



# The Suzuki Method

The Life and Times of Dr. Shin'ichi Suzuki

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## Preface

There were no observers that day, and I was the only one present for my private lesson. I was still a college student at the time. After my lesson, I sat down as usual to listen to whatever Dr. Suzuki had on his mind. Turning to me with an uncharacteristically grave expression, he told me,

“When I wake up late at night and think about children living in misery the world over, I can barely contain my tears.”

Ever since then, a teardrop of Dr. Suzuki’s has been lodged in my heart, along with a deeply etched sense of pain.

It was around 1993 when I started researching the original texts Dr. Suzuki authored. What started me on the project was a frequent comment I heard, both in Japan and overseas: “Suzuki-trained students can’t read music.” I was extremely perplexed by the claim, as everyone I knew was able to read music. Whether these fellow Suzuki students were under the tutelage of Mr. Tazawa—my first violin teacher and a direct disciple of Dr. Suzuki’s—before me, in my cohort, or a few years after me, I did not know a single person who had difficulty reading music.

It made me wonder, so why are students unable to read music? Is there a deficiency in the Suzuki Method itself? Or has something important been overlooked along the way? I began to search for answers to my questions.

After combing through the bookshelves at my parents’ home, I visited Dr. Suzuki’s home in Asahimachi, where I had taken lessons for years, and asked him to show me the bookshelves in every room. Although Dr. Suzuki was in the middle of writing something, he graciously agreed to do so. He also gave me supplementary materials from the 1940s, which I have carefully kept in my possession to this day. My next step was to ask Suzuki teachers throughout Japan to share any printed materials and photocopies with me, and those became the basis for my research on his original writings. As I worked my way through all the materials, I was more and more impressed by the profundity and complexity of Dr. Suzuki’s thinking, as well as the timing of how his educational movement spread.

When I started this research, Dr. Suzuki cautioned me not to get lost in the weeds. Indeed, there were more than a few times when I almost lost my way, or wanted to give up, or found myself entangled in uncertainty about where I was headed. However, I have since managed not only to write about the materials themselves, but to recall and record countless insights that I personally received from Dr. Suzuki in our routine interactions. Now that time is no longer on my side, I have come to take great joy in the thought that this project may contribute, however modestly, to the continuation and further development of his life’s work.

Fumiyo Kuramochi  
Tokyo, Japan  
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## Chapter 1

### Dr. Suzuki's Parents

Shinichi Suzuki was born in Higashi-Monzenchō, Nagoya, on October 17, 1898. He was the third son of Masakichi, who would later run the world's largest violin factory, and Ryō.

Dr. Suzuki's birth came thirty years after the Meiji Restoration, a tumultuous reformation in Japan that ushered in the formation of a centralized state and a capitalist economy. The Restoration marked the end of the Edo shogunate's feudal order, a system under which Japan enjoyed domestic stability for approximately 260 years through its isolationist policies. It was also an era, known as Civilization and Enlightenment, when Western culture flooded into Japan.

In his autobiography, *The Path I've Taken*, Dr. Suzuki wrote about his father Masakichi's approach to life as follows:

“Through my father's way of life, which was thoroughly grounded in the principle of sincerity, I learned a great deal about life and how humans should conduct themselves. Today, I respect my father most for the exemplary way of thinking he embodied in the two instances I mentioned earlier, and for living by his cherished principle.”<sup>1</sup>

Masakichi's approach to life undeniably had a major impact on Dr. Suzuki's character and how he conducted himself. Moreover, it is not a stretch to say that Masakichi was a man who was enthralled, his entire life, by an instrument called the violin. In order to understand Dr. Suzuki, then, we must inevitably learn about his father Masakichi's aspirations and the life he led.

### **Dr. Suzuki's Father, Masakichi (1859 – 1944)**



(Collection of the Talent Education Research Institute)

## **Masakichi's Early Life**

Masakichi was born in 1859, toward the end of the Edo period (also known as the Tokugawa period), as the eldest son of Masaharu Suzuki. Masaharu, a minor provincial retainer in Owari Domain, held the title of Otesakidōshin. This meant he was charged with maintaining public security within the domain.

