

Truly by Ear: A Guide for Suzuki Teachers and Parents

By Charles Krigbaum

The Suzuki method is based on an entirely natural and everyday occurrence—a small child learning how to speak. This ordinary process happens at every moment throughout the world and demonstrates, in an extraordinary manner, the incredible learning potential that exists in all children. According to Dr. Suzuki, any child can develop musical ability with the proper training, just as all children develop the ability to speak their native language.

The Suzuki method developed from the simple observation of nature at work as Dr. Suzuki carefully observed the way in which small children learn to speak, acknowledging the role of the parents' behavior and environmental conditions in this process. It became clear to him that in learning one's native language, *there is no failure*, all children acquire the ability to speak without effort, despite the great complexity of language. Every child possesses the incredible potential to learn language's smallest details, even the slightest nuances of a local dialect and the distinct shades of a regional accent. This all occurs despite the fact that most parents lack formal training in speech pedagogy. Dr. Suzuki maintained that the amazing potential demonstrated by children in learning to speak indicates the capacity to learn in all other areas, including music, and he applied this process of initial language acquisition to violin teaching.

Although music is not a language in the strictest sense, the process of learning music is similar to that of learning language. Consider for a moment how you first learned to speak:¹

- First, you listened to the language. From the time of your birth, and even before, you were surrounded by the sound of language and conversation. You absorbed these sounds and became acculturated to the language of your environment.
- Second, you tried (unsuccessfully at first) to imitate. Keep in mind that even before you were successful at imitating, you were praised for your efforts and encouraged to “babble,” even when the sounds that you were making did not make sense.
- Third, you began to think in language. Words and phrases began to take on meaning through your experiences with language.
- Fourth, you began to improvise in language. In other words, you were able to make up your own phrases and sentences that were organized in a logical manner

according to the rules of language. In doing so, you were able to engage in conversation.

- Finally, after several years of developing your ability to think and speak, you learned how to read and write. You were able to understand what you were reading because of all of the experience you had already gained in listening, imitating, thinking, and speaking.

These steps, in their specific sequence, are the same steps Suzuki students take in their journey of music learning. How would your language achievement have been affected if any of these steps had been skipped? How would your speech have developed if someone had tried to teach you these steps in a different order? For example, what would have happened if someone had tried to teach you how to read before you could think, or before you had even spoken your first word?

Understanding Audiation

Contemporary researcher Dr. Edwin E. Gordon's music learning theory is a modern explanation of how we learn when we learn music. His theory is based upon the concept of *audiation*.² But, what is audiation? Audiation is the word Gordon uses to describe the process of thinking in music *with understanding*. To audiate is to hear and to comprehend music that is not physically present, just as to think is to hear and to give meaning to language, even though the sound of words is not physically present. To put it another way, audiation is to music what thought is to language.³

Musicians audiate when they recall music they have previously heard, when they anticipate and predict what will come next as they listen to music, when they create and improvise music as they are performing, and when they read and write music.⁴ The comprehension (understanding) aspect of audiation is complex and includes the awareness and understanding of the underlying structures of music (melody, harmony, rhythm, tonality, meter, phrasing, etc.).

While the term *audiation* may be relatively new, the general idea is not. Musicians throughout history have audiated. Mozart is said to have heard entire symphonies in every detail in his mind before ever beginning to write them down. Nevertheless, Gordon's term provides us with a well-defined way to think about (and access) an essential musical phenomenon.

Everyone who has been exposed to music has the capacity to learn to audiate. You can do it right now! Sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star in your head. Could you feel the rhythm? Could you “hear” the music headed toward its resolution or resting on its tonic note? If so, you were audiating; you heard and understood music that was not physically present, but rather inside of you.

