

Elsie Persson

The Suzuki Approach to Violin Playing

In recent years, serious concern over the shortage of rising young string players to fill orchestral chairs has frequently been expressed both in the United States and in Canada. However stringed instruments in general, and the violin in particular, have always presented a challenge to the enthusiast, both student and teacher. Early violin pedagogues such as John Playford (in seventeenth century England) and Michel Corrette (in early eighteenth century France), suggested various ways of playing the instrument. Gemianini was the first (1740) among the Italian violinists to publish a method of violin playing, most of which was concerned with his version of the correct way to hold the instrument and the bow.¹

But it was Leopold Mozart, better known as the father of the wonder child and genius composer, Wolfgang Mozart, who published in 1756 the delightful "Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing." Many of the ideas set forth in this treatise are still useful today, although the instrument and bow have changed somewhat. The elder Mozart insisted on a pupil's grasping the theory of the written score and understanding note values, terms and signs, before commencing to play.

It is necessary that the beginner, before the teacher puts the violin into his hands, should impress not only the present chapter, but also the following two on his memory, [these three early chapters on the theory of music] as otherwise, if the eager pupil stretches both hands out for the violin at the beginning, learns this piece or that quickly

by ear, surveys the foundations superficially, and rashly shuts his eyes to the first rules, he will certainly never make up for his neglect, and will therefore stand in his own path to the achievement of a perfect stage of musical knowledge... Time makes melody, therefore time is the soul of music. Time decides the moment when the various notes must be played, and is often that which is lacking in many who otherwise have advanced fairly far in music and have a good opinion of themselves.³

The work of lesser known eighteenth century teachers such as L'Abbe le Fils and Lochlein contributed towards the development of violin technique as we know it today, while the unconventional playing of Paganini holds a unique position in violin history.³ The nineteenth century schools of Dancla and of Charles deBeriot were closely related to old French method, yet they exerted a great influence upon the teaching methods of the twentieth century. The Leopold Auer Violin School⁴ has influenced the education of violinists in the United States since early in the twentieth century, and in Europe, the methods of Ottaker Sevcik⁵ and of Carl Flesch⁶ have dominated. Artists such as Elman and Heifetz, Francescatti and Milstein, to name but a few, are products of one or other of these schools.

It may be said of all the artists and master teachers mentioned above that, while they differed widely as to their techniques in playing the instrument, they all agreed with Leopold Mozart that the child should understand the written notation before beginning to play the instrument. (The child Mozart was the notable exception!)

Today, parents who wish their children to have a musical education no longer seem to favour the violin, for with conventional methods and graded drill studies, it simply takes too long for the child to attain mastery. The piano, the clarinet, or almost any instrument other than a stringed one, offers reasonably quick success in this fast-moving, do-it-yourself world. Indeed, the young violin student, has much to contend with. He has been lampooned for years by cartoonists so that his friends regard him as an object of pity, if not of ridicule. What is more, the frustration and boredom experienced by so many are enough to atrophy the talent of even the musically gifted child. The total effect has been to discourage all but the most devoted string enthusiasts.

Could there not be a musically intelligent and rewarding way to learn the violin? Dr. Shinichi Suzuki seems to think so.

SUZUKI AND HIS TEACHING PRINCIPLES

In Japan, over eight thousand children have learned to play the violin, thanks to the genius and leadership of Suzuki who, with a staff of one hundred and twenty teachers, has created a generation of string players. The children, at a phenomenally early age, play so well that it is a pleasure for themselves and a joy for their listeners. "The teaching of Shinichi Suzuki is perhaps the most significant contribution to music education in the first half of this century," states Paul Rolland, Professor of Music at the University of Illinois. "Here is creative teaching at its best, based on the love for children and an unshakable conviction as to their musical potential," comments Carl Schultz. "The concepts of child readiness, tonal beauty of string instruments, ear training and complete mastery combined with the joy of learning through discovery and creative repetition have been developed to a high degree."⁸

Suzuki contends that all children are "educated" to speak their native language with the utmost fluency, acquiring this facility, this tremendous working vocabulary both voiced and understood, at a very early age simply by imitation. He claims that no child able to talk fluently is born tone deaf, or he would never learn his mother tongue with all its many intonations. Suzuki experimented by playing a fine recording to infants, day after day, and became convinced that, after a few months, the child had "learned" the melody — that is, that he had a tonal memory of it. These experiments conducted over many years led Suzuki to conclude that every child is born with musical aptitudes; that while some adjust to a superior degree, no child is born tone deaf though he may have been made to seem that way through improper training.

