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Chair's Column

By Dr. Mark George

The Other Suzuki Triangle

The Suzuki Triangle is a term used to describe the powerful relationship that develops among students, teachers and parents. The teacher serves the role of an expert guide, working together with the parent to provide the best possible music learning environment for the student.

The teacher facilitates, describes and demonstrates proper technique with regard to posture, hand position and tone in ten-thousand incremental steps that lead to greater and greater technical and musical proficiency. The parent creates an environment of safety, musical beauty and self-discipline. The result is that, with plenty of frustration, persistence, and no small amount of joy, the student becomes an accomplished player with a love of beauty, progressing at an entirely individualized but often rapid pace.

There is no better way to acquire the ability to play a musical instrument than through Suzuki Education. This statement takes into account the fact that Suzuki students are not selected on the basis of their extraordinary or inherent talent. Suzuki Education is talent education. All are welcome. All will succeed.

There is another triangle, a triangle of learning, that Suzuki teachers employ and integrate in their teaching. I am referring to character, technique and musicianship. Suzuki teaching at its best develops strong character in every student; enables every student to acquire the technical skill required to make music; and connects each student to an infinite world of musical possibilities.

It is important to understand the unique power and potential of this combination of three elements that make the miracle of Suzuki Education

possible—three gifts that are repeatedly and continuously given to children throughout the world.

Character development is the primary objective of Suzuki Education. Suzuki students learn to value and love a beautiful tone. The beautiful tone is analogous to a kind and beautiful heart. Music is a vehicle through which students learn to be noble and successful human beings. Suzuki students are disciplined, sensitive, compassionate, and open to all that humanity has to offer.

Success is celebrated in Suzuki Education. While Suzuki teaching is known for its positive environment, students never receive false praise. Rather, teachers always find something legitimate to praise and then work on the areas that need improvement.

Technical proficiency in music is best acquired in the early years. The acquisition of technique involves the development of basic posture, physical facility and most importantly, the connection between the ear and the physical mechanism that attaches to a musical instrument. The primary focus in the earliest years is on the development of the ear. The logic behind this is that children learn to listen and speak before they read and write. So the repertoire is learned by rote, freeing the student to concentrate on perfecting their sense of intonation, producing a beautiful tone, learning the basics of musical articulation, and becoming comfortable with the many sequential steps required to gain technical proficiency.

The official Suzuki repertoire, based on Western European and Japanese folk songs and a collection of classical music, is carefully constructed to facilitate sequential progress toward the goal of acquiring a proficient technique.

Continued on p. 5

This particular sequence of repertoire, along with the expertise to teach with it, is absolutely critical to Suzuki Education. This is what enables Suzuki educators to teach every child, not just the so-called talented. No other method of teaching does this as well as Suzuki Education. By demonstrating the capacity to teach every child, Suzuki Education makes the greatest amount of music accessible to the greatest number of students.

Once a basic technical proficiency is achieved, and sometimes even sooner, Suzuki teachers begin to utilize an unlimited amount of supplemental repertoire. At its best, Suzuki Education is like a great absorbent learning machine, assimilating music from every strata of society and every part of the world.

Since the 1960s, American Suzuki teachers have used fiddle tunes, Klezmer, jazz, blues and rock music to supplement the musical training and aesthetic education of their students. In South America, much indigenous music has found its way into Suzuki teaching, and the same is true in Africa. As Suzuki students become proficient in note reading, the list of supplemental music grows even more. Suzuki students develop an innate respect for the musical traditions of our vast world. The history of music has both oral and written traditions and Suzuki students can access them all.

The last part of the other Suzuki triangle very closely follows the first two. Because Suzuki Education develops character first, a deep respect for the musical art naturally follows. There is nothing surprising or revolutionary about this. Suzuki musicians simply care about what music is and how it is played. Music-making is something they have more than likely done every day of their lives since the age of two or three. Playing with a beautiful tone matters. Playing in tune matters. Playing the very best you can play matters. Honoring the composers and musicians of the past matters.

The discipline of practice, the constant listening and the habit of continuous self-reflection, things that are manifested in the mature musician, are born in the youngest students in the nurturing environment of the Suzuki studio. Suzuki Education is much more than a collection of pieces from the classical repertoire. It is the gateway to a life filled with music of all kinds, played with clarity, joy and respect. Suzuki education is the gift of music to the masses. 

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