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The adult's idea that freedom consists in minimizing duties and obligations must be rejected. The foundation of education must be based on the following facts: That the joy of the child is in accomplishing things great for his age; that the real satisfaction of the child is to give maximum effort to the task at hand; that happiness consists in well directed activity of body and mind in the way of excellence; and that true freedom has, as its objective, service to society and to mankind consistent with the progress and happiness of the individual.

Maria Montessori

Learning: A Fascinating Process

The development of musical skills in children is a fascinating subject for study, but those of us teaching and parenting don't have access to much research in this area. Scientific studies of the growth of musical skills in children are almost non-existent. Measurement of success is obviously too complicated. If a child makes seven good serves out of ten in volleyball, we can all see and record the results; however a student may play all the correct notes insofar as pitch and rhythm are concerned, only to be judged by a musician as deficient in dynamics, balance and phrasing. One can understand why studies are lacking in this area.

Fortunately, many of the principles of learning observed in other areas will help us in our work with children. Both the Suzuki parent and the Suzuki teacher can profit from a knowledge and understanding of the ways in which young children learn both motor and cognitive skills. Psychologists have done extensive research in these areas. Observations drawn from this research do have a bearing on problems we face in working with young children in music.

Although Suzuki says that he gave up reading books by psychologists some time ago, he did arrive at many of the same conclusions after his own extensive study of children. Such statements as "At age three children are unable to..." or "A four-year old cannot comprehend...", caused him to reject others' opinions and led him to study children directly himself.

Suzuki observed the learning habits of children. These observations and his reflections on them gave birth to his idea to apply the mother-tongue method to the teaching of music to small children. As his success tells us, he found that children have enormous potential for learning and that poor teaching; poor environment and inadequate adult expectations have been the principal causes of limiting that potential.

LEARNING: A FASCINATING PROCESS

Suzuki's Discovery, The Mother-Tongue Method

“All Japanese children speak Japanese!” exclaimed Suzuki to his friends one day. He had suddenly realized the astonishing fact that every normal child old enough to talk had been successfully educated by the mother-tongue method. “Children everywhere learn to speak their own tongues fluently which shows that they have a very high level of ability. The most successful example of the learning process is the mother-tongue method. Not only do normal children all over the world learn the basics of their mother-tongue without text, test or classroom, but they also learn to speak the dialect with its often subtle nuances and they are able to build an amazing vocabulary before they ever set foot in a school”.

Natural Learning

The characteristics of the mother-tongue method are actually those of the child's natural learning period in every area, the period in which the child's intuitive learning ability is at its peak and the period in which he is in the driver's seat controlling his advancement. It is only when the child learns to walk, to talk and to use his hands for holding, grasping and manipulating that he determines when he is ready to walk, talk and use his hands. We should reflect on all of the aspects surrounding the development of these skills. What an exciting period of growth to observe!

It is obvious that the environment encourages such learning. Adult interest and praise are usually strong, the desire to imitate the adult and other children is powerful and there are usually good models for observation. The child develops at his own rate, most often with a staggering number of repetitions.

Suzuki, in his approach, capitalizes on the principal features of the natural learning method. He stresses: 1) A favorable environment, with encouragement, interest, praise and models of sight and sound to observe (listening to recordings is an important part of that environment); 2) The awakening and growth of a desire to play a musical instrument; 3) Absence of stress, no problem with self-image; 4) A very slow rate of progress at the beginning; 5) Great number of