

The Key: *Discovering Suzuki-* *A Response to Chris Orton.*

Heather Moger

Having read Chris Orton's article 'Can you feel it?' (Autumn 2011), what I felt was excitement and optimism: Chris writes as one of what I perceive as a new generation of specialist trained recorder players committed to raising the standard of recorder teaching and playing in the maintained sector at grassroots level. There are, I am sure, many recorder players and teachers of all generations reading this who will be thinking, 'Well, I do that, too', and credit to you where it is due. I don't think it too big a generalisation, however, to say that if one has studied in any field to a very high level, as Chris has done, the expectation of the world at large is that one would wish to continue working at that 'top end'. In teaching, this usually means taking on advanced students, those who have been singled out in some way for their 'talent' at whatever age, or working in independent schools with the privileged few whose parents have chosen to pay for their education. Alongside his work at specialist establishments like Chetham's School of Music and the Birmingham Conservatoire, however, we see Chris sharing his gifts in a much less selective way, with the larger and much broader group of children receiving regular state education. Dare I say, controversially, that many would consider this to be a compromise for someone like Chris, a 'dumbing down', a 'waste' of his musical abilities.

For Chris, a performer of the highest standard and versatility, teaching is clearly not an add-on to a career in the concert hall. He devotes considerable thought and energy to ensuring that the pupils he encounters receive as quality an offering as his audiences. The work he describes is not of the 'hit and run' variety, whereby a virtuoso recorder professional visits a primary school for a short-term project, giving participants an insight into the true potential of our instrument when it is in capable hands, inspiring and effective though that can be. What shines through Chris's words is his passion for growing young musicians from the bottom up, which can only be achieved through the gift of time, week in, week out, throughout the school year, and from one year to the next. His goal is not only to give them a positive and quality experience of music-making, but to give them an experience

of progression, that sense of pride and joy in true musical achievement which is so often elusive in wider opportunities programmes.

Moreover, it is most heartening to find an instrumental teacher who makes it a priority to lay good pre-instrument foundations, addressing body awareness and control, training the voice and developing the inner ear. It would be unheard of to start maths lessons in a primary school and expect pupils to attempt multiplication and division before they had even been introduced to such concepts as more or fewer, larger or smaller, or taught to count to ten, let alone to add or subtract, yet so often we thrust an instrument into a child's hand and expect him/her to assimilate an overwhelming number of musical concepts and an endless barrage of information straight away, with little or no prior knowledge or experience.

Learning to make music on an instrument is one of the most complex tasks an individual can undertake; it involves all the perceptual, cognitive and kinaesthetic processes simultaneously and is the highest integration of developmental skills. Yet, in spite of the recent increase in focus on education in the early years, there is still a common perception that to work with beginners requires only minimal subject knowledge and little training or expertise. With music education in general, and recorder teaching specifically, this is very much the case. Although the recorder in the UK increasingly enjoys a much higher profile than it has for a long time (through internationally-renowned virtuoso professionals such as Piers Adams of Red Priest fame, and Pamela Thorby of *Adiemus* fame), and there are larger numbers of students studying the recorder as a first instrument through the UK's major music conservatoires, in the maintained sector the recorder specialist is still a rare breed among school instrumental teachers. It is my belief that it is vital for children to receive their early music lessons from a specialist if their potential is to be fully realized, and that it is vital for music teachers generally, and instrumental teachers specifically, to receive thorough training in how to teach young beginners effectively.

