

Going Beyond Yet Through the Repertoire

Reflections on Teaching the Student or Teaching the Repertoire

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Over the years, I've noticed that certain discussions always seem to take place in Suzuki teacher training sessions and informal teacher conversations no matter the level of repertoire or teacher's experience. These discussions take place because teachers genuinely want to know what to look for, because they're serious about what they do, and they naturally want to avoid making preventable mistakes. Often, such conversations revolve around topics like how can teachers tell when a piece is really mastered, or when students are really ready to move on to the next piece. I find these topics interesting because they remind me of an issue at the forefront of teaching. An issue that has to do with – Are teachers teaching the student or are they teaching the repertoire? Should teachers prioritize the student over the repertoire? Or is it the other way around?

Fortunately, for Suzuki teachers, Dr. Suzuki is very clear on what teachers should be doing – he purposefully prioritizes students' musical development over the repertoire. For Dr. Suzuki, the repertoire is a vehicle for developing students' musicianship, not the other way around.

The repertoire is first and foremost a teaching tool. Dr. Suzuki felt that extensive etudes and technical exercises were not necessary as long as repertoire was chosen carefully, and as long as it was presented by the teacher with the technical and musical development of the student always in mind. This, of course, places an enormous responsibility on the Suzuki teacher who must constantly monitor the student's development and utilize the pieces in ways that fulfill the function of building technique and mature musicianship. (ECC, 2003, p. A21)

Dr. Suzuki explicitly makes teachers responsible for students' musical development – a process that uses the repertoire to take students beyond the actual repertoire itself. The challenge with Dr. Suzuki's emphasis on student development through repertoire study versus teaching students to play the repertoire is the confusion over what exactly each approach looks like. How does teaching student development differ from teaching students to play the repertoire? Aren't they both just different sides of the same coin? Have a look at the following scenarios and see if you can figure out which teacher is

teaching student musicianship and which is teaching repertoire mastery.

Scenario One: Student plays through Mozart *Arietta* from Suzuki Piano Volume 2. Teacher says, "This piece needs more dynamic contrast on page 2 in the *forte* and *piano* sections. Play that section again, please." Student responds by playing *forte* and *piano* in the designated bars. Teacher says, "Could you make your *forte* sound more like this? Your arm should move like this." Teacher demonstrates and student imitates teacher's demonstration. Teacher says, "Got it. Now try to make your *piano* softer like this. See how I move my fingers." Teacher demonstrates and student imitates teacher's demonstration. Teacher says, "Nicely done. Now just practice the section like that ten times daily at home."

Scenario Two: Student plays through Mozart *Arietta* from Suzuki Piano Volume 2. Teacher says, "Let's explore some dynamics on page 2. I'm curious to see how loud you can play the *forte* section." Student responds by playing *forte* in the designated bars. Teacher says, "Sure. Let's see what happens when we use our arms to play *forte*." Teacher demonstrates and student imitates teacher's demonstration. Teacher says, "Got it. What happens when you use your whole body?" Student experiments. Teacher says, "Cool. What about *piano*? How about just fingertips?" Teacher demonstrates and student imitates teacher's demonstration. Teacher says, "Okay. What about no-tone?" Student experiments. Teacher says, "Nice. Why don't you practice ten times arms, ten times whole body, ten times fingertips, and ten times no-tone every day and see where you get to for next week."

At first glance, it may seem as if there is, in fact, no difference between the above scenarios. In both scenarios, teacher and student engage in an exploration of dynamics. Both scenarios incorporate affirmative statements and demonstrations. Yet, there is a subtle and immensely significant difference between Scenario One and Two. Namely, that Scenario One explores *forte* and *piano* only as they apply to the performance of *Arietta*, whereas Scenario Two explores *forte* and *piano* from a much larger, investigative, and more personal perspective belonging to the student. Scenario Two's teacher deliberately initiates the exploration of *Arietta* as an opportunity to refine, revisit, and regenerate the student's evolving tonal mastery. This teacher uses the repertoire as a launching pad for teaching musicianship, recognizing that a comprehensive approach to musicianship necessarily includes more than *Arietta*'s specific performance needs. Scenario Two's teacher demonstrates what Dr. Suzuki is looking for by going beyond – yet through – the repertoire as a vehicle for developing students' musicianship.

