Creating the Suzuki Environment

by Edward Kreitman

Edward Kreitman leading a group of students from the Naperville Suzuki School at the LaGrange Pet Parade.

I was delighted when *ASJ* Editor Andy Braddock invited me to write about the environment that we have created at the Western Springs School of Talent Education and the Naperville Suzuki School (WSSTE & NSS). Gathering my thoughts for this article, I remembered that the International Suzuki Association had recently made the William Starr interviews with Dr. Suzuki available online. In the first interview, Mr. Starr asked Dr. Suzuki to explain some of the fundamentals of the method. In the first twenty minutes of the video, Dr. Suzuki said the word "environment" eighteen times! Most often when we think about Suzuki's approach to music education, what first comes to mind is the idea of teaching music in the same way that we learn to speak. The method, often referred to as the "mother tongue" approach, relies on Suzuki's observation that children all over the world learn to speak simply by living in an environment where a language is spoken. But the more profound message that Suzuki was trying to convey is that human beings are adaptable creatures, and we will adapt to anything and everything in our environment. This is not limited to speech or music. Children learn all manner of things from their environment.

We all have anecdotal evidence that this phenomenon is true. The most dramatic example that I can share is of a student who started lessons with us in an unconventional way. A friend of mine had a family member who had a child at a very young age. In addition, this mother struggled with a variety of addictions. Her situation was dire, and she was unable to care for her two children. The extended family stepped in and my friend adopted the young boy, who was three years old at the time.

The child had been living in an environment that was completely devoid of stimulation, activity, and opportunity. The child was behind in every metric for his age. Changing the environment had an almost miraculous and immediate effect on this child's life. His new family provided a loving, stable, and supportive home life. He was also enrolled in a private school and came to our Suzuki school to start violin lessons. I was very hesitant at first and wondered how we would be able to support this child. Seven years later, he plays beautifully in Suzuki Book Four, loves music, and has grown into a delightful, social, and engaging young boy who enjoys performing regularly for guests at his family's restaurant. For me, this is a perfect example of Suzuki's idea, "change the environment and the child will adapt."

In thinking about the environment that we have created in our schools, what I know for sure is that the most important aspect of an environment is the people in it. There are many things that we consciously do every day to create the best Suzuki music school experience that we can, and I will share many of them in this article. Ultimately, though, the faculty creates the environment.

I have been so fortunate to work with the most amazing teachers for the past forty-four years. I would like to begin by saying thank you to each of them and naming them in this article. Our cello faculty comprises Suzuki Teacher Trainer Sally Gross, and our Cello Director, Alex Revoal. Together, they have created one of the best cello programs in the country, with a complete program of activities and educational opportunities for our cello students, including the advanced cello choir Cellissimo. Our violin faculty is equally extraordinary. Although retired in 2021, I must include Thomas Wermuth, who taught our advanced students and directed the Chicago Consort for thirty-three years. His presence and legacy still live on at the school. Currently, our violin faculty includes Teacher Trainer Nancy Jackson, Janis Wittrig, Sarah Torrenga, Beth Novak, Ryan Capparella, Maeve O'Hara, Sherri Deroche, and Vicki Szczepaniak who was a student at the school as a child and grew up at WSSTE. The most recent additions to our faculty are husband and wife Patrick and Emily Connolly. They also learned with us from the ages of four and five and continued all the way through the program. Patrick has taken on the role of Director of the Chicago Consort after assisting Tom Wermuth for several years. In June of this year, Patrick and Emily will take over as Directors of WSSTE and NSS.

Over the years we have been very fortunate to have phenomenal collaborative pianists with whom our students have worked. Most recently, Melissa Zindel was our pianist for ten years. When Melissa decided to leave to study law, we were blessed to find the equally talented Maria Yeh, who also happens to be a violinist.

As I am preparing to retire as the Director of my Suzuki Music School after forty-four years, I have been reflecting on my own experiences as well as thinking of Suzuki's idea about adapting to an environment. I was fortunate to have had the very best training in the Suzuki Method, but what is coming up for me now is the realization that I also experienced the very best Suzuki environments. I'm much more aware of how those environments shaped me as a teacher and I am reminded of this beautiful quote by Eric Allen:

> Everyone is my teacher. Some I seek. Some I subconsciously attract. Often I learn simply by observing others. Some may be completely unaware that I'm learning from them, yet I bow deeply in gratitude.

My Suzuki Story

My own Suzuki journey was somewhat unconventional. In 1973, I was a music education major studying the clarinet at Western Illinois University. I was following my dream of becoming a high school band director, a vision that I had held since junior high school. I always knew I wanted to be a music educator, but I had no idea that my life path was about to take a very different turn.

I first heard about the Suzuki Method when Suzuki pioneer Doris Preucil presented the ideas of Suzuki teaching in a violin methods class. While this course lasted only one semester, I was fascinated by Mrs. Preucil's enthusiasm and love for teaching. Later that year, she brought a group of students from her home Suzuki program in Iowa City to perform a full-length program at the university.

Sitting in Browne Hall and listening to these fantastic young artists perform was life-changing for me. I was fortunate to have had excellent music programs and opportunities in my formative years. The instrumental music program in my hometown of Elmhurst, Illinois, was one of the finest in the state, and I had the privilege of taking private lessons from the beginning. In my last two years of high school, I studied with Jerome Stowell, the associate principal clarinetist in the Chicago Symphony. While I had experienced musical excellence throughout my youth, I had never heard anything like what was coming from these young violinists who played with such artistry and ease.

