

# Suzuki, Music and Matsumoto

*By Stephen Power*

The Kaikan was a building, rectangular and rather squat, much like many other two storey concrete building from the 1960's, without inspiration on the outside, but on the inside full of life and energy, due to the inspiring personality of Dr Suzuki and due to his respect for the life force in all people, young and old alike.

Matsumoto was a city overflowing with cyclists. Every student-teacher at the Institute travelled to the Kaikan each day by this mode of transport; for Dr Suzuki worked every day of the year, and only took time off from teaching for the New-Year celebrations, and then only when ordered to do so by the kind, intimidating, but indispensable Mrs Suzuki. However, he even got round this by showing the guests bowing exercises with the cutlery. He also took 'Sports Day' off, but took part in the races on the dirt track, bringing his joie de vive and high jinks to the process, even winning a race aged 86!

After leaving the (unlocked) bicycle in front of the building with a hundred others, I would sometimes arrive at the same time as Dr Suzuki, who, as he did not drive, would be driven by one of the office staff to and from the building at the beginning and end of each day. He would walk up the stairs to his office on the first floor with the same greeting to everyone as he went, from the cleaner to the Talent Education Office manager, with the same open warmth, and twinkling eye contact. Dr Suzuki taught by doing, and this was the first of the day's examples.

Monday was unlike any other day at the Kaikan. It began normally enough with a group lesson: forty or so violinists on stage in the concert hall on the second storey of the building, mainly young Japanese students (called Kenkusei or 'research' students) around 18 to 30 years of age together with a few long stay and shorter term foreign teachers, watched by a small audience of others, piano trainee teachers like myself.

Dr Suzuki's lessons were lessons in motivation. My desire to play the violin had been re-awakened by the success of his teaching, so for my second trip to Japan I took my violin along and practised the exercises I had seen him do, alongside the twenty or so violinists all playing together in the student common room. Plucking up courage I sat in on group class, and, after I had successfully accomplished 'no tone arpeggio', (1), he said, 'see, even a pianist can do it'. My next effort at the next exercise was not nearly so successful, but at least I had the experience at close range.

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(1) Instruction in "No Tone Arpeggio" (Elbow Position):

Play silent arpeggio while holding the bow with thumb and fingers on the horse hair. Through thorough and continued instruction in this at lesson, help every student master the proper right arm position for bowing with the right arm in front of the body. Naturally, it is also necessary to give lessons in playing arpeggio with big tone using the same arm motion. This is an important instruction designed to form the arm position for producing the "diamond tone." From *Talent Education Journal No. 32 1988 Suzuki*

After a break for 'cookie time' where in a few minutes several large plates of all sorts of Western and Japanese confectionary were consumed by the students (with much gusto and high spirits, taking one into a world of childhood and playfulness; no bad thing for future teachers of children) it was time for 'Shugi', or Japanese calligraphy.

No practice was allowed during calligraphy, which took place mainly in the classroom/reception room on the ground floor (and since the Institute was full to bursting with the sound of practising at all other times, the lack of music was quite strange). The Sensei was a small old lady of perhaps eighty. Undoubtedly she was a great expert in her field as it is a principle of 'Talent Education' to give children and adults the highest quality model. She was also the Sensei for the Suzuki Kindergarten which was housed in the 'Smith' building a short way away from the Kaikan. This was one of a number of Suzuki Kindergartens in Japan and the first to be founded (in 1948). It was different to the Suzuki Early Childhood Education model of North America. I remember seeing the wonderful calligraphy the children 6 years of age produced, so full of spirit and discipline. (2)

Having unrolled the felt mat, placed the paper on the mat held in place by weights, rubbed the handsomely made ink-stone to produce the black ink, wetted the large brush (not small, as I was a beginner), I then went up to Sensei to watch her produce the model I was to copy. To begin with this was just four characters, each one in its own square on the folded paper. Then one set to work, amid banter with the other students, on reproducing the model. After many attempts I took what seemed like a reasonable approximation up to Sensei, to have her, without a word, correct the copy, (approving some things with a circle in red ink), and then the process began again. After some time, (weeks, months), of doing four characters, I moved on to six and to kanji with more strokes, and then later on to eight.

