

# Introduction to the Suzuki Method of Violin Instruction

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*“Talent is no accident of birth. In today’s society a good many people seem to have the idea that if one is born without talent, there is nothing one can do about it... Consequently they go through life without living it to the full or ever knowing life’s true joy. That is man’s greatest tragedy. Man is born with natural ability. A newborn child adjusts to his environment in order to live, and various abilities are acquired in the process.”—from *Nurtured by Love* by Shin’ichi Suzuki*

Since its introduction over forty years ago, the Suzuki method of violin instruction has become one of the most influential and popular methods in the U.S. and around the world. As research continues to accrue in support of the benefits of music education in early childhood, the Suzuki method—which encourages formal violin instruction starting as early as age two or three—has become increasingly attractive to parents.

The Suzuki method builds on several principles that distinguish it from traditional instrumental education:

1. **Passive listening.** Don’t let the word “passive” throw you—there’s plenty that is active and engaged in Suzuki violin study. But the method also emphasizes the importance of passive listening. Just as language is mastered by immersion in the spoken word, so an understanding and appreciation of the language of music is best achieved when music is literally in the air in recorded form or in live performance.
2. **Playing by ear.** Just as language is acquired by ear before children learn to read, so the Suzuki method teaches that music is best acquired by ear prior to learning to read notation. When students move on to learn music notation, a solid background in music as an aural phenomenon can facilitate and provide context for that new skill. Like language, music can be more expressive and nuanced when learned independently of its notation.
3. **Making music in group settings.** Whereas individual practice and study can feel isolating at times, the inclusion of periodic master classes and group lessons in Suzuki violin instruction emphasizes music as a cooperative and social activity and allows children to learn from each other as mutual models of developing skill.
4. **Active parent involvement.** Suzuki violin study has been described as “parent intensive,” and for good reason: parents attend lessons and are active and present as “home teachers” during practicing. Regardless of the subject area, parental involvement has been shown to be a critical factor in child learning. And because Suzuki violin emphasizes positive rather than negative reinforcement, the experience can serve as an enhancement of the parent-child relationship.

5. **Technique-centered instruction.** Because of its emphasis on details of movement, position, and form, the Suzuki violin method is often compared to martial arts instruction. Shin'ichi Suzuki developed specific “teaching points,” each focusing on a single aspect of violin technique.
6. **Positive focus.** Suzuki instruction focuses on positive reinforcement, encouragement and praise, taking every opportunity to recognize and comment on achievement while limiting comments on needed improvements to one or two focus areas per lesson. Suzuki instructors are cautioned to avoid all competitive references and timetables. Students are submitted to each level of graduation within the program when they are ready—not when they reach a predetermined date and time.
7. **Continual review of learned music.** Students are not permitted to abandon pieces once they are learned. An important part of the Suzuki philosophy is the constant revisiting and improvement of pieces from past lessons.
8. **Memorization.** The early approach of learning music by ear continues in later study as all music is learned by ear. “Getting away from the road map” of music notation allows students to develop the expressive and emotional side of music more profoundly than is typical when students are tied to the page.
9. **Frequent public performance.** Frequent performance further underlines the social and cooperative nature of music and puts students at ease in front of an audience. This encourages self-confidence in other aspects of a child's life.

Most important to understanding Shin'ichi Suzuki's unique method is understanding its original and ongoing intention: to nurture loving and noble individuals. “Teaching music is not my main purpose,” he said. “I want to make good citizens. If children hear fine music from the day of their birth and learn to play it, they develop sensitivity, discipline and endurance. They get a beautiful heart.”

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