

Objections to Suzuki Training and Teaching

C.M. Sunday – cmsunday@alumni.rice.edu

A poster on *Maestronet* inquired about why people seemed to object to Suzuki training. Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I think people object to one or some combination of the following:

1. "Mother Tongue" method & Parental Involvement: Children are taught by rote, the "Mother Tongue Method," which means repeating what teacher does and endless listening of recordings. Suzuki suggested that students listen to the recordings 50 times a day, which I think is a form of child abuse if it were really followed. But not music reading: at the earlier ages the book is really for the parents who are expected to acquire an instrument and spend anywhere from six weeks to several months learning the instrument, themselves, before their child starts. Most parents cannot or do not want to do this. The program also includes group lessons at least twice a month (harder for private teachers not associated with larger facilities at schools), where students hear others playing at different levels. This method is very contrary to the older method of starting children around age seven, by which time they are able to read. One could speculate that Suzuki lowered the age of starting to age three (!) in order to expand the commercial base of his efforts.
[I am able to start very bright four- or five-year-olds, but I refuse to start them at age three. Unless the child is very motivated—and some of them are—the parent piece of the "Suzuki Triangle" (student/parent/teacher) has to be very strong for students to start at these very early ages. Most parents have to undertake a good deal of parent education for this to be successful, and many won't do it. Private teachers may be afraid to insist on this for fear of losing income, so the whole thing falls apart.]
2. Asian versus Western customs: There are some customs associated with Japanese culture which are sometimes followed, but often, not, in private studios as the customs are foreign to the culture in the US, such as bowing and removing shoes at the door. It's cleaner to remove shoes at the door, but no matter how often you ask, it is not an American custom and people forget to do it. It becomes counterproductive to insist, after a while. Bowing after performances is fine, but to bow before and after a lesson is not a contemporary practice in the West and students are not going to do this.
3. Complaints against the insistence on using Suzuki books solely: From the time I began to be acquainted with this issue, until now, (a span of several decades), the practice of only using Suzuki books seems to have changed. A lot of Suzuki teachers have written their own materials to use with the Suzuki books, and there

is a lot of it, a lot of it very good. I think the Suzuki books were initially considered to be sacrosanct but not any longer; this is evident on the official SSA forums.

4. Complaints against Suzuki teachers: Another objection is the level of playing of some of the teachers. The greatest leaders in this movement have been good players, themselves, but there are also some teachers who really struggle to play the several pieces in the level 4 book, the playing of which is required in order to take the Suzuki training, the audition being video taped and submitted to the SSA in Boulder, Colorado. I don't have any data on how many audition tapes are submitted and how many, if any, are refused.
5. Suzuki Training: The training itself is also a point of contention. There is a great deal of this, starting with the initial, required course, "Every Child Can." Suzuki training is offered in two ways, either in Summer Institutes or at some universities where the Suzuki coursework is offered along with degrees in performance. At Denver University, the coursework may be taken by itself in either one or two years, a full set of the violin books, and costs around \$7,000 with no scholarships offered. NAU in Flagstaff offers the training also, along with a performance degree in violin or viola, and there are scholarships (the tuition is very low, anyway) along with the possibility of the playing in the Flagstaff Symphony, which pays around \$3,000 a semester, I believe. Information on other universities and the summer institutes is available on the SSA pages. Summer Suzuki Institutes are very expensive, often the housing is very elegant and very expensive, though there are some scholarship funds available for teachers.
6. Cult-ish Nature of some: This by no means applies to all Suzuki teachers, but with respect to some, and less so now than in the past, there were "true believers" who were really given to negative reactions when the method or Dr. Suzuki himself was criticized. More than one traditional teacher has innocently wandered into a Suzuki forum or group, only to depart because of a storm of angry responses. I will say that I have never experienced this on the official SSA forum, where the posters are very kindly and professional.
7. Controlling nature: I do find the printed paragraph in the front of the Suzuki books, insisting that parents check with the SSA before accepting a private teacher, to be uncomfortably controlling and intrusive. In my view, this is really what most of the underlying resentment against Suzuki is about: if you don't toe the line, so to speak, your income and life's work may be threatened. People do not react well to threats, particularly if they come from players who are inferior to the university level teachers. Many universities want nothing to do with Suzuki, even if they host a program. It's understandable why.

Note that there is no such thing as “Suzuki Certification.” That doesn't exist. What happens is that when you take a course, you are “registered” for that course, and prospective students can contact the SSA in Boulder and confirm your registration. University degrees, BA, BM, MM, etc., may include Suzuki training, and I think the SSA may be informed and thus the teacher is registered for that coursework, but I'm not sure about the current state of affairs in this regard.

It is very, very common for a teacher to use the Suzuki books, with little or no, or very limited understanding of the methodology as a whole. This is a sore point, naturally, with teachers who have gone to all the trouble and expense of acquiring the training. It is also very common for someone to take several semesters of Suzuki training—including observations, lectures, research requirement, student teaching—and yet not be “registered” with the SSA because the professor(s) they worked with were not official “Teacher Trainers.” This was the case with the viola teacher at NAU, whom I talked with several years ago. And it is true with me. I took training at UNC-Chapel Hill, but the faculty there was very clear and honest with me in telling me that my training would not be registered with the SSA because my Suzuki teacher, Ruth Johnson, was not an official SSA Teacher Trainer. Yet UNC-CH has a huge program, hundreds of students, even group orchestras, chamber groups and theory classes for these children.