Dr. Gordon’s research suggests that musical potential has very little to do with verbal, logical, or mathematical aptitudes.⁵ Therefore, some students might have more potential to achieve in music than in other areas! The best way for students to develop this potential is to actively participate in music, such as by singing, engaging in movement activities, playing an instrument, and composing. Gordon’s research further indicates that children’s early musical experiences from birth to age nine have a particularly profound impact on the extent to which they will be able to understand, appreciate, and achieve in music at a later age.⁶

The Suzuki approach and Gordon’s music learning theory share a fundamental assumption about music learning: that music is learned the same way as a language.

Playing by Ear: What it *is* and what it *is not*

Before we examine the process of playing by ear and the role played by audiation in that process, we must first discuss the difference between playing *by ear* and playing *by rote*. Although both playing by ear and playing by rote involve performing music without the presence of actual musical notation, the processes are quite different. When we play by ear, we play what we hear in our head. When we play by rote, we use symbols and instructions (finger numbers, note names, words) to recall what to play.

It is also important to distinguish between audiation and imitation. When audiating, one knows what to perform next, without negating memorization, by anticipating in familiar music and predicting in unfamiliar music what is to come; therefore, audiation “involves forward thinking.”⁷ Imitation, on the other hand, involves knowing what to perform next by remembering what is to be performed, “a process of looking backward.”⁸ Thus, playing by rote exists in the more passive realm of imitation, while playing by ear exists in the more active realm of audiation.

Gordon believes that “imitation is analogous to using tracing paper to draw a picture,”⁹ whereas audiation is analogous to visualizing an image and then drawing a picture. To audiate is to think for oneself; what is imitated is quickly forgotten.¹⁰ When students are taught to perform their pieces by rote (e.g., the teacher tells the student step-by-step, note-by-note how to perform a piece of music through demonstration and verbal instruction), they are engaged in the passive process of imitation. Although they are performing without notation, this type of learning does not involve the ability to play by ear; it merely demonstrates that the student is able to memorize a specific set of instructions.

In order to go beyond passive imitation and to begin to engage in active audiation, students must be exposed to extensive listening experiences and learn to sing. *Listening and singing give us access to audiation.*

Dr. Suzuki championed the importance of listening in music

learning. For children who have not experienced enough music through listening, learning a piece of music on their instrument is like trying to identify a color they have never seen, or pronounce a word they have never heard in a language they do not understand. Singing is perhaps equally as vital. When singing becomes a normal, accepted part of the lesson experience, students begin to understand how singing can help them to listen, and how listening can help them to play their instrument better.

Music learning theory practitioner Michael Martin says the following about the role of singing:

The idea of singing in an instrumental class is certainly not new. Many good musicians and teachers have encouraged students to be able to sing what they play. Zoltán Kodály believed strongly that singing was the foundation of all musicianship. Merle Isaac advocated singing simple songs in beginning string classes and then learning to play those songs by ear. Joseph Maddy and Thaddeus Giddings, who wrote one of the earliest string class methods in 1923, emphasized the importance of singing.¹¹

Why does singing make such a dramatic difference? The reason is that many students become so involved in the technical aspects of performing on an instrument that there is no musical thought (audiation) taking place. The mechanical and intellectual problems have taken the student’s attention away from the music itself. Singing requires students to listen and to audiate before they perform, since they do not have the instrument to help them.¹²

In essence, children are really playing *two* instruments: the audiation instrument in their mind, and the physical instrument in their hands!

Here are some thoughts about playing by ear from Jennifer Burton’s book, *Sharpen Your Skills*:¹³

I have found that when I listen to a piece many times, I can then sing it. When I can sing it, I can find the notes on my violin. All I need to know is the starting note and my ear and fingers can do the rest. Playing by ear is like teaching each finger to ‘hear’ where the next note is. The fingertips have ‘ears’ that can find notes. They can find the notes through trial and error. This process takes time at first but gets easier and faster the longer the child does it.

Add a few notes at a time until you get to the end of the piece. It may take many days to find the notes to an entire piece. Your fingers need many repetitions to remember how to find the spot you hear in your head. Please be patient with your hand, it needs lots of encouragement to find the notes.

