

LINDA LANIER-KEOSAIAN

SUZUKI METHOD VS. TRADITIONAL METHOD OF MUSIC INSTRUCTION

Suzuki's Goal in Formulating His Method

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." (p. 2, www.suzukiassociation.org) 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.

Points in my Case Against the Suzuki Method

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

- 1) 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 music experiences like Kindermusic and Music Together.
- 2) Second, that by delaying the introduction of the use of music notation to *learn music*, the effect is one of delaying *cognitive development*.
- 3) Third, that 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.

4) Fourth, that 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.

Music Illiterates are the Product

The Suzuki approach of involving the child physically in making music without regard to the printed page has basis in the Piagetian stages of early childhood. Children can sing and speak before they can learn to read. They can learn to count before they can add or subtract on paper. They can play a drum before they can use a pencil or crayon. They can imitate a melody sung or played before they can read that same melody in music notation. Speaking, singing, playing drums with big motions, counting, walking, and running, while they give intrinsic joy, also act as preparation for learning grammar, arithmetic, dance, and music, along with its symbolic representation. The Suzuki method of music instruction admittedly helps children develop progressive skills on their instruments. However, without the skillful use of music notation, they are unable to explore music beyond what their teacher can imitate or what they hear on a recording. They are not developing independence but rather are kept dependent on sources of music encountered aurally. This places their dilemma in the same category as the children of immigrants to a new land who simultaneously learn to read and write a new language while learning merely to speak their parents' mother tongue. Those who are unable to read and write a language, who merely speak and understand it, we refer to as *illiterate in that language*. Those children have become *literate* in one language, but remain

illiterate in the old one. The same is true for children who exhibit even a high level of skill and understanding on their instruments but who are unable to read and write the musical language spoken on their instruments. They can be said to be *illiterate* in the language of music.

The Use of Parents as Teachers

In the Suzuki method, parents and adults around the children are the source of much of their learning, their parents being their most comfortable and ever-present teachers. The Suzuki method uses this relationship by teaching the parents to teach the children. Just as this works well for the other skills learned in early childhood, it works particularly well to have a parent who leads in the development of music skills because the activities can become a part of everyday life. Even the traditional music teacher is grateful for the parent who is involved in the musical life of the child. This can have a “down side,” however, when either the parent’s skills or attitude wanes and the effect on the child’s development is one of slowing or stopping it.

Cognitive Gains

Just as reading and writing a language propel cognitive development in that area, the learning and use of music notation (*symbolic modeling*, in Bandura’s terminology) furthers the cognitive development in music. When a child learns to read, we expect the child to pick up books on her own and to begin to read without adult supervision. Reading independently will propel her further and much faster than a child who does not read on her own and must wait to be read to by an adult or older child. It is in this same stage, when the child begins to decipher written language, that the learning of notation for music that the child already plays on an instrument makes the most sense.

The introduction of music notation at the critical point of development described above helps children master the material in a more advanced way and helps them move more quickly. Vygotsky

wrote that good instruction “should march ahead of development, pulling it along, helping children master material that they cannot immediately grasp on their own. Their initial understanding might be superficial, but the instruction is still valuable, for it moves the children’s minds forward.” (Crain, p. 232) Using Vygotsky’s reasoning, I am certain that he would have advocated the introduction of music notation to help children acquire momentum and independence in their music studies.

Music Reading is Related to Language Reading

Vygotsky was enthusiastic about school instruction in general and its value in propelling the child’s mind forward. In the following quote from his writings, he described the preparatory period (the *zone of proximal development*) before a child begins to read and write. He wrote that “Before (children) are introduced to writing, they have mastered a great deal of spoken language, but their mastery is not at a very conscious level. Speaking is a bit like singing; it is physically expressive and flows rather naturally. Writing, in contrast, uses more formal and abstract systems of symbols and forces one to behave much more consciously and deliberately. When one writes, one is constantly making conscious decisions with respect to the proper verb form, the point of which a sentence should end, and so forth. Learning to write takes great effort, but it helps children see how language is structured. Writing brings awareness to speech.” (Crain, p.234) 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, 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 audiation (a cognitive process indicative of greater skill in music), and finally to learning to interpret for oneself what is on the printed page.

Audiation and Notation

Audiation ought to be the goal of every music student and every musician. It is an intellectual process which was identified and described by Edwin Gordon. He has described seven types of *audiation*, only two of which are possible without the aid of music notation. Audiation enables one to encounter music at much higher levels. The music that is the subject of this inner hearing, or audiation, then becomes the source and inspiration for creativity. About his six Stages of Audiation, Gordon says that they are hierarchical, that when one is omitted, learning is not ideal. Yet it is not possible to get to the latter, more advanced stages of audiation without a knowledge of music notation, i.e. without *music literacy*.

