

# Flute teaching the Suzuki way

By Diana Dickerson

The picture of small violinists with their tiny violins is a well-known image. Less well known is the Suzuki Method for flute, created by Toshio Takahashi, which combines the philosophy of Dr. Suzuki's teaching method with the technique teachings of Marcel Moyse. Mr Takahashi has created an exciting and well-planned method to teach 'tone' and 'expressive' playing. As a philosophy-based method I find it satisfying as it focuses not only on musical values but personal ones too. The story of my pupil Eleanor and her mother Sue is a good example of the fun and ease of learning of the Suzuki Method.

The Suzuki Method gained international attention in the 1950s. Many classical musicians were astonished by the standard of such young children. The Method is often referred to as 'Mother Tongue' method as it is based on the way we learn to speak, gradually and from birth, usually from our parents. We do this by imitating what we hear, which, as small children, is often repeated to us many times. Speaking begins with small sounds, followed by proper words and then phrases, until finally conversation is possible. With the Suzuki Method children listen first to sounds, then tone, phrases and repertoire. In the same way that children pick up the inflections of a regional accent, they will pick up through recordings not only the main musical elements of a piece but the nuances of the performer. They listen to recordings of the repertoire, internalising them completely and learning to play the pieces not by reading but through imitation. Instrumental and music reading skills are taught together, but only when the student has complete control of the instrument in exactly the way basic language is mastered before reading text. Children who are immersed in classical music at home know what sounds good. Children who learn only from the page tend to sound a little like those who learn a foreign language only from a text book.

Six-year-old Eleanor has been learning with me for nearly two years and comes every Saturday for a lesson with her mother, Sue. As Eleanor was only four when she started, lessons focused primarily on pre-instrument steps. To begin with she attended the lessons of other students who were learning elementary repertoire so that she could start to understand what an instrumental lesson involved. This taught her appropriate behaviour and allowed her to feel comfortable with me in my teaching studio.

**The role of the parents.** The parent, or parent substitute, is key to the success of early learning. The job of the parent begins early on as they must ensure that the child listens daily to the repertoire CD. Dr. Suzuki understood the excitement a

Diana Dickerson has been teaching Suzuki Method flute for ten years. After a career in media and having her children she came across Suzuki Method while looking for a teacher for her young son. Having read the philosophy she decided this was the path she would follow into teaching and has achieved a Diploma of the European Suzuki Association. She organises national workshops and training, teaches in schools throughout the Bristol area and has a large private teaching studio.





The Suzuki triangle at work. Eleanor's mother takes notes.

to the early start. Young children need help to practise and parents are very good at coaxing the child to play, judging good times for practice and knowing when they have had enough. As they become more independent then rather than 'home teacher' the parent becomes a 'chauffeur and cheerleader'. No teenager wants to be corrected by a parent.

**Progression through repertoire.** The repertoire is arranged in small, success-oriented steps made up, in the early stages, of mainly Baroque pieces and folk songs. These genres have been chosen because they have clear melodic lines, simple rhythms and structure. The right hand is introduced almost straight away so as to ensure that the hand is placed correctly. As a result the right hand is confident of its role and the risk of poor hand positioning is minimised.

Each new piece of the repertoire is just part of the Suzuki teacher's toolbox. Each piece is designed to help the child to develop a particular technique. If a piece does not have a new learning point it is used to give support to the learning point of previous pieces. After having great success with the last piece Eleanor learned, I suggested that she could start note-learning the next piece listed on the CD with her Mum. I played it to her on my flute and she said immediately, 'Oh, I know that one already'. Sure enough she found the notes herself with little guidance. Dr. Suzuki taught 'Children assume ability'. Eleanor may have been note-learning a new piece at home and at that point there may be many points to focus on, neat fingers,

articulation, breath control but a child of four or five cannot take on board all these things in one short lesson. By focusing on just one of these points it is possible to really fix it and the following lesson it can either be reinforced or a new point can be fixed. This way there is no overload of information and the parent is clear what the focus of the lesson was.

Often, a review piece will help to reinforce the lesson point and this gives the opportunity to allow the student to feel confident by playing a better-known piece. Review plays a large part in the Suzuki philosophy. Just as a child will learn to say 'Mummy', they won't then stop saying it as they learn the new word 'Daddy'. In the same way children taught in the Suzuki way keep previously learned pieces at performance level,

I am mentally preparing myself for the five-year-old mind. I want to come down to their physical limitations and up to their sense of wonder and awe.

*Dr. Shin'ichi Suzuki*

Tamzin keeps the ball in the air.



constantly improving and polishing them both at home and in lessons, they never consider a piece to be 'finished'. As a result a child always has a piece ready, giving them confidence to perform whenever asked, whether it be at school, in a group lesson, at home for family, in a large prestigious venue or indeed in an examination.

Suzuki students progress through a structure of graduation levels. There are no failures because the teacher decides when they are ready to graduate to the next level and each child has the opportunity to perform a graduation piece in a beautiful venue. In London, graduations take place at St. John's, Smith Square, and parents are always stunned at how their children get up on stage and perform so well with excitement rather than apprehension. Although the first summer Eleanor had only just started individual lessons with me she still participated in the concert I have at a local church. She took her place on stage just as the others did, held her flute beautifully in rest position, took a bow then returned to her seat. The smile across her face was enormous as the audience of around a hundred people clapped as hard as they had for any of the other students taking part—it may have been just a bow but it was all about having the confidence to stand in front of the audience and to have a positive experience.