Edward Kreitman’s model for playing the violin by ear from *Teaching from the Balance Point*¹⁴ states:

1. The student learns to distinguish between two notes that are the same and two notes that are different.

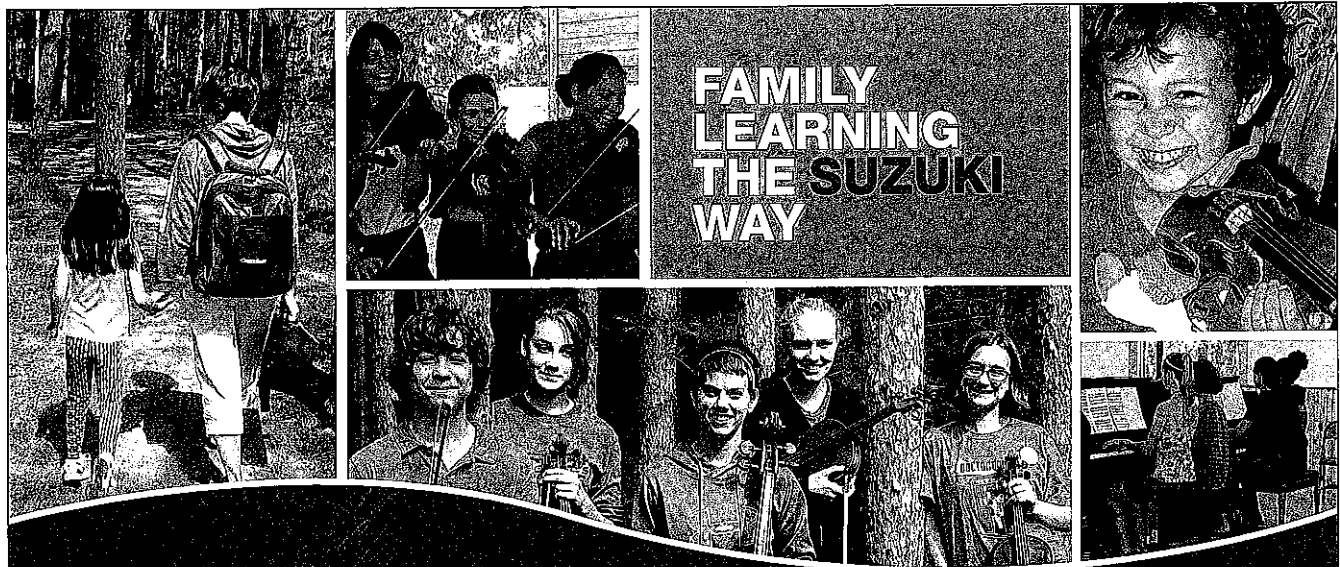
2. When the notes are different, the students can identify if the second note is higher or lower in pitch than the first.
3. The student understands the inherent logic of the instrument (in the case of the violin, adding fingers and crossing strings to the right raises the pitch, picking up fingers and crossing strings to the left lowers the pitch.)
4. The student has accurate aural image of the piece that is achieved by extensive listening and singing [is able to audiate the music.]
5. The student is able to think of the piece in terms of direction of pitch.
6. The student is given the opportunity to use trial and error to choose the notes to a piece.

Suzuki authors Jennifer Burton and Edward Kreitman both affirm the importance of listening and singing, and the need for exploration through trial and error in the process of playing by ear. Additional activities can also assist students in accessing the active realm of audition.

Activities that Promote Audiation and Facilitate Playing By Ear

- Listen actively and passively.
- Sing. Have students sing everything before they play. In this way, students become familiar with their repertoire first by listening.

