

The True Beauty of Repetition

by Sven Sjögren, ESA Teacher Trainer Violin, Sweden



There is an old proverb that says: *"If you want to experience something new - walk the same path every day"*. One of the main bricks in the Suzuki-foundation is **repetition** and, dear friends, here is a winner if we really understand how to use it! Dr. Suzuki is famous for his "ten thousand times" (to do something 10.000 times and this way learn it). I have always admired Suzuki's enthusiasm when, after hearing a student playing for him, he happily exclaimed "Good - now we can start to *work* on this piece!" - he did this both at home in Japan and on courses abroad. If, instead of blindly dashing ahead in our "piece-race", we take the energy and the time to review, we gain a tremendous amount in the long run. To make this work without too much friction, I believe requires good and sensible habits.

If the teacher constantly gives one or two pieces to review each week the repetition business will run smoothly. To repeat without improving is pointless! The reason that Suzuki is so particular when it comes to repetition is that it gives the student the opportunity to lift a piece up to his or her present technical and musical level. All of a sudden, it becomes interesting! -"How is my intonation nowadays? -How is that difficult spot today? -How far have I reached when it comes to phrasing?" A student who doesn't regularly review the pieces usually plays a lot worse than one who does review. Why? Well, the one who always only plays the last piece will become an expert in playing badly. In comparison to what you know right now the latest piece is quite difficult. So then most of the time is spent with "poor playing". The one who regularly reviews becomes an expert in playing musically and nicely. You see, it is possible to do this with the earlier pieces as one's technique and musical expression is growing constantly. So, most people know straight away how they want to answer the question "Do you want students to be experts in playing excellently or badly?" However, far from everybody realises that regular repetition is an important way, maybe *the* most important, to get there. When we asked Dr. Suzuki about how much our students should review his answer was quick: "If you practice an hour a day let 40 of those 60 minutes be reviewing!" Wow!

"How" more important than "What"

Parents and teachers can do a lot to stimulate and help by giving tasks - what can we think about and improve this time? It is more important *how* you play than *what* you play. This goes both for our students and for the soloists we listen to in the concert hall. Have you ever heard someone say:

- "Yesterday I went to a fantastic concert and heard the famous violinist 'X' playing Paganini Caprices!"

- "How did it sound?"

- "Well, it was terrible - out of tune and arrhythmic!"

In that case it wasn't a fantastic concert. The same thing with our pieces in the Suzuki books. When it comes to concert-time the audience prefers a somewhat easier piece performed in a musically and technically good way than a harder piece that still hasn't had the time to "get ripe"

To Learn by Doing

In Japan I was often struck by the fact that the students so often *learn by doing*. For instance, the teacher can request them to do a certain exercise many times for the next lesson ("ten thousand times...") Since these students live in a country where the cultural and social tradition still implies that you completely and exactly follow the instructions of the teacher, the students struggle along until the next lesson. They come back and *know* the

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place or passage perfectly. They learn by doing. To start with, they do not always understand *why* they do something, but they carry on through various projects and learn new things very efficiently.

In our western society we might to a higher degree be brought up to judge whether we *want* to do something - or whether we think it is *worthwhile* to do this or that. Of course it is important that we are motivated.

Maybe you would say that while the student in Japan gets motivated because the teacher wants something, the student in our western countries gets motivated because he or she "believes in it" - finds it worthwhile. In this approach, there might be a hidden risk that we restrict ourselves when it comes to learning new things. How can you, as a student, know what is good about something you still aren't familiar yet?

To know and to be able to

Suzuki often said: "*To know* is not ability. Ability is *to be able to*"! It is certainly interesting when you start to think about the difference between *knowing* and *being able to* and perhaps we far too often mix those notions.

The first step is of course to know, but for many of us in the west our learning process comes to a standstill with this knowing. So how do we get on? By *doing* it over and over again - by reviewing! I don't think that any parent yet has said: "Stop! Now you've said mother a thousand times - that's enough. Let's take another word!" Instead we continue over and over again to polish our vocabulary in this, perhaps the most superior learning process of all, the one we use when we learn our mother tongue. The formula that works both for language and music making is to *be able to = know x 10,000!* For Dr. Suzuki it was always crystal clear - the student who learned his mother tongue perfectly has proved his or her ability! If only the right method is used one can learn just about anything. Now, if this student is performing poorly in mathematics that only shows one thing, that the method used in teaching maths is an inferior one! The system is simply inadequate.

In my opinion it is exactly the same when it comes to the methodology for teaching musical instruments. For instance - the fact that violin is considered to be such a difficult instrument is mainly due to the fact that the methodology used for ages to teach this instrument has been extremely hard because it demanded too much at the same time. The student must master too many skills simultaneously: posture, intonation, rhythm, pitch, bow technique etc. If, like many good educationalists (Dr Suzuki being one of them), one is capable of splitting this up into small enough portions, presented in a well thought-out and progressive order, all of a sudden violin playing seems rather accessible. Try a combined course in high jump-bowling-fencing-windsurfing yourself and see how easy it is! The mistake with such a course - just like with a lot of instrumental teaching still - is that there are altogether too many new elements at the same time! But for what reason?

Who is the Student?

I think we *forget* so quickly! We teachers have the habit of forgetting, for instance, how hard it is to play long notes on a string instrument, to read music and to be able to coordinate both hands when playing any instrument. When one day we are able to play our instrument, we stand there impatiently expecting our students to snatch up what we already can do, in the same way that someone who knows how to ride a bike has already started to forget how it was when he couldn't. Here lies the innermost essence of pedagogy - to be able to imagine yourself in the student's place, at his or her present level.

I can never forget Dr. Suzuki's habit of stopping for a while before a lesson with a student and really concentrate on "getting in phase" with the student. The first time I experienced this was in Matsumoto in 1976. Just before opening the door to the classroom where the

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student was waiting I happened to see how he stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He stood there with his head bent down as if he had frozen to ice for a couple of seconds. Fascinated, I asked his secretary "Is he praying?" She answered "No, he is imagining himself in the same situation as the student he is going to teach." - another admirable point about this man who both methodically and philosophically was so far ahead of the age in which we live!

Walk the path of Repetition!

So, the idea to walk the same path every day is probably not such a bad idea: "Look, there is a funny root, I didn't see it yesterday!" - "What a nice ant hill, was it really here last week?" etc. When it comes to learning the repertoire that Suzuki put so much work into, we have many opportunities to discover and improve all the nice passages and places that at first we did not have the ability to see or hear! The pieces in the Suzuki literature are so great that they deserve to be played with feeling and nice phrasing.

"If you want to experience something new - walk the same path every day". Perhaps we will meet out there somewhere on the review path. I hope we have time to see each other because of all the new experiences that await us there!

I wish you a pleasant walk!