

## COMPARING TWO CONTEMPORARY VIOLIN TEACHING METHODS: SUZUKI AND ROLLAND

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### Abstract

*In the present study, two widely-used contemporary violin teaching methods, by Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) and Paul Rolland (1911-1978), were examined and compared. These two approaches have been widely used at American schools since 1960s. In this article the similarities and differences between them were compared, and advantages of using both violin methods were discussed.*

**Key Words:** *violin teaching in the United States; Shinichi Suzuki; Mother Tongue Method; Talent Education; Paul Rolland*

## İKİ ÇAĞDAŞ KEMAN METODUNUN KARŞILAŞTIRILMASI: SUZUKI VE ROLLAND

### Özet

*Bu çalışmada Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) ve Paul Rolland (1911-1978) tarafından ortaya çıkarılmış çok kullanılan 2 keman öğretim metodu incelenmiş ve karşılaştırılmıştır. Bu 2 öğretim yaklaşımı Amerikan okullarında 1960lardan itibaren geniş bir alanda kullanılmaktadır. Bu makalede bu metodların benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları karşılaştırılmış ve her ikisinin de keman öğretimindeki faydaları tartışılmıştır.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde keman öğretimi; Shinichi Suzuki; Ana Dil Metodu; Yetenek Eğitimi; Paul Rolland*

### 1. Introduction

Between 1950 and 1960 a rapid progress was done in string programs in American public schools. That time can be named as Renaissance in American string education. "This growth was largely due to the efforts of the MENC String Instruction Committee and the ASTA [American String Teachers' Association] National String Planning Committee as follows:

- In 1951, the first issue of the *American String Teacher* was published. This journal provided string-teaching articles for both private and public school

string teachers.

- The MENC [Music Educators National Conference] String Instruction Committee also published a series of reports that dealt with various aspects of public schools string teaching.
- ASTA sponsored yearly summer workshops and clinics for public school string teachers.” (1).

Another important development in string education in 1950s was the foundation of the National School Orchestra Association (NSOA). NSOA was instituted in 1958. “NSOA’s mission was into further the developments of school orchestras in the United States by increasing the status and quality of school orchestra instruction to that of school boards” (2). NSOA and ASTA engaged in 1998 and their name has been announced as *ASTA with NSOA* since this date.

The 1960s witnessed major social changes in the United States. “As the middle class continued to move to the suburbs, a growing economic disparity developed between the socioeconomic classes and funding for urban schools declined dramatically.” (3). To make education more accessible for particularly culturally disadvantaged children, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was completed in 1965. Title IV of this act was related to fund music research projects all over the United States. Paul Rolland’s String Research Project at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois was one of those 48 projects. In his project Rolland came “the awareness that violin playing must incorporate the most natural physical motions allowing all string players to play with ease and beauty of tone. By applying balanced body positions to violin playing, physical tension is reduced.” (4). He also made a series of fourteen films called *The Teaching of Action in String Playing* in which how to achieve this freedom was demonstrated. Each film has actions, such as Left Hand Position, Bow Strokes, Vibrato, and the procedure in string playing is established systematically. His basic principal was as follows: “Good rhythm concepts are the basis of all well controlled movements, otherwise our playing becomes disorganized and confused.” (5)

## 2. Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) and His Mother Tongue Method<sup>1</sup>

The most influential figure in string education in the United States was Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998). Originally from Japan and studied violin in Germany for six years, Suzuki developed the *Talent Education* or the *Mother Tongue* method in Japan af-

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1. For more information about Shinichi Suzuki, his string teaching method and criticism on his approach see the following article: Göktürk, D. (January 2008). “Suzuki Violin Teaching Method: Its Theory, Philosophy, and Criticism,” *Turkish Journal of Music Education*, year 1, vol. 1, number 1, <http://www.tjme.org>, ISSN: 1307-3389.

ter the World War II. According to Suzuki, talent is not innate but can be developed by individual. He stated in his *Nurtured by Love* that “Talent is no accident of birth... Man is grown with natural ability. A newborn child adjusts to his environment in order to live, and various abilities are acquired in the process.” (6) Suzuki also believed that talent was only a helpful element to develop the ability quicker than others. Suzuki’s basic idea regarding to his pedagogy was the *Mother Tongue* method. He observed that all Japanese children could speak their mother tongue, so he thought that children could learn how to play violin in the same way. He observed the practicability of this method as follows:

- The environmental conditions and their influence on the new-born baby as it accustoms itself to the sounds of the ‘mother tongue.’
- Teaching the child by constant repetition to utter its first sound. Usually ‘mama mama mama’ and so on.
- Everyday attitude of the parents after the baby starts to talk.
- Natural progress through daily practice.
- The skillfulness with which the parents build up enthusiasm in the child, and the happiness of the child finds in acquiring its new-found ability. (7).

