

## Don't Forget the Babies

by Heather Moger, ESA Teacher SECE and Recorder, UK

*"Don't Forget the Babies!"* [Shinichi Suzuki to Dorothy Jones, founder of Suzuki Early Childhood Education]



In the light of the upcoming ESA SECE Levels 1 and 2 teacher training in Zurich, 2017, I thought it might be helpful to share my experiences as an SECE teacher from York, UK. I hope it will encourage Suzuki instrumental teachers to consider signing up - one of the seven key statements of SECE is encouragement is essential! In August 2012, I attended the first ever SECE teacher-training course to be held in Europe, led by teacher-trainer Dorothy Jones with the help of Patricia Rüttimann and her team in Switzerland. Following an inspiring and energizing week in Lucerne and the subsequent completion of some written assignments, I gained my Stages 1 and 2, qualifying me to set up my own SECE classes. I have since completed Level 3 (Lucerne, 2014) and, with my teaching partner Helen Candy (who also came to Lucerne in 2014), now run eight SECE classes every week - such is their popularity! I plan to continue my training as soon as the next Level 4 course is available in Europe.

I first came to the Suzuki 'Mother Tongue Method' as a recorder teacher, and throughout my Suzuki recorder teacher training felt challenged by the inconsistency between the way we know children learn to talk and the practice of commencing Suzuki instrumental lessons around the age of three (or older), when children are usually well on the way to becoming competent speakers. Why were we waiting so long, when Suzuki himself said, "Let us begin to educate all children from the very day they are born"? To this end, when I started up my own Suzuki studio, Music at Heart, I included pre-school music classes as part of the package, developing a pick-and-mix programme of the best of all the early years music training I had ever received on a wide range of professional development courses in my 25+ years of teaching. It made a valuable contribution to my work. I knew about Suzuki Early Childhood Education (SECE), but back then there was no training available within Europe, so I did my best with what knowledge and experience I had.

Embracing SECE has enriched my life and transformed the lives of my Suzuki families beyond all expectations. Attending his first SECE class, three-week-old Edwin begins vocalising the minute we sing our Hello Song, because he has heard it for nine months in utero, carried by his mother as she came every week with his older sibling; Josie, held in her mother's arms because she is not yet walking, moves her legs in time to the beat of the drum, stopping and starting on cue with the sound; Olivia approaches a fellow toddler unprompted, picks up the scarf he has dropped and offers it to him. They exchange smiles and carry on dancing. Below is an email I received from one of my SECE parents:

"I just wanted to thank you for your wonderful classes and to say how much joy and fulfilment it brings Max. It has become such a part of his daily life and he is constantly exploring everything he's learning in class. In the pram today he sang the whole of 'Rain rain go away' to himself whilst alternating tapping his legs. In the bath he lines up three flannels over the edge of the bath and then sings the 'folding scarves' song as he folds each one up. I'm not sure the name of the instrument you use at the beginning of class to get all the children's attention and focus - but Max has made his version from his magnetic triangles and has been walking around going 'dong, dong, dong' all day and used it to announce dinner! He's spent the day running around singing 'Cuckoo, where are you' ... and then he bursts into laughter.

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All this he does completely unprompted. It is so wonderful to see him processing it all and playing with it during the week. Thank you, for bringing such joy and cultivating a real sense of excitement and love of music in Max; it's wonderful to watch it unfold."

For those who don't know much about SECE, it is a Suzuki music curriculum for children aged 0-3 years and their families, founded by Dorothy Jones at the behest of Dr Suzuki himself. On meeting Dorothy's son, Suzuki was impressed by his exceptionally well-developed ear and the special way he played the violin. He was most excited to learn that Dorothy had played music daily to David before he was born - following the example of the story of Hiromi in *Nurtured by Love* - and encouraged her to develop this vital work further. Dorothy defines SECE as "the realization of potential through active and reactive participation in the environment, i.e. all that surrounds a child, both before and after birth." As with all branches of the Suzuki approach, its ultimate goal is holistic, and it fosters ability in harmony with the natural way children learn, through play.



