

SUZUKI JOURNAL

Fostering Mastery

When we ponder those who have achieved excellence, we are often tempted to believe that they are somehow the exception to the rule; that their talent is innate, a rare divine gift, or simply hereditary. Dr. Suzuki spent his life dismantling these erroneous representations whilst providing tangible proof for his theory:

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masses of very young, very talented musicians. However, over half a century later we are still reticent in accepting the truth: talent is cultivated. Dr. Suzuki's vision was profound. Although he is most remembered

for his musical method, we often forget that he used music as a mere illustration of his philosophy. A method is a systematic procedure for accomplishing a specific task, whereas a philosophy is a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior. Dr. Suzuki left us with much more than a method, his legacy is a philosophy, a behavioral recipe for success in any domain. His 'recipe' is now referred to as Talent Education, or in didactic science, the Mastery Learning approach. What is mastery? How can we as Suzuki parents foster our children on their path to mastery?

Postmodernist ideas of the last century profoundly influenced educational approaches. Structure, mimetism and repetition became considered as hindrances to creative, original production. Educators came to believe it more beneficial for children to spontaneously create without structure, guidance or example. No foundation, consisting of reliable information in the given domain, was provided as a spring board from which the children might base their own creativity.



The artistic domain, above any other, suffered most significantly. Even today, many educators believe that skills such as drawing and painting are natural talents bestowed upon the rare child. Science has now illustrated that humans learn mostly through mimetism and that all previously accumulated knowledge is mobilized in the acquisition of any new information. This is also true of artistic creation and musical interpretation. We cannot pull out of our heads something which was not there to begin with. When creating, we delve into our cerebral databases. It would be unreasonable to ask someone to produce a sound which he has never before heard. Suzuki discovered this principle in observing linguistic abilities in small children. A child listens to their maternal language for an average of two years (not including the time in-vitro) before ever producing a single word! The child acquires a strong linguistic database before production begins. In fact, he identified the first step in learning as the creation of a referential mental database in a given domain. Thus the first principle of the philosophy of mastery identified by Dr. Suzuki is: Saturate the environment with that which the child must learn. Suzuki created the audio recordings for the purpose of building

the young pupil's mental musical database that they might have a foundation upon which to repose during their own musical production. However, for the database to be reliable and readily available for use by the child, he must listen to the piece he is to learn no fewer than 401 times per day to ensure saturation. This principle also signifies that increased exposure, in this case to classical music in general, leads to increased abilities. If the chief aim is high musical ability, then the child's environment needs to be saturated with music not only the Suzuki audio recordings; for as previously illustrated, a vast cerebral database leads to an increase in creative abilities! Just as writers begin with reading, so musicians begin with listening.

In observing young children, Dr. Suzuki also noted the repetitive nature of linguistic function. Every language possesses a finite phonetic database, upon which an infinite amount of words might be produced. Phonemes are the building blocks for words, just as words are the building blocks of discourse. Sounds and words are thus constantly repeated. In this way, linguistic function necessitates mastery by its very nature. Dr. Suzuki identified this principle as

being a fundamental element of mastery: all previous acquisitions must be constantly reinvested. With this thought, Dr. Suzuki created his ingenious method for teaching music, one ensuring the constant revision of previously learned skills. One where every piece taught would build upon the skill previously learned. Generations of musicians the world over would agree with the amazingly well

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chosen musical progression of the Suzuki Method books. Yet, this was not the only type of repetition Dr. Suzuki intended, nor will the mere progression of the pieces lead to mastery in and of themselves. All previously

learned pieces must be repeated, systematically, every day to ensure mastery. Without repetition, the child's mental database remains unchanged, they will be able to play one piece accurately well. As soon as the child moves on to the next piece, the previous one is replaced, and the child's database is still: one accurately well played piece. Repetition ensures the growth of the child's playing capacity, memorization capacity and musical mental database. There is a simple, progressive and systematic manner to ensure sufficient repetition of previously learned pieces throughout all of the Suzuki Method Books: All of the pieces from the child's current Suzuki book must be played every day. The pieces from their previous Suzuki book must be repeated every other day. The pieces from the book before that must be repeated every third day...and so on and so forth.

Repetition is the key to success... upon one condition. The child must receive one-on-one immediate feedback until mastery. Here lies the third fundamental key to Mastery Learning identified by Dr. Suzuki.

