

Tone & More Tone: Reflections on the Matsumoto Talent Education Institutional Theme

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Ever since I graduated from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute in May 1986, it's been fascinating for me to observe what people want to know about my three-year apprenticeship in Japan. What was Dr. Suzuki like? – Generous and charismatic. What was his favorite topic? – Tone. What did I learn about? – Tone and more tone. Yes, by the time my generation of *kenkyusei* settled into the TEI, tone was the fundamental, at times elusive, empowering, often frustrating, enveloping, and inescapable institutional theme. It was as if the entire TEI somehow reverberated with the vibrations of tone production. Day after day, Dr. Suzuki returned repeatedly to the study of tone. Practice rooms resonated with the sound of *kenkyusei* in their committed search for and exploration of tone. Concerts highlighted the need for tone, the growth in tone, the possibility of tonal achievement. Tone was everywhere. Following my graduation concert, Dr. Suzuki presented me with a certificate of Japanese calligraphy on which he had inscribed –

美しき音にいのちを

“Beautiful tone with living soul, please”.

Translated from the Japanese “*Utsukushiki oto ni inochi o*”, Dr. Suzuki often intoned this signature statement during my apprenticeship. And, in the three decades since, this phrase has been a guiding inspiration in my own teaching. It's a phrase that has pushed me to examine the musical values and personal dynamics of my own instructional approach.

My goal in this article is to explore Dr. Suzuki's signature statement “Beautiful tone with living soul, please”. To do so, I consider Dr. Suzuki's relationship with each element while benefiting from the viewpoints and insights of other musicians, philosophers, and educators. Using Dr. Suzuki's own inquisitive nature as a model – his constant search for deeper understanding – it's my hope to give voice to the legacy of “Beautiful tone with living soul, please” and its enduring importance for today's musicians.

美 – *Beauty*

While we typically think of beauty as associated with visual aesthetics, beauty is a term we may easily apply to a myriad of sound experiences from the formality of a Beethoven symphony to the spontaneity of a child's laughter and the natural melody of a bird's song. So, how do we decide what is beautiful? How do we know something is beautiful when we hear it?

According to American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, beauty is an invitation from what belongs to us (Emerson, 1860, p. 290). Beauty opens unexplored worlds of delight, divinity, contemplation, and creation (Emerson, 1940, pp. 11-13). In a similar vein, the eminent author H.E. Huntley provided an interpretation of beauty in his book *The Divine Proportion* (2006), describing beauty through the overlapping experiences of *surprise*, *curiosity*, and *wonder*. By highlighting these three aspects, Huntley draws our attention to the multilayered pleasure we take in recognizing, appreciating, and creating beauty in the ordinary and purposeful events of daily life. That's not to say that surprise, curiosity, and wonder exclusively point towards beauty. Surprise, curiosity, and wonder contribute to, prompt, and elevate our awareness of beauty. For example, as *surprise*, beauty is often unanticipated. An encounter with beautiful sound has an arresting, unexpected, and interruptive quality that grabs our attention, however subtle or direct. There's a quality of delight that pleasantly catches us off guard. As *curiosity*, there's something about beauty that invites exploration. For performers and listeners, we crave to know more, to get closer, to go deeper inside the sound and find out what's going on, what's the source of beauty. Finally, as *wonder*, beauty opens mystical worlds. It invites contemplation and instills transcendence. There's an element of freedom, of being spiritually transported, and experiencing a world without borders.

Turning to Dr. Suzuki, it's interesting to note how the aspects of *surprise*, *curiosity*, and *wonder* characterize his development as a musician. We find an excellent example in 1915 with his *surprise* initiation to the beauty of the violin as demonstrated in virtuoso Mischa Elman's performance of Schubert's *Ave Maria*.

