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“When Love is Deep, much is accomplished”

When we hear the name Suzuki, we often think of music and teaching small humans how to play the violin, but Dr. Shinichi Suzuki was many things. Certainly, he was a teacher of violin, but he was also a philosopher. His philosophy has many things that make up the whole and it is difficult to sum it up in just a few words. There are so many things that are important to understand the way he thought about children, music and the world. A big clue can be found in the title of his book which is partially autobiography and partially philosophy. Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education. Love. This is the most important thing about Suzuki’s philosophy. Not the lovey-dovey kind of love, although there is some of that, but rather the everyday, self-sacrificing, never ending kind of love. Love of children, love of humanity, love of art and love of music. “Love can only be had by loving. Our life is worth living only if we love one another and comfort one another.” (82) There are many other titles he could have called his book, but he chose to include love; making it of utmost importance and coloring every other aspect of the method.

The questions that Suzuki spent most of his adult life trying to answer, is “What is man’s direction in life? What is art?” (7) Music was the art that Suzuki found himself attracted to and when he was a young man, he left Japan to study music and through his studies, this question kept coming back to him. By the time he was older, he came to some sort of an answer. Suzuki does not speak much of the horrors of World War II in his memoirs, but likely the darkness of this time in human history, that he surely experienced in both Germany and Japan during this time influenced him. He looked for truth, beauty and goodness in art. Suzuki believed that to be a good artist was to be a good person and that art is found in truth, beauty and goodness.

Suzuki was teaching violin in a time when it was fairly accepted that mostly adults played violin. He was teaching violin to young men when a father asked him to teach his four-year-old son, causing Suzuki to ponder what sort of method might be used to teach music to small children. Likely from Suzuki’s struggles learning German and likewise his wife’s struggles learning Japanese, an epiphany happened. “All Japanese children speak Japanese. In fact, all children throughout the world speak their native tongues with the utmost fluency.” (1) Suzuki

realized that every child has the capacity to learn his or her own native tongue almost effortlessly. So why not music in the same way? This astonishing revelation set Suzuki on a path to discover the best possible method to teach children violin. The Suzuki Method, as it is now known uses by ear learning before children learn to read music, just the way a child learns first, to listen to language, second to speak and third to read and write. Children listen to recordings of the pieces they are to learn and memorize everything they play. In this way, Suzuki found that they could produce the most beautiful sound from the very early stages of playing the instrument.

Because Suzuki had his revelation related to the mother tongue concept, he began to think about how it is possible except for in rare cases for every single child to learn their native language with complete ease. Every adult speaks their own language without even thinking about it, because of this Suzuki believed that the children who display superior results in anything from math to music; it must be the methods of training that produce the best results Suzuki discovered that talent is not necessarily inborn, although he acknowledges that some people seem to be able to learn faster than others and that is what he describes as true talent. “I want- if I can- to get education changed from mere instruction to education in the real sense of the word. Education that inculcates, brings out, develops the human potential based on the growing life of the child.” (85-86) He believed that based on the idea of what he called the “Mother Tongue Method” and what is now known as the “Suzuki Method,” any child can learn how to create beautiful music. Suzuki believes that every child has value and that if they are educated in a way that they can understand, it is possible for each child to achieve remarkable things, in music or in whatever profession they should choose. “But I know that what I conceive is possible, and I believe that one day the human race will create the kind of world in which everyone will realize that children have the potential.” (105)

One of the things that comes across as very unusual in the Suzuki method is the essential involvement of not only a student and a teacher, but also a parent. This is known as the Suzuki triangle. All parties must be involved for the greatest success for the child. This triangle is not mentioned as much in Suzuki’s book, perhaps because in Japan parents want to be involved in their children’s studies or perhaps, he wanted to concentrate more on the philosophy rather than the methodology. In traditional Suzuki studios it is an absolute must that the parent attends all lessons and practice at home with the child. Often, the teacher will even call the parent “the

home teacher” and in many ways the early lessons are about teaching the parent more than teaching the child. For years, until the student can practice on his or her own, the time commitment of the parent is likely larger than that of the student. The parent, along with the teacher helps to encourage the child when times get tough and it certainly is not easy to learn an instrument.

One of the important things about learning an instrument in any sort of method, is consistency. Suzuki believes that there are several ways that can cultivate in the child a desire to learn which in turn makes both consistency in practice and the likelihood of success higher. He even suggests that if the desire to play violin is not there, it must be cultivated before the child can learn. Part of the reason that Suzuki insists on parent involvement is to create in the child a desire to learn. He would not teach the child until the parent could play one piece. Children want to be like their parents and in this way the children will also want to play. Group classes also help with this. It can be difficult to get parents to bring children to group classes, but the children love the group classes and they are a great motivator to practice and they build community, which is another important aspect Suzuki’s philosophy. “But the fact is that what the children enjoy most is group playing. They play with children more advanced than they are; the influence is enormous and marvelous for their playing.” (94) In group lessons, the students learn to play together as well as being greatly enjoyable for them.

By reading Suzuki’s book, it is clear that he was a very thoughtful person and he also believed that even when a child is beginning, it is possible to make a beautiful sound. But how? Anyone who has played the violin knows that it is not easy to master. Suzuki uses the “One Step” learning approach. “Confronted with a high mountain, you cannot reach the summit in one stride, but must climb step by step to approach your goal.” (45) The One Step Approach is where one new concept is introduced at a time and mastered before a new step is learned. Although the goals may not be easy, by breaking them into small steps, they are possible. There is no hurry and the student must master each concept before moving to the next. The repertoire in the Suzuki Books is designed for this; each piece introduces one or two new things so that the student can apply these new concepts in music. Because each piece builds and advances concepts of previous pieces, review or the revisiting of old pieces is highly important, and it is in the review that students really begin to develop advanced skills.

Although all of the parts of the Suzuki philosophy are important, it not completely about the music or violin playing; these are only the vehicle to get to the goal. That is, to grow as a person. To love other people. To see the world as it could be. Suzuki believed that by studying music, a child becomes a better person. “The purpose of Talent Education is to train children, not to be professional musicians but to be fine musicians and to show high ability in any field they enter. (78) This was his goal far more than creating musicians, though many have begun their career as a “Suzuki Child.” Many “Suzuki Children” go on in fields other than music and they have an appreciation for music and dedication that they learned through playing the violin. Suzuki found that by creating beauty, one desires goodness and this in turn creates a noble heart. He believed that a noble heart was the key to success in any field.

Sources

Suzuki, Shinichi. *Nurtured by Love; a New Approach to Education*. Athens, OH: Ability Development, 1983.

Many teachers and years, studying as a Suzuki Child.