*Dorothy Jones and Dr Suzuki in 1989 discussing the Suzuki ECE programme*

Like many other pre-school music classes (e.g. Kindermusik, Musikgarten), SECE provides a rich musical environment through singing, playing instruments, watching, listening and moving to music. Beyond that, the similarities end. The SECE classes use a constant curriculum over a three-year period, rather than the more usual practice of 'teach and move on', enabling families to experience thorough mastery - skill is knowledge plus 10,000 repetitions. They also comprise children of mixed ages, rather than the more usual practice of grouping children according to age, providing a heterogeneous learning environment - children learn from one another. The sight of someone doing something beyond one's current capabilities, triggering the desire 'I want to be able to do that too,' gives a boost to the human life force about which Suzuki spoke so often. Encountering familiar activities week on week, year on year, SECE families are able to practise their skills and raise them to higher and higher levels; the result is that every parent and every child grows in confidence and self-esteem.

What really sets SECE apart, however, and makes it infinitely more effective, is its teaching priorities. Usually, pre-school music classes focus on music, celebrating personal, social and emotional skills as value-added by-products. The SECE curriculum has different priorities: "In the Suzuki ECE course, the educational part of the parents and the development of the character are as important as the growth of musical, language acquisition and social skills." [ESA SECE Curriculum Guidelines, 2016]. SECE is truly character first, ability second. More on that later... If you are already an SECE teacher reading this I know I'm preaching to the converted. You will already be experiencing its rewards. If you are not, please ask yourself,

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“Why not?” and take time to self-reflect, an exercise Suzuki valued so highly - human growth is completed upon a reflective base.

Your answer to the question, “Is SECE for me?” might be ‘no’ because you already run a pre-school music programme. Please ask yourself, “How important is it to me that I am part of the world-wide Suzuki community?” Through social media, I read of an increasing number of Suzuki teachers becoming practitioners of franchised, non-Suzuki early years programmes as an add-on to their instrumental work. Many others share their own, innovative and very creative ideas about what they do with pre-schoolers. For the 2013 World Suzuki Convention in Matsumoto, I was thrilled to be invited to be part of the team of teachers leading SECE classes throughout the week. Joining SECE teachers from Canada, the USA, Western Australia and Victoria and Europe - none of whom (with the exception of Patricia Rüttimann) I had even met before, let alone worked with - I was able to help deliver session after session easily and successfully, with very little time for preparation, because everyone knew the same curriculum, just as with any Suzuki play-together: one repertoire, one language, one heart. Had we all been running a mixture of pre-school music programmes other than SECE this would not have been possible.



Your answer might be that SECE training is not for you because you are an instrumentalist at heart, and you believe your skill set lies in teaching and performing instrumental music rather than singing nursery rhymes and playing egg shakers. You love your instrument; you wish to pass on this love to the children with whom you work and using the Suzuki approach you strive to help them become better people. Please ask yourself, “How important is character development for me?” With the best will in the world, and even with helpful checks and balances such as that used by our cello-playing colleagues, ‘Teach the child, not the cello’ there is no getting away from the fact that

in any instrumental lesson at least some of the time has to be devoted to technical issues and learning how to play the instrument. Likewise, the content of the Suzuki instrumental teacher-training courses, particularly for the early levels, necessarily incorporates extensive modules devoted to teaching points and interpretation of repertoire.

SECE teachers are liberated from all the minutiae of instrumental teaching; the teacher training focuses on character development which is after all the foundation on which all Suzuki teaching is built. Where musical skills are concerned, Dorothy Jones says, “We hardly think about them anymore. They just seem to happen.” That’s not to say that instruments have no place in SECE classes. The percussion instruments we use are of the highest quality. They are chosen for their warm resonance and high standard of tuning, and they can be made to sound beautiful depending on how they are played. Suzuki’s maxim “Beautiful tone, beautiful heart” reveals a profound truth: how we are as musicians is how we are as people. SECE teachers handle the instruments with care and respect and help the children to do the same: the drum is not bashed haphazardly with a stiff, hard hand; the xylophone is not hit randomly with excessive energy; the shakers are not tossed into a bag, but put away neatly in the holes of an egg box. What better preparation could there be for children who one day will be managing a precious violin or a flute.

Your answer might be that SECE training is not for you because you are simply not interested in teaching babies. Please remind yourself that all the children you teach, whatever their age, were babies once. As teachers of the Mother Tongue approach, we cannot afford not to take an interest in babies. Please ask yourself, “How important to me are the core Suzuki

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beliefs: every child can learn, ability develops early and environment nurtures growth?" Aided by phenomenal advances in technology, neuroscientists now recognise the first three years of life (the target age-range of SECE) as being crucial for optimum brain development, a time during which billions of vital connections are made, a time when it's literally 'use it or lose it.' As a result of undertaking SECE training, teachers gain valuable insights into child development and the way children learn. We understand anything much better when we know its context and where it has come from. In Suzuki's own words, don't forget the babies!

