

**DEBATE: The Traditional Method of Music Teaching Trumps Suzuki**

Shinichi Suzuki said that he did not develop his method of teaching children in order to produce professional musicians but to help children fulfill their capabilities as human beings. As he has said, “Teaching music is not my main purpose. I want to make good citizens, noble human beings. If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth, and learns to play it himself, he develops sensitivity, discipline, and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart.” This is a lovely introduction to what is essentially a preparatory music experience for young children.

While the Suzuki method of teaching is well-known for its effectiveness in producing tiny music-makers of formidable skill, there are some problems with the method. This will be the subject of my debate: the traditional method better prepares the child both for making music as a cognitive as well as physical activity, and also prepares the child for full participation in music and life.

I will make four points in my presentation about this subject:

First, that while the Suzuki method of music instruction makes an excellent introduction to music and to some of the skills involved, that as long as the introduction and use of music notation is delayed, the experience remains in the category of **preparatory music**, as in some of the other early childhood music experiences like Kindermusic and Music Together.

Second, by delaying the introduction of the use of notation to **learn music**, the effect is one of delaying **cognitive development**. Vygotsky wrote that “writing brings awareness to speech.” This same process can be said to happen when the student of music begins to use the music notation as symbolic modeling for music-making. By learning how to write, to analyze, and to interpret a phrase of music, the student ascends to a higher plane of understanding. No one can dispute that the learning of music from the symbolic representation of it in the medium of music notation is a cognitive activity, as opposed to listening to a recording numerous times and memorizing what one hears. Listening to music is very important for the student, but using recordings as the means for learning new music relegates the exercise to a lower plane than that which begins with the notation, leads through the intellectual process of **audiation** as described by Edwin Gordon, and finally to learning to interpret for oneself what is on the printed page.

Instead of developing independent musicians able to progress on their own, the Suzuki method has produced students who have been kept illiterate in music, unable to read and write it. This has its parallel in one who speaks and understands a language but is unable to read or write it and so is said to be *illiterate in that language*.

Third, by delaying the use of music notation to the point where the skill on the musical instrument no longer parallels understanding in the symbolic representation of music, the child is being delivered into a situation of social discomfort that may result in abandonment of the skills already gained, because of embarrassment and humiliation.

The social aspect of making music in ensemble is also one of the most important areas for personal growth. Pitting one's skills against those of other musicians in the exercise of playing string quartets, orchestral music, or even duos and trios, delivers each musician involved to a much more advanced level. Without the skill to read music notation, one cannot encounter music on a cognitive, mental plane, or on a **social plane**. Families who all play instruments and/or sing, engage in family activities revolving around serious but recreational music-making. This is one of life's great joys, and it is propelled by a common ability to read music notation and to bring to life the music embodied in it.

Fourth, the positive effect on brain development that accrues from the study of music notation, i.e. an improvement in spatial-temporal reasoning, is lost without the inclusion of notation along with the study of music.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, it seems to me that, while the Suzuki method of introduction of music to children is possessed of a beauty in the form (teacher and student bow in respect to each other) and is noble in its goals for creating good citizens with "beautiful hearts," nevertheless, as a method of music instruction, it must be placed firmly in the category of *preparatory music experience*. In order for the music student to be empowered for independence in her study, she must be fluent in the language of music and in its written notation. She will then be prepared for personal growth and research, and for the social aspect of music: ensemble-playing. Her cognitive development as a human being will take a giant step, as will her self-confidence. Last, but not least, if her destiny is to be a professional musician, she will have been equipped responsibly with the tools to ply her profession with panache. In speaking of Marx's views on human nature, Crain says, "It is by inventing and using tools that humans master their environments, satisfy their needs, and, ideally, fulfill their deepest creative potentials."