My musical background was entirely traditional, and both my high school and college band directors were excellent musicians. But sadly, they were tyrants on the podium. They were able to get top-notch performances out of their groups, but they achieved their results through fear, intimidation, and competition. I hate to think about how I might have turned out just like them had I not met Mrs. Preucil.

My first inkling that the Suzuki approach was entirely different from my own traditional background was when I had a conversation with Mrs. Preucil after her students' concert. I asked her how I could find out more about this amazing method. I fully expected her response to be something along the lines of, "Well, the Suzuki Method is for violin, but you're a clarinetist," and that would have been the end of the conversation. But I remember verbatim her actual response: "One day, the Suzuki Method will be for every instrument! Bill and I are working on the viola volumes right now. Come along and join our Suzuki pedagogy class. *You* are going to write the Suzuki Clarinet Books." How is that for the power of positive thinking? Of course, things didn't turn out quite that way.

I joined her Suzuki Pedagogy class, so my first experience with the Suzuki environment was to be a part of a Suzuki program taught by one of the most incredible teachers that I have ever had the privilege to observe. I started taking violin lessons with one of the graduate students and observed the private and group class teaching of Mrs. Preucil every week. The following year, Almita and Roland Vamos came to WIU and my music world became even richer as I started to take lessons with Mrs. Vamos and play in the orchestra under Dr. Vamos's baton. Tanya Carey was developing the Suzuki cello program at WIU during this same period and I'm so happy to say that this was the beginning of friendships that have lasted for fifty years. I can not imagine having been part of a more rich Suzuki environment.

The Early Years of Western Springs School of Talent Education

As I came to the realization that my small Suzuki Program in Western Springs was actually a music school, I started to think about the environment I wanted to create. To be successful in anything, one needs to start with a vision. My vision was so simple that I put it on the back of our school T-shirts: "Come for Twinkle . . . stay for Tchaikovsky." What is implied in this simple statement is that everyone is welcome, everyone is capable of beginning, and we have the environment, resources, information, programs, and faculty to sustain a student's development through the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of music instruction.

While many of the things I will write about next are easier to accomplish in a school environment with many students at all levels, I will also give some suggestions for ways to achieve these same goals even when the studio is small or the teacher is just starting out.

Two posters (see photo) are displayed in every studio and classroom in our schools: one outlines the principles of the Suzuki Method, and the other outlines the Teaching Priorities from Teaching from the Balance Point to which our faculty adheres. We hope that every new parent will remember these points about the Suzuki Method from their ongoing parent education, but the posters serve as an ever-present reminder in the environment.

Posters displayed in every teaching classroom outlining the Suzuki Principles and priorities covered in this article.

What are these principles, and how do they shape the environment at WSSTE and NSS?

Every Child Can

Based on Dr. Suzuki's observation that every child learns to speak his or her native language, we conclude that ***every child has musical ability****. Creating a positive musical environment is paramount to developing that ability.*

This overriding principle of the Suzuki method drives every decision at the school and our acceptance of new students. There are very few situations in which a student would not be a good fit for our program. Our faculty's conscious intention is to teach with positivity and encouragement rather than criticism or competition. When students and parents struggle, we help them work through their difficulties rather than dismiss them. We help the students create goals and milestones such as completing a piece in the repertoire, solo recital performances, book recitals, large group concerts, and other motivating programs. Some of these include field trips to hear a soloist perform, playing in the park, performing in our local parade, ice cream socials, and preparation for school orchestra events such as solo and ensemble contests and the Illinois Music Association's regional and all-state auditions. We also provide performance opportunities for our advanced students through our three performing ensembles. Cellissimo is our advanced Cello Choir co-directed by Sally Gross and Alex Revoal. Allegro!!!, co-directed by Jennifer Mather and me, is a violin ensemble for Book Five–Six students and offers a unique approach to programming based on the work of Dean Marshall and Barrage. The Chicago Consort, founded by Artistic Director Thomas Wermuth and now led by Patrick Connolly, is our touring ensemble, which has represented the Suzuki Method on the world stage for over thirty-five years.

Developing the Whole Child

"Our purpose does not lie in a movement to create professional musicians but to create persons of a beautiful mind and fine ability. We engage in human education through music so the children will grow with beautiful and high sensitivity through an unparalleled, uniquely musical approach." Shin'ichi Suzuki

In the early days of our school, we were proud to have had our graduating students accepted into degree programs at the country's leading conservatories. These days, we are less inclined to steer a student in that direction. Rising tuition costs and the shrinking job market make it untenable to encourage students to pursue a career in music performance when they have many other career options. Only if a student truly feels that a musical career is their life calling will we support them in every way possible. We still encourage excellence in our students' playing. Many of our students continue to play in college and many receive substantial scholarships for playing in the orchestra or chamber groups. We encourage them to enjoy a lifelong music avocation while working in other meaningful careers. What we most hope to instill in our students is the idea of cooperation and kindness. Dr. Suzuki said that if a child is exposed to beautiful music, he will develop a sensitivity for beauty in the world. We know that playing a musical instrument is difficult, and we want the students and parents to understand the benefits of commitment, hard work, and problem-solving. These life skills will serve the students in every area of their lives, but they learn them in the music studio.

