

The Art of Suzuki Graduation

by Cathy Shephard

Dr Suzuki devised the graduation level system to reward children for a job well done. The teacher decides if a child is ready to graduate at a particular level, and then works together with child and parent to produce a tape that can be presented to Dr Suzuki for his comments. Dr Suzuki listened to all the graduation tapes in Japan. In Europe we use the same system of recording graduation tapes except that the tapes are sent to experienced local Suzuki method teachers via the Suzuki Association. Those of you who have received a report at sometime will know that care is taken to be positive, constructive and motivating.

Graduation is not an examination and not a pass/fail situation. Once a teacher is satisfied with the child's taped performance and is happy to submit it, the child has essentially graduated at that level. The icing on the cake is an encouraging report, a lovely certificate with Dr Suzuki's own painting of the Japanese Alps that surround his home town, and an opportunity to perform at St. John's Smith Square.

There seems to be a notion that each child must graduate at the next level every year. This can create unnecessary pressure. The beauty of this system is that if the children are not quite ready to graduate one year, they may graduate at as many levels as they like the next. This flexibility allows each child to continue developing his/her technique so that a "belated" graduation may prove to be of a much higher standard than a pressured attempt to meet a deadline.

The teacher's decision about when or whether to submit a tape must be respected for the system to work to full advantage. It is perhaps difficult for the western mind to grasp Dr Suzuki's non pass/fail concept. He did not pass or fail graduation taped performances, as he respected the teacher's decision to submit the tape. He listened intently, making the most helpful comments and was thrilled when he listened to a performance that displayed fine musical intent and sound technique. So, too, are the BSI teachers who listen to submitted tapes. I'm sure they would be overjoyed if every performance was in tune, rhythmic, with beautiful tone and musical character. It is very unfair for all concerned to pressure a teacher into submitting a tape that is not carefully prepared. Equally concerning is when a teacher forces a child to submit a tape that the child is not pleased with. It is unnecessary to submit inferior graduation tapes; it is an insult to the child, the parent, the teacher and the auditing teacher. It also makes a mockery of Dr Suzuki's ideals.

Working towards submitting a graduation tape is a wonderful form of performance practice. It does not need to become a chore but rather a positive opportunity to better each performance, to compete with oneself and to improve in a non-threatening environment. In Japan I met students who often made 100 recordings at home and in lessons and would then leave it to the teacher to choose the best ten or so.

Especially in the early levels, I like my students to be well ahead of their graduation pieces before beginning to record. My level 1 students are at least towards the end of Book 2 when they begin recording Gossec Gavotte for graduation. This means they have a wider palate of techniques from Book 2 and have chalked up a considerable amount of Gossec Gavotte review before we even begin taping.

Some parents and teachers have the view that “they’ll play it better if they tape it as soon as they’ve learnt it”. This attitude seems to defy every professional musician’s performance experience. One only needs to ponder the many times Heifetz performed the Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky Concertos to realise how ridiculous this attitude is – imagine thinking his first attempt at performing the Mendelssohn Concerto was his best!

Graduation is not meant to be the “be all and end all”. It is but one part of the overall Suzuki education motivation package which includes private lessons, observation, parental support, group lessons, solo and group concerts, workshops, daily practice and review, daily listening to Suzuki tapes, listening to other recordings and concert attendance. If all of the above are part of your child’s environment, then you are well on the way to a happy graduation!

In more specific terms, I find that a lot of rehearsal with piano accompaniment or taped accompaniment of every studied piece is essential for violin, cello and flute students. If the child has never had the opportunity to play with the accompaniment, be that in group or as a solo, he/she really doesn’t know the piece well and has not had a chance to enjoy the music fully. As I cannot play piano I employ pianists for groups, workshops, concert rehearsals and concerts and, with earlier books, I have my students play regularly with taped accompaniment. It is dreadfully frustrating for a child to record Gossec Gavotte if he/she has not already worked at all the Book 1 pieces up to tempo with Book 1 taped accompaniment.

I know that many teachers have a graduation party when students join together to perform all the pieces in one book. Every child works diligently to have every piece polished and the reward is a fun party and lots of chips and cakes! I have my own certificates for pupils who have completed all the Twinkle variations and Etude and can play with taped accompaniment. I find this is a great incentive and helps make the “official” Level 1 graduation taping easier.

Once when I was teaching in Texas, I was asked to write reports on four graduation tapes. To my surprise, I found that every tape included a performance of the level piece they were submitting plus all previous graduation level pieces performed anew. This really puts Suzuki method review into practice! The Bach Bourrée, played by a Mozart Concerto student was superb! For the auditor this was obviously a time consuming job, but what a wonderful education and confidence building process for the child, who begins to recognise, by comparing each year’s recordings, how well he/she is progressing. It also makes it crystal clear to everyone that a Book 6 child playing Level 1 must have a superior approach to when he first played

Gossec Gavotte. Europe may not be able to instigate this style of graduation, but it could prove very helpful if each teacher would re-record previous graduation levels to accurately assess improvement for themselves.

My final point is that of *Quality!* I am sure that the most powerful motivation a child can have to continue music and music practice is playing well. Children love to do well – to feel a sense of honest achievement. They know when a job is well done – you can't fool them! I encourage my pupils and parents not to compare with one another by asking irrelevant questions such as “what piece are you up to?” and “what level are you graduating at this year?”

I tell my students to help each other by commenting on aspects of playing like “your tone has improved and your vibrato is better”. The more we emphasise such qualities, the better players they will become because their self-awareness will develop to a point where they can practise well alone and become musically independent. If we merely instil an attitude of “mowing down pieces” we reinforce mediocrity and low standards because importance is taken away from quality and given to quantity.

Please think about these points. Let's all try to submit only quality tapes this year and raise each child's standards. If there isn't enough time – no fuss – just submit a tape next year.

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