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The Guitar and the Suzuki Method

Interview with Elio Galvagno, pioneer in Europe for his work with children

I met Elio Galvagno in his workshop in the old city centre of Saluzzo, a medieval town full of art and music. Photographs of concerts, children's drawings and posters make for a pleasant environment in harmony with the music that we can hear being played in the small rooms.

I am very interested in finding out about the Suzuki Method, going beyond what everyone knows about it. "Elio, let's begin with a family that is interested in studying music in one of your schools. What should they do?"

I am happy to start our conversation at this point because this touches immediately on a fundamental point: the family is at the centre of the method. The family does not just park the child at the school, but goes on a journey with him. However, to answer your question: generally, the parents hear about us from other families already involved in the school or our concerts. After an interview and attending a few lessons, we usually understand each other. On the one hand, people who arrive here are not usually wrong (...my son shows a particular interest in all things musical...) and on the other hand the one precondition I ask of the family before I begin is a passion for music. This is the prerequisite that will help overcome the usual difficult moments. Families decide to bring their children to the music course, just as they might take them every Sunday to the mountains, the seaside, the museum, a concert and so on. Some families approach us even before the child is born and are given a listening programme of carefully selected music. The more one listens, the more one learns naturally. These children hum snatches of music before they can say "mum" or "dad".

But how should one listen?

It is enough that in the environment where the child is born and grows up, the music the child hears includes the music he or she will start playing at 2 or 3 years old.

Excuse my curiosity, but what does one actually do with a 2 or 3 year-old child at the beginning?

The first year is very important, comparable to the first phase of learning a language. One of the possible definitions of the method is "play as you speak". The name of the first course is "Rhythmic instrumental", created and designed by Prof. Elena Enrico based on the demands of the various instruments. It consists of about fifteen songs to be performed on the instrument the following year. The child listens to this repertoire at home every day and sings the texts at school, memorizes the choreography, executes the rhythm with the legnetti, learns simple relaxation sequences, gets to know and to master

increasingly smaller parts of his body, finishing with the fingers and phalanxes. He also learns to keep a wooden guitar in position through song and movement. Each child goes at his own speed and it is the teacher's task to discover this, but usually after a year the child starts playing.

To go back to the role of the parent, what should they do at home during this year?

At home the mother or father should make sure the child hears the repertoire every day, then they should find time to play and repeat what the child has learned in the lesson.

And if the child does not want to do this?

Every case is different, but in general, if the parents find the time to play with their children when the children ask them to, there is no problem.

You said that the child learns the position of the guitar with a nursery rhyme using a toy guitar.

Yes, a wooden or cardboard guitar that we build together and that the child brings to school with all his other instruments: the legnetti for the rhythm, the two soft cubes stuffed with rice to develop manual dexterity and a small sponge tennis ball to play with to strengthen the fingers. Every activity has a song and develops appropriate movements: we have learning units specifically for the guitar which teach the names of the fingers of the right hand (thumb, index, middle,.....) and of the left hand (1-2-3-4), to learn to walk with the index and middle finger of the right hand on the table or a tambourine (at first freely then with the rhythms previously executed with the legnetti). Each of these units includes lots of games: the Suzuki teacher, given a theme, must be able to vary, adapt, improvise and find new activities to motivate the children.

I saw the phrase "educating the talent" in the school brochure: what does that mean?

To put it simply, Dr. Suzuki intuited (and studies confirmed it) that each of us has talents, including musical talent: developing it to the maximum, whether it is a small or great talent, depends on the surrounding environment. It is only in that way that each individual's growth is harmonious and at peace with itself.

So we are children of our environment?

Yes, Dr. Suzuki did not foresee the battles between different schools of thought that emphasize hereditary factors or environment factors. As far as he was concerned, there was no conflict: for example, without the contribution of the environment children cannot learn to speak, even if they have a normal ability to learn. The method was developed just after the First World War when Dr. Suzuki was in Berlin to continue his studies of the violin with Klingler. After two years, he became aware of his difficulties learning German, something that comes naturally to a child of a year or so. So he began thinking about how we learn a language, something that most people take for granted but not a genius like Suzuki. And so began a journey which led to him abandoning his career as a violin virtuoso and developing an extraordinary learning method available to everyone.

