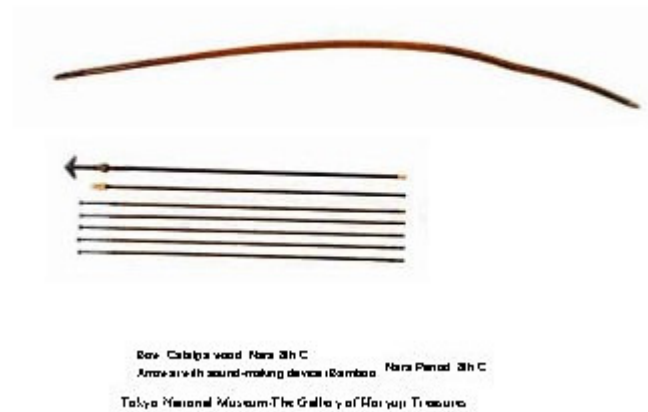


## The Azusa Yumi (Azusa bow)

by Shozo Matsumoto TERI Teacher Trainer JAPAN



Matsumoto city, where the Talent Education Research Institute was founded, is not only the center of Suzuki Method in Japan. For Suzuki students and teachers from abroad, it is thought of as a “holy place” of pilgrimage.

In Matsumoto, there is a beautiful river called the “Azusa gawa”.

This is where the “azusa”, or catalpa tree, can be found growing along the banks of the river. Since ancient times, this tree has been used exclusively for making “azusa” bows, from which the name of this river originated. The word “Yumi” means bow in Japanese. The bow is not used as a weapon, but instead for Shinto shamanistic rites, producing sound by plucking or tapping the string.

The azusa yumi has existed since ancient times and references to its “singing string” used as a magical talisman appear in Japanese classic literature, such as The Tale of Genji, by Shikibu Murasaki, the oldest novel in the world, or in Manyoushu, the oldest Japanese anthology which was compiled in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. From ancient times it was considered so precious that it was offered to the Imperial Court.

In a way, the first string instrument might even be the bow. The single string strung on a bow gradually increased in number over the years and evolved into the harp or the guitar, etc. Later it could have evolved into a form of keyboard, with hammers striking the strings, which became the ancestor of the piano. On the other hand, some people have thought of playing it with “another bow” which later became the ancestor of the violin or the cello.

If this assumption is right, it is very significant that the first string instrument was used in Japan as a magical talisman with the sound of the “singing” string. It is even more meaningful for me that the city of Matsumoto, where Suzuki Method was born, is the only place where this special bow has been made for more than a thousand years. Dr. Shinichi Suzuki devoted his life in Matsumoto studying how to use the bow itself to produce beautiful tone. Now, every summer Matsumoto city is full of children carrying their instruments who come for the summer school, and great musicians from around the world who gather here annually to participate in the Seiji Ozawa Music Festival.

To change the subject, in 1974 Dr. Suzuki published a set of home practice audio cassettes for beginner violin students. The title was “Practice With Me”. The very beginning starts with him playing pizzicato tone. He explains that the lingering reverberation which remains after the start-of-tone initial accent when you pluck the string is the model for bowing.

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One day when I met a Suzuki violin teacher from abroad, I talked about these Practice With Me tapes and attempted to explain the basic idea of how if we try to produce the same sound of pizzicato with the bow, that the tone would be much more resonant. I added that Dr. Suzuki's priority in teaching music consisted of tone production, and that his teaching method starts with tone and is continued up to the most advanced level.

A year later, I received an e-mail from the teacher. She said, "After you explained to me about pizzicato tone, for the next year I practiced the basics of ringing tone for twenty to thirty minutes every day. Gradually my life changed, and my students became so happy. Thank you so much".

I was so happy to read this. I only introduced her to what Dr. Suzuki taught, but she was so grateful. Once again I realize his greatness and felt a renewed sense of deep gratitude to Dr. Suzuki.