The common repertoire all the teachers have enables children all around the world to unite at workshops and summer schools. Last year's summer school in the UK had teachers and students from over ten countries participating all playing the same repertoire together by heart.

**Group lessons.** As Eleanor grew in confidence she started to join in with group lessons. Suzuki Method is not a group method. Each student has a weekly individual lesson and a frequent group lesson with students of a similar standard and sometimes mixed. This helps to:

- Consolidate the learning done in individual lessons through review
- Gives scope to hear repertoire above the current standard
- Gives a safe performance opportunity
- Encourages social growth and motivation

Most of the review gives the student a chance to learn something new about the repertoire or a connected skill. One of the Elementary Group's favourite games is playing hide and seek. One child goes into a different room and the others hide a toy. When the 'seeker' returns, instead of shouting 'hotter' or 'colder' the group play a piece they can all play, louder for closer and softer for further from the toy. After the game, which they would actually play for the whole lesson given the chance, we shout 'forte' and whisper 'piano' and then we try playing through some of our repertoire using these dynamics.

Often a group class will have some 'solo' time giving the students opportunity to play to each other providing a safe



Students play 'spot the rhythm'.

Working away from the flute helps clarify the teaching point. Esther works on F sharp to E on a wooden clave to allow her think only of her fingers.





Placing a napkin over the hands helps Ollie to feel and see in a mirror when his fingers rise too high.

performance opportunity. Also, a seven-year-old is far more inspired hearing a ten-year-old play than having the teacher play.

Playing an instrument can be a lonely business in the beginning until the student is proficient enough to join a band or orchestra. Group lessons allow the child to be part of something from the very beginning and this provides great motivation. Often parents will compare practice ideas while waiting for the group lesson to finish and again. This helps with home practice.

Although a parent's attendance and attention are vital to individual lessons, I actively encourage the parents not to attend group lessons as these help the child not only to develop independence but also to bond really well with the rest of the group. Additionally, group lessons often act as a strong motivator for practice. A child will hear a piece from the repertoire which is above their current playing standard and be very keen to play it, knowing they must achieve success with their current pieces before moving on.

**Every Child Can Learn.** Dr. Suzuki named his method 'Talent Education'. He fully believed that it was 'nurture' rather than 'nature' that developed 'talent'. Many people assumed that the children he toured with were hand-picked 'talented' children but that was far from the truth. He would accept any student with a wish to play and indeed put more effort into those who didn't flourish immediately. Developing the whole child rather than creating 'prodigies' was his wish, and as a teacher I am always the most proud of the student with the greatest struggle, just as in concerts the child who makes a slip but determinedly finishes the performance gets the biggest applause. Not only this but the structure of the method helps the children for whom things don't come so easily.

**Teacher Development.** A feature of the Suzuki Method is that the repertoire is committed to memory by both teachers and students. When I began to train as a Suzuki teacher I was concerned that this would be overwhelming. However, just as the children learn in small steps this is how I started and was pleasantly surprised at how able I have become at internalising and memorising the pieces. It cannot be by chance that we refer to memorisation as 'playing by heart' because our ability to express the music is much better when we know it so intimately. Being able to play at a recital and leave 'my friend the music stand' at home is a wonderful experience and while I know some teachers will have performed most of their lives by memory, for me it has been life-changing.

After nearly ten years of teaching the Suzuki way I still enjoy sharing ideas that we always have when together at teacher training events, summer schools and annual concerts. Teachers of all instruments are able to observe each other, take the best ideas and use them to improve, constantly, their own teaching techniques. It also gives teachers a forum to find solutions to any issues their students may be having.

I remember in the early days watching a very experienced Suzuki flute teacher playing with a group the wonderful *Lullaby* by Schubert. While still playing, one by

If you would like to find out more about Suzuki Method for flute, visit [www.britishsuzuki.org](http://www.britishsuzuki.org). uk or ring 020 3176 4170, or if you are interested in attending an introductory day contact Diana by email: [suzukiflute100@gmail.com](mailto:suzukiflute100@gmail.com)

one, they all lay down then jumped up when they reached the 'busy' section in the middle. As the original theme returned, they lay down again. What a fun and memorable way of demonstrating the 'ABA' structure, its meaning and the composer's intentions! Several years later I see new teachers using the same idea and others because they have seen how easy it is to learn and remember when teaching activities are fun and address the different learning needs and styles of the children.

Eleanor is now six and plays more than two octaves of notes with good tone and intonation. Each lesson has an element of tone work, current piece, review, scales and reading and her concentration is fantastic. She has a group of flute friends and likes to play her flute to anyone who will listen.

This overview contains the 'core' ideas of Suzuki Method. The strong social supports and the positive environment that help nurture good, expressive playing without the coaching of every single note and as a teacher the wide forum always available to us with the large community of teachers and parents teaching and learning this way are what make this philosophy invaluable. 



Dr. Shin'ichi Suzuki.



## Suzuki Method for Flute

Introductory Day for Suzuki Method Teacher Training

[www.britishsuzuki.org.uk](http://www.britishsuzuki.org.uk)

Wednesday, 3rd August  
Malvern St James School, Worcestershire  
9am to 5pm

If you are interested to know more about this unique model of flute teaching, then come along to a free Introductory Day for Suzuki Method Teacher Training.

For more information contact Diana Dickerson [suzukiflute100@gmail.com](mailto:suzukiflute100@gmail.com)

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