

Welcome Mandolin!

by Amelia Saracco
after the acceptance of Suzuki Mandolin to the ISA Board

The teaching method

My experience in teaching mandolin to young kids dates back to 1989, when I was introduced to the Suzuki teaching methodology by Elena Enrico, tutor in instrumental rhythm at ISI.

Supported by Antonio Mosca and all the staff, I began my study of the philosophy, the technique and the repertoire of the other instruments taught at Suzuki, and later applied my newly-acquired knowledge to the teaching of mandolin.

At the beginning of the new school year (1989-90) I started experimenting with the teaching of the mandolin technique and the repertoire from the Suzuki First Book, which was originally meant for the violin and "revisited" for the mandolin. We can note that, at the end of the 18th century, a mandolin teacher, Maestro Pietro Leone, dedicated to the Duke of Chartres la "Méthode raisonnée pour passer du Violon à la Mandoline et de l'archet à la plume".

At the time, my only pupil was a viola student, "borrowed" from Lee Mosca.

In the school year 1990-91, I set up the first Suzuki experimental course in mandolin across Piedmont, thanks to the support of my colleagues. It turned out to be a demanding but nevertheless extremely rewarding experience.

At present, the mandolin is taught in the Suzuki Schools of Turin, Asti and Savigliano, where some twenty children from levels 1-5 study a mixed repertoire, with some pieces transcribed from other instruments' repertoire and others originally composed for mandolin.

As the students belong to different age groups, ranging from 4 to 14 years old, I looked for smaller mandolins, and I rediscovered the "quartino", which used to be played in the mandolin orchestras, but was subsequently forgotten.

I had some of these instruments reproduced by lute makers in different sizes (also normal size and slightly reduced size - 3/4) and different models.

The experience gained in the past few years has shown me how the relatively "easy" structure of the mandolin, along with the comfortable posture, enabled even some physically challenged children to approach its study; they could have hardly played any other instrument.

The following features make the mandolin a very useful didactic tool, particularly for children:

- the tuning is in ascending fifths, like in the violin, with the same left-hand position, but the frets make it easier to play;
- the right hand, which holds the plectrum, rests comfortably on the instrument's body, while only the wrist is moving;
- the sitting position of the player, and the mandolin's limited dimensions, allow an easier handling;
- every mandolin is built to fit one particular child; it may be made in normal or reduced dimensions, and its cost makes it affordable to families and schools.

It must be said that the parents, while helping the children in their initial difficulty and speeding up their learning, found the study of the mandolin pleasurable in itself. Some of them eventually gave up, unable to cope with their own child's mastery; some played on, making an old, unrealised dream come true.

The whole experience, with its ups and downs, gave me many rewards, which encouraged me to pass on my own idea to other mandolin players, who believe in teaching children as well as adults, to grow up together and "to communicate universally the deepest emotions".