As a Suzuki teacher with over three decades of experience, I have an immense appreciation for Dr. Suzuki's insight into incorporating the repertoire as a vehicle for developing students' musicianship. I value the repertoire for its practicality in terms of immediate access at all stages of student development. However, it seems teachers may often be unsure what it means to use the repertoire as a vehicle for developing students' musicianship. It's as if their vision of teaching has been seduced by student performances of *Arietta* at the designated tempo, with appropriate dynamics, articulations, and phrasings, the indicated notes and fingerings, and stylized physical movements. This isn't to say that teachers shouldn't be concerned with *Arietta's* specific performance requirements. Of course, they should be. But, surely we can agree there's more to teaching musicianship than that.

Examining the idea of using the repertoire as a vehicle for developing student musicianship, it seems remarkable that Dr. Suzuki intuitively anticipated how teachers might misinterpret their role in the Suzuki Method. While Dr. Suzuki carefully selected repertoire designed to take students from beginner to more advanced levels of performance, he asked teachers to do much more than make sure students play each specific piece with its inherent performance requirements – “Everything depends on the teacher,” he said. So, what does this mean? What happens when teachers use the repertoire as a vehicle for developing student musicianship? The following themes stand out:

1. Teachers separate what the repertoire needs from what the student needs in developing musicianship
2. Teachers teach tone and technical fluency as the ongoing and evolving foundation of student musicianship
3. Teachers incorporate student independence and ownership
4. Teachers teach with an attitude of advocacy and agitation

Each of these themes is woven into developing student musicianship, into each specific piece in the repertoire, and into going beyond – yet through – the repertoire in order to explore, enhance, and empower student musicianship.

Separating Repertoire Needs from Student Needs – First and foremost, teachers who use the repertoire as a vehicle for developing student musicianship separate what the repertoire needs from what the student needs. It's one of the things most evident in Dr. Suzuki's and Kataoka Sensei's teaching – their ability to zero in on the basics of musicianship, no matter virtuoso or beginner. And it's something evident in my university piano instructor, Professor Gordon McLean – a student of Claudio Arrau – whose keen insight into musicianship was vital in helping me expand my own tools of musical expertise.

Teachers like Dr. Suzuki, Kataoka Sensei, and Professor McLean – that is teachers who separate the repertoire needs from student needs – all share a common teaching characteristic: the ability to differentiate between performance standards dictated by the repertoire itself and performance standards reflective of students' competency in performing the repertoire. They can differentiate between teaching staccato in *Wild Rider* and developing staccato fluency as part of students' entire range of musicianship. They can differentiate between the phrase shaping appropriate to *Ecosaise* and musicianship as a complete spectrum of tonal possibilities and technique. Teachers who differentiate in this manner purposefully separate repertoire needs from student needs so they can concentrate on whether students' musicianship is insufficient, sufficient, or more than sufficient to successfully perform the repertoire. Then, based on their observations, they address their students' needs by introducing any number of appropriate follow up strategies. For example, when students' musicianship seems to be insufficient, teachers find out what's going on and why things might be missing from their teaching. When students' musical development appears sufficient, teachers explore how they got there, what they need to stay there, and how they might extend what's going on. When students' musicianship seems to be more than sufficient, teachers challenge themselves and their students to find out what they might be taking for granted and what might happen if they went deeper. The advantage of teaching in this way is that no matter students' competency – insufficient, sufficient, or more than sufficient – the basics of musicianship come into play, not as a fixed interpretation of the repertoire, but as an ongoing and evolving process of musical exploration and refinement.

Tone & Technical Fluency – By the time I arrived at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute in 1983, co-founder of the Suzuki Piano Method Kataoka Sensei had been researching tone production and piano technique for nearly thirty years. Inspired by Dr. Suzuki's work, this extraordinary teacher worked tirelessly to develop an approach to piano technique that promoted one principle above all others – the idea that tone production connects to piano technique through listening. For Kataoka Sensei, the first step in learning to play the piano wasn't a matter of hand shape or arm weight. It was a matter of pianists listening to the sounds they make when they engage the piano keys. As a TEI apprentice teacher, I spent many hours every day in Kataoka Sensei's studio, observing as she taught her own students. Guided by Dr. Suzuki and Kataoka Sensei, I explored the relationship between tone production and piano technique – a daily one-hour commitment to tonalization practice for three years. A modest

estimate indicates that I practiced over 750 hours on the six notes of Suzuki's *Twinkle Variations* – yet, a reminder that understanding the relationship between listening, tone production, and piano technique requires patience and a willingness to allow insights to emerge over a long period of time.