Masaharu's salary was extremely modest, and the stipend of rice he received was hardly adequate for the upkeep of his household. With the acknowledgment and encouragement of his superiors, he made shamisen as a sideline. From a young age, Masakichi assisted his father with the business, and in so doing forged a connection with traditional Japanese stringed instruments.<sup>2</sup>

In 1867, the Edo shogunate relinquished power to the imperial court. This Restoration of Imperial Rule brought about an end to military rule in Japan, upending the social structure that had privileged the warrior class for centuries. The feudal Owari Domain was officially renamed Nagoya Domain, and it was there that Masakichi, from age eight, spent about three years studying the Chinese classics. When the domain newly formed a British-style military band, Masakichi found work there as a drummer, but half a year later the drums and fifes were replaced by trumpets and he was let go. He subsequently enrolled as a scholarship student at an English-language school established by Nagoya Domain. However, two and a half years later, in 1871, feudal domains were replaced by prefectures and the entitlements of the warrior class were substantially reduced. No longer able to afford his tuition, Masakichi had to drop out. Eventually, he wound up assisting his father, Masaharu, with what was by then Masaharu's full-time occupation: making shamisen.<sup>3</sup>

In 1873, then-fourteen-year-old Masakichi began an apprenticeship at Hidaya, a lacquer-ware shop run by his aunt and uncle in Asakusa, Tokyo, and worked there for about two years. However, they were forced to close the business after the uncle's passing. Masakichi once again returned to his father's home in Nagoya. Masaharu received additional income from the revamped entitlements program and decided to make use of it to build his shamisen-making sideline into a full-fledged business.<sup>4</sup> Masakichi also devoted himself to learning nagauta, a musical form intimately connected with shamisen playing (note: nagauta involved a shamisen player singing while plucking the shamisen; this was originally to accompany kabuki plays although later the music also came to be performed on its own). He toiled away at shamisen making until he was over thirty, but once he earned recognition as a master craftsman, he was able to sign an exclusive

contract to make shamisen for a well-established shamisen dealer. Finances were never easy, however, and his struggles only increased when the contract was terminated in the wake of a recession.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shinichi Suzuki, *The Path I've Taken* (Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo Sha, 1960), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Kōdō Akakabe [pen-name of Tokusaburō Akakabe], *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya* (Nagoya: Hayakawa Bunsho Jimusho, 1926), pp. 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Zenzō Matsumoto, *Teikin Ujō: A Musical History of the Violin in Japan* (Tokyo: Ressen no Tomo Sha, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Kōdō Akakabe, *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya* (Nagoya: Hayakawa Bunsho Jimusho, 1926), p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Satsuki Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins: Masakichi Suzuki's Life and His Quest for the Perfect Instrument* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Sha, 2014), p. 32.

## **An Encounter with the Violin**

Masakichi was twenty-five when his father Masaharu passed away in 1884. Due to the hardscrabble lives of the Suzuki family, there was no inheritance from Masaharu, only debt. Shamisen making simply did not bring in enough income, and the family continued to struggle. Masakichi hit upon the idea of becoming a primary school choral teacher, since the position guaranteed a relatively high salary.<sup>6</sup>

In 1868 came the start of the Meiji era. Everything in Japan underwent change and transformation, from the political system and commercial practices to art, architecture, and fashion. In 1872, a new educational system was promulgated and choral music was adopted as a school subject. Music did not, in fact, become part of the school curriculum until after 1879, when the Institute of Music (Ongaku-torishirabe-kakari: later renamed Tokyo Music Conservatory, it is now known as Tokyo University of the Arts) was established. The Academy began compiling an “Anthology of Primary School Songs” in 1881, but public schools faced an ongoing shortage of teachers and musical instruments. Due to the difficulty of acquiring pianos and organs, the portability of violins made them convenient for accompanying vocal students.<sup>7</sup> Against this historical backdrop, Masakichi sought out the tutelage of Ryōnosuke Tsunekawa, a music instructor at the Aichi Prefectural Normal School for Teacher Training who was engaged in the fostering of vocal teachers.

About a month after Masakichi began his studies with Tsunekawa, he had a fateful encounter. He beheld his first violin ever when a fellow student, Tetsukichi Amari, was carrying one around. Violins were highly prized items at the time, and even the Institute of Music had only a few.<sup>8</sup> Masakichi asked to borrow Amari's violin but had great difficulty persuading his classmate. Finally, he was allowed to take the violin under the condition that it would be for no more than a night, while Amari was asleep. Masakichi stayed up all night to create a blueprint of the violin, which eventually resulted in him abandoning his plan to become a choir teacher and instead devoting himself to making violins. That dream was realized when, in 1888, he completed his first violin.<sup>9</sup>

In the monograph *Chamber Music*, co-authors Shinichi Suzuki and Hideo Saitō include a chapter titled “A History of the Violin in Japan.” The chapter includes a section on the history of violin manufacturing, with Masakichi featured as a violin maker based in Nagoya. The following account is given of his circumstances at the time and the very first violin he built.

