

SUZUKI'S MOTHER-TONGUE APPROACH: CONCERNS ABOUT THE NATURAL LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

The mother-tongue approach, the corner-stone of the Suzuki method, is based on the assumption that a child can learn to play a musical instrument following the same principles as learning a first language. This teaching theory implies that through repetitive listening and ear-playing, music learning can unfold in a most natural way. The impact of the natural learning process applied to music learning is often overlooked. A study of different educational programs based on this concept of learning will show that there are reasons to be concerned when dealing with music instrumental learning. It will demonstrate that on this particular point, the Suzuki Method can be misleading.

Shinichi Suzuki started developing his music method in the 1930s in Japan. In the 1960s, it spread quickly through North America (Herman, 1981) and by the end of the 1970s, it “had grown to a world-wide movement” (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979, p. 1). Known as the mother-tongue approach, this method teaches how to play a musical instrument by following a process similar to the learning of a first language (Suzuki, 1969, 1981, 1986, 1989). Suzuki (1969) observed that “all children . . . were brought up by a perfect educational method: their mother tongue” (p. 10). He became fascinated by the way every child learns to master the complexity and subtlety of their native tongue and he wanted to apply the same principles to music learning. Barbara Schneiderman, a well respected Suzuki teacher, explains that “Suzuki has adopted as a model the mother-tongue system of language learning . . . defined its attributes and applied them to music study” (Comeau, 1998, p.6), and Mary-Craig Powell, an internationally known Suzuki trainer, adds that “the Suzuki method of musical instruction parallels virtually without modification the same course that the child experiences from infancy in the learning of his

language skills” (Powell, 1988, p. 6). Suzuki (1981) never doubted that the mother-tongue approach would work when learning a musical instrument for he saw “no distinction between one kind of human potential and another: it is the same whether it is language or anything else” (p. 11). We must therefore understand how he has applied the mother-tongue approach in the context of music learning and music performance.

In the beginning, the focus of the Suzuki method is clearly on developing the ear. This approach is based on the principle that by immersing young children in music, their musical abilities would unfold in the most natural way. Suzuki believed “that if children were surrounded by musical sounds to the same degree [that they are surrounded by language sounds], they would develop an equally remarkable ability in music” (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979, p.1). Using CDs, students are asked to listen repeatedly to the pieces they will learn to play on their instrument, for “when one listens repeatedly, the music enters the mind; and the more thoroughly it is internalized, the easier it is to reproduce” (Kataoka, 1985, p.13). It is through ear-playing that children are introduced to the instrument. It is only after a child can play many pieces on his instrument that music reading is introduced. This is done in order to follow the natural process of the mother-tongue approach: “a baby listens, imitates, repeats, and reads, so in the Suzuki philosophy a child is encouraged to follow these steps in studying music” (Fest, in Comeau, 1998, p. 58). Since “nobody teaches a baby to talk by starting with printed letters and words . . . in the same manner, in teaching piano to preschool children, we do not use printed music, but rather have them learn new songs from listening to the record and showing them how to use their fingers” (Suzuki, 1993, pp. 11-12). In this way musical apprenticeship follows the natural progression of a child who learns to speak before learning to read: “Speak first—read later. Play first—read later” (Starr and Starr, 1983, p.188).

Research Problem

The Suzuki method is well known as an approach that emphasizes ear playing through repeated listening and imitation while delaying music reading until a student has acquired basic performance skills on the instrument. By modeling learning on the acquisition of a native language, the teachers of this method are convinced that they follow a natural progression that makes learning easier and more accessible (Comeau, 1998). While it is common to associate ear playing with the Suzuki Method, the importance of natural learning is less obvious and its implications are often overlooked. A review of this process as defined in the Suzuki Method will show the need for a more in-depth analysis while identifying concerns about its application in music instrumental teaching.