As a graduate of the Matsumoto TEI, my teaching is anchored by Dr. Suzuki's passion for tone and Kataoka Sensei's insight into the vital connection between listening, tone production, and technical fluency. Encouraged by the accomplishments of these pioneer music educators, I've aspired to uphold their legacy through my own research into tone production and piano technique. As a result, I incorporate a fundamental yet explorative twofold approach to teaching tone and technical fluency. Firstly, before I teach anything else, I fastidiously pay attention to what's at the core of tone and technical fluency. I purposefully teach the basics of tone and how the body produces it. That's the fundamental part. Secondly, I facilitate activities that promote the exaggerations of tone and technical fluency. Here, I teach carefully chosen tonal and physical extremes that expand student musicianship. That's the explorative part. However, there's something more important going on here, because in facilitating a broad spectrum of extremes and exaggerations, something happens to the core of tone and technical fluency. Namely, there's a strengthening – a deep internalization – of tonal and technical basics. Of course, the extremes I incorporate are not chosen randomly. I deliberately generate specific tonal and technical activities that I know reinforce the basics of tone and piano technique. Through this twofold approach, carefully chosen extremes and exaggerations empower the core of tone and technical fluency. Stepping outside the essential core of tone and technique, extreme and exaggerated explorations function as the necessary and complementary tools in establishing the basics of tone and how the body produces it.

While it might seem like I'm talking mostly about tone and technical fluency as related to the body's physicality, that's not really the case. I'm also incorporating a complete range of emotional intensities, intellectual thought processes, intuitive understandings, and spiritual connections – and it goes without saying that I never lose sight of the repertoire. Which brings me to some of what I've come to understand about tone and technical fluency. Things such as: the disadvantages of teaching curved fingers and fixed body positions in contrast to the benefits of moving fingers, arm motions, and upper body flexibility; the advantage of getting off the bench and dancing; how tone production changes with emotional intensity; the danger of students thinking too much; what happens with letting go and being inside the performance; openness and trust as prerequisites to spiritual

sensitivity. Through this multilayered and overlapping approach – physical, emotional, intellectual, intuitive, and spiritual – that is both fundamental and explorative, I incorporate extremes as reinforcement for basics. I use exaggerations to strengthen the core of tone and technique. I use the repertoire as a vehicle for developing basics of student musicianship – tone and technical fluency.

Independence & Ownership – Early in my career as a Suzuki Piano teacher, a parent asked, "So, just how long will it be before my child is able to practice on his own?" I remember wondering, "Is this a question concerning the parent's role or what?" Then, I realized this question was all about my role as teacher. In particular, how my teaching approach addressed student independence and ownership. Somehow, intuitively, I replied, "Well, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to see how many things your child can do on his own even after the very first lesson!" And with that statement, my adventure into student independence and ownership was underway.

The problem with independence and ownership is that students frequently take ownership of things that impede their learning, impediments like wrong notes, awkward fingerings, etc. And I have the impression that many teachers solve this problem by administering absolute control over what students learn, furthermore requiring parents to monitor students' home practice. Such teachers regard independence as something only they can grant or bestow, and put off student ownership as a distant destination. However, under such circumstances, I question how the weight of teacher authority will avoid fostering students' blind complacency or outright dislike. Not to mention, such attitudes seem to ignore the evidence that all children come with an already existing personal history of independence and ownership.

By the time children begin music lessons, it appears obvious to me they're already equipped with an abundance of independence and ownership whether or not teachers choose to acknowledge students' existing knowledge and skills. My responsibility is to further students' natural inclination for independence by empowering and recognizing their ownership of the learning process. As it turns out, student independence and ownership play vital roles in the Suzuki Method's emphasis on student musicianship, especially in regards to tone and technical fluency, learning to play by ear, learning to read music, and self-expression. Because student ownership of tone and technical fluency opens the door for learning to play by ear; subsequently, student ownership of learning to play by ear serves as the necessary aural reference for reading music; while self-expression is integral at

all stages. In this way, student independence and ownership aren't supplementary to the learning process. They're absolutely essential to musicianship.