If the child, then, were caught early enough, could not his ear, so quick to pick up and select all of the words and phrases necessary to make himself understood, be also trained to listen for beautiful sounds? Could he not be taught to reproduce these sounds on a stringed instrument which he learned to handle by watching his teacher, his mother and his friends play? For reinforcement, could he not listen to the same pieces played each day on a fine recording, so that he might be encouraged to try to imitate the beautiful sounds that he hears?

Suzuki put these questions to the test, experimenting with groups of very young children, using rhythmic games and exercises designed to prepare the ears, eyes and hands for the skills to be acquired. Meantime he taught the children to play simple melodies. The children listened to the artist teacher and later at home, to recordings of the pieces they played. Each child was given individual lessons to ensure the correct techniques and his mother carried on the work between sessions. Just as she gently corrected mispronunciation, so she helped the teacher to mould the child's muscles until he had a fine posture and the bow and violin under control. Many of the lessons were given out-of-doors. Other children, at play, gathered around to listen and quickly learned from their peers how to handle the bow and violin.

Now Suzuki's pupils, and those of his colleagues, are trained from their earliest years to search continually for a refined expression of the stringed instrument tone. This search, in addition to awakening a desire to produce a beautiful sound, builds up an extraordinary awareness of accuracy of pitch. "Many six-year olds play with the accuracy, clarity and warmth that is rarely expected of students three times their age," writes Carl Schultz.⁹ The Japanese child who often begins violin lessons at the age of two and a half has been successful at all age levels with this new method. Dr. Suzuki's youngest pupil is eighteen months old; his oldest is seventy-six years!

A Talent Education Movement, called Project Super, is at present underway in the United States with Dr. Suzuki acting as supervisor. The country has been divided into zones with a coordinator for each area and string specialists recruited for summer workshop sessions. Many string teachers, including Americans and Canadians, have gone to Japan on study tours. Suzuki has visited and conducted workshop sessions in a number of American cities, illustrating his principles with a concert group of Japanese children. Anyone who was fortunate enough to have heard one of these groups from Japan who, with Dr. Suzuki, presented a concert in Montreal last October, can have no doubt as to the effectiveness of the Suzuki method.

A key factor in the progress of the Talent Education program is the insistence that the learner gains complete mastery of one piece or level of achievement before advancing to the next level, but always retaining, perfecting and polishing the material already

learned. Schultz explains:

This approach presents a great challenge to teachers, parents and students to discover new and interestingly effective forms of reinforcement through the use of creative repetition. Every lesson and practice period becomes an exciting venture, mutually beneficial to the child and to the teacher. With the understanding that the lesson will cover the music a student has memorized, the teacher is free to emphasize artistic interpretation, rather than purely technical matters.¹⁰

The ultimate success of the Suzuki method devolves, of course, upon the teacher. As Leopold Auer so wisely said, "There are no good methods; there are only good teachers." But Auer was dealing with putting a "fiendish polish" on already proficient artists, not with the pre-school child!

AN EXPERIMENT WITH THE SUZUKI METHOD

In September of 1966, the writer undertook to organize a pilot group of ten children at Macdonald College of McGill University. The children, from average suburban homes in the area, were tested for quickness of aural perception, ability to sing in tune, response to rhythm, and coordinative facility. The average age of the six boys and four girls was five years. Each child was given an instrument of the appropriate size (they are available in sizes as small as a thirty-second), as well as a recording of the first pieces he was to attempt. Lessons began in the late autumn although the instruments were not available until just before Christmas. Three lessons per week on an individual basis proved to be a good working schedule but there were also opportunities for ensemble playing every second week.

The early lessons, given to the group as a whole, called for responses to various rhythms, chanting and clapping, rhythmic games and adopting the correct stance and holding positions to numbers. Meanwhile, the mothers were taught to hold the violin correctly, and to draw the bow with confidence, producing a clear pleasant tone on open strings. Once a mother had achieved this — and often before — her child demanded that he be allowed to try. This involved his adopting the correct posture and his solving all the coordinating problems involved in bowing techniques. Meanwhile, he was hearing each day, at home, a recording of the folk songs that he was expected to learn. It was not long before he

was eager to "try to find the melody" on the strings. He soon learned that a certain finger on a certain string produced a specific note. His joy in discovering that he could play the melody with the bow as well was so infectious that others tried to emulate him.