“There being only one violin in all of Nagoya, the instrument was far too valuable to be loaned out to an impoverished youth for his studies. He was able to borrow the violin for no more than one night, from ten o'clock until the following morning. He therefore stayed up all night to draw a blueprint, and that blueprint became his sole, cherished reference for his painstaking efforts to create a rare instrument.”

According to Dr. Suzuki, Masakichi's very first violin was “obvious to anyone that it had been made by someone who—having neither a sample instrument of his own, nor any knowledge about the instrument—relied strictly on a blueprint drawn up over the course of a sleepless night.” In a testament to Masakichi's zeal for experimentation, Dr. Suzuki continues by stating that, “The third violin he [Masakichi] created is preserved in Nagoya to this day. It is substantially better than the first violin, able to produce twice as much volume.”<sup>10</sup>

At the time, Masakichi employed a mere handful of craftsmen in his humble workshop and had to ration his own meals at home. However, he was apparently never late in paying his employees' wages or honoring invoices for materials. Moreover, if an epiphany struck him, he would hurry to the workshop no matter what the hour and dedicate himself to his craft. He was soon producing quality instruments and gradually began to expand the scale of production as well.<sup>11</sup>

It is said that Masakichi approached the author of *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya*, Tokusaburō Akakabe, around that time and pleaded with him to include a certain anecdote in the publication.<sup>12</sup>

Around 1889 or so, a man by the name of Hayashi offered to finance Masakichi's business, but the ever-cautious Masakichi declined with the explanation that violin-making was not yet sustainable enough to guarantee the return of any loans. Hayashi assured him that he would never suspend his loans or pressure Masakichi to pay him back, so Masakichi began accumulating debt in units of a few dozen yen (¥1 ≙ ¥6.000 in 2019) or so each time. Once the aggregate sum reached around five hundred yen, however, Hayashi requested that Masakichi rename the business. Instead of Suzuki Violin Company, it would be Hayashi. Masakichi naturally refused, and Hayashi promptly withdrew his financing and demanded the return of his loans.

Masakichi is said to have been consumed with grief. He let go of his craftsmen and secluded himself in the workshop. But two of his most trusted workers paid a visit to tell him, "It makes no sense to us that you are stopping production just when this violin-making enterprise is finally gaining recognition. We do not believe this is what you truly want. As representatives of the entire staff, we have come to provide whatever support we can to you, because you've always been good to us. We estimate that if we all join our efforts for the next three years or so, we will be able to turn this promising business around and not have to abandon it. We should be able to hold out for that long, to help our master to whom we owe so much."

Masakichi repeatedly turned down their offer, saying, "To my dying day, I will never forget your gesture. But I cannot bring myself to do something as inexcusable as borrowing against my employees' wages." However, their resolve was firm and he finally accepted their generosity. He asked for the craftsmen to labor without pay for three months while he operated on a shoestring budget. Thanks to everyone pulling together, within six months Masakichi was able to clear the debt he owed his craftsmen, and to pay their wages as before.

Masakichi tearfully shared this story with Akakabe, adding, "That was the darkest period in my life, but it also impressed on me how beautiful human compassion can be. I owe everything to the selflessness of my craftsmen. I would be honored to pay tribute to their kindness by listing their family names in this account." Thus were the names of the seven craftsmen recorded for posterity.

<sup>6</sup> Sekisei Baba, *The Hundred Most Influential Men of Nagoya* (Nagoya: Nagoya Hyaku Shinshi Hakkō Sho, 1917), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Osamu Suzuki, "Musical Pedagogy in Japan: The Process of its Establishment from the Mid-Meiji to the Mid-Taishō Eras" (doctoral thesis, 2005), pp. 16-18.

<sup>8</sup> Akakabe, *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya*, p. 75.



<sup>9</sup> Hideo Saitō and Shinichi Suzuki, *Chamber Music* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū Sha, 1932), p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Baba, *The Hundred Most Influential Men of Nagoya*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Baba, *The Hundred Most Influential Men of Nagoya*, pp. 82, 87.