It is hard to put a label on these life skill qualities, but they are easily recognized. I remember once at the Ithaca Suzuki Institute when Sandy Reuning invited all the faculty out to a special dinner. As we enjoyed our meal, I couldn't help but notice that our server, a young college-age woman, was handling the large party with grace, ease, and a very friendly personality. I was so taken with her ability to manage our group so effortlessly that I mentioned to Mr. Reuning that she was really an extraordinary young person. I wasn't entirely surprised when Sandy said, "Oh yes, she's one of our Suzuki Program graduates . . . and she also plays a beautiful Mendelssohn Concerto."

Parental Involvement

As with learning a language, the parent is the child's main teacher. The parent attends lessons and acts as the "home teacher" during daily practice sessions.

While there are very few situations where we won't accept a student into our school, there are some instances where we cannot embark upon the Suzuki journey with a family because the parent is not interested or willing to make the required commitment, especially with a young child. We think it is best to explain the parental role up front and we are clear about the expectations so that there are no disappointments later. We ask the parent to attend private and group instruction with their child and to commit to daily practice and listening to the reference recordings at home. There also needs to be some flexibility around this idea of parents as home teachers. What we are really looking for is a reliable "home practice partner." We have had many situations where the "Suzuki parent" was actually a nanny, a grandparent, an aunt, an older sibling, or a family friend. As long as this person is committed to assisting the student with home practice and a listening regime and can regularly attend private lessons, these situations can be extremely successful.

Early Beginning

The early years are crucial for developing mental processes and muscle coordination. Formal instruction can begin as early as age three or four, but it is never too late to start.

One of the things that I've noticed working with teachers in SAA training courses is that many of them are working with older beginners. When I question why that is, they usually tell me that the source of their students is from a local public school orchestra program. While there is nothing wrong with an older beginner and while we will certainly accept a student at any point on their path, the Suzuki method is especially effective with younger children. I encourage new teachers to shift their thinking about where they might meet their potential students: pre-schools, new mother's groups on social media, home-school fairs, or anywhere that young families are likely to be in attendance. It takes a long time to develop a well-trained instrumentalist. Starting at an early age (3–6) allows for the full development of the student through all three stages of beginner, intermediate, and advanced player before the student graduates from high school. The most compelling reason for starting early is a phenomenon that I can provide no scientific evidence for, but is one that I have observed countless times in my career. When a student begins lessons, their progress and skill development grow gradually. Each day, week, and month, the child adds to their previous skills. When the student reaches adolescence, something really extraordinary happens. Whatever level of skill that has been accumulated to this point is multiplied exponentially. A student who has started at four or five years old will likely be playing at the level of Bach A Minor Concerto from Book Seven by the time they are twelve or thirteen. A year later, this student may be playing Mendelssohn Concerto. A student who begins at ten may only be midway through Book Two when they reach adolescence, and thus their "multiplication factor" will be far less dramatic.

Listening

Listening to music every day is important. Listening to the Suzuki repertoire your child is studying is essential to making excellent progress on your instrument.

Since I started teaching the Suzuki Method, I have lived through the eras of LP recordings, cassette tapes, compact discs, and now MP3 files and music streaming. I find nowadays, I have to spend much more time educating parents about how to create the best listening environment at home for their children. Searching for the Suzuki reference recordings can be difficult for non-musical parents, so we have included all of the links on the "Parent Resources" tab on our school's website, wsste.com. Parents can find what they are looking for in just two clicks. But once the files are downloaded, I need to ask how the recordings are being listened to. Most of the time, I learn that it is on the parent's phone. I highly recommend that the family invest in a good quality Bluetooth speaker, such as the Bose Soundlink mini II, which can be purchased for about $150. It is important that the family hears the reference recording on good quality equipment because this is the foundation of their home musical environment.

Repetition

Constant repetition through review of the repertoire is how we build our skills. New pieces teach interesting new techniques, but skill is built through the repetition of previously learned material.

One of the most unique concepts in the Suzuki approach to music learning is the idea of review. Of course, this comes directly from Suzuki's observation of how children learn to speak their native language. We do not discard words from our vocabulary when new ones are learned. We keep every word and continue to use them as we build our vocabulary on that foundation. I grew up as a traditional music student. My experience was that I was always learning new repertoire for a specific purpose. Whatever piece I was working on, I was learning to perform for an audition, a contest, a recital, a concert, or a jury. When that event was over, I never played that piece again. I went on to the next piece which was invariably more difficult than the piece I had just finished. So my experience of performing was that I was always playing "on my edge" and never in my comfort zone. This is one of the most significant examples of how Suzuki teaching is different from traditional. We always make sure that Suzuki students are performing from their review repertoire and are totally comfortable with the music they play. This makes for stress-free solo recitals.

At our schools, we offer six solo recital dates throughout the year and there are two to three recitals on each date. We want to be sure that every child has the opportunity to perform at least once each year, and many will choose to perform more than once. I want to be sure that our students do not have the kind of performance experience that I did growing up, where I was always nervous and worried about getting through my piece. The first thing that we talk about when getting ready to perform is that a performance is an opportunity to share a gift with the audience. It is not a time to be judged or critiqued. There will always be things that can be improved in one's playing, but recitals are the time to celebrate progress, notice all the good things that are happening, and encourage a positive attitude from parents and teachers.

