

Spotlight on Sweden

History of the SUZUKI™ Method in Sweden—Sven Sjögren

How it all started

Autumn 1970 I started my violin studies at Gothenburg State College of Music. One rainy day Mrs. Elisabet Samuelsson came to visit the school - she was a mother of two children and they had just got back from a 2-year stay in the USA. Elisabet was inspired by the kind of teaching program they had experienced over there and our headmaster gave her permission to give a talk to the violin students as she wanted to inform everybody interested about the so called "SUZUKI™ Method". The more I listened to her the more interested I became. Here was a person describing a kind of teaching that made a lot of sense, a pedagogy starting much earlier than was usual in Sweden at the time. Elisabet also described a way of teaching that seemed adapted for the really small children, and the parent's involvement was really smart - this could mean a lot in terms of help for the teacher. On top of this, there was a philosophy that appeared to be excellent as it was taking into account the whole person, not only the instrumentalist. I remember driving home on my scooter that night in a sort of mist I felt that something of huge importance had come my way. The last thing Elisabet told us was that she would like to start "Violin SUZUKI™ Teaching" in the basement of a friend's house in Norby Vallda (20 km south of Gothenburg) with some 10 kids from the block and the sooner the better. Elisabet had asked if any of us teachers would be interested to take this new class. First thing after coming home I phoned her and said that I was interested. What I didn't know was that this would change my life forever. . .

SUZUKI™ Teaching begins

Elisabet was a very dynamic person and right away we had a little group in Norby Vallda. Every Wednesday afternoon we had individual lessons and then in the evening we had a group lesson in a nearby parish house. This little group grew and the teaching started with help of the SUZUKI™ Violin School books and records that Elisabet had brought back with her from the States. Elisabet also provided the contact with a Professor John Kendall. Of course, Mr Kendall needs no presentation here - we were so lucky that one of the most important persons to introduce the SUZUKI™ pedagogy in the 1960's and 70's - not only in the USA, but all over the world -was the person to give us help here in Sweden.

Long before internet and e-mail, dozens of questions were written down in a letter which was mailed to Mr Kendall mostly every week. Mr Kendall very helpfully returned the letters with many answers always in a very encouraging way. We kept doing this until Mr Kendall came to Sweden in 1971 on sabbatical leave when he lectured about the SUZUKI™ pedagogy at universities and other institutions.

Gothenburg Suzuki Group

The growing group of students and parents had now moved into Gothenburg (the second largest town in Sweden) and we were lucky to have our group lessons at the university there. In Gothenburg, Mr. Kendall found our growing and now quite hard-working Suzuki group, which he used for demonstration in some of his presentations. I still remember how, on the morning Mr Kendall



was to leave and continue his travel northwards, we were sitting in his hotel room going through the first books of the Violin School. I wrote until my pencil started to glow, delighted at not having to use the somewhat tedious exchange of letters.

The interest in SUZUKI™ teaching grew and there were quite a few music teachers - not only violinists - visiting our classes. Mr Kendall invited me to come to his university in Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville (SIUE) to be one of his graduate assistants there. What a joy! I spent 1973-74 there and soon many more Swedish violin teachers took the trip to SIUE in the years to come. Up until now, it was impossible to earn enough from my teaching, so when I graduated in 1975 I auditioned for a position in the Gothenburg Opera Orchestra. So besides teaching I became an orchestra musician for the next 20 years. I thought life was so kind to me.

The role of "study group" evolved and many teachers came and observed. Some of these teachers went home and started their own groups. At first, the starting age was maybe 6-8 years, but pretty soon the age began to go down. Soon there were more groups and gradually we started to organize annual national summer workshops - both for students and teachers. Here Mr. Kendall was of course our favourite guest teacher. Mr. Ken-

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dall came over to Sweden ten times in the 70's, 80's and 90's to teach in summer workshops and to help us structure our teaching.

How “Nurtured by Love” turned into “Kunskap med kärlek”

During my time in the USA with Mr. Kendall, I started thinking about how important it was to get a Swedish version of Dr. Suzuki's book “Nurtured by love” to be used in the work of building a Swedish SUZUKI™ movement. I thought that this task required someone with “one foot in SUZUKI™ and one in English”. I talked a lot with Mr. Kendall about this and one day he said “Sven, you should translate the book yourself! You can do it...!”. Modesty had prohibited any thought of this, but who could argue with Mr. Kendall's words?

So, after returning to Sweden, I started translating one hour every night after coming home from the Opera. This was usually around 11 pm. But – as Suzuki so often said: “A habit is half the work!” Or: “Don't run – don't stop – just continue walking!” This way the translation work continued slowly but steadily. It was a very special task to translate this book and was possible to some extent because Dr. Suzuki's original book had been translated from Japanese into English by his wife Waltraud who was from Germany. At the beginning of 1976 I wrote to Dr Suzuki with a long list of questions about the translation and, to my amazement, one morning in Spring a reply from the Talent Education Institute dropped into my mailbox. It was an invitation from Dr. Suzuki to visit Matsumoto the following summer and I could stay for two weeks! I was in a state of ecstasy!