My Japanese language tutor at home in Cambridge was an expert calligrapher and she told me that students would study with a master calligrapher for 10 years, producing *exactly* what the master wrote, and then, after ten years, they would be allowed to have their own style. It is through the process of copying, I think, that they create their own style, or their own style forms, and with this way of doing things a certain discipline and control is gained.

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## (2) Education in Yoji Gakuen

After two years, the children, who at the beginning (aged four) only drew circles which looked flat or triangular, are ready to demonstrate calligraphy before an audience at graduation. They proceed with correct forms of calligraphy and pick up the brush properly. With ample ink in the special size brush for large calligraphy, almost too big for their little hands to hold, they write in one breath, showing their confident profiles to parents and guests. I found it so gratifying to see them demonstrate their calligrapher's art with flushed cheeks and shining eyes that I instantly forget all my previous painstaking efforts. They, too, are pleased when applauded by the audience—a precious sight to see. As Mr Suzuki says, all children are more capable than adults think. If I were more competent and had more time, I know they would be able to write even better. *By Kimiko Akiyama*

Contained within the methods, and philosophy of this way of studying calligraphy are many parallels with 'Talent Education'. For one the idea of the quality of the model, the idea of learning in a non-verbal way, the idea of learning through repetition so that the body takes over, of learning patience and self-growth through the process, of something taking as long as it takes ('without rushing, without resting').

At the Institute Dr Suzuki decided when a Kenkusei was ready to graduate: Graduation could take place at any time after one year, after eight, never in some cases (I am thinking of a foreigner who attended Dr Suzuki's Institute for 14 years, on and off, more off than on...). "Graduation" was permission to begin to study, not the end of the road, but, 'now you are ready to begin'. I think that what he looked for in the Kenkusei was some growth, some change in tone and in personal development, and then they were ready to graduate. At graduation the student produced (along with their recital and the other associated rituals), a large scroll containing a calligraphic message of special import for the student, (chosen in league with the Sensei), which was displayed on stage for all to see as a backdrop to their recital. Calligraphy was part of the journey. "*Calligraphy, or the way of writing, is a Way. From the beginning, therefore, I teach correct letters and proper form.*" (Kimiko Akiyama)

In the West we have become extremely knowledge-based, and we are used to courses that have a certain time frame with frequent examinations to test the knowledge achieved, and a certain syllabus to tick off. But here it was different. Here it was about 'ability development', which is the development of the *ability* to learn. We had much to learn from the East. Dr Suzuki was a unique blend of East and West, with a really acute ability to observe nature and, to use an expression of today, a genius when it came to thinking outside the box.

Some students preferred to practise calligraphy in the student common rooms on the first floor. Dr Suzuki would sometimes leave his office and show these students some aspect of calligraphy; how the brush held lightly in the hand comes to the surface of the paper from above with a decisive movement; like 'start of tone' on the violin. The balance of the arm required is like the balance of the arm required for playing the piano and the mental preparation can be compared with the 'mindless' preparation of mind/body/emotion that the pianist must have before playing. He did not explain the reasons behind study, one learned through doing and, as I am doing here, discovered one's own interpretation of why things were done.

Then there was lunch, which I often took over the road opposite the Kaikan, but on occasion Dr Suzuki would take the whole student body out to lunch. On one such occasion the students conspired to pay the bill before he did, secretly gathering up the money, but he was, as always, way ahead of them.

After lunch there was 'Monday concert' where Dr Suzuki, with his lifelong friend Mr Aoki (who was head of the piano department of Talent Education in Japan), listened to the long, long concert at which all the student teachers were asked to play. I think this was another of Dr Suzuki's unconventional but brilliant pedagogic ideas: a concert every week where the students had a chance to perform before a very supportive and non-judgemental audience, and would work hard to get the piece ready. They got useful performance experience, and Dr Suzuki was able to assess the

level of the entire student body which, I have no doubt, influenced where he went with his teaching for that week, both individual and collective.