Readiness to Read Music

A child's spontaneous development in music can signal readiness to begin learning the notation for it. Vygotsky believed that in order to fully develop their minds, "children also need the intellectual tools provided by their cultures - tools such as language, memory aids, numerical systems, writing and scientific concepts." (Crain, p. 239) We have the responsibility to equip the child with the intellectual tools to excel in chosen areas, such as writing, math, and science. We also have a special obligation to equip them with specific tools to excel in an area of active interest. Music notation is just such a tool. In fact, equipping children with the tools they need in order to progress more quickly corresponds to Vygotsky's theory of the *zone of proximal development*, which theorizes that a slight amount of adult assistance at the appropriate time can quickly enable a child

to succeed in more advanced problem-solving. Equipped with music skills and with literacy in its notation, a child is prepared to walk into the future with confidence.

While the Suzuki method suggests introducing music notation after several years of study, around the age of six, this rarely occurs. Having begun the music study without the printed page, the child becomes resistant to change. Rather than losing the child as a student over this issue, the teacher allows her to continue learning aurally. More often than not, the child arrives at her first orchestra class only to find that she is woefully unprepared to participate.

The Social Aspect of Music-Making

Music is an area which provides not only opportunities for personal and individual growth, but also presents opportunities for making music with others. In fact, this is arguably the most important aspect of music. Children who have learned to play stringed instruments in the Suzuki method play together in recitals, playing melodies beautifully in tune. This is wonderful for them at an early age, but would not be seen as advanced at a later age. This is because the next step in music-making is to do it in ensemble with other music students. Pitting one's music 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 play in such ensembles, one is prevented from encountering the music on a cognitive, mental, physical, emotional plane, or *on a social plane*.

Ensemble-playing need not wait until young adulthood. Many siblings make music together and many parents make music with their children. This family music-making may be simply recreational in the sense that it is purely for fun and involves simple forms of music. There are some families whose members all play a classical instrument and whose family activities revolve around

serious music-making. This would not be possible, i.e. to get the family together to play the Mendelssohn Octet for strings, if the education in music had stopped short of music notation.

Equipped with music skills and literacy in music, a child can approach the school or community performing ensemble with confidence. The child who has had music study only in private lessons, and who has never read music from the printed page, arrives with only half of what she needs in order to participate fully. The beautiful sound she makes on a stringed instrument may mean she is chosen for the group. But then, what is she supposed to do when given a part to play? This might result in such embarrassment and humiliation that the child may well decide not to join the ensemble after all. The strongly confident child may dig in and learn what is necessary as soon as possible, but it seems pointless to put a child through this. If a child plays well enough to have been chosen for such an ensemble, then, equipped with music literacy, that same child could have been propelled to a much higher level, not against his will, but out of his own curiosity and readiness to move on to something new.

Notation and the “Mozart Effect”

Current scientific research into the effects of the use and reading of music notation demonstrates that it enhances the capacity of the child or student to compete successfully for higher scores in the area of *spatial-temporal reasoning*. This means that the child has an increased ability to do advanced math, science, and logic. This exciting discovery has brought the spotlight to music education and its effect on the child’s success in other un-related areas. This effect is only possible with particular kinds of music experiences and the reading of music notation, with its vertical, horizontal, and spatial dimensions, *is one of them*.

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.”

Linda Lanier-Keosaian

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Bruner, Jerome S. On Knowing, Essays for the Left Hand. Expanded Edition, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1979.

Crain, William. Theories of Development, Concepts and Applications. Fourth Edition, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, 2000.

Gordon, Edwin. Learning Sequences in Music, Skills, Content, and Patterns. Fourth Edition, G.I.A Publications, Inc.: Chicago, 1989.

History of the Suzuki Method. Suzuki Association of the Americas, Inc. 1997. www.suzukiassociation.org/hist.htm

Katacha, Haruko. How to Teach Beginners. Translated from the Japanese by Mitsuo Forumachi. First OnLine Edition: 11 July, 1997. Last Revised: 14 February, 2001.

Vygotsky, L.S. Mind in Society, The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1978.

Gardner, Howard. The Disciplined Mind, Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education That Every Child Deserves. Penguin Books: New York, 2000.

Music Educators Journal, July 1999.

Riemer, Bennett: Facing the Risks of the “Mozart Effect”

Music Educators Journal, September 2000.

Hodges, Donald A.: Implications of Music and Brain Research

Demorest, Steven M. and Morrison, Steven J.: Does Music Make You Smarter?