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Suzuki: The Man and his Dream to Teach the Children of the World, a Review

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Whether judging by number of members, speed of growth, or sheer global reach, few music pedagogical approaches can be said to be as impressive as the one founded by Dr. Shinichi Suzuki. With five international associations around the globe serving over fifty countries, and over 3,500 registered private teachers in North America alone, the influence of Dr. Suzuki's pedagogy on music education since he founded the Talent Education Research Institute (TERI) in Japan in 1950 is undeniable. In a new biography, *Suzuki, The Man and his Dream to Teach the Children around the World*, author Eri Hotta offers a new perspective on the nuances surrounding how Suzuki's philosophies have been integrated with a special focus on its adoption in the United States – currently the country with the largest Suzuki teaching community.

Hotta's book differs from past biographical works, including those by Evelyn Hermann (1995) and Masaaki Honda (1976), in that it heavily prioritizes the Suzuki movement's historical context. It does so by framing its evolution and subsequent adoption in the US as influenced by pre-and-post-war political, social, and educational dynamics in Japan. Hotta gives as close to an objective view as possible of the events leading to the movement's current success and highlights some ways that the movement has grown to embody elitism and competitiveness. This is notable because the embodiment of competitive values contrasts starkly from Suzuki's philosophy that any child can learn and his emphasis on nurturing the student's soul (Suzuki, 1983).

Aside from providing an extensive and contextualized historical account of Suzuki's life and pedagogical approach, Hotta laces descriptions of Suzuki's philosophical ideology throughout the storytelling, pointing out how it was manifested not only in his words, but also in his actions. We find throughout Hotta's account that Suzuki believed talent is something that is cultivated, not passively existent in the student. According to Suzuki, the goal of music education should be to establish transferrable skills and foster a "beautiful human" rather than to develop a specialized ability (Hotta, 2022).

Those familiar with Hotta's past publications would be none too surprised by the book's in-depth focus on historical context. Considering her two previous publications, *Pan Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945* (2017) and the very well-received *Japan 1941* (2013), one could argue that she is in a uniquely qualified position to present Japanese history as it relates to a figure of global significance. Hotta herself was born in Tokyo Japan. She was a research fellow at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, and she has taught international relations at Oxford University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The book begins by emphasizing the importance of historical timing in the narrative of Suzuki's life, highlighting that the year of his birth in relation to the timeframe of World War

It positioned him well to create a revolutionary educational movement. Mention is also made of Suzuki's father's violin shop, the increasing popularity of violin lessons, and the unlikelihood of such a European commodity being made readily available in a country that was increasingly closing itself off from the rest of the world. Hotta also highlights a key development of Suzuki's ideology early in his life. Suzuki, seeing his mother crying as a result of his own misbehavior, subsequently vowed to live a life of self-reflection including rejecting norms and established methods that might cause harm to those he associated with in favor of ones that aspired to create lasting good in the world.

Our attention is then drawn to Suzuki's many influences, including the literary works of Leo Tolstoy, the recordings of violinist Mischa Elman, and the musical development of young violin prodigy Nejiko Suwa. Evidence even suggests he kept company with one Albert Einstein. However, perhaps one of the most formative relationships seems to have been with "scholar-adventurer" Marquis Yoshichika Tokugawa, who took it upon himself to culture Suzuki and eventually invite him to Berlin where he would end up studying with violinist Karl Klunger. Through this relationship Suzuki would become involved in the highest levels of musical society giving him a notability that would soon prove instrumental in his success as a visionary pedagogue. Hotta continues by describing the beginning of Suzuki's teaching experiences in 1932, how he was among the first violin teachers to take very young students, and the pedagogical practices he developed as a result. The reader is offered a glimpse of how, amid a post-war efficiency-minded Japanese school system, Suzuki maintained an active voice against school entrance exams and other rigorous practices focused on raising "fine Japanese" (Hotta 2022). Rejecting this competitive-style approach, Suzuki proposed a style of teaching that focused on accessibility and emphasized the importance of encouraging confidence. In Japan, however, his proposals largely fell on unyielding government ears.

