

“Don’t Rush, But Don’t Rest”

Reflections on Dr. Suzuki’s Affirmative Guidance

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In his book *Where Love is Deep*, Dr. Suzuki begins with a deliberate and intensely personal Pledge to Myself, “*I have pledged that from today on I will not be satisfied unless I make every one of my students a fine violinist*” (page 3). It’s a bold statement demonstrative of his devotion to students and one that challenges Suzuki Method teachers everywhere to consider how we might influence our students in achieving musical excellence. “*Everything depends on the teacher*” (page 45), writes Dr. Suzuki, fully aware that teachers have an implicit and unfaltering responsibility to their students. As a Suzuki Piano teacher, I find it interesting to observe how Dr. Suzuki’s affirmative guidance shows up in my teaching. Statements like “*Don’t rush, but don’t rest*” (*Nurtured by Love*, page 54) can be found discretely tucked into the folds of my instructional responsibility.

Know the Destination... Watch the Clock – Ever since I started teaching three decades ago, the responsibility I set for myself as a teacher has always been the same – my job is to help students achieve the level of piano expertise necessary to learn a moderately challenging music selection they’ve chosen all on their own. Of course, there are many interrelated variations to students’ achievement and expertise including figuring out a favorite selection off the internet, performing an upper level RCM examination, deciphering guitar chord sheets, getting a handle on improvisation or jazz basics, and preparing hymns for church. Yet, these variations in achievement and expertise share an unavoidable stipulation – they all require time and effort – some may even take any where from five to ten years to get there. However, as Dr. Suzuki says, “*Everything depends on the teacher*”. So, it’s my job to know the destination and watch the clock. “*Don’t rush, but don’t rest*”, Dr. Suzuki advises. Consequently, I keep a handle on my students’ achievement and expertise. I watch where my students are going, figure out how I’ll help them patiently but assuredly get to the destination, and make sure I keep track of the time. It’s all up to me!

One thing I’ve found very useful in my teaching has been to set the intermediate Suzuki Piano repertoire (Volumes 4-5) as a suitable five-to ten-year destination and work backwards from there by asking some very basic questions. What’s the role of listening to the

recording? What needs to happen in terms of music reading, tonalization, and piano technique? What kind of parental involvement is reasonable? How will students transition from a learning-by-ear approach to a learning approach that involves listening and the printed score? I revisit these questions a lot because they remind me that even though the repertoire provides a framework for student development, it's up to me to find answers that keep my individual students and the destination in sight.

As a result of working backwards from Volumes 4-5, I came up with a strategy that responds to the above very basic questions. Volume 1 repertoire is perfect for developing the fundamentals of tonalization, piano technique, and learning to play by ear, but Volume 1 is not my final destination. I continue in Volume 2, employing the repertoire to initiate the transition from learning-by-ear to a combination of learning by listening and using the printed score. I also introduce specific student-owned repertoire practice tools to replace students' reliance on parental assistance. But, getting to the end of Volume 2 is not my final destination. Rather, Volume 2 shifts students away from their heavy dependence on listening and parental involvement of Volume 1 to a broader and more student independent approach to studying the repertoire and developing music reading skills. Volumes 3-5 repertoire is ideally suited for continuing to reinforce, internalize, and refine the skills students acquired in Volumes 1-2. My job is to keep track of a broad musical skillset including but not limited to the repertoire and music reading skills, along with exploring scales, chords, and more. It's up to me to recognize where students most need my assistance and respond to the large surges that come about as their strengths and weaknesses fluctuate from one end of the spectrum to the other. All the while, I'm keeping an eye on the destination and the clock, neither rushing nor resting as Dr. Suzuki advises, and imagining what direction students might take once we get there.

Reports & Interviews – With Dr. Suzuki's affirmative guidance of "*Everything depends on the teacher*" and "*Don't rush, but don't rest*", there's an additional aspect I consider as part of my teaching responsibility and it has to do with accountability. In order to be accountable to my students, their parents, and myself, I incorporate two effective tools borrowed from my colleagues who are classroom teachers: Student Report Cards and Parent Teacher Interviews.

While some Suzuki teachers might argue that Report Cards are contrary to the Suzuki Method's noncompetitive ideology, I find Report Cards to be immensely relevant for two particular reasons. Firstly, Report Cards help me with the practical long-term tracking of my students, especially when I've got 50+ students for periods of five to

ten years in my studio. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Report Cards provide me with a format for self-reflection and professional critical evaluation of my own teaching effectiveness. Report Cards help me monitor what I'm doing as a teacher, providing an opportunity to identify areas I consistently and inconsistently address. Because I keep previous and current Report Cards, I can get a clear idea of what's working and what needs extra attention or a different approach at the individual student's level and for entire groups of students in my studio. The following example illustrates the format I used in the 2012-13 teaching year for all levels of students.

