

How Suzuki Changed My Life

by Tove Detreköy

I started to play violin at the age of 6. In my home came every week an old Russian violin-player to give lessons to my mother, and he decided that I also should learn to play.

So he organized a 1/4 size violin, placed a book under my right arm, the bow on the string and counted 1-2-3-4. I did not find it very interesting. I was relieved, when he left town after half a year. My mother stopped playing, but I was sent to another teacher. He was rather boring but in a friendly way, and it was, in any case, more pleasant than what I had been used to before. A couple of years later I had my first real teacher, a well-educated violinist and a dedicated teacher. Little by little I began to enjoy playing.

At age 18 I moved to Copenhagen and entered the Royal Danish Conservatory. After getting my diploma I spent one more year to get a diploma in pedagogy. During that last year I began teaching at the conservatory's preparatory and evening classes, and at the same time enjoying string orchestra and chamber music playing. My way of teaching was the good old one: scales, etudes and what ever else was healthy stuff. But I rather enjoyed it and my students did not seem to suffer too much.

A new chapter in my life began, when I got married, had two children and played full time in orchestra. No time for teaching! In 1967 our family moved to Bellingham, Washington, USA. That was the beginning of a major change in my life. In Denmark I had heard about the Suzuki Method. A well known Danish violinist had spent a year as guest professor in Tokyo where he had heard the big Suzuki concert in Budukan. He wrote an article in a Danish music magazine about the method and showed pictures of many children playing together. My reactions was the same as all my colleagues' - very negative. Group playing, not learning the notes - NO! Naturally I was not at all interested, when I discovered there was a Suzuki group in Bellingham. But thanks to one of the mothers, Mrs. Lawrence Friedenrich, who insisted on my listening to the children, and to the Japanese teacher Ms. Aruga (later Mrs. Masada), who patiently answered all my questions, I found out, that the Suzuki Method was about something much more than just "playing an instrument". When I then heard the Japanese Tour Group and met Dr. and Mrs.

Suzuki, I decided I had to go to Japan.

In 1971 I was in Matsumoto for the first time. Still there were not many visitors from foreign countries, so we got a lot of attention. I met Jeanne Janssens from Belgium and Jean Middlemiss from Great Britain - the beginning of a lifelong friendship - and Dr. Suzuki went through Book I, II and III with us, piece by piece. What an experience! All doors were open for us, we could come and go in the classrooms as we wanted. We listened to and worked for hours on thumb power, elbow, wrist and tonalization. We watched Dr. Suzuki teach his pupils, children who played so musical and beautiful, that it was hard to believe. We experienced an atmosphere so relaxed and positive, that it seemed as if everything was possible. Behind all this was Mrs. Suzuki, who smoothed our way in all protocol questions and situations. In those days, when nobody in Matsumoto spoke English, there were lots of situations that called for HELP!

Back in Denmark in 1972 I wanted to start a Suzuki programme, the first in Denmark and one of the very first in Europe. But I had forgotten that “we” did not like the Suzuki Method. Nobody could understand, how I could prefer to teach small children instead of playing in a good orchestra. How could I explain this? I was up against some hundred years of tradition of how to teach music. But Béla could understand! So I stopped talking and concentrated on my students. An article in a Sunday newspaper telling about this interesting new way of learning appealed to some few parents despite the fact that playing violin was not in at all. Very few children played this “difficult” instrument, the conservatories had only a few violin students, and the level was low. No wonder that after a few years my students called for attention. My group was growing, and after 5 years - in 1977 - we founded together with the parents the Danish Suzuki Institute in Copenhagen, a private music school run by the parents. Today (2006) we have more than 200 students, more than half of them play violin, the rest piano, viola and cello.

Little by little new Suzuki programmes started in different countries in Europe, national associations were founded, the ESA was founded, teacher-training courses were offered - the seed was growing! In Denmark today the Suzuki Method is not only accepted but also pointed out as an ideal educational method with unlimited possibilities.

All children can learn - so Dr. Suzuki told me. I know now this is true, and I feel extremely privileged and grateful, that I am allowed to take part in this life affirmative process.