



CELLO

Notes from the Ed Sprunger Suzuki Teacher Workshop November 1-3, at the University of Minnesota

by David Holmes

Here is the bio for Ed Sprunger, a well-known and highly respected Suzuki educator and therapist:

A former student of Dr. Shin'ichi Suzuki, Suzuki Method™ originator, Edmund Sprunger has taught violin for more than 20 years, including over 300 workshops and master classes throughout North America, South America and Europe, and is a Registered Teacher Trainer with the Suzuki Association of the Americas. He has presented sessions at numerous state, national, and international conferences. Mr. Sprunger holds a BA in music from Goshen College, where he studied violin with Lon Sherer, and piano and piano pedagogy with Marvin Blickenstaff. Also trained as a psychotherapist, he holds a Masters in Social Work from the University of Michigan and has done post-degree training with the Michigan and St. Louis psychoanalytic institutes. Additional violin studies have been with Chihiro Kudo, Reinaldo Couto (Alexander Technique/Violin), Kent Perry and Anna Martin. He has served on the Board of Directors of the Suzuki Association of the Americas and as Chair of the American String Teachers Association's [ASTA] Committee on Studio Instruction. In 2004 he received an ASTA Citation for Leadership and Merit. He currently serves as Director of the Child Development Program at the St. Louis Psychoanalytic Institute. His books, *Helping Parents Practice: Ideas for Making It Easier (Vol. 1)* and *Building Violin Skills: A Set of Plans Designed to Help Parents and Children Construct Positive Practices*, are available from yespublishing.com.

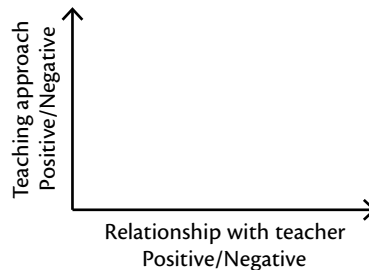
Here are some ideas discussed in the stimulating and enlightening three-day workshop.

Teacher Related Topics

The mind of the teacher is crucial in a lesson, since the teacher determines what does or does not happen. Sprunger spoke of a lesson with a child as having a sense of “containment”—what limitations and structure the teacher imposes—and “invitation”—the

actions of the child being solicited by the teacher.

Sprunger devised a graph on the teacher/student relationship to open up an important conversation among teachers.



This graph illustrates the various pos/neg combinations between a teacher's approach and the relationship of the student with the teacher. The implications of each pairing (p/p, p/n, n/p and n/n) is different. A negative teaching approach with a negative relationship is the worst-case scenario, as the student is taught poorly by a teacher the student also doesn't like. A positive teaching approach with a positive teacher relationship is the ideal model. A positive teaching approach with a negative teacher relationship might result in a student improving on their instrument, but the student could be miserable because of the troubled relationship with the teacher. For instance, the teacher could be unkind, mean, degrading, or lack the ability to connect with a student. The four combinations of positives and negatives clarified my past relationships with teachers and prompted me to consider my interactions with my own students. The same graph can be drawn with the parent and teacher relationship considered.

Sprunger engaged the workshop teachers with interesting and, at times, emotionally challenging topics. One scenario he introduced with a story about a student who wishes to stop “doing Suzuki” and move to an artist teacher, one who has performance classes twice a month and very good students as well. How does a teacher handle this situation? There was a bewitching silence as people mulled this over. Ques-

tions were raised: do some parents or students view their Suzuki teacher as just the prelude to a “real” teacher, since in their mind they have concluded that Suzuki is for little kids, and, indeed, is Suzuki teaching unrelated to other categories of string teaching? Effective or ineffective teaching probably share the same value regardless of the label displayed by the teacher.

Some teachers—myself included—shared personal stories about students who have left their studio and the pain felt over this. Someone reflected that perhaps the teacher hadn't noticed things were amiss prior to a student leaving. Surely there were signs that the teacher/student relationship was changing. Also, if one has taught a student for 10-12 years, perhaps that is long enough. A student who has been with a teacher for as long as they can remember might feel a need to establish independence much as they would with their parents. Perhaps out with the old and in with the new is not necessarily a “bad” thing for student or teacher.

Thoughts about the Child/Student

Sprunger gave a clear outline of the 4 stages to competency in children:

1. Parents do everything for the child
2. Parents do things with the child
3. The child does things with parent observing
4. Child does things by themselves

The best preparation for a bad experience is a good experience. In other words, students mostly need to have positive experiences and not be “building their character” through multiple unpleasant undertakings, as is sometimes believed. Recurrent negative experiences are dismaying or even damaging to people.