Working with Suzuki parents, I've noticed they readily buy into independence and ownership because, long before the child starts music instruction, parents have already encountered their child's independence. So, I make sure parents know about cornerstones they can put in place to support their child's independence. The first cornerstone of independence is listening to the recording. With adequate listening, children take ownership of learning to play by ear. Without it, independent learning is in jeopardy. Playing the recording is an easy thing for parents to do that has an amazing impact on their child's independence. The second cornerstone of independence is practicing. For parents who practice with pre-school children, I encourage them to excel as motivators of their child's independence and ownership. For school-age students who practice on their own, I let parents know that research reveals most students quit music lessons a year after their parents *stop* reminding them to practice. This cornerstone is all about appropriate parental motivation and parents not being afraid of squashing their child's independence and ownership by reminding them to practice.

Student independence and ownership are absolutely essential to my teaching – to my language, the homework I give, and the way I use the repertoire to develop student musicianship. Yet, what's worrisome for me is that students can demonstrate tone and technical fluency, play by ear, and read music *without* student independence or ownership. In fact, I've taught many students in workshops and institutes who have minimal ownership of their experience in learning to play the piano. They're excellent models of what their teachers have taught them to do – and yes, on occasion my own students show up playing exactly how they think I'd like them to play. However, I think we all know that developing musicianship is more than replicating what teachers have to offer. Developing musicianship involves teachers passing on what they know about performance while encouraging the student's own self-expressive voice – student's independence and ownership of their own musicianship.

Of course, as I previously pointed out, students frequently take ownership of things that impede their learning. Yet, in my own teaching, I've observed the basics of musicianship – self-expression, tone, technique, playing by ear, and reading music – can survive and even flourish despite the arrival of impediments. Does that mean I ignore students' impediments? Not in the least. In fact, my response is pretty much the opposite of ignoring impediments – I validate them.

Yes, because for me, confirmation of impediments serves as a vital steppingstone in facilitating student refinements. This means that whether it's a matter of tone (harsh sound), technical fluency (stiff fingers), playing by ear (wrong pitch), or reading music (wrong notes), I always start by reinforcing student ownership of the impediment. Most likely, I even ask students to show me this impediment a few more times. Then I facilitate students' ownership of their refinement with as many variants of students' awareness and expertise as appropriate. I incorporate back and forth processes to fuel students' ownership of both their refinements and impediments. In this way, students' awareness of refinements and impediments are directly and meaningfully connected with each other. What seems to work for me in this process is that I avoid getting sidetracked by impediments associated with student independence and ownership. I take advantage of impediments as practical opportunities for expanding students' awareness of their own musicianship. I use the repertoire as a vehicle to stimulate and support students' independence and ownership of their musical refinement because developing musicianship isn't just about getting rid of impediments. Developing musicianship involves students' independence and ownership as platforms for the practical awareness and expertise they'll need to solve their own musical problems.

Teacher's Attitude – When I think about being mentored by Dr. Suzuki for three years in Japan, I'm reminded of how much I always felt Dr. Suzuki was on my side, and yet, how nervously I anticipated what he had for me to explore. There was, in his approach, an attitude of advocacy and agitation – a simultaneous integration of acceptance and tension. It's an attitude that plays a very important role when teachers use the repertoire as a vehicle for developing student musicianship. When teachers teach with an attitude of advocacy and agitation, they provide effective leadership without falling into the trap of controlling every moment of students' learning processes. Advocating student musicianship is all about welcoming students into unconditional learning processes that respect students' personality, their home life, and their relentless desire for self-expression. It's not about changing students into something else, nor controlling every musical gesture. It's not about teachers telling students everything they'll ever need to do, nor passive teacher participation that accommodates whatever students have to offer. Teaching with an attitude of advocacy means teachers aren't afraid of who their students are. They trust what their students have to say – literally and musically. Of course, teachers bring extensive knowledge and expertise to their instructional

approach. However, developing student musicianship isn't about the teacher's journey. It's about the student's journey. And this heartfelt and shared exploration begins with teachers' attitude of advocacy – the openness to accept and engage students for whom they genuinely are, not for whom teachers might want their students to be – as the following story demonstrates.

Around the time energetic Arthur was in preschool, his older sister Janine informed me he would soon be starting lessons. "*My Mom really hopes that piano lessons will help to settle him down*", she told me. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that both Janine and her Mom might be disappointed by the outcome of Arthur's lessons. Because, my goal wouldn't be to reduce, minimize, or eliminate Arthur's energetic outlook. It would be a matter of amplifying who Arthur is as a person.

