

CELEBRATING THE SUZUKI METHOD

All images: Bill Hiskett



Helen Brunner, Emeritus Director, Suzuki Gala 2023, explains what was involved in organising this year's international showcase event at the Royal Albert Hall, and asks why prejudice against Suzuki teaching still exists in the UK

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Nearly 2,000 performers from all over Europe and beyond travelled to London to participate in the British Suzuki Music Association's Gala concert on 9 April 2023 at the Royal Albert Hall (RAH). Teachers and children came from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, India, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Vietnam.

Everybody knew that this would be a once in a life-time experience.

Planning started more than two years earlier with finding the right date; Easter Sunday was chosen to embrace most of the European school terms. Then we had to book the venue, but the RAH has an 85% full house policy and children's concerts, surprisingly, do not usually fill the hall, so I had to persuade them that with our young Suzuki performers, typically the whole family comes along too; in fact we quickly sold out.

Then the programme manager was alarmed that our children were playing the entire concert from memory. How is that possible? No music, no stands, no chairs, no single conductor and only one day of rehearsal? And behaviour was a huge issue. I had an email saying they thought that in proposing to put on a gala, I 'had not quite understood the aesthetic of our hall'. We patiently explained the process behind the Suzuki method: how students are trained to memorise everything as they go, and how these thousand children learn about good concert behaviour right from the beginning. (The youngest child was five years old.)

Of course, we also depended on the 174 highly-trained Suzuki teacher-leaders who created the musical magic of each performance, and the 108 teacher-helpers, who stayed with the children in the hall throughout the concert. Detailed organisation, a pencil and paper effort of ingenuity, was masterminded by Suzuki teachers Juan Drown and Mona Kodama. Registration for a mammoth event like this needs professional help. The process of registering every player was done off-site in the old Baden-Powell House, Queens Gate and took two days.

Children were not auditioned to take part in the Gala, (except a few pianists, because of keyboard limitations) but they had to be a minimum of Suzuki Book 2 standard.

Rarely have I witnessed such clear evidence of the power of music to break down the barriers of language, race, religion, disability, gender and nationality. The young musicians rehearsed together for only one day, next door to the RAH at the Royal College of Music. At least half of them did not speak English, but our Suzuki teachers know how to lead without words, and the results were electrifying.

Images: British Suzuki Music Association's Gala concert at the Royal Albert Hall

Photos: Bill Hiskett



Stage management was nothing short of miraculous. The RAH creates a custom stage for every new client and our team were on site with the builders at 5am on the day of the concert. Tech rehearsals began at 9am, making space for a Steinway concert grand, 1,300 children, 300 adults, 20 pianos, and 20 orchestral players.

Some of the programme was instrument-specific, such as the Bach double violin concerto, Massenet's *Méditation* and the Mendelssohn concerto for violin, the Haydn concerto for cello, and Mozart's *Rondo alla turca* for piano. Some of it was played tutti, with the music arranged by the amazing Timothy Murray for all our instruments to play together. Tim was also commissioned to compose a new *Fantasia on 'Greensleeves'* for the occasion, which was breathtaking. The whole concert was backed by world-class piano accompaniment and a formidable professional string ensemble made up of former Suzuki students.

A planned Gala Concert in April 2020 was cancelled at the last minute because of COVID-19. The RAH reimbursed all tickets, then British Suzuki had to rebate all the registration fees. We had already organised thousands of Gala 2020, merchandise, expensive software and extra professional administrators and were nearly bankrupted. This time, we hoped to make a profit, but as a charity that is not our *raison d'être*. Every single musician, teacher/leader, compère and helper attended without a fee. We had a home-stay scheme for those who wished to stay with Suzuki families, but hundreds of Suzuki teachers paid their own air fares and hospitality.

This extraordinary generosity is only possible because of each individual's gratitude to their teacher, Dr Shinichi Suzuki, the founder and inspiration behind the Suzuki Method. He changed our lives for ever. His vision was to use music to bring people together and make the world a better



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place. Personally, I feel incredibly lucky to have been born on the same planet as Suzuki, in his life-time.

Unfortunately, there is still systemic prejudice against the Suzuki Method in our professional schools and conservatoires. One of my own violin students was awarded a place at the Purcell School last year and at her first violin lesson was told, 'we don't have anything like Suzuki here. We regard the Suzuki Method as "cheating education".' My pupil spoke with other former Suzuki students at the school: they told her they never dared mention the word Suzuki in their lessons. She decided to leave.

In 2023, is there a UK Conservatoire brave enough to include a Suzuki Junior Department, where parents are welcomed into the lessons, recordings are listened to at home, and regular group lessons enjoyed, as they are at the Juilliard School, Curtis or Eastman in USA? Where are the UK universities with Suzuki Teacher-Training departments, where graduates can do post-grad in-depth study to become trained Suzuki teachers, as in the University of Antwerp, Belgium? Suzuki students typically become Suzuki parents, as evidenced in my own studio. Some become Suzuki teachers and professional violinists, some become skilled Suzuki Teacher Trainers; British Suzuki Music Association has excellent Teacher Training programmes in the UK for violin, viola, cello, piano, flute and recorder. It is a long training, but a powerful one.

In Suzuki Method we are trained to find the potential and finest quality in every child, and in their parents. We start with rapid notes on one pitch until they sound good. The students have listened to recordings of the music they will play so many times that the sound has been internalised and is now absolutely part of them. With careful teaching, students match what they are playing to the music which is inside their head, forever self-correcting. Music is a performance art. It exists in the transference of beautiful sound from the heart of the composer to the heart of the listener.

The Royal Welsh College of Music announced recently that every undergraduate will now have three solo concert opportunities a year. In Suzuki Method children concertise all the time. We rejoice that our recording artist for Suzuki Violin Books 1, 2 and 3 is Hilary Hahn, another grateful former Suzuki student.

I travel a lot with my violin for my work, so I am a sitting target for people who want to tell me how they used to learn the violin/guitar/piano/harmonica and then gave up. When I ask why, it is usually the same: 'I was rubbish'; 'my Dad said I was no good'; 'the teacher asked me to leave'; 'the noise was horrible'. The number of students who learn an instrument in the UK, give up and never play again is a shameful and wasteful aspect of this country's music education. It is almost as if teachers and families expect that to happen. Why?

britishsuzuki.org.uk

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