The string instrument with the lowest note is the double bass. In jazz music, the double bass is mainly played with pizzicato. As the word "bass" is pronounced base, it acts as the foundation of music. Jazz bass has the unique power to drive music forward with its continual pizzicato accents, bringing us the feeling of groove. Dr. Suzuki paid homage to the words "Rhythm is the soul of music.", from Leopold Mozart's book, "The Art of the Violin." In mainstream jazz, the double bass seems to connect directly to the soul.

Incidentally, I think that jazz musicians are people who study music actively by the Suzuki method. Most of them must have copied great performances by their favorite musicians by ear ever since they were young. They imitate models and repeat them over and over. After imitating them, they eventually find their own style and "graduate" from their model. In addition to this, the charm of music lies in improvisation, so jazz musicians are also composers. It goes without saying that Bach and Mozart were excellent improvisers. I think that great jazz musicians are always toiling away in close contact with the foundations of the origin of music.

There is a book written by a famous Japanese double bass player called "55 Great Jazz Recordings That Will Change Your Life" (published by Takeshobo Co.,Ltd. 2016). I will quote the part I am particularly interested in.

*"Scott LaFaro had long fingers, so he played by alternately using the index and middle fingers. This was unusual on the double bass, but he was most likely the first to do this. By alternating the fingers, he could play twice as fast. If a bass player is searching for speed, he would like this way, but as I am searching for tone colour, I play by using the index and middle fingers together like one finger. When playing with only one finger, the tone is vastly inferior. Later, Eddie Gomez only used one finger at a time. I think his aim is rapid playing rather than tone colour, and he was looking for a way to do this on the double bass. I want to search for music, so I look for this through tone colour."*

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The author of this book is Yoshio Suzuki, Dr. Suzuki's nephew. I don't think he studied with his uncle as the genre is different, but the point they reached seems to be the same. In music, functional facility is necessary, but in the end, tone must ring in order to touch the heart - otherwise I suppose there is no meaning.

We Japanese use the word "hiku" for playing an instrument. The written character, or kanji which represents "hiku" has a part which represents an archery bow, and this kanji can also be used to mean plucking, bouncing, beaming with joy, bursting open, or even a bullet.

Now the word "twinkle" is used to mean not only light, but also the sound of a bell. "Suzuki" literally means "bell tree" in Japanese, and it is very interesting to note that if we translate the word "twinkle" to mean sound, we say "hajikeru", using the same kanji as the one for "hiku".

"Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" is perhaps the Suzuki method theme song. If children can play Twinkle with beautiful ringing tone and lively rhythm, their souls will "sparkle" - or "hajikeru" (burst open). If they are not happy when playing Twinkle, without doubt it is because the tone is not ringing like the sound of the plucked bowstring.

If the tone is ringing, the soul sparkles too, and they will continue to enjoy playing. That is why tone is so important from the very beginning.

There is a term, "kinsen", which means "heartstrings" in Japanese. Did the ancient Japanese people listen to the resonance which the "azusa yumi" brought as it tugged on their heartstrings? If tone itself can act as a charm, music made from beautiful tone must surely be connected to happiness.

It is a continuing mystery to me that the place where the azusa yumi originated was chosen as the birthplace of Suzuki Method.

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Shozo Matsumoto teaching in Barcelona February 2017

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After graduating from Konan University, he studied Suzuki philosophy and methodology with Dr. Shinichi Suzuki at the Talent Education Research Institute in Matsumoto.

Since 1988 he has been teaching violin in Kobe and has taught at several summer schools and world conventions.

He is one of the teacher trainers at the Talent Education Research Institute, and in the past has held the positions of director of the All Japan Teacher's Conference and member of the Violin Committee, editing Dr. Suzuki's writings and recordings as well as serving many years on the TERA committee which published both the quarterly magazine Suzuki Method and the monthly newspaper.

Additionally Mr. Matsumoto is one of the teachers appointed to write graduation reports for TERA students.

He performs with his piano trio and conducts the Kobe Amadeus String Ensemble which consists of Suzuki students.

He lives in Kobe with his wife Miyuki and their two children.