So, this was how I first got to meet Dr. Suzuki in Matsumoto when he



was 78 years old – although he acted like a young boy. Almost every day we had tea together and he gave me all the time I needed. The two weeks extended to more than a monthI was so happy as, in addition to our book sessions I also got many precious individual lessons. Mrs. Suzuki did her best to make me feel at home by driving a WHITE VOLVO – probably the only one in Matsumoto at the time!

Svenska Suzukiförbundet (SSZ) is born

In 1983 the Swedish Suzuki Association (SSZ) was established – one of the first national organizations to be founded in the ESA. At this point we were quite a group of teachers and there was a need for some organisation structure.

Our very first Annual General Meeting was held and an SSZ Board was elected. Two years later our first national SUZUKI™ Magazine was printed and eventually was published four times a year. We began to see an organization emerging that really could help to build and develop the SUZUKI™ Method in Sweden.

In 1985 I was back in Matsumoto – now for a longer period of time. How privileged I was to be able to live up in the mountains above Matsumoto in wonderful Mrs. Ishi's house, going back and forth on her bicycle (sometimes in deep snow). How privileged to be a part of Dr. Suzuki's individual and group lessons every day. Every moment with Dr Suzuki made me feel that I was in the presence of an exceptional hu-

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man being. Of course, most of the participants were usually from Japan but now, in the middle of the 80's, there were also quite a few from abroad. For me it is impossible to choose between all the great things that we experienced, but Dr Suzuki's habit of every morning finding some pedagogical "new idea", his mixture of discipline and humor, his "10,000 times please..!", his running to the office after 3 hours of group lesson to the very special box of chocolates and cookies to throw at each other – these are all just some of the ways he used to get his fundamental musical and technical ideas across.

One day he came up to me and announced the date "...for your graduation concert". Me – graduating...?! The usual procedure was to play in an official Graduation Concert accompanied by a chamber orchestra consisting of students at the institute. All too aware of the distinction between the competence of the Japanese teachers and someone like me, I was still extremely happy to give this concert and to receive a hand painted certificate from Dr. Suzuki. Now I was qualified to start training SUZUKI™ teachers in my home country – and I started that very same year. I will never forget Dr Suzuki's words, when he said with a smile "Sven – now go home to Sweden and start training teachers in the Swedish-Japanese SUZUKI™ Method!" How easy it would have been for this man to say "... in my Method" but he knew that to really succeed with something like this takes a lot of adjusting to a new culture whilst still maintaining the building blocks from his Method.

In 1988, only three years later, the Swedish Suzuki Association had the honour of organising the 8th European Suzuki Conference in Bor-

länge, a small Swedish city. At that time Dr. Suzuki was 90 years old and more joyful than ever. On arrival at the local Swedish airport with his wife Waltraud and the Japanese "service crew", Dr Suzuki started dancing on the red carpet holding his violin case. All the young violinists performing in the welcome-orchestra had a hard time playing whilst trying to stifle their laughter. First almost 100 teachers and then 700 students with their parents from all over the world spent 11 unforgettable days together in August in Borlänge.

Gothenburg Suzuki Group and SSZ today

This year, in 2021, the Gothenburg Suzuki Group is celebrating its 50th anniversary and SSZ its 38th anniversary. Today, in Gothenburg 15 teachers are teaching on violin, viola, cello, guitar, flute, piano, organ and early childhood education. In Sweden the Cultural Schools have much lower fees so we always must fight for and defend the SUZUKI™ approach which, as we all know, is very sustainable. After all, no "method" is better than the people using it. The world of today needs the SUZUKI™ approach more than ever. Many of today's political and military leaders seem to miss some old fashioned responsibility, concern for other human beings and the necessity of telling the truth. In a world like ours we must find the roots of humanity again in order to save ourselves and our planet. All through his life, what Dr. Suzuki wanted us to understand, and what we need to put into practice more than ever today, is that a better world has to start with our growing children.

After 37 years of being President of SSZ, I resigned in 2018. A couple of years before, I had to have surgery on my shoulder which made it quite difficult to play the violin. Both teaching and training teachers became difficult. However, I continue to help out in teacher training courses and love to sit on the exam panels at ESA exams. All those years were so full of – work! Yes, but also of joy, community and learning. Dr. Suzuki gave the students, parents and us teachers tools for life. Tools for survival. It takes a long time and a lot of work to put those tools into action. But it is possible - and necessary. Today our Swedish association has around 180 teachers and more than 900 students.

By the way – Elisabet Samuelsson became a Life Time Honorary Member of the Swedish Suzuki Association.

'The Suzuki movement is perhaps the most significant music movement in music education of today.'

Dorothy Delay