So, in my teaching, I advocate on Arthur's behalf. I stand up for his preference for slouching, low wrist, moving around, and his unavoidable double-jointed fingers without ignoring my responsibility to Arthur's musical development. I see no need to control his every movement, his thoughts, his imagination, or his desire to explore. My job is to guide Arthur, not by getting rid of who he is as a person, but by anchoring his musicianship in whom he is as a person. Advocating for Arthur doesn't mean I neutrally respond to whatever he has to offer. It means that I also incorporate teaching strategies that draw from another perspective. Namely, I agitate on his behalf.

As agitators, teachers challenge their students by taking them just slightly beyond their comfort zone. They introduce explorations that break away from doing only what's easy, knowing that developing musicianship isn't a sanitized problem-free process. It's a process that necessarily proceeds with ups and downs, with celebrations and frustrations. Observing Dr. Suzuki's teaching in Japan, it was impossible to ignore his enthusiasm for challenging his students – playing with the bow upside down, stopping and starting while the recording continued. It's as if he was always looking for the next available challenge – the exploration that would assist students in refining themselves and their musicianship. What I appreciate about Dr. Suzuki's example is how much students trusted his guidance. Trust was at the core of their relations. So, in my own teaching, I establish trusting relations as the foundation for searching out, experimenting with, and integrating specific challenges that stimulate and support development of students' musicianship. Teaching musicianship isn't a smooth trajectory without ups and downs. It's a process that necessarily involves instability, risk, tension, and conflict. My job as agitator is *not* to eliminate these so-called undesirable themes from my students' learning processes. Far from it! As a trusted agitator who

develops honest and trustworthy relationships with students, my responsibility is to introduce explorations that step away from doing only what's easy. I use the repertoire as a vehicle to empower students in finding challenges that engage them as their own personal agitators of musicianship.

Resonating World of Music

This exploration examined a quartet of themes associated with Dr. Suzuki's emphasis on developing student musicianship. As I come to the final paragraphs of this exploration, it occurs to me that Dr. Suzuki's enthusiasm for using the repertoire as a teaching tool places enormous demands on teachers' knowledge and expertise. From one perspective, teachers need to know about the big picture of developing student musicianship – where they're headed and how they're going to get there. From another perspective, teachers need to incorporate the details of musicianship – what's at core of self-expression, tone, technique, playing by ear, and reading music. Then, there's the perspective involved in moving from the big picture to the details and back again– how to deal with explorations that lead to instability, how to strengthen and promote internalization without micromanaging, how to empower refinement. Furthermore, the perspective of teachers' backgrounds comes into play – how they were taught as students, how past and current musical traditions contribute to their teaching. Not to mention, the perspectives students bring to the process. The challenge with these various perspectives is they overlap in harmonious and discordant ways. They continuously move through conflict and agreement, synchronization and separation. Yet, in this overlapping of perspectives, a cyclical pattern of teaching emerges. A simple process that involves exploration, then instability, then internalization, and finally refinement, followed by more exploration, more instability, more internalization, and more refinement – all purposefully integrated to stimulate and support the development of student musicianship, of students themselves.

Ultimately, the most remarkable thing about the Suzuki Method may be its dedicated focus on students. Students are the priority. And by putting students at the center of the Suzuki Method, Suzuki teachers accomplish something quite extraordinary. They foster the student's sense of self. They nurture "noble hearts and minds" through the celebrations and challenges of making music. They invite character development as something embedded in the everyday experience of being a musician. Just as Dr. Suzuki explained in describing his own experience with music, "The real essence of art turned out to be not something high up and far off. It was right inside my ordinary self".

So, our purpose in teaching students through the repertoire is to give spark to the flame that is the child's sense of self. We are charged with using the powerful and intimate dynamics of music making as the resonant avenue for exercising, exploring, and experiencing the character of our students.

What happens when teachers teach students through the repertoire? Quite remarkably, through the circuitous journey of musical studies, improvisations, accomplishments, and frustrations, children get a particular picture of who they are. Children reinforce their sense of self in the ways they make music – whether it's out-of-control fast and loud, or the loving expressions of emotional mastery. Perhaps that explains why children commonly seek out their own challenging musical encounters as a way of testing or proving who they are as persons, as their own way of purposely demonstrating to teachers and parents the self-affirming value they derive from themselves. Through the purposeful and sometimes fleeting moments of teaching and learning, musical explorations remind each of us about who we are. And in this dynamic environment, teachers have not only the responsibility of sharing their musical experiences, they also have the immense privilege of listening to what students have to say as active music makers in the resonating world of music. A world in which students' voice are recognized, valued, and appreciated as they move beyond yet through the repertoire.