

# Suzuki Teacher by Name, Suzuki Teacher by Nature - or Nurture?

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As the only Suzuki recorder teacher-trainee in the UK, I was asked by Nancy Daly to write about my experiences for Ability journal. I began to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard, should I say!), and quickly realised that what I would like to share has little to do with my instrument, but everything to do with what I am learning about myself and what it means to be able to call myself a Suzuki teacher, with that all-important pre-fix. Suzuki teacher by name, Suzuki teacher by nature – or nurture? Had I been a violinist or a pianist or a flautist, what follows would probably have been the same.

At the time of writing I have just finished reading *They're Rarely too Young and Never too Old to Twinkle*, the required reading book for Level 3, having completed all my Level 2 written assignments over the teaching-free summer holidays. With my playing, whilst I continue to work on and review the repertoire for Levels 1 and 2, I have now started exploring the Level 3 music, and am enjoying the greater variety (with Level 1 and 2 recorder there is a great deal of overlap between material for descant and treble recorder, but the two part company for Level 3) and longer pieces. Nothing significant in all that, until I add that I am still a relatively-wet-behind-the ears Level 1 teacher! Eager beaver with an insatiable appetite for all things Suzuki I may be, but clearly I am also in grave danger of trying to run before I can walk.

Two 'Suzuki experiences' during the course of the last few months have brought me to my senses with a jolt: at the end of August I attended Ed Kreitman's London workshop, and shortly afterwards embarked on a series of lesson observation sessions with Suzuki violin teacher Helen Brunner.

Ed's presentation included a session on Defining Progress in the Suzuki Method. Alongside many wise and wonderful insights, he spoke about studying and reviewing the repertoire pieces, and how pupils' progress may be measured not by how many pieces they have learned, but by how well and beautifully they play the pieces they already know: "Progress is about developing skills, and the music provides the opportunity for demonstrating those skills." He observed how even the most well-intentioned parents sometimes fall into the trap of comparing notes to discover which child has reached the most advanced 'Top Piece'. In my ever-growing enthusiasm for everything Suzuki, I realised I had fallen into the similar trap of seeking to measure my own progress by how many boxes I had ticked on my check-list of training course requirements. I was eager to work my way up through the Levels as quickly as possible, so that I could get on with the practice of teaching without the distraction of constantly having to prepare essays and notes. Measured against Ed's criteria, how was I doing at my own development of skills, I wondered?

From Helen Brunner, who embodies the essence of Suzuki's teaching – the joy of sharing in music, a generosity of spirit and emphasis on helping one other – I learn continuously, but what has helped me most to date is my observation of how the tapestry of her teaching is shot through with golden threads of affirmation: for every word of praise she gives children (and the attending parent) for what they do, she tells them ten thousand times over that they are special and valued for who they are. In response, they glow – and play / watch / listen much better! During my 20 years of pre-Suzuki 'traditional' music-

teaching experience, I built up a reputation as a successful teacher based on the quality of my pupils' performing as demonstrated in ABRSM exams, school concerts, festivals and competitions. I would say I have always been good at encouraging pupils and praising them for their achievements, both great and small, including extra accolades for effort, organisational skills, self-discipline and focus, but it has only ever been within the context of the music. Clearly some re-thinking was necessary.

Through these experiences, I ponder, "Am I developing my Suzuki-teaching abilities through what I do, or who I am?" and "Am I only a Suzuki teacher when I am engaged in the act of teaching, or am I a Suzuki teacher 'by nature' 24 / 7, through the way I live my life and relate to others?" To borrow a concept from theology / sociology, I have found a helpful analogy in considering the ways in which people come to identify with a particular religious or social group: Belonging, Believing, Behaving.

**Belonging** – when people start attending the meeting / gathering of a group because they are interested in what the group represents. Having been introduced to the Suzuki Method by Nancy Daly and attended a 'Taster Day' in London I liked what I heard and decided to learn more by signing up as a teacher trainee and thus joining the 'group', the British Suzuki Institute. I became affiliated with the Suzuki family, if only on the peripheries, and started telling friends and colleagues, rather cautiously, about the commitment I had made. At this stage I had read *Nurtured by Love* and *Ability Development from Age Zero*, but not yet taken them to heart.