Perfect practice makes perfect. It is said that it takes ten perfect repetitions to initially learn something new, and one hundred perfect repetitions to correct a learned error. The learning child must then have feedback from a parent during his practice sessions in between his lessons in order to prevent the learning of errors.

Mastery Learning aims to develop unconscious competency at a given skill. This is virtuosity. The virtuoso accomplishes his skill without having to furnish conscious effort. There are three developmental stages preceding virtuosity. Foremost, a novice begins as being unconsciously incom-

petent at a particular skill. For the novice musician, this signifies that inability to recognize the proper sound, inability in differentiating quality from mediocrity, inability to distinguish adjacent tones, inability to recognize the octave... At this point, the pupil's mental musical database is not sufficiently furnished for these tasks. For this developmental stage, Dr. Suzuki created the audio recordings for the purpose of training the pupil's ear and furnishing quality musical samples which will serve as the foundation for future musical reference.

Soon, awareness dawns upon the apprentice. He is conscious that his own musical is not conform to that of the audio model. He begins to automatically correct his intonation, to mind the quality of his sound.... He has become consciously incompetent at his musical skill. This development



Bilder: Christian Perret

stage is colossal because consciousness has expanded to a point that enables the learner to differentiate quality from mediocre. This is when feedback is of utmost importance. The child is aware of his shortcomings and he strongly desires to obtain the knowledge enabling him to produce the quality that he is accustomed to hearing on the audio examples.

Following, perhaps years later, with perfect, systematic repetition the pupil becomes consciously competent at his skill. The pupil is aware of the procedures required to modulate his own production and he uses these procedures consciously so that his sound conforms to the chosen example. He must still, however, focus all of his attention on his skill in order to obtain the desired results. This is the faithful Suzuki pupil who continues to play their Book 1 songs whilst they are learning Book 6. They play with astounding, nearly perfect quality ... when they think about it.

Mastery comes with unconscious competency. The pupil reproduces the desired sound without conscious effort. This is the pupil who can recite poems, read a book, hold a conversation whilst playing...exactly like the audio recording. However, when he does think about what he is playing, it becomes the highest form of self-expression. It is at this step, and not before, that the pupil's mind is so entirely free from the technical difficulties that the skill requires that they are able to communicate through their art. This is fluency. This is breathtaking beauty. Masters do not falter no matter the environmental stress. Stage fright, nerves, noises and disturbances do not change the quality of their production. When their conscious mind acknowledges these stresses, their unconscious mind is



managing their skill and that is why they do not falter. The skill can be produced without conscious effort and they can use it as a medium to transmit a message, their unique message.

The genius of the Suzuki Method resides in its systematic review of previous learned pieces because it provides the opportunity to travel through each of these developmental learning stages. The child who is learning Book 6 but still plays Book 1 pieces is experiencing virtuosity, at least for the pieces in Book 1. They know what it feels like to be unconsciously competent. This is the surest source of motivation. Andrew Pudewa, a graduate from the Talent Education Research Institute and founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing, in his speech on mastery and motivation identifies three truths: Children desire to do what they can do. Children desire to do what they believe they can do. Children refuse to do that which they believe they cannot do. The Suzuki pieces are set up in such a way that

each new piece does not present an insurmountable challenge compared to the previous piece. In addition, every time a child repeats his previous pieces he is building his self-confidence, and thus his belief system of success. In this way, the more the child reviews his previous pieces the more he will want to, in order to experience the feeling of virtuosity.

There are many practical things a parent may do in order to feed their child's motivation in the daily routine of repetition. A child's motivation is more likely to be or to become intrinsic if their environment is properly saturated. For the Suzuki music pupil this means frequently attending concerts, master classes, workshops, and conferences. In order to make these experiences most meaningful, wait for the musicians to come out after the concert so that your child might ask questions and get an autograph. Also, listening to classical music should be a priority: in the car, as bedtime music, in the shower, during mealtimes.

For the times, when the child is not spontaneously picking up their instrument to play it without being told, one could aim at inspiring their motivation. Inspiration can come directly from their music teacher, but not uniquely. A good source of inspiration can come from the audience. Extended family members living near can easily provide a real audience for your child at least once a week. With a bit of imagination it is possible to create a makeshift audience and this option is just as effective. For younger children, setting up their favorite stuffed animals, Playmobil or Lego men in neat rows is an audience worth playing for. For older children, printing a picture of their favorite composer to hang on the wall, or a picture of a full auditorium



can bring lasting inspiration. Sometimes just standing on a chair to play gives the child the impression of being on stage. Opening the window during practice time can give the child a feeling of being "heard" by passers-by. Allowing the child to play on the sidewalk or in the backyard are all

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ways of allowing him to share his talent with anyone who will listen, thus bringing inspiration.

