

MacPhail School of Music: Suzuki Talent Education

How does a child learn a native language? Nurturing adults speak to (and around) the child from the moment of birth, naturally repeating the words and phrases that move the world along.

“Then one fine day, that toddler utters a syllable, and everyone celebrates,” says Kamini Bhargava LaRusso, a Suzuki violin instructor at the MacPhail School of Music. “No one expects them to speak in full sentences right away, but eventually they will!”

Without a doubt, we all learn to speak in full sentences—long before we learn that sounds have corresponding letters and a system for stringing them together. The Suzuki approach to learning an instrument is based on this natural model of picking up the sounds around you.

“We capitalize on young children’s excellent ability to copy,” says Beth Turco, the Director of Suzuki Talent Education at MacPhail. As the head of the most comprehensive Suzuki program in the country, Turco leads a stable of accomplished teachers who wholeheartedly believe in this philosophy. That is: Learning to play music is like learning a language.

So, what are the components of language learning, and how do MacPhail instructors translate them into music instruction?

Start early and learn from the adults in your life.

Who teaches babies to speak? Their primary caregivers, usually. So it is with the Suzuki method, with parents intimately involved in the learning process. MacPhail instructors call parents “practice partners.” They are present during the lessons, learning alongside the student so they can help at home every day.

This goes hand in hand with another Suzuki principle: starting early. “When your kids are very young, you do a lot of things collaboratively with them,” Turco says. “It’s a time when most kids need (and still want) to do everything with a parent. Preschool-age (starting around three) to seven is the ideal time to start.”

La Russo’s own children began lessons with her colleagues, Kathy Wood, and Katie Bast, when they were just shy of their third birthdays. At this early age, teachers help parents figure out how

to inspire their children with games and incorporate imaginative play. Katie would use a stuffed animal. “She would ask, ‘Does Louis the bear see your feet in rest position?’”

Be immersed in an environment of learning.

Language is always bubbling and popping around young children. Suzuki instructors teach parents to create a similar environment with music. “That’s the core of the method,” says Turco, who teaches piano through the Suzuki method. “They are listening to professional recordings of a repertoire at home as part of their daily routine. It is just part of the background. The practice partner might play the music at bedtime or before meals or during other activities. And then, the older the child gets, the more active listening they do.”

Learn privately but get reinforced by the wider community.

When toddlers venture out, they hear other people stringing together the same sounds they have heard from their parents. Suzuki students get this community boost, too. “One of the things that makes this method attractive is that students have a weekly private lesson *and* a group class,” says LaRusso. In MacPhail’s program, the strings meet weekly, and the piano students meet monthly in a collaborative environment. Harp, guitar, and flute students also have regular group classes. She points out that with other music-learning techniques, the student might have 18 private lessons and then a recital. “Suzuki students have exposure to their peers right away,” she says. “That feeling of community is built into the experience. It is motivating.”

Absorb knowledge at your own speed.

Some babies are spouting words at their first birthday party, while others are still pointing and grunting at two and a half. Parents know they will all get there eventually. The same goes for learning to play music with Suzuki--a philosophy that is still encapsulated by Dr. Shinichi Suzuki’s original motto, *Every Child Can!* “With the proper environment and the proper approach, every child can learn an instrument,” Turco explains. “I really believe that.” While all students move through the same set of repertoire books, “the timeline is different for everyone. Some kids have an innate ability. They move through the books quickly” But that does not mean their slower peers will not end up in the same place.

Progress sequentially.

Babies gather a few words, and toddlers gradually learn to form sentences, hitting language milestones along the way. Suzuki instructors guide students through their own milestones. “We

engage them at whatever their age and wherever they are in their development,” LaRusso says. “Then they layer skill after skill after skill, one at a time. We teach a child to feel at ease every single step of the way, and to celebrate each small advance in capability.” Turco notes that all the MacPhail teachers are phenomenal masters of their instrument, but as instructors, “we really teach to the individual child. We do not let children feel failure. Instead, we help them to find their own success in the program.”

Experience the benefits of a positive feedback loop.

Babies notice when their words provoke joy in the adults around them. It makes them want to repeat those words—and experience that reaction again. Learning an instrument requires daily practice, so MacPhail’s teachers and parents actively inspire young musicians with incentives to keep going. “I think any time you do something daily, you have to expect ebbs and flows to motivation,” LaRusso says. “When my daughter was little, we would make charts of what we were going to do, and she would place a sticker on each accomplishment. She’s 14 now, and stickers on charts still motivate her.”

Turco, too, is all for incentives. “What kid always wants to brush their teeth?” she says. Practicing an instrument every day can easily fall into that category. “It is part of the process of growing up. Motivation comes with success. We try to break it down into small steps, so they have success right away—and often.”

Hear, imitate, and *then* read.

Brand new readers already know the word “dog” before they learn to sound out “d-o-g.” And Suzuki students already know what notes sound like before they learn to read them. “We start with listening and doing pre-reading activities, like learning the musical alphabet and naming the notes on the piano keys,” Turco says. “We try to introduce note reading as soon as they are ready. But that is a parallel course to the playing skills. By the time they are in middle school, those skills are about the same.” This organic approach distinguishes the Suzuki method from more traditional music instruction.

Pass it on.

Teaching one’s child to speak is an act of love and patient guidance. Wrapped up in this process are other, ineffable teachings...about perseverance, about developing a love of learning, about gratitude. Devotees of the Suzuki method are aware of this higher purpose, too.

“The thing I like best about the Suzuki approach is that it encompasses a whole philosophy,” Turco says. “We take the principles and craft them around each child.”

“We are with our students every step of the way, through the frustrations, the ups and downs,” LaRusso says. “We are always carrying a vision of where the student is going, very long term. Most of the teachers at MacPhail are with our students from age four until their senior recital. We are invested in their experience, and then we send them out into the world.”

Such personal attention can help to shape a growing musician. LaRusso’s 14-year-old daughter Natasha, a violinist, calls the Suzuki program “a big part of who I am as a person.”

“I love playing all the recitals at MacPhail,” says Natasha, who also recently played the fiddler in her school’s production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. “But the Suzuki method also teaches things like patience and being open to new ideas that I get to apply to the rest of my life.”

Beth Turco has been a member of MacPhail’s piano faculty since 1984 and has led the Suzuki program since 2011. She is a member of the Music Teachers National Association, the Minnesota Music Teachers Association, the Suzuki Association of the Americas, the Suzuki Association of Minnesota, and the Suzuki Piano Teachers Guild.

Kamini Bhargava LaRusso teaches Suzuki violin weekly private and group lessons. In the fall of 2019, she started Vivace Violins, an advanced violin performing ensemble.

Natasha LaRusso is about to complete the eighth grade. She is a talented violinist (currently in Suzuki Violin Book 8) and a member of Vivace Violins.