In addition to Rolland’s *String Research Project* conducted and recorded at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign in Illinois (and supported by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965), another project was also sponsored by ASTA in 1960s to bring the Suzuki Method to the attention of American string teachers. Through this project, Shinichi Suzuki came to the United States to perform for the ASTA conferences first in 1964 and then in 1967. The two most important principals by Suzuki from his *Mother Tongue* approach are as follows:

- All children are encouraged to strive for their potential. Given the right environment, any child can learn to do anything, and in particular, to play the violin. This musical environment includes supportive and actively involved parents, listening to good music from an early age (including the early violin pieces), and good instrumental training.
- Children can learn to do anything given enough repetitions in an encouraging environment. As a result, practice is based upon the number of repetitions rather than the quantity of time. (8).

In sum, the Suzuki approach in string teaching is based on listening. According to this principle, listening is the basic activity that should be done daily by students. Another principle is learning to read music by rote. “Contrary to the more traditional approach of learning a musical instrument, Suzuki’s *Mother-Tongue* method does not use printed music with beginners. Instead, students listen to recordings of the litera-

ture they play.” (9)

Another main idea of Suzuki’s string teaching pedagogy is parental involvement. Suzuki believed in parents being at the center of his plan, and according to him mothers are strongly encouraged participating lessons. “Not only do they attend each private lesson, and monthly ensemble class, but they also actually learn to play the instrument themselves, taking lessons during the first few months when the child is to listen to the recordings. When the child begins to take lessons, the mothers take notes, study the manuals, and practice daily with the child at home, basing their help on constant encouragement and patient repetition.” (10). Indeed, repetition is the main factor of achievement in Suzuki philosophy in string teaching. “Repetition is crucial for success in the Suzuki approach. After learning a composition, students must continue to review it, for Suzuki maintains that in ideal practice working for perfection on the previous piece is the most important point for cultivating abilities.” (11). Motivation concept is also very important in Suzuki approach. Encouraging students through constructive support and stimulation, for instance “ ‘Very good. Can you do better?’ is the basic Suzuki formula” (12).

### **3. Paul Rolland (1911-1978) and Rolland Method**

“Get them started right and aim them in the right direction and they will reach the top . . . It is a fallacy to believe that the careful teaching of fundamentals will slow down the pupil . . . Most elements of string playing can be introduced, in embryonic form of course, during the first year of instruction, and refined thereafter . . . One would be quite surprised at what pupils can be started on during the first and second years . . . Music educators should strive to develop players who not only play in tune with a good sound but who also feel comfortable and happy in so doing, and who use well coordinated movements without excessive tension as they play . . . It is of paramount importance to develop a well balanced stance, balanced right and left arms, and a balanced hold . . . Good balance is the key to efficient movements . . . A small child can be taught to play with a beautiful tone and sonority by the use of good balance of the body and by avoiding static tensions in his movements . . . Stressed is freedom of movement; trying to inculcate the pupil with a feeling of kinesthesia, a feeling of lightness, both with the bow and the instrument . . . naturalness, naturalness, natural-ness . . .” (13)

Paul Rolland (1911-1978) was born in Hungary and trained in Europe. After coming to the United States in the 1930s, he became a professor at the University of Illinois. He began to develop his string pedagogy in the 1950s. “Rolland based his pedagogy on the similarity of natural everyday movements to the motions required for string playing. The word ‘motion’ defines the operative and often overlooked mode of thought.” (14). In his project, “Young beginning string players were recruited from the Urbana Public Schools, in the Illinois town where Rolland resided. Rolland and

his research associates taught approximately one hundred students for a two-year trial, using the principles that Rolland had developed over the course of his teaching career. Out of the project came a book called *The Teaching of Action in String Playing* (1974). This book was designed and developed to help classroom string teachers teach movements conducive to good string playing in a group setting. Rolland produced a set of illustrative films to accompany the text of the book.” (15). His vibrato and shifting techniques are still popular today. According to Rolland “Teaching, and therefore learning, occurs in two channels: Developmental and Remedial. New skills, new knowledge should be introduced, and impressions already gained must be deepened, and constantly refined. Of the two channels, the first one is always more popular with the student, and the teacher should guard against being carried away by progress which is too fast and without real substance and quality.” (16).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the similarities and differences were discussed between the two string methods.

