

boot camp babes

The Suzuki style of teaching children music is exhausting and intense, and that's just for the parents. But the results, as *Caroline Phillips* found when she attended the London Suzuki International Summer School at Bryanston, are a delight



The Countess and Chief Executive Officer are sitting at a Formica table eating tandoori chicken, broccoli, and jelly. Grafyn (Countess) Evelyn Pacht has driven for two days from Germany to stay in an English boarding school. "Having cold showers, queuing for food and being woken at night by false fire alarms is romantic and special for us," she says. "We can't do this in Germany."

"I went to boarding school, so this is familiar," responds Masamichi Yokoi, President and CEO of Daiwa Europe, the Japanese securities conglomerate. "But aged 52, I wasn't expecting to sleep somewhere without a private bathroom. I hope I'll survive. This is my only holiday this summer." Later, I hide behind a flimsy curtain in a shower, hoping that the unknown man waiting outside to bathe will disappear so that I can get out for my towel. We're here for our children to learn music, so we are mucking in.

"It's wonderful to see the incredible progress my daughter has made in her music in a short period," continues Masamichi, who came last year but stayed in a hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant. A four-year-old girl wearing bunches walks past carrying a violin, which is one sixty-fourth of the volume of a full concert violin. By the end of the week, like many of the children here, she'll have performed a solo in front of up to 600 people.

Welcome to the London Suzuki Group International Summer School – a week-long violin, viola, cello and piano course held at Bryanston School, Dorset, for the past 16 years. The course is organised by London teachers of Suzuki, a Japanese method for teaching music. Over 500 people are attending, including 236 children – aged four to 17 – and their parents. Participants from as far afield as Israel, Japan, Singapore and Colombia. Some 39 teachers are on site – local and flown in from America, Spain, Peru and Italy. Plus enough pianos to stretch the length of Sloane Street.

All the course places were snapped up weeks before the closing date for applications. There was a waiting list the length of a cello, including children who had performed at the Royal Festival Hall.

The week costs £430 for children aged over seven (marginally less for tinier musicians). A bursary may be awarded to one child per family for a proportion of the fees. "My eldest son, Hannibal, then 14, sold his beloved saxophone to contribute to his brother's

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Bryanston fees," says Collette Morris, Deputy Head of a state primary and a bursary holder. "When Hannibal's school heard this, they bought him a new sax." Bryanston is the Morris annual holiday, but such commitment is not unusual.

There are 200 Suzuki teachers and 10,000 students in the UK. This intense method was evolved in the 1930s by Dr Shinichi Suzuki, a friend of Albert Einstein. Suzuki noted the capacity of young children to learn their mother tongue. If infants can master a complex language like Japanese by the age of six, he argued, they must be able to learn an instrument if training begins aged two or three. Dr Suzuki challenged the idea of innate musical talent. "There is no such thing as talent," he said. "The secret is repetition."

Parental involvement is a prerequisite. "This allows the child to start very young – a huge benefit when learning a complex, stringed instrument," notes Christine Livingstone, a Suzuki teacher. "Every four-year-old wants to make a noise," adds Emma Bruce, mother of four. "And it's lovely to start them on proper music."

Learning is by listening and sight-reading is delayed. "You can't ask a child who isn't reading books yet to try to read music," explains Christine. Pupils must also listen to a daily recording of their Suzuki repertoire. It drives me nuts. And students have to practise every day because Suzuki said, 'Every day you eat, you must practise'. Occasionally, my children ask to starve.

Now my daughters are talking about the 'cigarette' cards, rewards here for good musical efforts. Last year it was, "Swap you Schuman". (Anya, then 8.) "Nah. I like Rach-man-off cos he's the purple card." (Ella, then 5.) Now they're bartering unpronounceable performers and are keen to visit the Bryanston shop. "Pleeeeee Mummy." The shop sells loo paper emblazoned with musical notes, crackers containing song sheets, Chopin Liszt notepads and, er, 'Gone Chopin, Bach Soon' blackboards.

At Bryanston, under-sevens study for three hours a day. Older children have private and group lessons: musicianship class, Music Mind (the grammar of music), chamber music (26 groups) and four orchestras. On the first day, 40 beginners play together, all at different speeds. Plus they have Dalcroze – "Kneel when you hear the Chinese bells," exhorts the teacher – and *djembe* drumming. Here, a teacher wearing stripy trousers and bells around her ankles does an elephantine tribal dance while twenty energetic kids thump Senegalese drums. This is good for rhythm and listening skills. The children also enjoy swimming sessions, squash, tennis and meeting friends. For parents, there is a 'Can't Sing' choir, a 'Can Sing' one and (cringe-making) handbell lessons.

Everywhere I go, there's music. Ad hoc madrigals being sung in the grand entrance hall; Helen Brunner, a leading violin teacher



quintet with style. And then, we have what I consider to be the musical highlight...*drum roll*...when my daughters, Anya and Ella, play their concert pieces.

Playing like this requires dedication and hard work. Jenny Macmillan, who attended Bryanston eight times as a parent and who has taught here, used to drive for two hours to get piano lessons. Her three children learned seven instruments between them. "We got up at 6am every morning to practise," says Jenny. "My daughter, Pippa, got three Grade 8 Distinctions by the age of 13. Now she plays with the National Youth Orchestra. Everyone at Bryanston was so supportive."

Parents have to strive to help their children to learn. "It's a long haul," notes Jane Afia, violin teacher and mother of three Suzuki children. "It's like bringing up

Livingstone. "They have to learn to be constructive and build on what the child does well rather than looking at what he does badly."

Some people are sceptical of such intensive training for young children, fearing that it puts an unnatural pressure on them. But group lessons are fun and sociable. Suzuki children love attending year-round 'home concerts' where they play songs, then eat cake and hang out with their friends. Most take a joy in learning music. And the drop-out rate is very low. The method makes use of the phenomenal capacity for learning and growth in very young children and helps develop concentration and discipline.

"It's about inspiring children to do their personal best and get the most fun from it," asserts clinical psychologist Helen Likierman, a Suzuki mum who has been attending Bryanston since 1988. "I'm against hot-housing. But this is about encouraging children to develop general learning skills."

Suzuki's intention wasn't to produce professional musicians – he nursed a deeper purpose. Yehudi Menuhin recalled Suzuki saying that his ambition was to create amateurs who might give themselves the joy of music and contribute to the harmony of society. Suzuki believed in developing sensitivity, discipline, endurance and a beautiful heart. As I watch my children performing joyfully in their concerts, I think he got it mostly right.

This year's Bryanston International Summer School takes place from 19-26 August 2007. Contact Nick Pullinger (01372 720 088) for more information.

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who introduced Suzuki to the UK, playing her baroque Amati violin; impromptu musical soireés; the sounds of children practising and performing.

Now we're in the concert hall and Konrad Wagstyl plays a Mlynarski *Polonaise* incredibly – performing from memory, as do all the children. Next day Maya Yokoi, 10, daughter of Masamichi, stands on stage in a white dress and plays a beautiful rendition of Vivaldi's *Concerto in G Minor*. Later Nathasha Neale, 14, leads a

children. All the animals in the kingdom get rid of their young long before we do. Equally, it can be ten years before a child says, 'I love this piece of music. I want to learn it'. She persevered because, "You're giving them something for life. Being a Suzuki parent has given me the greatest highs and lows of my parenting life."

"One of the hardest things for parents is to rid themselves of negativity when working with their children. They interrupt or say, 'No, no, no!'", explains Christine