The over-programmed teenager was mentioned by multiple teachers as a source of frustration. The pervading culture, especially for children many of us teach, is one of intense and multiple demands that necessarily limit a child's practice time. Sprunger believes

teachers can learn to be content with over-programmed kids who won't achieve at the highest levels. Perhaps this falls into the category of not raging at the moon, since there is nothing one can do about it. Accepting reality and working with it is important for one's own and for one's student's well-being. Begrudging the student for not reaching levels that they haven't the practice time to achieve is counterproductive.

It is not desirable for the parent/child relationship to be negatively affected by home practice. I taught my daughter from age 4-12, and in hindsight, it might have been better to send her to another teacher several years earlier. Daily practices began to take a toll on our relationship. However, every Suzuki family has their own unique and ever evolving responses to home practice.

Sprunger likes the idea of parents telling children that practicing daily is like doing chores. You brush your teeth, make your bed, clean your room, and you practice your instrument. Chores aren't fun, but they still need to be done. Daily practice is necessary to develop skills on the instrument. On the other hand, he sympathizes with parents who both work fulltime and may not want to spend their limited time with their children "fighting over bowings" as one of Sprunger's parents said. He says this attitude makes sense.

How does Suzuki Live in my Mind?

Sprunger pointed out that Suzuki liked his teaching to be called the "mother-tongue approach," not the Suzuki "method." As a selling point, however, the publisher insisted it be called the Suzuki Method, not the Suzuki Approach. A "method" book suggests a more rigid curriculum than Suzuki wished, whereas the word "approach" indicates openness to change. True to his word, Suzuki would change his books immediately after having them published, which drove his publishers to exasperation. He was always experimenting and trying to improve his teaching ideas. This is surely an axiom that all dedicated teachers live by.

We don't need to teach what students will learn anyway. The example Sprunger used was from a study of children who used "gooder" instead of "better" when speaking. One group of people openly corrected kids when they used "gooder" and another group didn't correct kids, but used the word "better" around them. Kids learned to use "better" at the same pace, whether being corrected or not. In a lesson, then, a missed note can be ignored, but fixing a bad violin/cello hold is always important. So, knowing what to and what not to teach at any given moment is an important consideration.

Kids don't like to be corrected. A teacher falling into the trap of constantly correcting can be a lesson killer. There are other ways to get students to make progress and be engaged in the process. Using games with younger students can be both motivational and place the teacher in the wings, as the focus on the game temporarily rewires the relationship. Shaping a student's lesson requires some creativity to avoid the trap of "fix this, fix that."

Children get pleasure in things they can do. Constantly introducing new skills can threaten a child's sense of accomplishment, leading to frustration and resistance. This is why reviewing past pieces is a brilliant idea: it secures skills on the instrument, and it enables young children to feel competent at what they are doing.

A number of times Sprunger has been asked by a parent if he has children—which he doesn't—and his interpretation is that a parent could really mean, "You don't know about the hell I live," or could be saying, "I am trying to invalidate some of what you are telling me to do with my child." How a parent understands what is going on in their child's lessons is important, which is why communication lines between teacher and parent should be open and active.

The Amazing Baby!

Sprunger shared a film about Beatrice Beebe, whose remarkable research on babies has radically altered our understanding of what

is going on in the mind of an infant. Beebe is a distinguished professor at Columbia University. By videotaping the interactions between parents and their babies, she has uncovered a world never seen before. She and her research team coded second-by-second microanalysis social interactions that show responses between baby and parent are too fast, complex, and indeed, fascinating for the naked eye to see. She revealed that so much more is going on in a baby's mind than we ever knew. An infant is shown sticking its tongue out in imitation of his father at just ten minutes old. Beebe's and others have raised awareness of how the first three years of life are so very important to the future well-being of a child. YouTube has a talk by Beebe and clips of films with parents interacting with their babies. Please go to "decoding the non-verbal language of babies" to view.

For Your Reading Pleasure: Child Related Books or Writings.

Sprunger recommended *The World in Small Doses* by Donald Winnicott, who points out that 2-4 year olds share a bit of the adult world with parents, but also have their solitary imaginary world. It is the parent's role to monitor their child as they gradually become more and more in the adult world.

He also recommended Selma H. Fraiberg's *The Magic Years* (1959), as a groundbreaking book on understanding children ages 1-6. Kids have magical thinking about being able to do many things. This is an important idea for teachers who deal with young children.

Another author Sprunger likes is Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst who has written 12 books and who is also a child therapist.

David Holmes spent his first twenty-one years in Texas, but has lived in Minneapolis since 1993. A Suzuki teacher for the past 25 years, he has been guest clinician at over 50 institutes. David teaches at the North Star Cello Academy. †