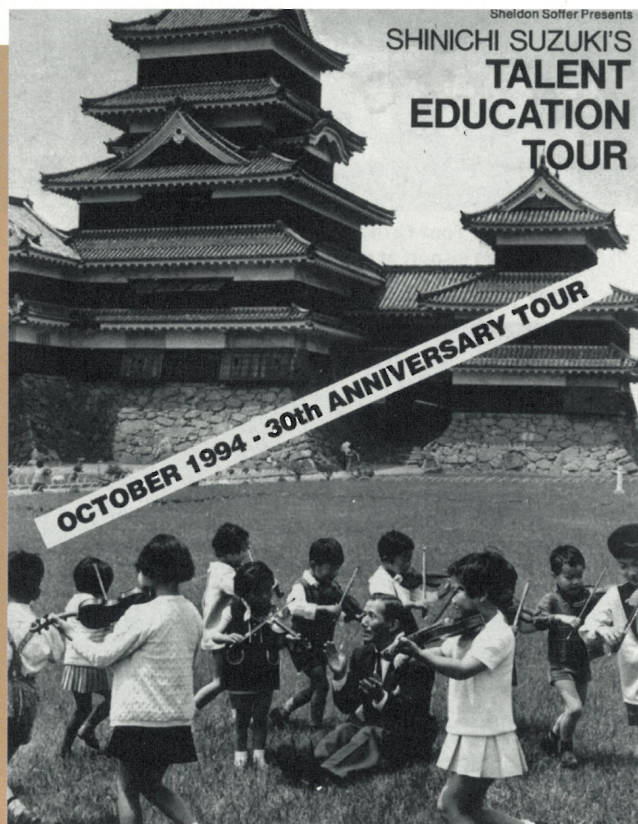


My Father and the Talent Education Tour

By Yuko Honda



There was a scarcity of string players. Many orchestras around the country had openings in their string sections. Many people were worried about the future of classical music in the United States of America.

That was in 1964, the year that the first Talent Education Tour brought ten Japanese children to perform in the USA. People who came to hear these concerts could not believe their own eyes and ears. That was thirty years ago. In those days communication was not as developed as it is today. Americans knew very little about Japan. In many people's minds, Japan was a country that was still very backward in many respects. I am sure it was surprising enough just to see Japanese children playing violin. But, these children played so well and so beautifully! Their performance brought tears to many people's eyes. At the end of the performance, everybody was on their feet cheering.

At first, people thought these children must be very special children. After the children performed a few pieces, Dr. Shinichi Suzuki came up on the stage and spoke to the audience. He said

these were all ordinary children. Dr. Suzuki then stunned the audience by claiming that any child could play the violin like these children if they were given a good environment and good instruction at an early age!

Dr. Suzuki said, "American children are not born speaking English. They learned how to speak because they heard English from the day they were born. There are no failures in learning their mother tongue. If it works for language skills, it has to work the same way for any other area of a child's education. I have applied this idea to music education. Now, you are seeing the result."

It was hard to believe. However, the audience had little choice but to believe. The evidence was right before their eyes. Although there were already a few teachers experimenting with the method in this country, this first tour performance was really the birth of the Suzuki method outside of Japan.

The first Talent Education Tour was planned by Clifford Cook, John Kendall, Robert Klotman and my father, Masaaki Honda. It was not an easy task for any of them. First, there were financial problems. After tossing around many ideas, their solution was to choose children whose families could pay the round trip airfare from Japan to the United States. But, on the American side, they still needed to cover expenses for the tour once they arrived.

These days the Suzuki Method is well known, so selling tickets is a relatively easy task. I don't know how in 1964, Cook, Kendall and Klotman thought they could convince people to host and plan concerts for Japanese children. I am amazed at the determination and courage of those people who decided to accept this responsibility, without knowing how they were going to sell tickets to the public. They could not be sure themselves if indeed these children could play the violin!

While booking concerts at various places was underway in America, in Japan my father was facing incredible difficulties. When he visited big businesses for sponsorship, they would almost laugh at him. "Japanese children playing violin for Americans? Don't you know Americans are much more advanced in Western music than we are?"