Suzuki Piano Studio of Dr. Merlin B. Thompson		
Student Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____		
Start Date: _____	Volume #: _____	Volume #: _____
	<i>December 2012</i>	<i>June 2013</i>
<i>Study Habits</i>		
<i>Technical Development</i>		
<i>Reading Development</i>		
<i>Self Expression</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Events Attended</i>		
<i>General Progress</i>		
<i>Other</i>		

I fill out the sections for each student, most often with two or three words for elementary students, and slightly more descriptive entries for intermediate and advanced students. Then, I use the Student Report Cards as the starting place for the Parent Teacher Interviews in December and June. After examining and talking through the Report Cards, I invite parents to share with me what they think I need to know about their child. I encourage them to tell me what they require from me. Then we talk about what we might consider doing as appropriate follow up. I am purposefully invitational, taking on Dr. Suzuki's model of affirmative guidance, because I recognize that although my role is to provide musical and instructional leadership, I am in this role at the request of the parents. My responsibility to parents and students is that of a servant leader, not an unquestionable dictator. While from another perspective, I look to parents and students for their own affirmative guidance – for their insight into what we share in teaching and learning. I deliberately set up an attitude of openness and reciprocal trust where it's not about rolling out my own agenda, nor parents running the show. It's about listening to each

other. It's about multi-directional affirmative guidance as integral to supportive and respectful relationships that stimulate musical and educational processes and environments. It's what I do because I take to heart what Dr. Suzuki so firmly stated – "*Everything depends on the teacher*".

While Student Report Cards and Parent Teacher Interviews work for me, I'm aware other teachers may not be comfortable with the process of critical self-reflection that's inherently involved with these two tools. Yet, in the example of Dr. Suzuki, we find an individual dedicated to a life of personal refinement, a man who participated in "*daily self-reflection*", an educational giant who emphasized the importance of teachers enhancing themselves "*step by step toward superior ability*". So, I offer this description of my experiences with Report Cards and PT Interviews in keeping with Dr. Suzuki's passion for the "*higher and the finer*" (*Where Love is Deep*, pages 46-47). All the while, acknowledging that meaningful self-reflection is always connected to each person's own personal and intentional processes.

Furthermore, in practical terms, I want to respond to teachers' objections that Report Cards take too much time and they're not paid for PT Interviews. From my perspective, the two to three hours it takes me to prepare 50+ Report Cards is well worth it. In terms of PT Interviews, I include the cost of a 15-minute interview for each student in the term's tuition. And I don't teach any lessons on the weeks of PT Interviews, knowing that people already have enough to do without making two trips to my studio, not to mention the impossibility of scheduling 50+ PT Interviews in addition to my regular schedule.

Affirmative Guidance... What seems certain to me in Dr. Suzuki's statement "*Everything depends on the teacher*" is that Suzuki teachers face multiple responsibilities in assisting children learning to play musical instruments – responsibilities that involve paying attention not only to the journey, but also to the destination. "*Don't rush, but don't rest*" isn't about prioritizing the journey over the destination, or attempting to juggle both the journey and destination at the same time. "*Don't rush, but don't rest*" is about recognizing teaching and learning as processes characterized by constantly fluctuating periods of adjustment that require teachers to be skillful, confident, and open to critical reflection. What stands out for me is that it's up to me to avoid tunnel vision, because teaching Suzuki Piano – like teaching sports, art, or any subject matter – can easily turn isolated technical aspects, teaching strategies, and specific pieces in the repertoire into semi-permanent stop-overs instead of the means or processes for getting to the destination they're intended to be. In other words, I

make sure not to confuse the tools, devices, means, and ways for getting to the destination with the destination itself. *Everything depends on the teacher!*

Cheers!

Dr. Merlin B. Thompson is one of Canada's leading authorities on the Suzuki Piano Method. As the first Canadian to complete the three-year teacher apprenticeship program at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute (1983-1986), Merlin studied under the mentorship of Drs. Shinichi Suzuki and Haruko Kataoka — co-founders of the Suzuki Piano Method. Merlin has worked with hundreds of children, their parents, and teachers in workshops, institutes, conferences, established programs, and mentorships throughout Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. He was Artistic Director of the Mount Royal College Suzuki Piano Program in Calgary, Alberta from 1988-2004. His academic achievements include Ph.D. in Education (University of Calgary), Maitre es Arts in Musicology (Université de Montréal), and Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance (University of Regina).