The Henley Report (Music in Education in

England, February 2011) found that 'Much primary school classroom teaching of music is provided by non-specialist teachers,' and also noted 'The amount of time dedicated to music in most Initial Teacher Training courses is inadequate to create a workforce that is confident in its own ability to teach the subject in the classroom.' In maintained schools where recorder lessons are on the curriculum (either in-house, as part of Whole Class Instrumental and Vocal Tuition or as a part of the peripatetic instrumental service), they are usually taught by a willing volunteer able to play a few basic tunes, a non-specialist class music teacher or a visiting woodwind teacher who has picked up the recorder along the way but has little or no specific recorder training and little or no performing experience on the instrument. The knock-on effects are manifold: the teaching and performing model given is often poor (and so often demotivating); children (and their parents) and schools in general remain ignorant of the true potential of the recorder and of its versatility as both a solo and ensemble instrument; pupils who do learn the recorder receive little or any guidance on technique, limiting the learning outcomes and leading to bad playing habits which store up problems for future enjoyment of the instrument; the recorder continues to be regarded as a cheap, beginners' instrument to be discarded as soon as something 'bigger and better' is offered.

Even with recorder specialists who choose to go into teaching, new teachers have by and large always been expected to get on with the job, cobbling together their own programme of lessons using a mix and match approach with the many tutor books currently on the market, together with their own ideas and those picked up from their own teachers. Chris has managed to develop a successful approach to recorder teaching based on the non-instrumental resources of Dalcroze Eurhythmics and Kodaly – but not, I am sure, without considerable perseverance, trial and error, creativity and personal skill.

What struck me about Chris's account of his teaching experiences was his revelation 'My first mistake, as a fresh graduate and new teacher, was to think that I had to teach 30 children a recorder lesson, at once. It did not, and does not, work.' As a specialist recorder teacher of twenty-five years (whose decision to move straight from music conservatoire to state primary school classroom was met with horror from peers and tutors alike), I have much empathy with Chris. In my quest for survival (!) and my deep concern to meet the needs of my pupils, I, similarly, developed my own successful way forward, but I longed for kindred spirits, recorder-playing teacher colleagues with whom I could meet, share and consult, and from whom I could learn and receive support. Despite being an active member of ERTA and benefiting

from the once-a-year weekend 'fix' of recorder mania, I found at times recorder teaching to be a very lonely occupation!

The turning point for me came with my discovery of the Suzuki Method training course, which has given me all that and more, and completely transformed the way I approach teaching beginners. There is nothing radically new in the Suzuki Method, and it shares much common ground with the philosophies of Dalcroze and Kodaly: children should have quality musical experiences as young as possible; through experience, singing, movement and listening, children can internalize musicianship skills before moving on to instrumental study; music experience must precede music reading, and inner hearing of what one plays must precede actually playing it on an instrument; well-rounded musicianship should be the goal, developing a good sound and an understanding of the nuances of phrasing, dynamics etc; the teaching should emphasise a co-operative, rather than a competitive spirit of learning; the process of music-making is therapeutic; music education should be an education of the whole person – focusing ultimately on the total well-being and self-esteem of the child, not on the musical product; musical sensitivity can be translated into sensitivity towards others in life as a whole; a musical life is an enriched, fuller and happier life.

The advantage of the Suzuki Recorder teacher-training course, however, is that in addition to all of the above, it offers specific tuition in how to teach the recorder. The curriculum addresses the all-important pre-instrument stage in a fully comprehensive way, including the teaching of the basic music concepts of pulse, rhythm and pitch through the body and the voice (our first musical instruments), and the aural learning of songs that are later transferred to the recorder. Teachers are guided through the process of introducing the instrument to the pupil step-by-step, so that good habits are established from the outset, and they are given the knowledge and skills to develop pupils' playing to a very advanced level. The repertoire itself, which progresses from two-note folk melodies to recorder concertos, is drawn from culture and art music, and is entirely gimmick-free.

The training includes help with the different strategies necessary for teaching individual and group lessons, and there is plenty of opportunity for teaching practice, working with Suzuki-taught recorder pupils who come along to the training sessions as 'guinea-pigs'. This way, teachers can work with their pupils with much greater confidence, rather than having to learn on the job, and Chris and I, and I'm sure many of the teachers reading this, have had to do. Suzuki trainees are taught how to enable pupils to learn by ear and to memorise (skills

sadly neglected in many other instrumental teaching methods) and how to read music – yes, really! Contrary to common misconception, music-reading is an integral part of the Suzuki Method, and it is taught in such an effective way through innovative games (no pencils or scary blank manuscript paper in sight!) that my pupils continually request music-reading activities because they love them so much. The course also covers issues of child development and psychology, and gives practical suggestions for how to establish a teaching practice.