There are a number of "policies" that we've instituted throughout the years that I think are helpful to share here. We offer the opportunity for the youngest and least advanced students in our program to participate in what we call the "Beginners Recital." This event takes place in a small chapel, is very informal, and does not make use of our collaborative pianist. The children take turns standing in front of the group and showing us some small aspect of their playing. Sometimes it is just getting up and taking a bow. Others might play a Twinkle variation rhythm on an open string and someone else might play a section of Twinkle. We always have treats for the performers afterward, and the whole experience is designed to be completely stress-free and celebratory. We want the children to associate playing in a recital with joy.

Before a student is invited to perform on one of the regular solo recitals, I ask the parent to bring their child to a solo recital as a member of the audience. After they had attended the recital, at their next lesson, I ask if they enjoyed hearing the other students perform and if they would like to play in the next one. I think this is a crucial step. I can't imagine asking a child to play on a solo recital if they don't know what this is. Who knows what they might be conjuring up inside their head?

The next step in ensuring a long future of successful solo recital performances is to make sure that the first one goes well. For this reason, we have every student perform Twinkle Variation A and Theme as their piece on their first formal solo recital. This recital takes place in the sanctuary of the church, has more children performing on it, and all performers are accompanied by our collaborative pianist. We program our recitals so that there are beginners, intermediate, and advanced performers on each recital. This is a conscious decision to create an inspiring environment for both students and parents. Children hear pieces that are coming up in the repertoire and look forward to working on those pieces. Intermediate students start to hear and learn repertoire that is outside or beyond the Suzuki books and they get excited about playing at that level as well.

After the student has performed Twinkle on their first recital, in future recitals they may play a piece of their choosing from a suggested list of review repertoire. Teachers help the children to choose a piece that is several pieces prior to their current piece. It is important that the child has the ability to choose the piece they will perform but it is equally important that they are limited to pieces that are in their review repertoire.

On the subject of pianists, I cannot stress enough how important it is to have a professional pianist who has an interest and skill in working with young students. In preparation for the recital, our students have a 15-minute rehearsal with the pianist up through Book Three and an additional 30-minute coaching with the pianist from Book Four on. It is critical that the student's performance be enhanced by the skill and musicality of the pianist. I have heard many unsuccessful student performances because the pianist was a well-meaning parent or someone who struggled to get through the accompaniment. I encourage every teacher to search in their area for the best, most supportive pianist they can find and develop a relationship with that person to enhance and support the program.

Encouragement

Each child learns at his or her own rate. Children and parents are encouraged to support each other's efforts. Our motto is: "Cooperation, not competition"

This is an essential lesson for the parents and children in our program. They live in a world that is driven by competition. In school, in sports, and seemingly everywhere they turn, they are encouraged and motivated by competing with others. We believe that everyone does better when supported by the entire community. Of course, we understand the reality of the "outside music world." As students progress into the intermediate and advanced levels, they will participate in concerto competitions, auditions for school orchestras and state-sponsored music festivals, and possibly college auditions. It is our job to prepare students for these types of situations so that they have realistic expectations going in. Having served on the board of a local symphony, I have sat in on the adjudication process of concerto competitions and understand that many other factors are being considered besides "who played the best," which is in and of itself completely subjective based on the opinions and biases of the jury. I have seen students passed over because "their teacher's student won the competition for the last two years in a row," or because, "the orchestra doesn't own the orchestration to that piece, and it is available for rental only, which isn't in the budget," and even "the orchestra cannot pull off the orchestration to that piece."

We want to protect our students for as long as possible from the inevitable disappointments of competition. By its very nature, competition implies that only one or two will be successful, and we are searching for ways to help every child feel successful in their musical endeavors.

Learning with Other Children

Group classes are a required part of our Suzuki program. Children enjoy learning to play with others and sharing their music together.

The most significant factor in creating a positive learning environment at our schools is our group class program and the performing ensembles that are an outgrowth of that program. We feel so strongly about the benefits of participating in group classes that it is included in the tuition. We will only accept a student into our program if the family can commit to participating in group as well as private instruction.

Group class begins for a student the day they enroll in the school. We offer a violin group experience at Pre-Twinkle, Twinkle, Book One, Book Two, Book Three, Book Four, Book Five–Six, and advanced violin ensemble for Book Seven and above. The cello groups are structured more loosely around the levels of the current students and often combine students from adjacent book levels.

The curriculum for each class is different and I will explain some of these differences here. What is important to keep in mind is the purpose of group class. First, we are learning the important skill of ensemble playing, which cannot be taught in a one-on-one lesson. Second, we are reinforcing the skills and teaching points that have been introduced in the private lesson. Here we are able to do many more repetitions of a skill because of the power of the group. Children are willing to do the extra repetitions because everyone else is doing them, and we are doing them together in a positive, fun manner. Third, is to enjoy the social and community-building experience of joining together with friends to make music together every week. I know that something valuable is happening for the children and parents at group class because we have nearly 100% attendance every week.

I often hear from newer Suzuki teachers that they don't think they have enough students to have a group class. I remind them that "Two is a group." When trying to get groups started in

a program that hasn't had group classes as part of the structure of the program, I recommend having a pizza party. Everyone brings their instrument and there is some playing together and then sharing of the pizza. Do this once or twice and the families will be begging you to have them more often.