The sweetness of the sound of Elman's violin utterly enthralled me. His velvety tone as he played the melody was like something in a dream. It made a tremendous impression on me.... Elman's "Ave Maria" opened my eyes to music. I had no idea why my soul was so moved. (Suzuki, 1969, p. 79)

There's *surprise*, *curiosity*, and *wonder* in Dr. Suzuki's description – a kind of spiritual uplifting – as he's caught off guard by Elman's sound.

His curiosity is so strong that it compels to teach himself how to play the violin.

While this encounter pulled Dr. Suzuki decidedly towards the beauty of the violin, *surprise, curiosity, and wonder* would continue to dominate the bulk of his musical formation over the period of eight years (1920-28) he spent in Berlin, studying the violin and attending concerts by the most respected musicians of the time. Listening to the great performances and studying with the German violinist Klinger, he gradually learned that art wasn't something distant and beyond understanding. Beauty, musical appreciation, and artistic expression were reflected in a person's everyday thoughts, words, and actions. In this way, Dr. Suzuki's efforts to understand beauty led to a heightened awareness not only of the world around him, but also a particular sensitivity and understanding of who he was as a person.

What I find remarkable about beauty is the way in which *surprise, curiosity, and wonder* play such vital and dynamic roles in the teaching/learning process. It's as if our responsibility as teachers is to empower students in their journeys of *surprise, curiosity, and wonder*. Our job is to help students hear, see, and feel where beauty shows up in what they do. All of which means there are probably several questions we as teachers might want to consider. Questions like – How do we treat beauty? What happens when teachers connect beauty to ordinary everyday life? What about *surprise, curiosity, and wonder* in our teaching? How might teachers foster awareness of these aspects of beauty in students' musical development?

音 – **Tone**

In a most basic way, tone is all about *intensity of energy* – the idea that tone is characterized by sound vibrations that range in spectrums of *intensity* from soft to loud, light to heavy, bright to dark, short to long, flat to round, playful to serious, jubilant to melancholy, shallow to deep, and more. Thus, tone isn't something we merely hear as commonplace sound. Tone is something we perceive or interpret in terms of intensities that have aesthetic and personal significance. We experience tone as having qualities from beautiful to ugly, pleasing to displeasing, sympathetic to harsh.

Historically, tone has been considered as a most essential ingredient in the world of music because mastery of tone production enables artistic expression. Heinrich Neuhaus, renowned piano teacher at the Moscow Conservatoire, identified tone production as the first and most important among other means of which a pianist should be possessed, while cautioning that tonal mastery remains a means of musical

expression, not its purpose (1973). Consequently, musicians spend a lot of time developing a robust understanding of technique – that is the performer’s approach to producing and listening for tone – all with the purpose of using tonal colors to create meaning in their performances. They explore tone in the most engaging manner possible as the necessary tool for expressing their own imaginative outlook, the poetic content of the music, the emotional and harmonic drive of a phrase, the spirituality of the composer. Musicians transform the multilayered physicality of music performance into the vibrating energy of sound.

Dr. Suzuki responded to the challenges of tone and technique by incorporating tone production as the first step in learning to play a musical instrument. He insisted that all Suzuki Method students begin with “tonalizations” designed to fulfill the basic tonal/technical requirements of each particular instrument – a reworking of the term “vocalization” as applied to the kind of training vocalists receive in vocalizing exercises (Landers, 1984, pp. 143, 146). Furthermore, he considered tonal studies as essential to students’ continued progress through the repertoire. Dr. Suzuki’s passion for tone development emerged as a meaningful theme prompted by his own search for personal and artistic expression.

Having heard records, I wished to produce the fine tone of those maestros, and tried to play the violin with a power which nearly crushed the strings with the bow... The sound I wanted was in those brilliant big sounds, beautiful sounds, and tender sounds of the maestros, and yet I was scratching away pressing the string which could have rung beautifully: not knowing how to produce the beautiful sound I aimed at, I was trying to play with power. (Suzuki, 1982, p. 82)

Listening to the tone of the recorded maestros had an immense impact on Dr. Suzuki’s mastery of the violin, stimulating a personal and practical exploration of tone development that would endure throughout his entire life. Furthermore, it explains a lot about why Dr. Suzuki was so enthusiastic in promoting tonal study as essential to all stages of students’ musical development.