You mentioned the mechanisms of learning a language: although we cannot digress too much, could you outline them briefly?

There are three, which became the basis of his method: listening (when one is still in

one's mother's womb), extremely favorable surroundings (no one reproaches children when they babble their first words, in fact we encourage them) and repetition (for example, after learning how to say 'mother', the child does not put this word aside to learn others, but keeps on using it with infinite expressions in infinite contexts).

Let us go back to the time when the child can start playing.

All right. The child, as you can imagine, is full of music: music is becoming one of languages with which he naturally expresses himself. After a year watching other children play the violin, the violoncello, the piano, the harp, the mandolin, the flute and the guitar, he chooses... to play the guitar! At this point, the parents' role becomes paramount again, because in the summer months the parent must prepare to play with the child. So in June and September the parents take eight lessons where they meet other parents and compare experiences. They begin to learn simple musical notation and to play the first repertoire.

So the parents play too...

Yes, they learn the very first passages to play at home with their child. Some parents continue for a year, or two or three, others stop. It doesn't matter: what is important is that everyone knows the technical points and learning methods for every passage, until the child begins to be autonomous.

But when does the child start to play? (obviously joking).

You joke, but your impatience is important and indicative: it is what the children feel after a year of Rhythm, after seeing other children, and even their parents, play...

When they begin, they need exactly the right instruments: 1/16 (36 cm of diapason), 1/8 (42 cm) , 1/4 (49 cm).

Using special strings?

The companies Dogal and Hannabach produce the best strings made to measure. At Christmas, after ten or twelve lessons, the child holds his first concert. This is a big party. But we also celebrate the first time he uses both hands to play D in the first position and make a beautiful sound, (without mosquitoes buzzing around!). You can find a detailed description of the learning units that take the child up to "playing the first passage " on my site.

(See <http://www.seicorde.it/galvagnosuzukiguitar>)

You talked about concerts. Can you explain what you mean and how they take place?

The concert is the natural outlet for one of the pillars of the method: the orchestra. On this point Dr. Suzuki was a revolutionary, not so much for the discovery of its importance (because other teachers had understood this before him) but for having stubbornly insisted on it. He discovered that after just one lesson very young children play with great ease, naturalness, and joy, if they can play the passages they were studying in little groups. The orchestra is also a means to overcome difficulties that they would otherwise have to face alone. It is always a pleasure to hear from parents that after rehearsing with an orchestra their child is now able to play a passage that they previously found very difficult.

Everyone affirms the importance of chamber music, of the chorus, of the orchestra, but

then... we spread a veil... Something is changing now.
Five volumes of orchestra repertoire take the pupils from the first canon to L. Mozart's Toy Symphony or the Vivaldi concertos. So the concert is a way of communicating what has happened during the year.

Do you perform many concerts?

Never more than ten, even though there are many requests.

But how many lessons do the children attend a week?

Dr. Suzuki did not impose an organizational plan. In Italy (and every country does the same) we have developed a pedagogically specific educational plan over the years. However, to answer your question: the child attends a weekly group lesson called rhythm-instrumental (that in later years becomes Rhythm and Vocality, Choral Singing, Reading and Dictation), and a single instrumental lesson. The orchestra lesson is every two weeks; close to the concerts some specific orchestral courses are held. In addition, the school holds two music camps (one at the end of June and one at the beginning September) where the children live, eat and sleep together.

When I say that my pupils are filled with music - and this is the most important aspect for me from the educational point of view, just thinking of people with so much music inside them! - I mean that in their minds, apart from the individual instrumental repertoire and the choral repertoire, there are other hours of orchestral repertoire for 3,4 or 5 voices (I am thinking, for example, of the Lachrimae Antique by J. Dowland)

Do the lessons have some fixed points or not?

Yes. In a cheerful atmosphere full of surprises but respectful of everyone's role (student, parent and teacher), the teacher checks that the parents and children listen to the repertoire at home (listening) and know how to motivate the children to play and study (motivation). The teacher must also check that the position is still correct (position) and that the sound is the best possible (tone). The rest depends on these four aspects.