Moreover, it makes great practical sense for the growth of your studio to take an interest in babies by including at least one SECE class as part of your Suzuki studio programme. When you first encounter a new instrumental pupil and parent, think how much time and energy you have to expend simply getting to know them and building their trust. You have at least three or four years, if not more, of catching up to do! By engaging with children from birth you begin to build up a relationship with them and their families much earlier. When you first encounter a new instrumental pupil and parent, think how much time and energy you have to invest helping them understand the Suzuki Way from ground zero: the value of positive encouragement, repetition, and perseverance; the acceptance that to achieve thorough mastery is going to require daily effort and a long-term commitment. You have to manage their pre-conceptions and expectations with care and compassion and steer them carefully through stormy waters. You have to help your pupils learn the code of behaviour for group lessons, collaboration, co-operation, self-regulation, turn-taking etc, and build up their self-confidence gradually in preparation for their first solo performance. SECE pupils and parents are already experienced in all these things...

In other words, as an SECE teacher you are growing your instrumental pupils from seeds, in the best, most fertile soil, your goal the blossoming of self-motivation. Another email from a parent:

"As there was no music class yesterday (it was Half Term), I took Violetta to the Art and Music exhibition at the City Art Gallery. She had the xylophone all to herself and played it in perfect rhythm for half an hour! People were stopping and commenting on the baby with such focus and enjoyment of making music. I actually had to drag her away when it was time to leave.

I'm so excited about her delight in music - and I'm sure it's because of her experiences in your class. We practise beating rhythms on the table with spoons every day whilst singing songs from the classes and she adores it. Thank you for the pleasure that you have already given to her - and to me. It's a wonderful gift and I hope that I can nurture it for as long as possible."

For Violetta, and for all children, SECE lights the touch-paper. It provides a PRE-pre-instrument stage, the very first and most fundamental building block in the Suzuki step-by-step way. Taking up an instrument formally then becomes the next logical step on an adventure that started long ago - and before you know it the demand for instrumental lessons from your SECE families wishing to continue in this way will be so great you will never have to advertise ever again! When I began SECE in York four years ago I was the only Suzuki instrumental teacher, and by the end of the second year of classes SECE graduates had boosted my recorder timetable to capacity. The York Suzuki community has now expanded to include piano, cello and flute (and we would dearly love a violin teacher to join us if anyone reading this is interested). I have introduced each incoming teacher to my SECE families by hosting a 'Meet the Teacher' information evening in my studio, and SECE graduates now make up a significant majority of all Suzuki instrumental pupils in York. Every teacher says what a head start the SECE families have when they begin Suzuki instrumental lessons. They already understand the language of Suzuki, they have greater

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focus, they demonstrate more advanced skills from the beginning and make faster progress.

If I've still not convinced you, please reflect on your own teaching practice in the light of Suzuki's sobering words, "The fate of the child is in the hands of the parents" and ask yourself, "How effective / successful is my Parent Education programme?" One of the most valuable aspects of SECE is the potential it offers for parent education. During our instrumental lessons, we don't see the parents in action. As we follow Suzuki's 'one teacher' rule, the parent takes a back seat, and between lessons when the parent becomes the home teacher, we don't see what goes on between parent and child. SECE teachers observe parents working with their children at close quarters every week, because they take part in the classes with their children. Moreover we work in a team of two, and four eyes are infinitely better than two. The constant curriculum enables us all to practise the critical behaviours that nurture citizens of good character, love, empathy, generosity, gratitude, patience, tolerance, kindness, honesty and respect. What a privilege!



Finally, and most crucially, when a Suzuki instrumental teacher meets a new parent, that parent will have already done at least three years' parenting - for good or ill. SECE teachers have the opportunity to start fresh with parents of new-borns, from day one of their parenting journal. By our example, we can educate them in the ways of positive parenting before habits have been hard-wired. I find, as Suzuki did, that such parents are at their most receptive, their hearts overflowing with love and the desire to do all they can for the health and happiness of their offspring.

Is SECE for you? SECE is for everybody. Without doubt it is the essential first stage of Suzuki talent education, too important to be overlooked by any Suzuki teacher - a window of opportunity not to be missed. I recommend it unreservedly. In the words of Emma O'Keefe, SECE teacher-trainer in Australia, "SECE is the Suzuki Method."