Some children were more successful than others in mastering the necessary skills. The girls found it less difficult to acquire the playing techniques than did some of the small boys whose powers of coordination mature somewhat later. (Girls far outnumber boys in the Japanese classes.) The problems encountered were as varied as they were interesting. Bad habits were picked up very readily but were almost as readily dismissed and supplanted by better ones. Holding the instrument up for longer than thirty seconds proved difficult at first, but the time was stretched very gently until five minutes became practical. Drawing the bow at right angles to the string and at the desired distance from the bridge, absolutely essential in producing a pleasant tone, proved a real hurdle for most children and the writer was often hard put to it to devise new ways to encourage this result. Little fingers, lacking strength and individual control had to learn how to function independently and accurately and to seek out the sound that most closely resembled that provided by the model. The self-discipline acquired by these youngsters was so remarkable that they soon demanded a perfection, not only of their peers, but of themselves. Not the least reward was the improved performance, both in accuracy of pitch and in beauty of tone.

Once the initial difficulties of coordination, of bowing and left hand techniques, intonation and good tone were mastered, progress was very rapid. By spring, the children were able to play several folk songs in unison, in rounds, in "question and answer," in various rhythms and in various keys. They played for a number of elementary school assemblies in the area and at Expo'67 in May. Audience reaction varied from disbelief to tearful enthusiasm.

CONVENTIONAL VS THE SUZUKI APPROACH

Many violin teachers, trained in the schools of Sevcik, Auer, Flesch or Galamian, to name those whose influence affects most of today's artists and teachers, are frankly skeptical about the unconventional approach to violin teaching that Suzuki employs. Their chief objection lies in the fact that the child is not immediately concerned with learning to read music. Galamian says, "Among

the absolute values are (a) the necessity for total technical control and (b) the requisite of completely unqualified knowledge of the music to be played in all of its details, including a thorough understanding of its harmonic and formal structure."¹¹

However, since Suzuki understands the pre-school child's need to imitate his elders and peers both aurally and manually, he postpones the translation of the written symbol into sound until the child can read his own verbal language with facility. Those who follow conventional methods usually believe in waiting until a child is older before permitting him to handle the violin, arguing that he had neither the coordination nor the ability to concentrate successfully. They recall that attempts to train little children to play the violin have been made before this, but they have nearly always failed (except in cases like those of wonder children like Mozart, Heifetz or Menuhin), since the teachers were attempting to force the small child out of his natural depth, where he was incapable of coping with the complexities all served up to him at once. Yet Suzuki has conceived an approach to violin playing, where the child simply reflects the world of music around him. Thus by the time a student, starting later and trained by conventional methods, is playing reasonably well, the Suzuki-trained child is often capable of artistic performance at the concerto level.

Although it is too early to give a final estimate of the success of Project Super in the United States, the enthusiastic reception of the approach is undeniable. The writer has heard groups from Rochester, N.Y., from Long Island and Boston, whose results are most encouraging. Miss Yvonne Tait, 'cello teacher on the Faculty of Music of the University of Oregon, has adapted the Suzuki system to young students of the 'cello at the Grade Three level, and has found, in a class of one hundred and eighty children, a tremendous surge forward in interest and in musicianship. The system is being enthusiastically used at all grade levels of both elementary and high schools, right across the United States and in many cities throughout Canada. Jean Cousineau, for example, at the Cardinal Leger Institute in Montreal, has one hundred children varying in age from three to fourteen years studying the violin. Cousineau employs the psychological principles of Suzuki, but uses original materials.

In an era when leisure time is beginning to pose real problems, ought we not see to it that our children be given opportunities to

gain skills that will allow them to take pride in their accomplishments, to develop their musical potential, to cultivate their artistic leaning; "to graduate them," as Suzuki says, "as human beings!" And he adds, "Teach a child to play in a Mozart quartet and he will never go to jail!"

Suzuki is not alone in this faith in music. When Pablo Casals visited Japan some three years ago, on the occasion of a great violin festival in which hundreds of children played an astonishingly beautiful program, he was heard to exclaim, "It may very well be that music will save the world!"¹²

REFERENCES

1. F. F. Polnauer and M. Marks, *Senso-Motor Study and Its Application to Violin Playing*, Urbana, Illinois: American String Teachers Association, 1964, pp. 45-73.
2. Leopold Mozart, *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* (1756), London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 25, 30.
3. Polnauer and Marks, *op. cit.*
4. Leopold Auer, *Graded Course on Violin Playing*, New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1926.
5. Ottaker Sevcik, *Violin Method for Beginners*, London: Bosworth & Co. Ltd., 1901.
6. Carl Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*, New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1939.
7. Carl Schultz, "Shinichi Suzuki: The Genius of His Teaching," DeKalb, Illinois: *The Fiddler's Gazette*, IV (1966), 7.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Ivan Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962, p. 4.
12. Shinichi Suzuki, *Every Child Can Be Educated*, an address given in Rochester, N.Y., 1966.