I would like to know something about the repertoire.

Warner Bros. have recently published (distributed by Carisch in Italy) the first 4 volumes of the repertoire. I have just finished arranging the remaining 6 volumes just approved at last meeting of European Suzuki Guitar Committee. I would like to say that before being published this repertoire was tested out all over the world by about 350 guitar teachers who have tested the passages and the progression during thousands of hours of lessons. They sent their observations; there was an extraordinary level of communication and I can say that it is probably the first time a method has been developed not from the experience of a single teacher, but from a collective effort which is giving rise to unexpected results. Twenty years ago, when Dr. Suzuki encouraged me to start - He knew Andres Segovia very well and admired his sound - I had no idea what would happen or what I would achieve. Today, when the research is just beginning and continues indefinitely, I can say I am beginning to see the first results.

I saw from the posters that you are about to celebrate.

We have two particular events to celebrate.

This year the Suzuki School in Saluzzo is officially 15 years old, although I had already been experimenting alone in my workshop for some years. In this sense, I was very lucky because I discovered some extraordinary families who allowed me to treat their

**children like guinea pigs. I discovered so much.
And then 'Chitarrissima' is celebrating its tenth edition.**

What is it and how did it come about?

It was born from an awareness that our instrument was exploiting little or nothing of its chamber repertoire or works for several guitars.

So I thought that if this was important for 2-3 year-old children, why not to give it to students, to those with a diploma and to professionals? One comes to Chitarrissima to play in an orchestra, because the orchestra is one of the pillars of the Suzuki method and not something extra or something added at the end of the day after the master classes. That is the main objective around which others are growing (to mention just one, a project with Dr. Brazzo on the health of the musician)

Secondly, teachers trained in the Suzuki method have to be able to organize and to direct a children's orchestra: how will they learn without direct, personal experience? Therefore, Chitarrissima is an important aspect of their training.

Do you have many teachers in training?

This year I have 20: there are teachers from as far apart as Napoli and Gothenburg, as well as Barcelona, Geneva and several other Italian towns (Rome, Varese, La Spezia, Milan, and Siena. So far, we have trained around 100 teachers.

What motivates a teacher to choose this method?

The conviction that each child can learn and can learn to sing and play just as he learns to speak.

What is the ultimate aim of the method?

The president of the ASTA (American String Teachers Association - the society which groups together all American teachers of stringed instruments), Joseph Cingold, has said that Dr. Suzuki did more for the violin than any other teacher in the last century. And yet when one asked Dr. Suzuki what his aim was, he said he was interesting in forming citizens with hearts full of wonder, who were willing to listen and understand the feelings and the needs of others. People with this heart and this sensibility - he asserted - can then reach the heart of Mozart's and Bach's compositions, the ultimate aim of making music.

Elio Galvagno Biography

The winner of numerous national and international contests, in 1984 he founded the "G. Cappa," Ensemble devoted to promoting early 19th and 20th century chamber music. His knowledge of Antonio Vivaldi's music often led him to be invited to play as a soloist with leading concert orchestras.

He studied Dr. Shinichi Suzuki's teaching methodology first in Berlin, then in Stockholm. In 1987 he founded the Suzuki Talent Centre in Saluzzo (Piedmont) and was encouraged by Dr. Suzuki himself to begin experimenting with the guitar.

In the same period he started the Suzuki Method European Committee and the International Committee for the guitar, to handle all the publications of the "Suzuki Guitar School." The first four volumes (book and CD) of the Suzuki Guitar School have already been published and are available.

He has been President of the Italian Suzuki Institute since it was founded in 1994. He has held seminars on the Suzuki Methodology in Italy, Europe (Lyons, Geneva, Mainz,

Stockholm, St. Andrews and Edinburgh), and in the USA.

He and his students have played in many prestigious venues and concert halls, including the Sarajevo Library in May 1998 in a concert for the reconstruction of the city's Children's Library.

He has pioneered the search for a guitar repertoire suitable for three-year-old children and has encouraged manufacturers to build high quality guitars for children.

His book "The Child and the Guitar", published by Carisch, describes these experiences.

He teaches at the Pescara Academy of Music.