In Suzuki's own writings (1969, 1981, 1986), the concept of the natural learning process is structured around two central themes: 1) music learning can develop in a natural way, and 2) every child can attain superior music abilities. Suzuki (1989) truly believed that music learning could unfold naturally with the proper environment: "every child in such an environment grows steadily and without mishap toward an involvement in this delightful ability, and responds according to the stimuli supplied . . . by the parents" (p. 20). Although there are technical skills that need to be acquired, Suzuki (1993) explains that they will develop naturally, just like the acquisition of the grammatical code: "The correct combination of words into sentences involves technical grammatical factors. However, as a child's vocabulary grows, they master grammar naturally. Careful consideration of this process of mastering one's native language can teach us very important things [about music learning]" (p. 6). Suzuki teachers, who have adopted this teaching philosophy, often tell parents that children are "able to move easily and naturally into

the study of an instrument at an early age” (Herman, 1981, p. 13). They believe that by following the mother tongue approach, “natural progress [will] allow time for the child to enjoy mastering each step in the learning process . . . the learning process proceeds without strain and pressure through consistent reinforcement” (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979, p. 7). In an article in the *American Suzuki Journal*, Gettes (2007) identifies “modeling, nurturing and offering” as the building blocks of the Suzuki method and explains that with such an approach, music learning will “occur both naturally and inevitably” (p. 40). Then the author, a Suzuki teacher and medical doctor, makes the claim that this natural learning process at the heart of the Suzuki method is well supported by a few decades of neuroscience research.

Environment plays a prominent role in developing music abilities. For Suzuki (1969), “man is born without talent” (p. 20) and talent is “not inherited” (p. 18), but “trained and educated” (p. 31). After observing how every child learns to speak their mother-tongue—all children raised in Osaka automatically speak the very difficult Osaka dialect—Suzuki became convinced that “everyone can develop superior sensitivity and a true understanding of music if they are raised amidst high quality music” (Suzuki, 1993, p. 2). Since “human beings are not born with particular talents, but have the potential in which those talents originate . . . if proper training is given under good leadership and in a good environment which makes it easy to grow, any talent will display outstanding ability” (Suzuki, 1986, p. 11). Because Suzuki advocated that talent is not inborn, but a result of training, as the human being is the product of his environment, he gives “the impression that he believed that people are born with equal ability” (Chang, 1999, p. 10). Suzuki did admit that people may be born with different aptitude and would therefore adapt to the environment according to different levels. However for him, the “environment is stronger than innate differences for a person’s ability development” (p. 10). He would often

repeat that any child was able “to display highly superior abilities if only the correct methods [were] used in training” (Suzuki, 1969, p. 9) and he explained that when a child failed in something, “it is the educational system that is wrong. His ability or talent was not developed properly” (p. 10). Suzuki teachers often stress that since “all children develop the ability to speak fluently and greatly enjoy the process” (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979, p. 3), the “first and most potent implication of the mother tongue idea is that there are no failures. Any child who can speak his native language has the potential to learn to play the piano” (p. 2). And since “every child can learn to perform music just as he has learned to speak” (Fink, in Suzuki, 1981, p. vi), teachers believe that this is the “most effective method of education . . . [for] in this method, there are no dropouts, and everyone achieves a high degree of success” (Herman, 1981, p. 9).

Nowadays, thousands of music teachers around the world (Suzuki Association of the Americas, 2010) are applying the Suzuki method to introduce young children to playing a musical instrument; questioning the principle of natural learning at the heart of the Suzuki teaching philosophy is fully justified. So far, very little research has been conducted on the Suzuki Method and certainly none have looked into this aspect of it. There are no papers investigating this method published in scientific journals¹ and fewer than 20 Ph.D. dissertations²

¹ No article on the Suzuki Method was found in academic journals. Brief mention of the Suzuki Method was found in five articles of the *British Journal of Music Education* and seven in the *International Journal of Music Education*.

