to reading music. This equips the kids really well when they join the school string ensemble or orchestra. One of the quickest ways to turn kids off music is to allow them to feel inadequate before their peers and teachers at school.

Parents, don't overlook this important part of your child's practice routine. If you keep chipping away at note reading it will become an important factor in your child's musical development. Your child will become a valued member of the school ensemble. Conductors are looking for confident readers to lead each section of the orchestra. For the pianists, great readers become great accompanists.

Doing reading homework is hard work and brain-strain but is well worth the effort. In my opinion the greater urban myth is that kids who learned the traditional method learned to read music. The truth is that some did and some didn't. Some kids are more naturally wired for music reading than others. In my own family, one child learned traditional piano and failed to read while another learned Suzuki method and read almost intuitively. Their differing reading ability reflected natural physiological differences rather than lack of diligence or hard work. Both did their music reading homework with assistance. Both were avid readers of the written word. Adults often lose their ability to play music for life because they failed to develop adequate music reading skills in their youth.

So teachers, make sure you have a well thought out reading program and as soon as each child masters school reading, get started. A 5 minute reading assignment for each day is an achievable starting point. Reading skills will grow steadily with this approach.

Senior piano teacher-trainer Mary Craig Powell from Ohio, USA recommends 20 minutes/day for her pupils and sets special goals for holidays e.g. 100 pages of reading. She has a library of music books which pupils borrow for a week at a time and read through. With intelligence and flexibility let us not forget this important aspect of music education. In the true Suzuki spirit, let us do our bit to dispel the myth that Suzuki kids don't read.