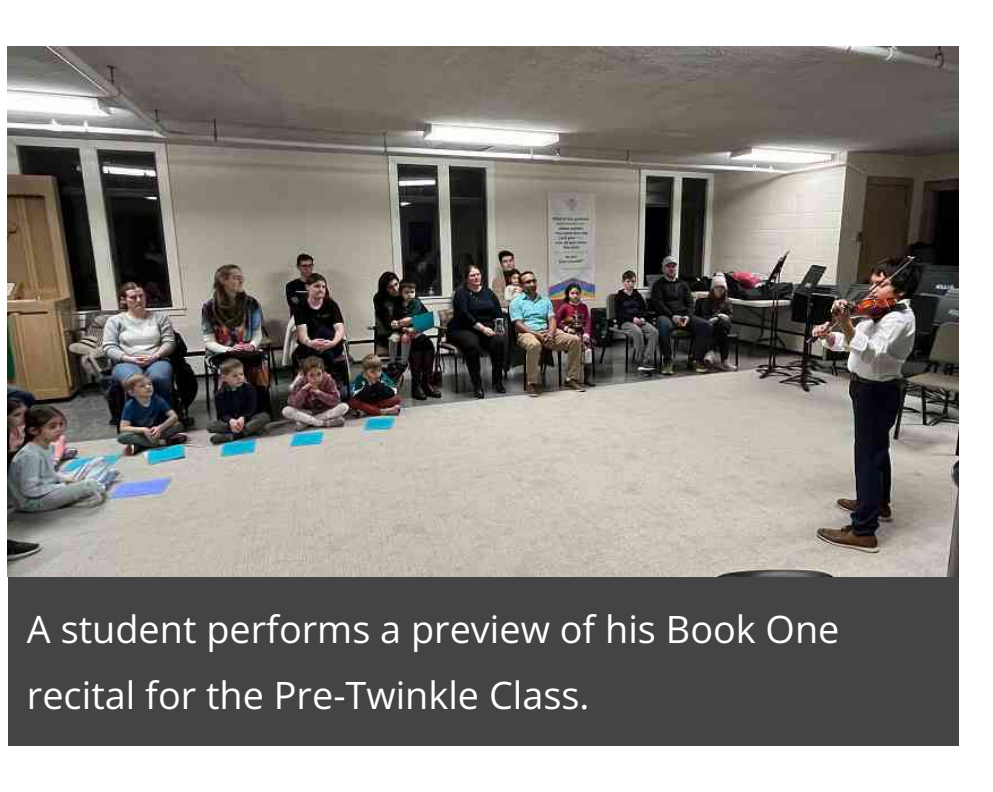
Before I discuss the curriculum for the instrumental group classes, I want to say that we are very fortunate that we are also able to offer the Suzuki Early Childhood Education curriculum at our schools. Two of our violin faculty, Vicki Szczepaniak and Maeve O'Hara have founded Suzuki Early Childhood Chicago. Partnering with them has allowed us to benefit from the new enrollment of students and parents who have been prepared for instrumental music lessons through the environment provided by SECE training.

Pre-Twinkle Class

This group is for students from day one up until Go Tell Aunt Rhody. In this class

This group is for students from day one up until Go Tell Aunt Rhody. In this class, the practice partner sits on a chair behind their student so that they can assist the student with posture and bow hold skills. The focus of this class is to reinforce the pre-Twinkle and Twinkle skills in a group setting but without any playing together. The children take turns demonstrating or playing one by one for each other. We reinforce all of the “play by ear” listening skills such as “same and different” and “higher and lower” as well as learning about the logic of their instrument. We also use this class to educate children and parents about recital etiquette by inviting an older student who may be ready to perform a Book One recital to play their program for the Pre-Twinkle Class.

Twinkle Class


A student performs a preview of his Book One recital for the Pre-Twinkle Class.

The Twinkle class is for students who are working on Go Tell Aunt Rhody to Perpetual Motion. The repertory level of each class is designed to be well below the pieces the students are working on in their individual lessons. The reason for this is that the student needs to be able to make subtle adjustments to their tone, timing, intonation, and articulation. Making these adjustments requires a level of skill that is only present in their review pieces.

In the Twinkle class, the room is configured differently from Pre-Twinkle. Here, the parents are sitting in front of the class, and the children stand in rows from tallest to smallest, facing the instructor and parents. I know some teachers prefer to have the parents sit behind or to the side of the students, but I find that it is good recital training for the students to be able to focus on the teacher and ignore the parents. It is also good training for the parents to be able to sit and observe the class without distracting anyone.

The main focus of the Twinkle Class is learning how to play together so that the group sounds like one big violin. This requires tremendous focus and concentration and the ability to listen to the sound of the teacher’s instrument, the sound of the rest of the class, and the student’s own instrument at the same time so that they can make the subtle adjustments necessary to place their sound together with everyone else’s. Once the students have learned how to do this, they are ready to move on to the Book One Class.

Book One Class

This class continues to focus on playing with fine posture and bow hold while reinforcing the teaching points of each piece. During the course of a school term, we will alternate between focusing on review, sometimes just playing through the book, a particular technique (for example, “let’s play all of the staccato bow pieces today”) and preparation for a group concert. During the six weeks prior to a concert, we shift our focus to make our ensemble and musical expression especially wonderful. We also want to remember that at the concert we will only play each piece one time, so if our best rendition of the piece is the second or third time through, the audience will never get to hear that one.