Perhaps the truest source of pleasure in playing is derived not from playing

for others, but in playing with others. Accompany your children on your own instrument, have siblings play together, look for a pianist in the neighborhood. When live accompaniment can-

not be found, play with the Suzuki audio-recordings. If the tempo is not right, use the program *Amazing Slow Downer* to adjust the speed

Sometimes, however, a parent must contrive motivation. These are quick, game-like ideas meant to awaken a young, glossy-eyed child as he conducts his daily play-through of previously learned pieces:

› Play in an unusual position: laying down, cross-legged, against a wall, in front of a mirror, with eyes closed...
-Complete a task during a specific note or pause: jump, kick, turn, squat, run...

› Draw the next piece to play out of a hat, or simply change the order in which the pieces are played

› Add to the "audience" of stuffed animals after each piece

› Add to a collection of marbles/toys, one for each piece (toys that are only seen during playing times, and that are put away otherwise)

› Give one random piece of a puzzle for every piece played, the child must work for several days in order to put the puzzle together

› Give parts of a Playmobil scene (one for each piece of music played) the child will take pleasure in constructing the scene as he plays each piece

As the child grows, he will no longer need such short-aimed motivation. Practicing all of his pieces will no longer be a daily battle. The older child needs longer-term motivation. Getting through all of the pieces in a day is no longer difficult, however being diligent about playing every-

thing everyday for a week, a month or a year might be more challenging. For older children the following ideas are helpful:

› Have the child write down the date of when he memorizes each piece, allowing children to look back on their progress is very encouraging

› Schedule a quarterly "home-video night" where the child gets to watch his old concerts

› Have the child put a check mark for each day he practices all of his pieces, after 100 check-marks, plan something special: a cake, an outing, a certificate...

› Plan a special family concert/outing/meal for the completion of each Suzuki book

-Establish a system of points or play money that can then be used towards a reward (stickers, pencils, snacks...)

Passion is contagious. If music is part of your family culture the child will seldom resist learning to play a musical instrument. Even if this is the case, it is most helpful to make the child's practice session become an integral part of their daily routine, a non-negotiable, like bathing, or brushing teeth. If practice is done at the same time every single day, the child will come to count on it. Sometimes resistance does not come from a lack in the learning environment but from a problem in the modality of practice. Is the child practicing at a time when they are tired or hungry? Is the practice session too long?

Given the fact that the parent is the main feed-back provider and enforces the goals appointed by the teacher on a daily basis until the child is about thirteen years old, it is helpful to have

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an array of easy-to-employ techniques in the form of a game aimed at providing feed-back in a positive way. The parent could use the following techniques:

- › Have the child repeat the required task the same number of times as he is old
- › Have the child throw a trick dice (that always lands on six) to determine the number of times he has to repeat a task
- › With a set of blank dice, write six different things the child could focus on, one per side.
- › Make a "car" race. With a matchbox car, move the car forwards for each time the child does the required task with success, otherwise the car

remains in the same place. When the car gets to the designated 'finish line' you move on to another task.

-Use a puppet who pretends to be the "conductor" to give the child feed-back

› Set up "stations": different areas of the room corresponding to different skills. For example in one corner it would be the 'straight-bowing musicians', in another the 'in-tune musicians', or the 'beautiful left-handed musicians'...the child must play one piece in each corner and become that 'type' of musician.

The ideas are literally endless, the objective remains the same: provide correctional feed-back and positive opportunities to perfect a new skill.

The overriding philosophy of Mastery Learning is the certainty of cultivating human virtues, qualities of the spirit. In a world of instant gratification, the willingness to put in the effort it takes to develop a skill to the highest degree is rare. Society hails immediate pleasure and success. The path to mastery cultivates determination, self-discipline, excellence, confidence, patience, purposefulness, reliability, responsibility, and reverence. The destination of the mastery path, success, is merely the natural outcome for anyone who employs such virtues. This view was also shared by Dr. Suzuki, "Our task as parents and teachers is to raise our children to be worthy people who will be able to assume responsibility for further development of the world."

BY RAQUEL LE BOUQUIN