

# An Eastern Approach to the Philosophy of the Development of Tone Colour in the SUZUKI™ Method

by Mauro Bianco Levrin, ESA Teacher, Guitar, Italy



In the SUZUKI™ Method the continued research for a kind of tone<sup>1</sup> capable of being recognized as excellent, is a factor of primary importance. Out of the vast themes which can emerge from the title, I have chosen to focus on an aspect very dear to me - to define the reason for that importance.

In Dr. Suzuki's thoughts, from which intentions, recommendations and processes have emerged which we can define as "The Suzuki Method™ Philosophy", the quality of tone produced by a player - and, although not completely, even by a child who has just begun to play an instrument - is linked to his deepest inner qualities. From this point of view, the quality of tone shows the quality of thought and the behaviour of the person who produces it. We need to underline that the word "quality" implies a whole range of possibilities concerning thought and behaviour and, as a consequence, to the tone colour a person is capable of producing on his instrument. Thus, a nice sound may be connected to a person's agreeable nature, or to his kindness, whereas a disagreeable sound, apart from medical problems, can be synonymous with an inner imbalance, temporary or permanent, or can be the sign of an egotistical approach to the instrument, which may be confined to producing mere technical and digital ability.

During the last decades there has been a serious debate in artistic and musical fields on the definition of "beauty", which has unfortunately distorted its meaning, claiming that good and bad tone does not exist, and that on the contrary, each sound transmits specific qualities all equal to each other. Regarding this viewpoint, it would be best to quote the famous sentence: "All men are equal, but some are more equal than others", but modify it to "Admitted that all sounds are equal, some prove to be clearly more acceptable than others"! In any case Dr. Suzuki's point of view on this subject was very clear, resulting in the production of a tone colour rich in fundamental harmonics, tone which can be defined as being "warm" or "soft", reflecting human nature's highest qualities. Among various demonstrations of such an ability, I will always remember that of Miss Yuriko Watanabe's as an exemplary model<sup>2</sup>.

At this point we can ask ourselves how a warm, deep, mellow tone, devoid of any metallic or angular sound, can mirror noble inner qualities, whereas a different tone cannot do the same. To answer such a question I think it is necessary to divert our attention from the purely musical and artistic side and focus instead on the underlying motivations which have imbued Dr. Suzuki's whole life and personal research, in which the main purpose of his approach was to educate people with wonderful character. In consequence it is necessary to ask which natural inner vibration could be the one that - aside from the ups and downs of life - habitually permeates the thoughts of a subject who possesses those marvellous qualities on which Dr. Suzuki used to place so much emphasis. We need to remember that Dr. Suzuki was born and grew up in a social environment deeply rooted in the Zen-Buddhist as well as in the Shinto tradition, in which the human mind is essentially part of an immaterial cosmos or, in other words, is composed of an infinitely subtle

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and impalpable substance for which man constantly yearns. The answer we were looking for can be found in that quintessential part - the refinement of the human soul and of those qualities which will lead to the subject becoming a good person, constantly striving to become a “better citizen” (S. Suzuki). In line with this philosophical outlook, the musical instrument is conceived as a tool which reveals something which humanly is not audible: the beauty of the soul and its various attributes, such as altruism, dedication to society and one’s fellow man, respect for people and for the rules of society, nobility of soul, etc. Lastly, since in this context the beauty of the soul is a fundamental aspect on which the whole Suzuki philosophy is based, it goes without saying that the player, starting from the very beginning, should continually research and develop the ability to produce a sound whose tone colour can reflect such beauty, to the maximum degree personally achievable. The position of the instrument, the pressure and weight that a violinist exerts on the bow or, in the case of guitarists, the shape of the nails, the position and tension of the wrist and right hand, and the trajectory of the fingers, etc. are elements to which it is necessary to devote great attention. In fact it is from these elements, together with any other necessary factors, that it will be possible for the player to unveil his soul so that it becomes audible to other human beings. Moreover, through the production of sound which is imbued with beauty, anyone can contribute to raising the physical world’s level of vibration and as a consequence, the level of consciousness of mankind.

Finally one last consideration: in this short essay I have viewed the entire subject through personal research, but the same philosophical definition is also fully valid at a didactical level. In the same way that efforts to improve oneself sharpen our perceptual and behavioural abilities, a teacher - meaning anyone who teaches anything to another person - who now or in the past has developed his own abilities, can provide an example and help others, mainly young students, to move forward step by step in the process of ability development. Moreover, in his own teaching, the teacher himself also benefits, learns more and refines his own personal and didactical characteristics. On a musical level, the teacher must always remember that young students unconsciously try to imitate his sound and tone colour more than by verbal explanations, and that to some degree, they try to copy their teacher’s personality and behaviour. The responsibility that the Suzuki Method™ lays on each teacher’s shoulders, regardless of whether he is a professional teacher or a parent, is indeed enormous.

In writing this essay, I did not intend a deep analysis of the fundamental aspects of the Suzuki Method™, but instead I have tried to give a more eastern slant to a didactical system born in the far east which, in becoming better known in the west, has been at times perhaps unconsciously deprived of its deepest essence.

## Note 1

In this essay, to avoid confusion for the non-professional reader, the words sound and tone have the same meaning as the word more commonly defined as tone colour.

## Note 2

The Japanese violinist Yuriko Watanabe was a Suzuki student as a child and trained to become a Suzuki teacher with Dr. Suzuki. Because of the deep level of understanding that she attained during her studies, at the age of just 29 she was chosen by Dr. Suzuki himself to be his personal assistant

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and to this end accompanied him on countless trips to demonstrate his concept of tone. She played an essential part during the Suzuki conferences and workshops which were held both in Japan and abroad, exemplifying the quality of tone that he wanted all teachers to strive for. In fact, the attainment of such varied tone colour meant that the focus on self-reflection and development of the person's best abilities during the course of study had already been achieved.

*This paper was presented at the SMA (Suzuki Method in Action) teachers' meeting which took place on May 1st , 2015 in Saluzzo, Italy, and was organized by the Saluzzo Suzuki Association.*