Not only that, but my father had to deal with Dr. Suzuki's reluctance to make the trip. In Japan, Dr. Suzuki's ideas were not yet widely accepted. He thought that an American tour was too risky. After all, those business people might be right. Maybe Americans would not come to hear the Japanese children's violin performance. But my father thought that Americans would understand Dr. Suzuki's method and probably it would be a sensation. He told Dr. Suzuki, "I promise to spread your method to America. It is my mission. Please agree to make a trip." Dr. Suzuki did not reply.

Then John Kendall wrote to my father that bookings in America were progressing. With this news and more pleading, my father finally convinced Dr. Suzuki. They then selected the tour group members. It seemed everything was finally under way when suddenly another big blow came!

The Minister of Education sent the message that he would not permit children to be absent from the school for such a long time. Without the Minister of Education's approval, passports could not be issued to the children. It was obvious they were at a dead end, but my father was not to be discouraged. He left his



Top, left: Tour group at Rochester airport, October, 1968.

Lower left: Tour group arrives at Memphis, TN, airport, Oct., 1976.

Above: 1989 Tour Group is welcomed with a concert at the Chicago airport at midnight. (Flight arrived late)

Below: 1993 Tour Group in Mt. Vernon, WA.



The next morning they played on a TV show at 8:30 a.m., played another performance at 10:30 a.m., then dashed to the airport to catch a 2:55 p.m. flight to Chicago!

It was already spring in Japan and Seattle had been warm. It was a big surprise for them to find that Chicago was still in a middle of winter. Snow was deep and the wind from the lake was ice cold. Next day in the afternoon, they performed at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Their tour went on and performed at Southeastern Illinois University in St. Louis, The New England Conservatory in Boston, The United Nations and The Juilliard School in New York City. They played at White Plains, NY, and Trenton, NJ, at the Music Educator's National Conference and the American String Teachers Association in Philadelphia. Then they went on to Oberlin College in Oberlin, OH, Wayne University in Detroit, and Wichita University in Wichita, KS. From there they traveled to the University of Arizona in Tucson, AZ, on to San Fernando State College in Los Angeles, and then played for the California String Teachers Association in San Francisco. Their final performance was in Honolulu, HI. When they left Honolulu on March 25th, they had given nineteen concerts in twenty days in twelve different states!

real job behind for the moment and began daily trips to Tokyo once again. He made appointment after appointment to influence the government's decision. He always believed George Bernard Shaw's saying, "Where there is a will, there is a way." Soon Dr. and Mrs. Suzuki, ten children, and my father were on their way to the first tour of America!

On March 5, 1964, the tour left Tokyo airport at 9:50 p.m. Their first stop was Seattle. The plane landed at 1:30 p.m. Seattle time, only 6:30 a.m. Tokyo time. The children had very little sleep on the plane. The first performance was scheduled at the University of Washington at 3:30 p.m. They did not have a chance to eat, nor even to change their clothes!

The children were taken directly to the University from the airport. Suddenly they were on the stage, performing for the first time for the American audiences. When they finished, however, their day was not yet over. They had only time enough to eat and sit for a while before they had another performance at 7:30 p.m. Forty hours after they got up that morning in Japan, they were finally taken to the host family's home for a short rest.



There have been some changes in the years since the first tour. During the early years, the group stayed in each location for only one or two nights. Now they stay longer, participating in workshops and play-ins with local students as well as playing performances at concert halls and local schools. Audiences have also changed. For the first tours, many audiences were skeptical and became excited as the concerts progressed. These days, audiences are made up of many Suzuki students and their families, though the excitement is the same.

Problems and exciting moments have also been part of the tours, with misplaced instruments, lost clothes, and dashes for planes. In 1976, the group was to take a chartered flight to New York City after a performance in Ithaca. As they were autographing after the concert, the pilot of the chartered plane dashed backstage and shouted that the airport in New York would close at midnight. The group ran to the taxi without changing. In the rush, six-year-old Yasuko's 1/10 size violin was forgotten in the taxi. Though the loss was announced on the radio with a reward offered, the violin was not returned. In those days small violins were not readily available. However, a Japanese woman living in New York brought her daughter's 1/10 size violin to Lincoln Center so that Yasuko could perform.