² The majority addressed curriculum concerns (the development of lesson plan sourcebook, Hwang, 1995; of a teacher’s guide, Lee, 1992; of a reading course, Lo, 1993; of a comprehensive curriculum, Romeo, 1986; of a program combining Waldorf and Suzuki, Smolen, 2000; the description of home practice sessions, O’Neill, 2003). Others compared the Suzuki method with other methods (investigating violin technique between Suzuki and other pedagogues, Perkins, 1993; cello technique in Suzuki and other pedagogies, Lee, 2001; two different pedagogical methodologies for the clarinet, Sperti, 1970) or proposed new application of the Suzuki Method (adapting the Suzuki method for art education, Arimitsu, 1982; for the bassoon, Schwalje, 2008; for a mixed method for cello students, Lee, 2007; for American and European piano pedagogical materials, Rutledge, 1983; for an alternative class piano approach, Williams, 2000; for a program in Israel, Menczel, 1997). Four experimental studies were done: Moorhead (2005) measured the perceptual/cognitive listening development between Suzuki trained and traditionally trained students, Scott (1987) studied the attention and perseverance behaviours of preschool children enrolled in Suzuki lessons and others involved in preschool activities, Stamou (1998) looked at the effect of Suzuki

have been written, all on specific teaching issues of the Suzuki Method. Nowhere are we able to find a critical analysis of the Suzuki teaching philosophy; no research has questioned the principles behind the mother-tongue approach³ and no one has ever investigated the foundation of natural learning as it is presented and applied in the Suzuki Method. This paper will address this concern and argue that while the concept of the mother tongue approach has contributed valuable teaching strategies (see Comeau, 2002), the assumption that learning a musical instrument can be achieved through natural learning can be misleading. Our analysis will first study how the natural learning process has been applied in education and will then point out potential problems when this process is applied to the specific situation of learning to play a musical instrument.

The Natural Learning Process in Education

In education, natural learning refers to the procedure used when first learning to walk and talk. It involves observation, mental imagery, imitation through trial-and-error and repetition as primary methods of learning (Criss, 2009). For walking, children start by observing people around them and they develop clear mental images of what it is to walk. Then they follow with imitation; through a period of trial and error, the behaviour of walking is attempted until it matches the model. No adult explains the technique of walking or analyzes the progress of the child. Parents simply praise and encourage and learning seems perfectly natural, easy and simple. Riding a bicycle is another example used to explain natural learning. Mastering this skill does not require a complex set of instruction or an intensive cognitive analysis of each specific step.

instruction and early childhood music aptitude, and Chang (1999) investigated the effect of different incidental listening experiences.

³ The paper we published in 2002 and the one we submitted in the summer of 2010 are, to our knowledge, the only two papers taking a critical position on the mother-tongue approach as applied in the Suzuki Method.

Most children learned to ride a bicycle by developing a mental picture of the behaviour and by imitating through a period of trial and error. The same principles have been applied in other educational contexts by educators who were looking for strategies that were more in line with the “way young people learn” (Criss, p. 44). We will review two literacy programs and one music program that have centered their approach on natural learning.

Based on his extensive experience as a classroom teacher and his hundreds of hours of classrooms observations as a researcher, Brian Cambourne (1988) has proposed an alternative way of learning to read and write that follows a natural learning process. He believes that learning the written form of a language should not be “more difficult, complex or demanding than learning to control the oral form” (p. 31) and if this is not the case, it is because “the real world simply does not provide the conditions for learning to write that it provides for learning to talk” (p. 41). For Cambourne, schools have the responsibility of creating those environmental conditions that will make literacy a natural, uncomplicated and barrier-free process. He has identified the components of natural learning that should be apply to reading and writing: 1) immersion in text of all kinds, 2) multiple demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used, 3) positive parental and teacher expectations, 4) learners making their own decisions about when, how and what they want to learn in any learning tasks, 5) learners needing time and opportunity to use, employ and practice their new skill in significant, functional, non-artificial ways, 6) learners being free to approximate the desired ability, considering that mistakes are part of the learning process and, 7) relevant feedback provided from experts in a non-threatening way.