I was attracted to the Method initially because I was interested to learn more about the revolutionary way of taping up the finger holes to enable pupils to start learning with both hands in the correct playing position, and to encourage the production of a good tone from the outset. (The first note learned is low D, which can only be produced by a gentle, steady and controlled flow of air, and rules out the possibility of the sound ever being ‘awful’). I knew very little about the Method as a whole, other than the impressions I had formed from seeing hundreds of tiny Japanese violinists playing Vivaldi *en masse*, and the commonly expressed – but I now know ill-informed – opinions of others. For example, ‘Suzuki pupils don’t read music’ (they do, but they tend to prefer to play from memory – as do the majority of performers on the professional stage – because it is liberating, enables more expressive playing and allows for better audience communication) or ‘The Suzuki Method is a group teaching method’ (it isn’t, although group music-making is integral to it) or ‘Suzuki pupils play like robots’ (not in my experience, and certainly no more mechanically or unimaginatively than children taught by other methods).

I decided to give Suzuki training a go, and I can honestly say it has been the best decision of my teaching career. Teaching has always been my vocation and passion, but I now have job satisfaction on a level I had never dreamed possible. The Suzuki Method has improved my teaching ability and my effectiveness out of all recognition, I am continually buzzing with new inspiration, and the relationship I

have with my pupils is on a much deeper level than I have ever known. I have been greatly motivated in my own playing, my technique is better than it has ever been, and my performing has reached new heights. I am now involved in the training of other Suzuki teacher-trainees, and the ongoing stimulation we get from each other is invaluable. Training weekends are jewels in my diary, and throughout the year we continually share resources, offer teaching tips and lesson suggestions, and discuss teaching issues which challenge us. With trainees joining us from Finland, Germany and Belgium, and Suzuki recorder colleagues from many other European countries and the USA coming together for workshops and summer schools, we enjoy a healthy cross-fertilisation of ideas and a wonderful international camaraderie.

I have written before in this *Magazine* about my experience with the Suzuki Method, but I am prompted now to recommend it alongside my plea for more specialist recorder players to commit to a career in mainstream, non-selective teaching because there is no other course like it available in the UK, nor (to my knowledge) in Europe. More significantly, it works, particularly as a way in for young would-be instrumentalists at the start of their musical journey. Yes, one can embark on recorder teaching without it, but the benefits of being fully prepared through a comprehensive, well thought out and expertly-executed training course cannot be under-estimated.

Heather Moger runs a Suzuki studio, ‘Music at Heart’, in York. Her work, with children from birth upwards, encompasses early years pre-instrument sessions and individual and group recorder lessons.

If you are interested in teaching or are currently teaching the recorder and would like to learn more about the Suzuki Method in action, you would be very welcome to come and observe her!

For more information about the Suzuki Recorder teacher-training course, visit www.britishsuzuki.org.uk

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COMPETITION

To win a copy of Ross Winter’s new CD, ‘British Recorder Music’, reviewed in this issue, simply answer the following question:

At which London music establishment did composer Arnold Cooke take up a professorship, until his retirement in 1978?

Send your answers to the editor at Scout Bottom Farm, Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge HX7 5JS, or email laura@fleuri.co.uk with the subject title ‘The Recorder Magazine Competition’ by 3rd January, 2012. A winner will be drawn from all the correct answers.

In the winter issue we asked: ‘What year was the French recorder maker Peter Bressan born?’

The correct answer is **1663**. Congratulations to **Hazel Ford** who will receive a £10.00 Recorder *MusicMail* voucher (for spending on any music by Peacock Press).