Book Two Class

Following the pedagogy of the Suzuki Curriculum, Book Two Class focuses primarily on tonalization skills. We set aside the entire winter term for the “Tonalization Celebration.” Each student will have studied Dr. Suzuki’s tonalization technique in their individual lessons, but here we have the opportunity to review all of the skills of tonalization in the group context and explore and enjoy the power of tonalizing together in a group.

Book Three Class

In this class we turn our attention to musical expression and focus on finding all of the hierarchal layers of a piece. We study each piece from the first note to the last note. We study the form of the piece and understand its musical structure. We work on the musical line or phrase and the level just below the phrase. This is the level of “note grouping” as explained by David McGill in his book, Sound in Motion. For a detailed explanation of my interpretation of this work, see Teaching with an Open Heart: A Guide to Conscious Musicianship for Suzuki Parents, Teachers, and Students. Finally, we listen to the level of individual notes, making sure that each note has the appropriate attack, sustain, and release for its function in the piece.

Book Four Class

Starting in Book Four, we continue to reinforce the skills learned in the repertoire and enjoy exploring the techniques of shifting and vibrato, as well as scale work and the study of the circle of fifths. Book Four is the first time that the students are playing music that was composed for the violin. This is a huge shift since everything in the first three books was transcribed by Dr. Suzuki for the violin (with the exception of his compositions). Additionally, other than the Böhm Perpetual Motion, every piece in Book Four is a concerto. I’ve always thought that Suzuki students have a distorted concept of what a concerto is because we are always playing the solo part together as a group accompanied by one person playing an orchestral reduction on the piano. When in reality, a concerto is performed by one person accompanied by the many members of the orchestra behind them. In order to help the students have a better understanding of the concerto genre, we do a project in the Book Four Class every fall semester. Each week, the students are asked to go to YouTube with their parents and search for “violin concerto.” The assignment is to choose one movement of a concerto performed by an artist player and report back to the class the following week. What I love about this assignment is that in addition to learning what the concerto looks and sounds like, they are becoming familiar with all of the violinists of our time and the concerto repertoire for the violin. I love watching this assignment evolve over the twelve weeks of the term. The first week, each student arrives at group class with a little piece of paper upon which they have written down the name of the violinist, composer, orchestra, and conductor, and it is a bit hilarious to hear some of the pronunciations of the composer and conductor names. But after a few weeks’ time, they don’t need the little reminder paper. The students start to come in and talk about the concerto they listened to. Then, one day, one of the children will say something like, “I watched Hilary Hahn perform the Sibelius Concerto with the Chicago Symphony,” and right away one of the other students will exclaim, “I saw that video too!” That’s when I know that the assignment has been successful.

Allegro!!!

I once took a Book Five teacher training course with William Starr in which he described the Vivaldi Concerto in G minor as “death to the violin.” I thought this was hilarious. I actually love the Vivaldi G minor, but I completely agree with Mr. Starr that for some students, it is a very long piece, and for an eleven or twelve-year-old, maybe not the most exciting music they have ever heard.

It is largely because of this that I developed the Allegro!!! Ensemble at our school. Students are eligible to audition for Allegro!!! after learning the Bach Double Concerto in Book Four. The Allegro!!! experience is transformational for each of the students who participate. It also has had a 100% success rate. In over twenty-five years, we have never had a student stop playing the violin after being a part of the Allegro!!! group. Based on the work of Dean Marshall and his world-renowned performing group Barrage, Allegro!!! incorporates live music, choreography, staging, theatre lighting, and videos to create a dynamic, awe-inspiring one-hour show. The group has delighted audiences all across the United States, Puerto Rico, and China. They have performed for the Suzuki Association of the Americas National Conference and for the American String Teachers Association Conference. The process of creating the show begins in October when the members of the group are chosen by audition. First, their music is rehearsed and memorized, and then the choreography is added during a three-day retreat weekend. Many former Allegro!!! members have said that it was the most fun that they ever had playing their violin.

What I love most about the Allegro!!! experience for the students is that in order to add the choreography to their playing, they must achieve the level of “mastery” in the playing of the repertoire. For some of the students, this may be the first time that they have achieved this level of playing. The main draw for the students is that the Allegro!!! group is extremely social. The students spend a lot of time together rehearsing, performing, and traveling. Playing music that is relatable to them is another important reason why this program is so successful.

Cellissimo

For our most advanced cellists, we have Cellissimo, which is a cello choir of typically 12 to 16 students. While there is no choreography involved, their repertoire is also extremely varied and much of it is fun to play. With music available from Two Cellos, the Piano Guys, and the like, there is a wealth of material that the students connect with. Of course, they also perform more serious classical music and have even had pieces composed and arranged for the group. While Cellissimo has been somewhat limited in their ability to travel internationally due to the logistics of traveling with cellos, they have toured regionally in the United States and have performed for the Suzuki Association of the Americas International Ensembles Concert and were featured at the SAA Leadership Retreat in Ohio.

Chicago Consort

Founded by Thomas Wermuth in 1990, this group has been our school’s touring ambassador for the Suzuki Method on the world stage. Again, repertoire is crucial and we are so fortunate to have a wealth of material in our library that was arranged for the ensemble by Mr. Wermuth. Our tradition continues as our current Music Director, Patrick Connolly, also arranges material for the group to perform. Under Mr. Wermuth’s direction, the group performed throughout Europe, South America, North America, Cuba, and China. This June we are looking forward to traveling to South Africa and collaborating with the Suzuki students there as well as members of the Cape Town Camerata.