Don Holdaway (1979, 1984) has also applied the natural learning process to reading and writing in a classroom situation and he refers to it as the model of developmental language-learning. Observing that children learn complex skills like talking or walking with great

satisfaction, he wondered how learning to read and write could become a joyful and successful undertaking. He describes developmental learning as being 1) highly individual and non-competitive, 2) self-regulated rather than adult-regulated, 3) relying on a minimum of instruction, 4) associated with real life purposes, and 5) emulating the behaviour of people who model the skill in natural use (1979, p.14). According to him, this type of learning is always highly motivated, consistently meaningful, strongly reinforced both intrinsically and extrinsically, and often related to other aspects of development. It happens with little consciously planned teaching, but maximizes the conditions of a favourable environment. It gives the learner the right to self-correction. Freed from any external regulations, children make their own decisions about what to learn and how to achieve it. The approach relies on the potential of all young learners to “teach themselves within a properly supportive environment” (1979, p. 7).

In the well-known *Musical Performance: Learning Theory and Pedagogy* (1985), teacher and researcher Daniel Kohut showed how many problems in music education resulted too often from the way teachers rely on analyzing and explaining instead of letting students learn through a “natural learning process” (p. 4). According to Kohut, when learning to walk, children allow their “bodies and minds to function naturally and efficiently, as nature intended” for when “left alone, our brains will process what we see and hear, and our bodies will imitate” (Criss, 2009, p. 44). Similarly, young children learn to speak by listening and imitating. He suggested that instrumentalists of any age be taught in the same fashion. He put forward an approach based on ear modeling (sound before sight) and imitation. He had often seen the natural learning process working well with musicians: “In the case of musical performance, there is ample evidence that it has worked exceedingly well, particularly in the case of many jazz and country-western musicians who were largely self-taught” (Kohut, 1985, p. 5). Through repeated listening and

observation of people performing, these young musicians develop “mental blueprints” of specific perceptual-motor performance tasks. When these mental images are needed, they retrieve them and use them as they try to reach their performance goals. By a process of trial and error, they make proper adjustments through repetition until they obtain the desired results. Stored mental images, imitation and repetition are integral parts of the process. Kohut came up with five steps that he judged essential to make natural learning process possible: 1) observing, 2) forming a mental image, 3) imitating, 4) trial and error, and 5) practice. He made it clear that this process would work in music if the following key elements were respected: 1) the brain programmed with good musical images; 2) students learn to focus on the performance goal, not the process; 3) imitation and trial-and-error practice are present in abundance; and 4) body feedback is used as an important tool for detection and correction of performance errors (p. 18).

Natural Learning and the Specificity of Learning a Musical Instrument

According to Cambourne and Holdaway, the application of the natural learning process has produced good results in literacy and many children have learned to read and write with this approach. A review of their programs was beneficial in helping us identify the major characteristics of natural learning, but we will see that the particularity of literacy raises doubts about the possibility of integrating this process in music teaching. As for Kohut’s music program, there is no doubt that he is right in saying that a number of self-taught jazz and country-western musicians learned their skills the “natural” way, but is that enough to assume that the natural learning process can be applied with any music student learning to play an instrument? Can a few musicians in a particular music style serve as an example for teaching all students, especially those training in the classical tradition? We will look at some fundamental

differences between the nature of the skills normally associated with natural learning and those required by music learning and that will raise interesting questions. We will show how certain characteristics central to natural learning do not apply with the Suzuki Method.

The skills usually identified with natural learning are closely linked with a sense of necessity. There is a strong desire to learn to walk and talk, and later on to read and write. The same urgency does not apply to music performance. It is much easier to go through life without playing the piano or the violin than without being able to walk or talk. Natural learning works best with skills that are acquired by every member of a society. Children learn to talk and walk, and read and write, because everyone around them master those skills. Not everyone learns to play a musical instrument and a young child knows many people who are perfectly happy without performing music. It should also be remembered that natural learning usually covers the development of basic abilities, but when walking becomes ballet dancing and literacy becomes reading Shakespeare or writing poetry, this level of competency must be developed through training. It is perhaps naive to think that dancing on point or doing pirouettes can unfold with complete ease and naturalness. Learning to play a musical instrument belongs to the category of skills where refined abilities and high level of competency are achieved over a long training period.