**Believing** – when people accept and own the 'dogma' / common principles which unite and define the group. Initially, I was drawn to the Suzuki Method as an instrumental method, with its interesting approach to teaching beginners, taping up the finger holes of the recorder to enable both hands to be placed in the correct position from day one and to encourage a relaxed, raised finger action. This, I thought, as I embarked on my Suzuki journey, is going to revolutionise

my teaching! Since then, I have gained a much deeper insight into Suzuki's holistic approach to education and ability development, and have come to believe in it passionately. Now it is this which is revolutionising my teaching, and I find myself an ambassador, actively recommending the Method to friends (and even strangers!) and colleagues.

Over a period of time, Believing leads to Behaving – when people's adopted beliefs begin to affect the way they conduct themselves in society from day to day. Believing in everything Suzuki stands for, finding myself more and more at home within the Suzuki community and taking an increasingly active part in Suzuki events, has brought me to a re-think of how my life should be lived if I am serious about my identity as a Suzuki teacher. Surely Suzuki teachers 'by nature' should have something about them in the way they present to the world which sets them apart from other teachers, not just in the way they teach, but all the time, in their 'being'.

From our earliest training courses we have been taught that at the root of all Suzuki teaching lies 'Parent Education, Parent Education, Parent Education' and having now started to grow my own Suzuki seedlings I have quickly learned, through trial and many errors, what a fundamental role the parent plays as part of the Suzuki Triangle. Yet who am I to tell parents how to behave if I don't model that behaviour in myself? Some of the most-well-thumbed pages in my personal copy of *Ability Development* are those addressing issues of behaviour - *Anger is Unnecessary in Everyday Life*, *The Interest on Love*, *Use a Friendly Voice*, *Feeling Happiness is an Ability*, *Act when you Think* etc. Suzuki says that parents must constantly ask themselves whether they are good examples for their children; so must I constantly ask myself whether I am a good example for my parents – and my pupils.

Rolled into one, these three stages of Belonging, Believing and Behaving may be summed up as *Becoming*, which leads me full circle to my opening question: how does one 'become' Suzuki by name, Suzuki by nature? The answer, inevitably,

is through nurture within the best possible environment, the very process Suzuki advocates for all education. Only by using small steps and lots of repetition can I hope to become the fine person Suzuki would want me to be. I've missed the boat on the 'early start' by many, many years, but I can strive to make the most of the time I do have.

The best possible environment for Suzuki teachers (both trainees and trained) to find nurture is within the Suzuki community, through courses and lectures, workshops and concerts. I always come away from Suzuki events filled with inspiration and fresh vigour. In approaching my training the way I described at the beginning of this article, I have been trying to take too many steps too soon, steps which are too big, setting myself goals which I am not yet ready to achieve. Taking smaller steps at a slower pace, allowing for continuing review, will enable me to ensure that my Suzuki future is built on firm foundations which will stand the test of time.

Sometimes it all gets a bit overwhelming. I try to keep the 'Suzuki Way' to the fore, but it ebbs and flows with the demands of the daily round, depending on how busy or tired or emotionally challenged I am feeling. At times like these, when the steps I take seem to have lost their spring, it helps to remind myself of Suzuki's sense of fun, and the importance of the 'joy in practice' he spoke about so readily. Sadly, I never had the privilege of meeting Dr Suzuki in person, but those who did never fail to mention the twinkle in his eye.

And the repetition? Suzuki describes the way in which children learn to speak their mother tongue as "a natural process in which practice continues from morning till night." In order to develop my abilities as a Suzuki teacher I must do the same, always seeking better and newer ways to develop them to an even higher level. The word 'becoming' is a present participle, carrying with it the sense of something ongoing, not completed. I will never manage to tick all the boxes, or achieve a state of being 'fully trained' because there is always more to learn. 