Not every student in our program will participate in our performing ensembles. For some students, participation in their school orchestra and the reading orchestra at our school may be enough group participation to keep them motivated. But we want to be sure that we are offering enough additional programming to keep most of our students musically and socially engaged.

Group Class Concerts

In addition to our six solo recital days, we also plan two large all-school group class concerts. In the fall, we combine the group classes from Western Springs and Naperville to present each of our group class levels individually. On this concert, we enjoy hearing the musical and technical progress of the students as we move from Twinkle to the more advanced levels of playing. In the Spring, we present a “playdown” style of concert. In this format, we begin with the most advanced level on stage and play down through the repertoire, adding more and more children to the stage until all students play the Twinkles together at the end. This type of concert is very exciting for all of the students. The advanced players enjoy performing their old Suzuki repertoire with greater skill, ease, and musicality. Often they will play the Book One pieces in upper positions or add a harmony part. For the little ones, the opportunity to stand in the middle of the sound of the advanced players is thrilling. The large group class events are another way of creating an environment of community at the schools. Everyone is working together toward a common goal and it is fun to gather all at once in a beautiful venue to enjoy the progress of each level of student at the school.

Creative Ability Development Classes

One of our faculty members, Maeve O’Hara, was a student of Alice Kanack, the founder of CAD or Creative Ability Development. Maeve’s first-hand knowledge and training in CAD’s unique approach to teaching improvisation allows our students to experience this wonderful program through group class instruction and as an elective offering when we have our winter workshop. For more about CAD, see Alice Kanack’s article in ASJ Volume 51, number 2.

Chamber Music Camp

Perhaps because of the commitment required of our group class programs, we have found it difficult to sustain a chamber music program throughout the school year. However, we find that many students are interested in exploring chamber music, and we are able to offer that experience in the summer term: our week-long Chamber Music Camp led by faculty members Ryan Capparella and Alex Revoal. This intensive experience allows our students to experience small ensemble music-making at a very high level. During the week, the students have a daily coaching session, a scheduled rehearsal hour, a string orchestra rehearsal, and a musicianship class. Additionally, all participants enjoy a trip to the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago to hear an excellent program of classical music. Their week wraps up with a concert where each of the ensembles performs for the rest of the group along with the chamber orchestra.