At most concerts he would at some point walk onto the stage and give an impromptu lesson, sometimes briefly conducting the string orchestra which sometimes accompanied soloists preparing to graduate. These brief examples of his conducting, maybe to show mood and tempo, revealed perhaps more than his teaching his profound musicality: a glimpse perhaps of how he might have been during his performing career in the early 30's as a chamber musician and conductor. Dr Suzuki said, 'I teach tone, tone, tone,' which was the basis of everything, but even here he would also have 'new idea', such as the month where the Monday concert was performed with the lights out in a pitch black auditorium. This meant that there was a greater awareness of sound and feel on the part of the player, and as C.P.E Bach said c.1756, (I am paraphrasing) 'if you want to be good at sight-reading- play in the dark'. It also meant that all the pianists suddenly stopped playing in the Monday concert or played very easy pieces, and the Monday concert became a lot shorter. Word came down via the head of the student body (coincidentally named Mr Matsumoto) that Dr Suzuki would like *all* the pianists to play, and nothing easier than book six! There was some frenzied extra practice from the piano department after that!

Dr Suzuki is often thought of in rather simple terms, but he was someone who was a strict teacher, who would lay down challenges for us. He was also very honest: he would say excellent if it was excellent, good if it was good (or 'so' with an affirmative gesture), or poor/miserable, if it was poor etc.

I feel that Dr Suzuki's life force was driven by his respect for everyone, (adults as well as children), by his belief in people, by his mission in life: to be of service. I feel it was this life force that gave him the power to heal through touch; to which I was witness on more than one occasion. His astounding intuition also owed its power to his special way of looking at the world. His life experiences, including his contact with great individuals like Einstein, not only gave him special insights into violin playing, but also into the heart of the individual. If this makes him seem to good to be true, well, he did have his faults: he was a chain smoker and in typical joking fashion said (he was in his 80's at the time), that he had decided to quit smoking, but had then heard of a Guru who smoked and lived to 110, and decided not to give up.

While talking to the piano parents, children, and teachers present at the concert given in his honour at the European Conference in St Andrews in 1990, Dr Suzuki said 'Living soul has no age'. As he was 92 at the time the audience applauded, thinking he was referring to himself, but he made it plain afterwards that he was talking to the adults in the audience 'not just my soul, but your soul too'. Another challenge would you not say? There is a world of possibilities.

His working day ended when he left the Kaikan around 5.00 pm, and went home to Mrs Suzuki, who oiled the wheels of his existence by cooking, laying out his clothes, and dealing with problems behind the scenes so that he could focus single-mindedly on his work; and the day finished with bed at 9.00. The chauffeur, his hands in the white gloves of the professional driver, carried a box of cassette tapes, a small proportion of the thousands of graduation tapes that children and their teachers sent to him from all over Japan. As he left the building he said goodbye to everyone he met,

just as he had said hello hours earlier. His day had started long before ours: in the early hours of the morning (around 4 o'clock) when he listened to these tapes, recording his comments onto the end for the children and teachers. His finger was on the pulse of the whole Talent Education community in Japan in this way. He could tell the teachers growth (or otherwise), through their students' playing. Teachers continued their training in Talent Education long after they graduated, and once a month teachers from all over Japan would gather at the Kaikan for group class with Dr Suzuki, including in their number some of his first trainee teachers from 1948.

Each morning he also painted ('I am a famous painter, but only in my own house'), and practised calligraphy which was written over his painting of mountains or flowers, which he gave away to us students, visiting artists, musicians, friends, acquaintances. (In a conversation I had with the distinguished pianist, the late Edith Pikt Axenfeld, over twenty years ago she recalled Dr Suzuki giving her his calligraphy at a dinner in Japan; although this was one of many thousands he had done it was a personal gesture, and one she was obviously touched by).

I went to Matsumoto for the first time when I was 26. I treasure the calligraphy I have from Dr Suzuki, and I am still discovering, 25 years later (like a Buddhist Koan), the depth of the ideas written in Japanese and English, that seemed so obvious at the time: '*Man is the child of his environment*' and '*Where love is deep much can be accomplished*' etc. As part of my inspiration I look on the brush work and know that it carries something of Dr Suzuki. To my surprise he once gave me a large pile of his calligraphy when I was sitting alone drinking a cup of green tea in the student common room, typically accompanied by the comment, 'if you do not want them throw them away.'

*Stephen Power visited Dr Suzuki's school in 1984, 1987 and 1990 for three month study visits, as well as observing Dr Suzuki at conferences in England, Eire, France, Finland, Germany, and Scotland during the 1980's.*