With each tour, the children have reached out to countless people to demonstrate Dr. Suzuki's message. There are now many Suzuki programs in this country which produce very highly skilled students. Many American groups have made concert tours to different destinations around the world. They impress people as much or even more than the students in the Japanese Talent Education Tour. Why then has the tour group been returning to America for such a long time? The Japanese tour group travels to America every year only to demonstrate the philosophy of Dr. Suzuki, that EVERY child can be educated. They are still reaching out to people for the same purpose as during the first tour.

My father is not a musician, as many people assume. He is a medical doctor who admires Dr. Suzuki. He has pledged his lifelong commitment to help spread the Suzuki philosophy. I remember when he first took our entire family to visit Dr. Suzuki in Matsumoto in 1950. It was only seven months after he enrolled me in violin classes. Talking to Dr. Suzuki and listening to young Koji Toyoda's violin performance, my father was completely con-

vinced about Dr. Suzuki's philosophy. He promised Dr. Suzuki that because he could speak English, he would help him introduce the Suzuki method to the world. That very day, my father started his life's work, to introduce the Suzuki Method to the entire world.

As he worked to fulfill this mission, my father has met many famous musicians who have been impressed by the work of Dr. Suzuki and the performances of the children. Once while waiting in New York's Grand Central Station, my father heard someone call, "Dr. Honda." He turned to see Leopold Stokowski standing there, smiling at him. They talked about the Suzuki method. When the group was getting on the train, Maestro Stokowski called out, "Please remember me to Dr. Suzuki." Another year, the group visited Philadelphia to perform at the Academy of Music, home of the Philadelphia Orchestra. As the children rehearsed on stage for that evening's concert, my father saw an elderly man listening to the children's playing. My father walked toward him and asked, "Do you like music?" The old man replied, "Yes, I like music very much." After they talked for a while, my father asked, "What is your name?" "Eugene Ormandy."

In this country people know Dr. Honda only as a spokesman for the Suzuki Method. In Japan, he has been on the Board of Directors of the Talent Education Institute for forty-three years. During the long history of the Suzuki movement, many people who have supported Dr. Suzuki have come and gone. Those who have become disenchanted with Dr. Suzuki for one reason or another, have criticized my father's unshakable loyalty. He said to those people, "A true friend would stay when there is trouble and would help in any circumstance." My father has been an advisor, navigator, and sometimes a sounding board for Dr. Suzuki.

Thirty years have passed since that first tour. Many American children who have grown up as Suzuki students have become top

Tour Group Facts

Total visits:	283 cities/20 countries
U.S. tours:	217 cities/46 states
No. Concerts per tour:	10 (average)
Group size:	10 children
Age range:	4 to 19 years
Average age across groups:	10 years
Participating siblings:	9 pairs
Children participating in multiple tours:	more than 1/3 (some up to 11 times)
Former participants now prof musicians:	approximately 20%

students at music schools and have become leaders in the music world. Orchestras around the country have very few openings in the string sections these days. My father wrote a book entitled *Suzuki Changed My Life*. Indeed, Suzuki not only changed my father's life, but also changed the music world. That fact itself is testimony to my father's fulfillment of his promise to Dr. Suzuki.

As I am writing this, my father is preparing his thirtieth tour to the United States. I know he is hoping to reach even more new people to spread Dr. Suzuki's philosophy. 🌱

Yuko Honda is the daughter of Dr. Masaaki Honda. She was born in Japan and began violin instruction in the Suzuki method at the age of four. She was a long time student of Dr. Suzuki and has assisted him in giving workshops and lectures in the United States. Yuko has performed as a soloist with orchestras across the U.S. and has given numerous recitals both in this country and in Japan. In 1968 she was asked by Dr. Suzuki to help develop the Suzuki String Program at the Eastman School of Music. From there she has gone on to teach at many colleges and universities in the U.S. She directed the Suzuki String Program at Memphis State University and founded the Memphis Suzuki Institute. Yuko is a registered teacher trainer and has taught at many workshops and institutes throughout the U.S. and in Europe.

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