A clear distinction must be made between learning basic music skills and learning to play an instrument. To be part of a musical culture, to learn to sing and appreciate music, to develop a sense of rhythm and pitch, can all happen naturally and spontaneously as long as music is part of the environment. With musical acculturation, no explicit teaching is required and children do not deliberately try to get better—they improve naturally the more they are exposed to music. But this is not the same as mastering the necessary skills to perform classical music. It is difficult to

see how a child could learn to play Bach or Mozart on the violin or the piano entirely through natural learning. With good recordings and supporting parents, a child in the Suzuki method can learn all the songs and figure out how to play them on his instrument. But performing musically is not simply about getting the right notes and the proper rhythms. It is about reaching a high level of technical ability and a very refined level of musical expression: a musician “must learn to hear the slightest differences in the quality of his tone, phrasing, dynamic shadings; to notice the slightest rhythmic and technical inaccuracies; to perceive the finest sensations in his playing apparatus” (Kochevitsky, p. 51). Experienced Suzuki teachers would agree that this level of playing does not happen simply by listening to recordings and imitating on the instrument, but requires extensive work with a competent teacher. The assimilation of the cultural norms for performing classical music is a sophisticated process in which the young performer is constantly striving to get as close as possible to a certain musical ideal. This kind of quest is possible through specialized training over a long period of time.

When we analyse the essential components of natural learning, we find that some are hardly applicable to learning a musical instrument, or at least are not applicable in the Suzuki Method. An important criterion of natural learning is the control that children have over their own learning. Cambourne explains that “tutors” must provide “high saturation and give meaningful demonstrations” (p.36)—something Suzuki teachers and parents can do well—but he also says that they must not impose any sequence of learning or decide any particular convention that needs to be attended to. Learners must be left to decide what part of the task they want to learn and when they want to learn it. Once that responsibility is taken away from the child, by predetermining what should be learned, in what order, and at what rate, the learner is “depowered” (p. 33). The learning process no longer reflects the “natural” characteristic of first

language learning where parents never sequence what children should learn, when they should learn it or how they should learn it. It is obvious that the Suzuki method cannot meet this requirement, as all aspects of learning are carefully sequenced by the method book and the teacher's plan and there is control over what technical gestures must be learned with each piece of the repertoire.

Another essential aspect of natural learning is the display of a sincere desire to learn. This can be observed when a child is learning to ride a bicycle, and he is willing to fall many times and start over in order to eventually get it. Riding a bike requires technical control of an external tool, but unlike music performance, this is mastered in a relatively short time and the progress is rapid and tangible. It is not comparable to the slow progress and the small steps that a beginner needs to go through when learning to master a musical instrument. As much as the Suzuki method would like the whole learning process to be as natural as possible, the reality is that mastering a musical instrument requires controlled and deliberate work that may quickly become unpleasant for children, especially when that kind of effort is required on a regular basis. Initial motivation, more often than not, melts away when confronted with constant repetition that demands coordination, fine motor skills and concentration. Parents are faced with the difficult task of getting their child to the instrument, ideally every day, and they must show a lot of ingenuity and determination to ensure that good practice can happen. It is not surprising that Suzuki teachers provide numerous parents' talks on motivation. The struggling, the pressure and the constraints needed to get the practice done are inevitable, since left to themselves, very few preschool children would practice daily. We are far from the ease and inevitability of natural learning and parents face challenges that they never encountered when their children learned to speak their mother tongue.

Conclusion

Under these conditions, it would be misleading to suggest that with the Suzuki method, musical playing will happen “naturally.” It would be wrong, when progress is slow and practice is difficult, to assume that with more listening to recordings, success will inevitably come.

Learning to play music on an instrument does not happen as smoothly and easily as we would wish. At the same time, however, it should be understood that if the Suzuki method does not meet all the requirements of a natural learning process, this approach to teaching music has gone a long way toward making the learning of a musical instrument more effective and more pleasant.

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