

Two Dutch Suzuki boys in the US

We are Titus (8), Julius (6) and Annet (Mom) and since August 2003 we have lived close to Boston in Massachusetts. Before that we lived in California where we started our music education through the Suzuki Method. Titus plays cello, Julius violin, and Mom is their dedicated parent teacher.

Since we got the impression that our music education here is a little bit different from the situation in Holland, we wrote an article for the Dutch Magazine "Suzuki Nieuws" and they asked us to translate it into English for the webjournal of the ESA.

Julius was three years old when he first wanted to play the violin. At that time we lived in California and the Suzuki Method was very popular there for very young children. That meant that it was hard to find a teacher so Julius got placed on a waiting list. We also found out that many Suzuki teachers had their own private studios, mostly at home. There were hardly any music schools which provided Suzuki education classes.

After six months Julius was asked to come to the studio to observe some students who were playing from the Twinkle Variations up to the middle of Book I. Meanwhile the teacher found three more early beginners and the four children came together once a week for a 30 minutes lesson. During that lesson they were doing the typical Pre-Twinkle/early beginners things. Once a week the parent teacher also had a parent orientation violin class (Mom had to bring her own violin) and she had to practice everything Julius was doing or about to do. For at least 6 months parents had to take these classes, practicing the violin and trying to understand the Suzuki philosophy and method. When Julius was almost 4 years old he got his first real violin and from that time on the teacher would spend about ten minutes on private instruction and focus more attention on the instrument, while the others observed. With Julius practicing the real violin at home his older brother Titus also became very enthusiastic and he began playing the cello, also with a teacher at a private studio.

At the end of the first year both boys were doing the core curriculum: 30 minute private classes and Julius had a group class once a month and Titus every other week. During group classes for the violin, students from different teachers and studios would come together to play their repertoire. Most of the string teachers were members of the Coastal Branch of the Suzuki Association of California and this association organized at least two concerts per year where students played their pieces in a Play-Down. Book Graduation Concert took place in February, students played and taped their book pieces for their own teacher and at the graduation concert a selection from different books was played.

The cellists had their small group class at the teacher's studio and twice a year they had to do a solo during a cello recital organized by the teacher. Once a year there was a very big cello Play-in at the beautiful Auditorium of Stanford University with more than 200 students! Normally concerts and recitals would typically take place in churches.

When the boys have to perform, they have to wear concert attire: black pants, white shirt and black shoes. Red accessories are allowed and they ask you to wear your graduation pins. At the end of a concert, the teachers would hand out a rose or a carnation to the students.

For two years we went to the Annual Northern California Suzuki String Institute in Santa Rosa (in the San Francisco Bay Area) in the summer for a week. This workshop is like the one in Retie (Belgium) but only for strings. Students came from all over the US to participate in this excellent workshop.

In September the Suzuki families went camping in the mountains of the Bay Area. This is called "The Gashuku Weekend". The boys had music lessons during the morning, played sports and games in the afternoon and after dinner there was time for beautiful concerts.

Last year we moved from California to the Boston Area in Massachusetts. This area is very well known for its music activities so for Mom it was easy to find new teachers for us. In September we continued our music education at the Suzuki School of Newton (SSN). Newton is a suburb of Boston. Here there are not that many private studios, but a lot of music schools where you can do the Suzuki Method. The SSN offers instruction in recorder, flute, piano, guitar, violin, viola and cello and has almost 250 students. The school offers also instruction in chamber music, orchestra, solfege, music & movement and teacher training.

Every week we have a 30 minute private lesson, a 45 minute group class and a 30 minute solfege class. When you're in Book 3 and up, you can also join the school orchestra and/or chamber music class. Every semester you have to do a solo during a recital at the school and play in a concert with the whole school. Typical concerts are the Christmas Concert and the Summer Concert at the end of the school year. Book recitals are a little different from California. Here the violinists will play all the pieces from a book during a Graduation Concert at a date set by the school and the cellists will do their Graduation Concert by the time all the students of the group class (same level) will have finished that book (date set by the group class teacher). Both boys are in Book 3 now, so both did two book recitals. On a regular basis the school will organize parent meetings, performance opportunities and share the music of the school with the community through public concerts, e.g. at festivals, hospitals, nursing homes etc. (Community Outreach Performance Program). Students can sign up for those public concerts and we always do!

Every year in April the "Massachusetts Suzuki Festival" takes place. This is a two days workshop with a specific theme. Last year it was "Baroque Music" and there were teachers who played a baroque violin. At the end of the workshop we all had to play Minuet 3 from Bach with a harpsichord accompanist, while dancers dressed up with beautiful costumes and wigs, danced a minuet. It was very impressive!

Last summer we did a one week workshop at our school, for SSN also offers workshops and masterclasses.

At public schools you will always find a string or school orchestra, a band and a choir and students in grade 4 and up are strongly advised to take part in one of these activities. Titus joined the String Orchestra since he was in first grade, because by that time he was the only student at school who played the cello. All the other orchestra members were playing the violin. This orchestra performs twice a year. Furthermore the school has a so-called "All School Meeting" once a week, where the principal reserves 10 minutes for talent. A student can sign up for this meeting and show off his talent, like playing a couple of Suzuki songs on the violin or cello. Since Julius has been playing, he has played Christmas songs at school every year and brings in the violin whenever he is "Person of the week" or has his "share day".

The method works very well for us, although I have to admit that it is very extensive. Sometimes it's hard to schedule all the different classes so that I can attend classes for both boys. They are very different from each other and not all aspects of the method work for both just as well. Titus loves private classes. A close relationship with the teacher is very important for his success and he doesn't like to switch teachers for different classes. He likes to perform for an audience and the solos and concerts are very nice for him. He doesn't like group classes (same teacher) so much and the idea that you can learn from each other doesn't appeal to him. On the other hand he enjoys meeting peers, playing the same instrument, and making friends with kids who share the same interests. We decided to give up solfege classes for him, because he thought it was too boring so he didn't want to go anymore. Now his private teacher integrates this part with his private classes. We also found out that playing in an orchestra at that age (he was 6 when he started) was tough. He could not sight-read and harmony parts sounded so different from the melodies he was used to and less fun to play.

Julius gets a lot of profit from his private and group classes, but doesn't really care about solos and concerts. He has different teachers and likes that. He especially enjoys group class this year, because it's a mixed group (Book 1-5) and he is the youngest one who's "already" in Book 3. This class encourages him a lot in playing.

I really liked the parent meetings in California and it was extremely helpful for me. I would recommend these kind of classes for every parent who is teaching the Suzuki Method. What I don't like so much here, are the set dates for the Violin Graduation concerts. In this way, students sometimes have to wait a long time before the Graduation Concert takes place and that is not a good incentive for the kids. When you're 5 years old and you play all the songs in Book 2, you want to do Graduation Concert as soon as possible and show off that pin at your next concert!!

As you can read, we are very busy with music here in the US and hopefully you got a good overview of how the Suzuki Method is being taught here, although this is only a very small part of the US and only a personal journey of two boys and their mom through the world that's called "Suzuki Music Education".