

“YOU DON’T SAY, JAPANESE CHILDREN CAN ALL SPEAK JAPANESE!”

Why is nobody here aware of the mother-tongue method?

by Heiko Schulz and Michael Kröger

Photo Aorta

300 children, sitting on a stage, with violins and pricked ears. A teacher beats out a wild rhythm with his foot. Almost simultaneously all the children jump up and play the piece the rhythm he is beating out obviously comes from. The teacher dressed in shorts, a Hawaiian shirt sporting a beard and answering to the name of Lars makes a signal: sit down again. Silent expectation, this time more measured – and again comes the immediate response of the children who start to play the song.

Before it all degenerates into a demonstration of monkeys playing the fiddle the children are all asked to play a waltz by Brahms together. 300 children aged 3 to 16, in all sizes, from all over the world. A colourful mix. Viewed from the auditorium they do form an impressive unit. People standing still with violins resting confidently under their chins, their bow movements synchronised.

Initial scepticism whether this kind of mass presentation is musically appropriate rapidly disappears when you hear them play and see the well satisfied faces of the musicians at the applause. A second piece is played - the 3rd movement of Vivaldi in A minor. Those children who have not reached this level yet sit down on stage and look up to their more advanced fiddle-playing peers, not without a certain degree of admiration. When concentration is threatening to fade and the mass of musicians slowly be

comes restless, their teacher Lars starts up a little relaxation game. Who can put their hands on their head and drop them three times in a row the fastest? 1,2,3, go. 600 flailing arms, bursts of laughter. Their attention is back again and the lesson can continue.

These impressions of a group lesson held as part of a workshop hint at the principles of Dr Shinichi Suzuki’s remarkable philosophy of “talent training”. Start them young, develop their abilities through repetition and insist on perfect technique. Shinichi who?

SHINICHI SUZUKI’S PLAN

Shinichi Suzuki was born in Nagoya, Japan, as the son of the founder of a major violin factory. He started out working in his father’s business, learning how to play the violin at 17, studying in Tokyo and then going to Berlin where he stayed for eight years. There he met important artists and musicologists and he returned to Japan full of European influences and with a wife Waltraud. It was in Japan that he founded the Suzuki Quartet with his three brothers, giving concerts and teaching.

Then he had a realisation: how quickly and apparently effortlessly children learn their mother tongue. Simply by imitation and repetition.

Then he had an idea: to transfer this to music. He developed a teaching method which is based on training the ear, imitation, repetition and the close mother-child relationship. Which brings us to the “mother-tongue method”.

FIRST LESSON: BOWING!

In the first official Suzuki lesson you hear nothing – just rustling and snipping sounds. Of the class making cardboard violins. This way the children can get used to the violin. Then they move on to posture exercises, for instance bowing at the start of every lesson – as a sign of mutual respect. (Obviously, the teacher also bows to his pupils.) Cardboard violins are great. They can fall on the floor and you can bite into them.

HEALTHY: PEPPERS, LITTLE CARROTS AND VIVALDI

The child, let’s call her Bea, is all ears at the start of her Suzuki lessons – even before and during the cardboard violin phase. The child is played a few classical pieces and is fed, along with all the apples and pears, peppers and little carrots, with small doses of Mozart, Bach and Vivaldi. In addition to this the child also listens in when older pupils play. At the same time her mother has lessons to learn the basic elements of violin playing on a small instrument. Ideally, no one decides whether Bea wants to learn to play other than Bea herself. When she wants she’ll just pick up her mother’s violin and off she’ll go. After all, she has already heard the first pieces of the method often enough and has them in her head so to speak. So, initially, learning comes about by listening. As soon as Bea can play her first piece “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and the variations thereof and can hit the right notes in the right places, things move on, but not with the next piece. She then learns how to play “Twinkle” “beautifully”. This idea of “good, beautiful playing” is consistently implemented right from the outset. Bea already elaborates her own interpretation even if she is only 3 years old. You might say the child is being trained for perfection. Frightening these Japanese. Not at all.

"MR SUZUKI, WILL ANYTHING COME OF MY SON?
- NO, HE WON'T BECOME JUST "ANYTHING."

Mr Suzuki has no interest in turning Bea into a violin robot, or even a professional musician. Bringing out and promoting musical talents is just the consequence, not the aim, of the method. The aim is nobler and loftier. What he wants is to nurture children's incredible potential for learning. In his writings the actually mild-mannered man judges the laxity of early musical instruction and the over-academic approach to music at the leading schools very harshly. Suzuki wants his idea of talent training to be seen as relevant for all areas of life. "I want to change education – move it away from pure instruction towards training that brings out and promotes human potential. A child should become the best person (s)he is capable of becoming."

