Suzuki organ in Australia: A musical Revelation in Organ Pedagogy

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The Suzuki approach to music education has been established world-wide for over forty years. Based on the principle of "Character first, ability second" the Suzuki philosophy is to nurture good people who can also play an instrument musically and enjoy music as a lifelong skill – as players and listeners.

Dr Suzuki (1898-1998) was a Japanese pioneer in early music education. His Mother Tongue approach is based on the observation that babies and children absorb the flow, tempo, accent and modulation of language by listening – even before birth - and long before they can speak. Suzuki realised that children could learn the language of music with similar exposure to its sounds and rhythms, because music is a language (an international one at that), whether sung or played.

Suzuki Organ was pioneered over twelve years ago. Swedish Suzuki teacher, Gunilla Rönnberg was given the opportunity to develop an organ repertoire suitable for children as young as three. This was something that had never been done before anywhere in the world. Traditionally, organ studies are not commenced until years of study on the piano, so an "older" start is usually taken for granted. But Suzuki Organ opened the door to all ages – an inclusive curriculum that welcomes the youngest child.

Rönnberg devised practical ways to make adjustable seats and organ consoles that could be lowered to suit a small child. A serendipitous discovery was made in observing just how much young children enjoy the huge variety of tone colours on an organ, from the highest sounds of a piccolo to the thunderous bass of a tuba or the brilliance of a trumpet. Once lessons start, children are highly motivated by the variety and fun of discovering sounds all over the keyboards and pedals. In fact the pedal board is a 'super sized' keyboard, perfect for developing gross motor skills with the feet and later in using the whole body – hands and feet simultaneously - in the technical development of co-ordination, independence and reading skills appropriate to the age of the child.

Highly trained teachers follow a state Suzuki teacher training curriculum specialising in their instrument. Annual professional development courses are compulsory to maintain accreditation and to keep up to date with the latest research. Child Protection certification is compulsory (which is not always the case with self-taught, unregistered home music teachers).

Online teaching is an important part of the program for both teachers and students. Students in my studio send in audio files for assessment between weekly face-to-face lessons. This enables the student to keep on track during the week and to make sure they are thoroughly prepared before the next lesson. Technology has proven to be a positive and powerful ally in student/teacher learning, practice and performance.

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St Giles, London, after students' recital and lecture to Royal College of Organists and Royal Academy of Music.

Over the past six years Suzuki Organ in Australia has grown beyond all expectations. As a Teacher Trainer in Suzuki organ and piano, I now teach organ over 30 hours per week. There are eight teacher trainees studying with me through the NSW and Victorian Suzuki Associations. This is a three-year part-time curriculum where teachers study online and face-to-face as they begin to teach.

Summer Schools are held annually (with the exception of 2012 when my students went on a five-week European Study Tour). The largest ever Summer School was held at the Geelong College in January 2014, with over one hundred children, parents and teachers attending. Directed by Geelong Suzuki Organ teacher Brendon Lukin, the School involved students in tutorials, master classes, hymn-playing and improvisation classes as well as singing, concerts, practice time and games on the oval.

An exciting innovation was the Gala Concert play-in for multiple organs, keyboards and pianos. The concert hall resounded to the magnificent ensemble of over thirty students performing "Prelude", from the Te Deum by Charpentier (with antiphonal organ) and folksongs such as" Little Playmates" and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Prior to attending the Summer School, fourteen young organists presented a Rising Stars Recital at the Organs of the Ballarat Goldfields Festival.

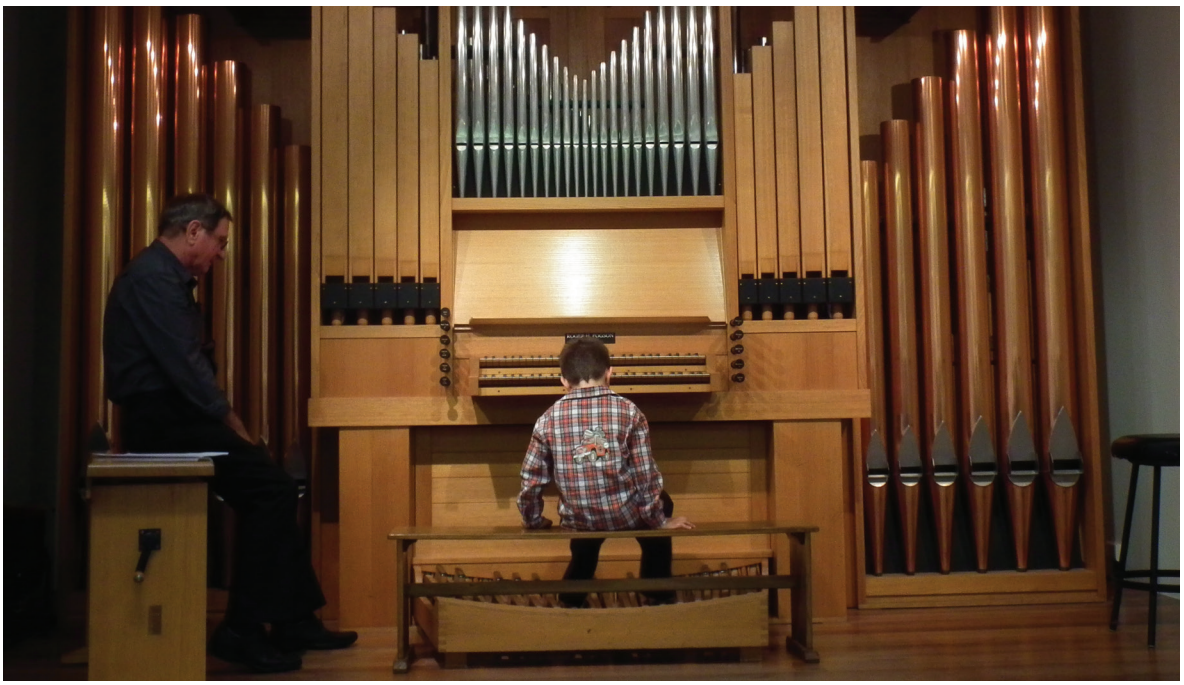
The whole Suzuki approach is experiential based learning rather than exam based. Weekly opportunities are given for students to play in their local churches as well as further afield. Students play regularly at interstate events, at cathedrals, town halls and concert halls such as the Sydney Opera House. Master classes are held on a regular basis.

The 2012 European Organ Study Tour involved eight students and their families. Master classes with leading European organists were held in Basel (Switzerland), Stade Organ Academy (North Germany), Paris and London. In London I presented a lecture to organ teachers from the Royal College of Organists and the Royal Academy of Music. This was followed by a master class in Westminster Abbey with Robert Quinney, sub-organist at the Abbey. The learning experiences gained on such study tours will stay with these children for the rest of their lives - and influence countless others.

Currently, after completing the six Suzuki Organ books, three students are now working towards the nationally recognised Associate in Music organ diploma through the Australian Music Examinations Board. Two others are preparing for Year 12 exams in organ. A coast-to-coast USA concert tour is being planned for November 2015.

Suzuki Organ in Australia is here to stay: a revelation in early childhood organ pedagogy and a global revolution that has no boundaries. TEACH

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Paul Butov at the Newcastle Conservatorium organ, David Clark looking on to support.