In the early 1960s, the Suzuki method was introduced to the US in spectacular form. Concerts with large groups of young Suzuki students playing difficult pieces together including the solo parts from the Bach Double Violin Concerto, Vivaldi Concerto in A Minor, and Vivaldi's Concerto in G Minor were given in Chicago, Oberlin, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other musical and cultural hubs around the US. In contrast to its cold reception from the Japanese government, excitement quickly surrounded Suzuki's approach in the US, leading to the eventual adoption of his repertoire by many teachers. Hotta suggests, however, that in many studios, the spirit of the Suzuki movement – focused on creating beautiful hearts and beautiful minds – has not transferred. The introduction to the method by way of an impressive performance by young children has instead contributed to a culture of violinistic overachievers striving towards the same high level of performance demonstrated by the touring Japanese students. The eventual dubbing of his approach as "The Suzuki Method" (a term Suzuki adamantly resisted, but eventually conceded to) seems to signify its focus being

shifted from “beautiful hearts” to “impressive playing.” This is a phenomenon that notable first-generation Suzuki teachers such as Rhonda Cole and Joanne Bath are aware of and actively oppose in their approaches. Former president of the Suzuki Association of the Americas Pat D’Ercole perhaps expressed the sentiment best in her American Suzuki Journal entry, “Message to the Membership,” published the year Shinichi Suzuki passed away:

In the fervor of the moment, in our sorrow because of our loss, our commitment to this dream is most strong. In time our fidelity will be tested, however. It will be tested by the passage of time. How good will we be at perpetuating Dr. Suzuki’s vision? Will we be able to hold on to the dream without his person and charisma reminding us of it? (D’Ercole, 1998)

Hotta ends the book with a poignant first-person account of her own encounters with Suzuki’s legacy since her childhood in Tokyo. This nostalgic narrative suggests that in Japan, the remnants of the “Suzuki Messodo” (Suzuki Method) seem to occupy an elitist, niche space hidden from the common eye that is tangential to common educational practices. Hotta’s experiences seem to suggest that the golden age of Suzuki’s vision has run its course, that the light that once shone so bright has gone gently into that good night.

It is hard to imagine a more extensively researched account of Suzuki’s life and development of the Suzuki movement during his life. Hotta draws on a wealth of resources in both English and Japanese to paint a wonderfully detailed picture of Suzuki’s vision and the measures he took to make that vision a reality. I finished this book with very few questions in my mind about Suzuki’s life and works, but more than a few about his legacy in present day Suzuki programs.

The book makes a challenging argument about how those in the Suzuki teaching world uphold his legacy. I found myself personally convicted reading about Suzuki’s ability to infuse encouragement and light into his teaching. As a Suzuki teacher myself, I know that I can be pigeonholed by pushy parents, or the need to perform into the mentality that focuses only on getting results in the students’ playing. Further research into the pervasiveness of this phenomenon in current Suzuki programs/private teachers/the SAA in the US might be a starting point for a logical sequel to the information about the Suzuki philosophy so meticulously presented in this book.

Overall, I found Hotta’s book an engaging read that informed my understanding of Suzuki’s philosophy and life in a meaningful way and challenged my assumptions of how his philosophies are being interpreted today. Taking into account Suzuki’s near household-name status in the music community worldwide, this book also has the potential to provide

awareness of Japan's history to a new audience who otherwise might not be exposed to such in-depth knowledge. I recommend the book to current Suzuki teachers and parents, former Suzuki students, administrators of schools that house Suzuki programs, and anyone who wants a well-paced historically informed view of mid-twentieth century Japanese culture.

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About the Author

Adam Symborski is a Suzuki trained violin teacher who has been teaching the Suzuki approach in schools across the United States and in his private studio since 2014. A former Suzuki student himself, he has benefitted from numerous takes on the Suzuki method having studied with five different private Suzuki teachers from elementary through high school as well as having studied Suzuki pedagogy with notable teacher trainers such as Rhonda Cole, Joanne Bath, and James Hutchins. He draws heavy inspiration from Suzuki's love-based approach in his teaching and believes that music has the unique ability to facilitate meaningful personal growth in students and teachers alike. Adam earned his BM in music industry from James Madison University in Virginia, his MM in violin performance and Suzuki pedagogy as well as a certificate of advanced performance studies from East Carolina University and is currently in the DMA program for music education and teacher licensure at Boston University.

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