The Suzuki method is aimed at teaching the violin appropriately, conveying good posture and the production of correct notes. But not just this. With its emphasis on accuracy and the importance of imitation it is rooted in *shitsuke*, the traditional Japanese concept of child rearing: children should first learn "good behaviour" through their imitation of a master. Commenting on this Lars, the Suzuki master from Sweden, says: "A culture that has managed to develop a training method for body and mind from sword-fighting is obviously capable of doing this for the violin bow too."

CRITICISM – BAD

During her Suzuki career Bea takes both one-to-one and group lessons. In the one-to-one lessons the pupil works in a very concentrated and calm manner with the teacher - in an almost Zen-like way. Lars believes learning from Mr Suzuki also means learning praise. He trains 3 year old beginners to say *umai* (good) after everything they do. He never says: "No, that wasn't good", but always "Good, can you do it even better?" Lars: "Can you do it better as a teacher?"

IT'S NOT ABOUT BECOMING ANNE-SOFIE MUTTER

The group lesson is obviously what Bea and the other children enjoy most. At the end of the session the small children always play music along with the older ones. Here elements of the so-called *sempai-kohai* exercises play a role - which allow a system of "peer support" to develop. This means: younger pupils learn from the older ones until they themselves become the older ones. This promotes mutual respect. They don't make fun of Bea if it wasn't all that long ago that they themselves still produced sounds on the violin that sounded more like screeches than music. The pupils learn that it's not about winning or losing or about becoming a violin-playing child prodigy like Anne-Sofie Mutter but developing something together. As we said, noble aims.

SOFT, CRITICAL TONES

Such emphasis on joint exercise makes dyed-in-the-wool individualists shudder. Where did the idea of children having their own mind go to? What about self-expression? What about Bea's personality? So as to dispel the impression that a hymn is being sung to Mr Suzuki here, we now also let a mother have her say. Her daughter has been learning and playing using the Suzuki method for six years now.

- What do you think of the Suzuki method?

- Every method depends on the teacher. Suzuki can be awful if it's not applied properly. Over-ambitious parents can do lots of stupid things with the method.

- What does your daughter get from the lessons using this method?

- She gets a lot out of playing and Suzuki's principles, even if she decides to give up the violin later on. The lessons are hard work, obviously, so naturally it's tiring. On the one hand, my daughter regularly holds the violin out the window and shouts: I'm letting go. On the other, she recently got 24 points in the youth music scheme "Jugend musiziert". She played there with her eyes closed in front of the academy professors. It was great.

- Are you proud of her?

- Pride is not much use to me but I'm often impressed by my daughter and that's a great feeling. She gets a lot of praise and she likes playing for relatives and gives concerts for residents at old people's homes. She stands out there in front of them with no fear. She has that in her now.

- How do you react to the criticism that Suzuki pupils are technically brilliant but play "without feeling"?

- Oh that old chestnut about violin-playing robots, wholesale balderdash. That can always be put down to the teacher. Suzuki sharpens your own senses and gives you power, that's what I really think. My daughter is very obstinate. She refuses to wear dresses and "get in there" is one of her favourite phrases.

- Do you think the method is child-oriented?

- Very much so, it's playful and individual. Some teachers and parents aren't child-oriented.

- What's good about the method?

The work with posture, the whole time they work on posture. Not external posture but rather internal posture. Grand words, but that's just what it's about. When practising you only look to see how far you've got and try to take another a little step forward. And you try to be satisfied. In fact, really taking these little steps is the good thing about it.

IT'S ASTONISHING

Mr Suzuki makes a point of asking for concerts to be held regularly so that children can present their progress. Especially popular are the in-house concerts that are held before the child can play anything at all. They go like this: little Bea stands up full of concentration, takes a bow, holds the violin and the bow in the resting position, takes another bow and accepts the thunderous applause of parents and invited neighbours as cool as a cucumber.

Suzuki beginners are also regularly taken to concerts and presentations given by more advanced pupils. Watching other children - the calmness of an older girl like Thea or the virtuosity of Max - is obviously much more stimulating than receiving praise from adults. The concerts are fairly relaxed affairs. You realise they are mainly held for the children on stage and in the audience. The children have to stay utterly quiet. Obviously, they are not supposed to tread on the violins, make jeering noises or open coke cans during pauses.

Each of the regularly occurring, international Suzuki workshops ends with a concert like this.

SARA AND KALLE FROM UPPSALA

A workshop is being held in Worms, Germany this month where pupils come together from among such places as Uppsala in Sweden and Cologne so as to take little steps forward. The children practise and play in concert. Among the pieces they play is the Swedish folk song "Sara and Kalle". Anyone can attend concerts like these. Lars is expected to be there. But sadly not Mr Suzuki as, and this is where the end comes: Mr Suzuki has been dead for 6 years. But his idea is just starting to come alive.