##### **Similarities between Suzuki and Rolland methods**

Similarities between Rolland and Suzuki methods are as follows:

- When Suzuki toured the United States in 1964, Rolland received a grant to create a film *Suzuki Teaches American Mothers and Their Children*, and, consequently, he was influenced by him. “Many of Rolland’s ideas are related to the teaching of Shinichi Suzuki. Such as matters as the rote-note approach, a strong concern for correct playing posture, constant review and refinement of a relatively small but constantly growing repertoire, the use of short, rapid bow strokes at first, and the concept of an early bow hold are found in the teaching of both Suzuki and Rolland.” (17). Moreover, their approaches on teaching vibrato are mostly similar.
- In Suzuki teaching the most important point is technique and tone, and the reproduction of sounds. Since Suzuki teachers often go through a rigorous certification process, parents should ask about the teacher’s level of training and expertise. On the other hand, teachers using strict Rolland approach will spend a great deal of time focusing on the quality of the sound and also on students’ technique, which will involve students doing repetitive physical actions to release the tension in violin lessons.

##### **Differences between Suzuki and Rolland methods**

Differences between Rolland and Suzuki methods are as follows:

- Although Suzuki philosophy is not based on musical talent, Paul Rolland’s method does not mention anything about inborn ability or does not indicate

that every child can play the violin.

- Parental involvement is a very important part of Suzuki's teaching. As one of the most important parts of Suzuki's teaching, parents are expected to attend both individual and group lessons. They also have to practice with the child at home every day. Moreover, parents are expected to take notes at lessons to help their children to practice at home, and they should be in constant contact with the teacher. On the other hand, involvement of parents is not required in Rolland's approach even though they are encouraged to be supportive of children. Parental involvement is left to the preference of parents and/or teacher.
- In the Suzuki method, reading music becomes a focus later. During the first year of violin instruction, students will be introduced to music reading through the use of letters, and they move to read basic staff notation in one year. Rolland method does not require a similar way to teach how to read music. Students begin to read music in the early stages of the instruction in Rolland's approach.
- Weekly group lessons are mostly required in addition to individual lessons in Suzuki method. Group lessons are not required in Rolland's approach.
- Both methods offer early bow-hold; however, each of them requests a different style. For example, Suzuki approach offers the early bow hold as holding at the normal place of the bow but placing the thumb not the inside but the outside of the frog (see Picture 1 below). Rolland method offers the early bow hold as holding at the balance point (see Picture 2 below).

**Picture 1. Suzuki bow hold for beginners** **Picture 2. Rolland bow hold for beginners**



- Rest positions differ from each other in each method. In Suzuki approach, stu-

dent holds the violin under the arm but in Rolland style the violin is held like a guitar.

- In Suzuki pedagogy, tapes are used for each finger on the fingerboard. Yet, in Rolland's method only a dot is used on the middle part of the fingerboard.
- Both hands (bow and left hand) are used together in the first lesson in Suzuki approach. In Rolland Method, the left hand position is taught first (before using the bow) through plucking and playing pizzicato. Once students excel in left hand technique they can begin to use the bow.
- Shifting technique is another difference between two string teaching methods. According to Suzuki, beginning with the fourth position is the easiest task in shifting for students. On the other hand, Rolland's method offers shifting to third or fifth positions as the simplest approach for students. In addition, Rolland's system includes broader information and more examples of shifting techniques than Suzuki's method.

“The work of Rolland and Suzuki and the adoption of their materials for use in the string class have had a tremendous impact on raising the quality of string programs in the schools. Also, through continued efforts by ASTA, NSOA, and MENC, string programs are now appearing in schools where they had disappeared or never existed before.” (18). For the future of string education in the world “we can continue to improve our methods, approaching them, it is hoped, with the same thoroughness and thoughtfulness that has never been handed down us.” (19). With the use of these two string methods in Turkey, string education can start early and better string instruction can be provided. As a recommendation, these two methods should be adopted in Turkey and string teachers should be educated through workshops (either abroad or by inviting experts in these areas). If we desire to have a better quality in string education in Turkey (so that we can train well-equipped musicians) we should start adopting new methods from other countries. As the author, I believe that the United States is a good example that we can follow regarding this issue, and “I believe that true confidence and peace only come with borrowing and learning experiences from each other along with following nationally distinct paths.” (20).

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