Tone production involves the musician’s natural yet intentional personal engagement. As music education philosopher Naomi Cumming (2000) has affirmed, the musician’s production of sound quality is not an “impersonal or accidental event” (p. 21). Tone production is an activity in which musicians play from the heart, mind, and soul of who they are, while relying on their fingers, hands, arms, and body as the practical physical means for generating tone. Yet, as Heinrich Neuhaus pointed out, there are two mistakes teachers and

performers commonly make regarding tone production. One mistake is to underrate tone by focusing mainly on technique and accurate notes. The other mistake is to overrate tone, fixating on a specific type of tone to the detriment of the music's meaning and the performer's spiritual intent.

Dr. Suzuki's passion for tone production began in his youth, continuing as a lifelong foundational element in his teaching and personal exploration. His enduring commitment to tone production indicates teachers may want to ponder questions like – What do we know about tone? Where do we find our inspiration? How can teachers move past the technical physicality of tone production to encourage students in emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and spiritual tonal explorations?

いのち – *Living Soul*

Throughout his life, Dr. Suzuki's philosophical outlook gradually evolved from his youthful fascination with "conscience" to a focus in his mature years on "living soul". It all began in 1915 at age seventeen, when he devoured the contents of Tolstoy's *Diary*. Tolstoy had declared, "To deceive oneself is worse than to deceive others", and that "the voice of conscience is the voice of God" (Suzuki, 1969, p. 74). From this early philosophical prodding, Dr. Suzuki experienced a profound and instrumental questioning of himself as a person.

Describing his philosophical development, Dr. Suzuki acknowledged the influence of Mozart's music as having taught him to know "perfect love, truth, goodness and beauty" (Suzuki, 1969, pp. 91-92). In particular, a 1922 performance of Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* stands out for its impact on Suzuki. Living in Berlin and frequently attending concerts, Suzuki experienced an unprecedented and deep satisfaction in the music of Mozart - one that induced a state of profound spirituality. Dr. Suzuki recognized the transformative power of music.

Dr. Suzuki's philosophical outlook was also influenced events of World War II. Living in Tokyo, he witnessed the 1942 air raid bombings and delayed his departure out of concern for his students. In the aftermath of massive firebombing that ravaged Japan, Dr. Suzuki's dedication to the lives of children and his commitment to international peace intensified. He envisioned the creation of a better world for the children of Japan and promoted music education in terms of developing "noble hearts and minds in children". Within a decade of moving to Matsumoto – where he established the Talent Education Institute – Dr. Suzuki added another layer of understanding, once more through his relationship with music.

In 1953 at the age of fifty-five, Dr. Suzuki received word the renowned violinist Jacques Thibaud had died in an airplane crash. Responding to Thibaud's death, Dr. Suzuki's philosophical outlook evolved to incorporate the idea of "life force". Listening to Thibaud's performances, Dr. Suzuki felt the impact of Thibaud's life force. Drawing from an Eastern philosophical perspective, he used the expression "life force" to underscore the life-giving energy in every living thing and purposely articulate the internal emotionality, intellect, and physicality of "life force". "Life force" compels each of us to seek out experiences, relationships, and knowledge. He envisioned "life force" as all about finding our selves and the meaning of life. While there may have been an implicit assumption that "life force" incorporated a spiritual or transcendent element, Dr. Suzuki's philosophical language evolved still further in the 1970s to explicitly take up this spiritual thread.

At the 1975 Suzuki Method International Teachers' Convention, Dr. Suzuki included in his summary of purposes for music education an emphasis on "breath and spirit in playing" (Suzuki, 1981, p. 185). One year later, in a document titled *Teaching Points for 1976*, he introduced the affirmation "*Tone has the Living Soul*" and shared his thoughts on *Training Spirit and Breath*.

