



# VIOLIN

## Suzuki in the Schools

by Katie Gustafson

I wish I had a penny for every time a parent has asked me whether the Suzuki method was better than the traditional method of teaching strings. And what I wish even more is that I had a decisive answer for them. Their eyes usually start glazing over somewhere in the middle of my lengthy pros and cons diagram. I have observed exceptional teachers from both schools of thought, so as a young teacher I am now trying to work out this question for myself.

When I first started violin at age ten, my teacher followed the traditional method with note reading, rhythm counting and basic mechanics of the instrument. Ear training was slipped in occasionally, but I did not learn any music by rote. Because I grew up with this emphasis on literacy, it has always been my default approach as a teacher.

Many teachers in school orchestra programs follow the same method because they often have lessons in groups, and sometimes with several different instruments. Teaching music by rote in this setting can be tedious for both student and teacher, so they try to get the kids learning music independently as soon as possible. This is the position I find myself in now, with my beginner orchestra classes.

Unfortunately, asking a beginner in a group class to learn note reading and the mechanics of operating a stringed instrument at the same time is also very cumbersome. Students need a great deal of attention and support to do this, which is not always possible in group lessons. The result is that kids who do not have lessons outside of school may struggle to keep up, or develop sloppy technique.

This dilemma is why I have turned to the Suzuki method for new ideas. After observing a few Suzuki violin lessons and consulting with local guru Mark Bjork, I have identified a few elements of the Suzuki method that could complement and enhance the typical string orchestra curriculum. Those elements are delaying note reading (be still my heart), memorizing repertoire, and reviewing previously learned music for the purposes of retaining and

refining technique.

### 1. Delay note reading.

To clarify, I mean delay note reading as the primary means of learning pieces of music. Depending on how your class time is structured, you could still devote some time early on to basic theory and note reading, but it should happen separately from learning to play the instrument.

For example, first year students might have small group lessons that focus on basic posture, bowing, and learning music by rote. Their full orchestra rehearsals could be devoted to learning basic theory elements, rhythm activities, or review of any lesson content that is common for the different instruments. Sometime mid-year, once students have gained some basic competency with posture and bowing, they can start learning some tunes by reading the notes. The note reading music should be much easier than what they are technically able to do on the instrument.

For anyone who is unfamiliar with the Suzuki method, the rationale for this idea is that children learning their native language can speak fluently before they learn to read. In music education we often underestimate how difficult it is for a child to decode abstract symbols. If we introduce note reading separately from their performance pieces, the success of their first concert will not hinge on whether they can remember which line on the staff means first finger.

As a side note, our cultural fixation with technology has made learning music by rote much easier. Eden Prairie students have school-owned iPads to use both in school and at home, so I have begun making short video tutorials that they can use as a practice tool. If your students do not have iPads, videos could also be posted on a website or blog for them to watch.

### 2. Memorize repertoire.

Teachers might disagree about how much repertoire their students should memorize, but most will agree that at least some memorizing is good. Memorizing the notes frees up a student's attention for other important

things, like musicality, listening to other members in an ensemble, or a technical skill that needs refinement. These things can help improve both their ear training and the overall level of polish to their piece. It also gives students a sense of accomplishment if they can pick up their instrument and immediately play a tune for someone, even if they do not have music with them.

If you are teaching music by rote, then the memorization happens automatically. However, if the piece is being learned through note reading, there are still ways of encouraging students to memorize. For last year's spring concert, I offered up a challenge piece for any student who wanted it. They could perform "the special bonus number" on the concert if they could memorize it. I intentionally chose a piece that was fun but not too difficult. It was also repetitive so that it would be easier to remember. Those who accepted the challenge performed it as a group, and seemed very proud for having done it.

My favorite part of having students memorize their music is the fact that it lays the foundation for my last Suzuki discovery: revisiting previously learned music.

### 3. Review often!

This is a concept that I am excited to work into my time with students. I have often been surprised at how quickly students can forget things that they have learned. Last year I encountered this problem with my second year students. I worked with them for several weeks on dotted quarter note with eighth note rhythm patterns. We counted, we clapped, we did body percussion, we played tunes with the patterns, and we practiced recognizing the rhythm in many different exercises. At the end of the unit, nearly all of my lesson groups had passed the mini "playing quiz" that I gave them, so we moved on to another unit. A few months later I came back to this concept to review it, and fewer than half of the students could remember how to count or play the rhythm. Another classic example is the student who had perfect posture at the beginning of the year, but starts slouching

mid-year.

This was an important lesson for me to learn. Just because students demonstrate that they understand a concept does not mean that they will retain it over time. The Suzuki method addresses this by using previous performance pieces to review and refine technique. For example, once a student has memorized *Allegro* from book 1, they are not finished with it. The teacher might use it frequently to review things like staccato articulation, straight bowing,

or bow distribution changes between quarter notes and eighth notes. They might also simply use it as a tune that is familiar enough that the child can play it while focusing on their bow hold or left hand position. All of these skills need constant reinforcement.

The three strategies that I am borrowing from the Suzuki method are highly complementary to the typical string orchestra curriculum. The list of tunes taught by rote can be taken straight out of whichever method

book a teacher prefers. The memorizing and review can be worked in alongside other curriculum elements that a teacher likes to use. It is my hope that other teachers find them useful.

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