- Identify the resting tone to develop a sense of tonality.
- Identify and distinguish the beat and the rhythm.
- Have students move in a variety of ways to the music they are learning.
- Remind students to audiate or “sing in their head” what they are going to perform on their instrument *before* they begin and *while* they are performing. If you are not sure if they are audiating, have them sing the piece first.
- Discuss the form of pieces and identifying the phrases. Remind students when phrases are “the same” or “not the same.”
- Teach students to take the preparatory breath in the tempo and character of the music. The breath is the “on-switch” for hearing the music in our minds.
- Sing and play *for* students, not *with* them.
- Play the same songs in many different keys, tonalities, and meters (i.e., *Lightly Row* in D major, *Go Tell Aunt Rhody* in a minor key, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* in triple meter).
- Have students sing while placing their fingers for the correct pitches.
- Have students sing while shadow bowing or bowing in the air.
- Teach students the proper names of tonalities (major, minor, etc.) and meters (duple, triple, etc.) and how to recognize them by ear.



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Audiation or Imitation?

Teachers can easily recognize students who are imitating rather than audiating the music they are performing.¹⁵

Indications that a student is audiating include:

- The student can identify, sing, and perform the resting tone or tonic pitch (e.g., in Twinkle, the student hears that the music is heading toward a conclusion or "resting" on A).
- The student can move consistently to both the big beat and the little beats.
- The student can sing along the piece they are performing on their instrument.
- The student can maintain a steady beat while performing.
- The student is capable of making subtle adjustments in intonation without coaching from the teacher or parent.
- The student can identify the tonality and meter of the music by ear.

Indications that a student might not be audiating, but rather imitating or mechanically responding include:

- The student plays with poor intonation.
- The student ignores accidentals or fails to recognize that something sounds "wrong."
- The student performs with incorrect rhythms, particularly by failing to sustain longer note values.
- The student must make frequent stops in the performance in order to recall what comes next.
- The student performs with poor tone quality.
- The student relies on the teacher or parent to correct missed pitches, inaccurate rhythms, or identify musical phrases.

How Parents Can Help

What can I do to help my child at home?

Playing by ear is a skill that is developed over time. The most important job that you have as home teachers during this process is to give encouragement. Let your child know that you are their number one fan, and encourage their endeavors! Play the reference recordings for your child every day and create a musical environment. Sing and practice with your child.

Make sure to let them learn by ear. Whose job is it to find the notes for the next piece? Do not show your child everything; children must learn to teach themselves how to unlock the secrets of playing by ear on their instrument. Do not write down the songs in any way to help them "remember" or "memorize" the song. This may seem like a good idea to get quick results, but it will ultimately delay the development of playing by ear, which is an important goal. The *Suzuki Violin School* was masterfully designed with this process in mind. For violinists, the first nine pieces are in A Major. Therefore, there are only eight possible choices when finding the notes to a new piece. Allow your child to use trial and error, and

give them freedom to explore how their instrument works. They will soon discover that they can find the notes that they hear in their head on their instrument. Through this process, children can experience a sense of ownership and independence in their musicianship, which is a true source of motivation and pride. ❧

Notes

1. Eric Bluestine, *The Ways Children Learn Music: An Introduction and Practical Guide to Music Learning Theory*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000).
2. Edwin Gordon, *Preparatory Audiation, Audiation, and Music Learning Theory: A Handbook of a Comprehensive Music Learning Sequence* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001).
3. Edwin Gordon, "All About Audiation and Music Aptitudes," *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (1999): 42.
4. Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2003).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 10.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Gordon, "All about Audiation."
9. Ibid., 15.
10. Ibid., "15."
11. Michael Martin, "Why Can't They Play in Tune: Developing Accurate Intonation in Instrumental Lessons and Ensembles." *The GIML Audea* 2, no. 2 (1996): 2-4.
12. Ibid.
13. Jennifer J. Burton, *Sharpen Your Tools: A Practice Companion for Beginning Violin Students to Refine and Polish Techniques*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Burton Suzuki Studio, 2007).
14. Edward Kreitman, *Teaching from the Balance Point: A Guide for Suzuki Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Western Springs, IL: Western Springs School of Talent Education, 1998): 19-23.
15. Charles Krigbaum, "The Development of an Audiation-based Approach to Suzuki Violin Instruction Based on the Application of Edwin F. Gordon's Music Learning Theory" (master's thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 2005).

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