A performance without spirit results in music without heart and tone without soul. Not only in music, but also in the formation of personality, it is necessary for all humanity to have spirit. Forming people who have spirit is one valuable goal of education. (Ibid, p. 193)

By incorporating "living soul" into his philosophical outlook, Dr. Suzuki directs our attention to the details of daily life that are personal, reflective, and expressive, while invoking a spiritual grounding that is connected to the uplifting and transcendent experience of music making. He envisions the aspect of "living soul" not as a separate instructional item that teachers address on its own. Rather, he considers "living soul" through the resonance of beautiful tone. "Living soul" takes on not only a spiritual dimension, but a spiritual requirement. In this respect, "living soul" is not a superficial recognition of spirituality. Dr. Suzuki is concerned with the practical development of noble hearts and minds through the transformative and transcendent implications of music performance.

For Suzuki teachers, Dr. Suzuki's example is significant in that he envisioned soulful connectivity as integral to the interplay of beauty and sound. This may mean we need to carefully consider such questions as—How is spirituality or soulful connectivity relevant to my work as a musician? What kind of language is required in exploring

spiritual or transcendent themes with my students? How will my acknowledgement of spirituality impact my students and their musical understanding?

Please

As the final word in Dr. Suzuki's signature statement, "Please" might easily escape our attention. Without it, "Beautiful tone with living soul" could stand alone as a description of inspirational artistic performance. However, by including the word "Please", Dr. Suzuki makes something very clear – he intends this statement as a request for action. He uses "Please" to reinforce his heartfelt invitation for others to consider music as the transformative vehicle for personal growth and refinement.

To have a superior model, to seek deeply, and to search while practicing everyday comparing ourselves to the model; to think about what and how to practice in order to enhance ourselves step by step toward superior ability, superior sensitivity and refined sounds; in other words, to aspire toward a Way of life – this is our path in music. (Suzuki, 1982, p. 46)

Dr. Suzuki's approach to personal growth and refinement calls for a striving, critical, and committed individual – someone whose deeply meaningful connection to music inspires an attentiveness to his or her self, to others, and to engaged musical exploration. He implores each of us to return over and over again with self-criticality and reflection to the themes of beauty, tone, and living soul.

Through dedication and commitment, Dr. Suzuki developed more sophisticated understandings and deeper insight into music teaching and performance. His example stands as an invitation for teachers to consider – What does it mean for us to continually deepen our own understanding of beauty, tone, and living soul? How might we follow Dr. Suzuki's example in order to stimulate the sophistication of our own teaching approach?

Closing Thoughts - Legacy

Through signature statements such as "Beautiful tone with living soul, please", Dr. Suzuki's legacy continues to endure because he recognized something fundamental to people everywhere – their relation with music – how people from diverse cultures, age groups, and personal backgrounds connect with music in immediate and life-affirming ways. Dr. Suzuki's passion for beauty, tone, and living soul continues to resonate because music touches each of us in ways that bring meaning to our lives – as pleasure, distraction, solace, inspiration, emotion, culture, refuge, transcendence, and

communication. Music lifts us up. Music gives expression to the inexpressible, the irrepressible, and the irresistible. Music brings us together. It helps us to stand on our own. That's why we always go back for more. That's why we cannot imagine our lives without music.

What seems certain in "Beautiful tone with living soul, please" is that Dr. Suzuki intended this phrase to accomplish two things – firstly, as reminder, and secondly, as call to action. On the one hand, he gently reminds each of us to consider how we take inspiration from music, how we relate to music, how music ignites something extraordinary in us. While on the other hand, he calls each of us to grow in sophistication, to pursue our own deeper understanding of music and life, to practice our craft, to challenge our own routines of teaching and music making, to willingly question our understandings. In this way, his signature statement serves as the welcome upbeat to a lifetime of purposeful and joyful musical exploration. It stands as the inspirational thrust for each of us to pursue our own meaningful journeys of "Beautiful tone with living soul, please".

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Bio

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