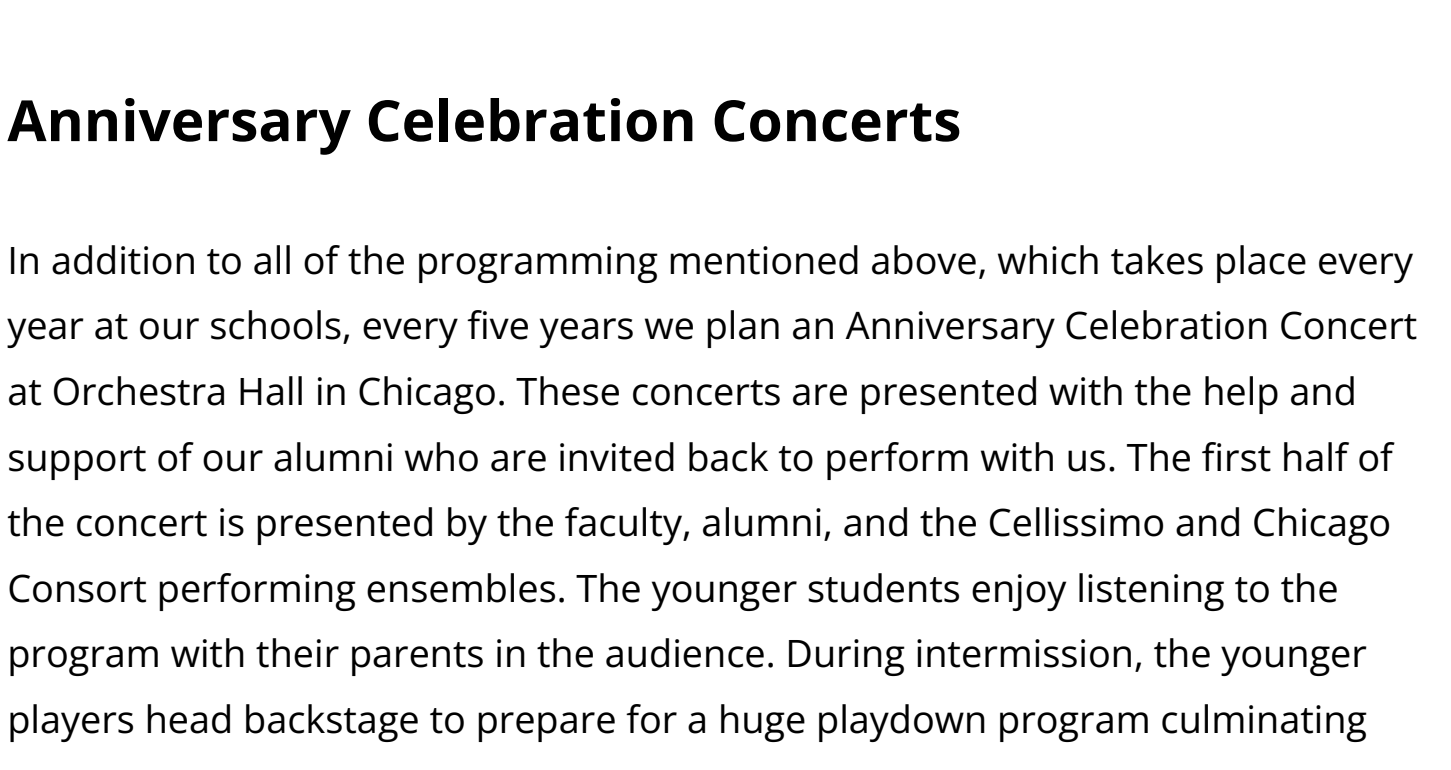
Suzuki Access For All

The Western Springs School of Talent Education and the Naperville Suzuki School’s reputation for excellence puts us at the center of the worldwide Suzuki movement. Those of us who are leaders in this movement carry a responsibility for how the Suzuki Method evolves into the future. Our faculty, along with our colleagues in all of the countries represented by the Suzuki Association of the Americas, are greatly concerned that our method has evolved in a way that is not accessible to every member of our community. Of course, this was never Dr. Suzuki’s intention. His powerful conviction to his belief in the ability of ALL children led us to name our introductory teacher’s course “Every Child Can.”

At WSSTE and NSS, we had to ask, “Does the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial makeup of our student body reflect that of our community?” Sadly, the answer to this question was “no.”

To study this concern, I enrolled in the inaugural Growing Equitable Music Studios (GEMS) class with Clara Hardie, the founder and director of Detroit Youth Volume. During this intensive six-week course, we studied ways to work toward building equity, inclusion, and access for students who, for various reasons, have not been a part of our schools. As a result of this work, we have launched a new program at our school, Suzuki Access for All (SAFA). Our goal is to be able to provide scholarships and other support to students of color or financial hardship within our community.

We want to take a step toward building a student body at WSSTE and NSS that better reflects the communities we serve. We aim to raise enough funds to support three students at each campus for at least three years. We will need to raise $10,000 per year to achieve this goal. The SAFA program will run under the auspices of our 501(c)(3) non-profit West Suburban Suzuki Foundation so that all donations are tax-deductible. We are now in our third year of the SAFA program, and I am happy to report that we have reached our fundraising and scholarship goals each year.


The Anniversary Celebration Concert in Chicago’s Orchestra Hall, featuring students, faculty, and alumni from the WSSTE and NSS programs.

Anniversary Celebration Concerts

In addition to all of the programming mentioned above, which takes place every year at our schools, every five years we plan an Anniversary Celebration Concert at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. These concerts are presented with the help and support of our alumni who are invited back to perform with us. The first half of the concert is presented by the faculty, alumni, and the Cellissimo and Chicago Consort performing ensembles. The younger students enjoy listening to the program with their parents in the audience. During intermission, the younger players head backstage to prepare for a huge playdown program culminating with hundreds of performers on the stage for the Twinkle Variations.

This year we will celebrate forty-four years of Suzuki music-making at WSSTE and NSS at Orchestra Hall on May 26th, the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. All are invited to attend. Tickets will be available at the CSO box office (cso.org) in April.

I appreciate the opportunity to share how we have created a successful Suzuki environment at WSSTE and NSS. I hope that some readers will benefit from these ideas and perhaps implement one or two of them in their programs. I want to close with a letter that I received from a parent of four Suzuki students at our schools which was included with her final tuition payment. Receiving a note like this makes all the time and hard work it takes to implement these programs worthwhile.

> Of all my life’s accomplishments, I count finding you as one of its highlights. Because of you, we have met so many incredible, caring, and loving teachers and families. Because of you, we have traveled all over the world and been given opportunities that not many students or families can claim. Because of you, my children know how to work hard, work every day, over and over and over, whether it is on a concerto or a difficult math problem. Because of you, they do not wilt under pressure—they will do what it takes to get the job done. You have helped my husband and me know how to parent, with encouragement and consistency, whether it’s music or chores. Okay, it’s because of me that they don’t starve—I was the one to come up with snacks at Allegro!!! Practices—but everything else, you.

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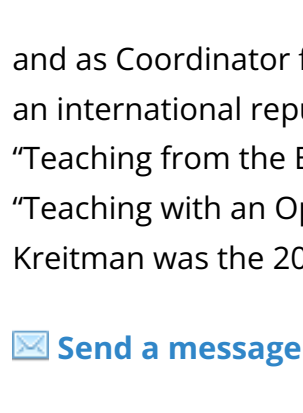

Edward Kreitman is the founder and Director of the Western Springs School of Talent Education and the Naperville Suzuki School. Mr. Kreitman received his undergraduate degree from Western Illinois University where he studied Suzuki Pedagogy with Doris Preucil and Almita Vamos. In 1986 , he studied with Dr. Suzuki at the Talent Education Summer School in Matsumoto, Japan.

Mr. Kreitman has served the SAA in many capacities including a member of the Board of Directors, Violin Committee, Teacher Development team and as Coordinator for several National Suzuki Teacher Conferences. Edward Kreitman enjoys an international reputation as a registered Teacher Trainer of the SAA and is the author of “Teaching from the Balance Point: A Guide for Suzuki Parents, Teachers and Students” and “Teaching with an Open Heart: A guide to developing Conscious Musicianship.” Edward Kreitman was the 2019 recipient of the IL ASTA Studio Teacher of the Year Award.

Send a message to Edward Kreitman

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