## **Large-scale Violin Production**

Having undergone such hardships, Masakichi arrived in Tokyo in 1889 with one of his violins and requested that Rudolf Dittrich (1861-1919), an Austrian professor at the Tokyo Music Conservatory, try it out. The professor lavished high praise on the instrument as “the best . . . produced in Japan,” and followed up, in 1893, with a letter of recommendation whose main point was follows:

“Mr. Suzuki’s instrument is near perfection. Not only the various parts of the structure but also the sound indicates great improvement, making it suitable for schools and concert venues. The low price will also make it accessible to anyone. I anticipate that it will become increasingly higher in quality.”<sup>13</sup>

As Satsuki Inoue notes, “Masakichi was able to benefit, in addition, from the advice of other teaching staff and the acquisition of violins from overseas. These opportunities gradually enabled him to create high-quality violins, which subsequently led to additional recommendations from numerous music teachers, including one of the finest musicians in Japan at the time, Nobu Kōda. After 1890, the demand for violins steadily increased among the general public. Music teachers from overseas frequently visited Japan, giving local musicians an opportunity to receive excellent training domestically.”<sup>14</sup>

The next step for Masakichi was to expand his distribution channels. He first went to Kyōekisha, a bookstore in Ginza, Tokyo, both to purchase a book on primary school songs and scout the place. The following day, he brought his own violin and asked them if they would sell it for him. The bookstore owner immediately asked, “How many kinds can you provide?” When Masakichi replied, “Initially, about three,” the response he received far exceeded his expectations: “Send me three samples then.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Ren’ichi Shirai of Kyōeki Trading Company became Masakichi’s violin distributor throughout the Kantō region, which includes metropolitan Tokyo. Shirai later introduced Masakichi to Sasuke Miki of the Miki Musical Instrument Store. Miki’s distribution network in the

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Kansai area, which includes the urban centers of Osaka and Kyoto, enabled the sale of violins in yet another major region. This was how the Suzuki Violin Company's distribution network expanded nationally.<sup>16</sup>

Here is an anecdote illustrating Masakichi's mindset. One day, a doctor by the name of Yoshisuke Matsuoka (?-1840) suggested that the entrepreneur ought to obtain an exclusive patent. When Masakichi replied that he could not hope to get a patent for something as deeply rooted in European traditions as the violin, the doctor retorted, "Then you should get a patent for your instrument's original character. "Befuddled, Masakichi asked him what he meant, and Matsuoka replied, "What others can't replicate—that's what an exclusive patent for original character is." Inspired by these words, Masakichi resolved to create a better instrument than those from overseas and supply it at a much lower price.<sup>17</sup>

In 1890, Masakichi purchased a house in Higashi-Monzenchō, Nagoya, and began full-scale production at his violin factory with several of his apprentices. That same year, his violin received the top prize, Third Meritorious Award, at the Third National Industrial Exposition held at Ueno Park in Tokyo. This remarkable accomplishment came only two years after Masakichi produced his first violin.<sup>18</sup>

"Masakichi Suzuki's violin" subsequently received an award at the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. The certificate he received stated that his instrument had "excellent sound quality and exhibited superb prowess and finish."<sup>19</sup> For the first time, one of Masakichi's violins gained international recognition.

The Sino-Japanese War began in 1894, and Japan managed to come out victorious after signing the Sino-Japanese Armistice Treaty in 1895. By the end of the 1890s, Western music had become popular, and there was increased demand for violins. Cheap imported musical instruments started to show up in Japan around that time, and Masakichi began exploring a new method for mass production. One reason for his decision could be the fact that the Tōkai region, long-established timber country with excellent logistics channels, had been a major hub for timber processing.<sup>20</sup> However, Masakichi was unable to find adequate equipment for mass production and thus started developing his own devices. He ended up with twenty-one inventions, including an automatic grinder for the scroll (the decorative end of a violin), and a deck milling machine used to add curvature to the front and back of the instrument during the shaving process.<sup>21</sup>

In 1900, the largest World Exposition of the nineteenth century was held in Paris, and Masakichi entered his violin in the contest; however, it only received an honorable mention. This disappointing result was due to some disparaging remarks from the judges. Some speculated that Masakichi's violin had been judged unfairly because the judges believed he had simply affixed a Suzuki label to a European-made instrument. The truth of the matter, however, remains uncertain.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Matsumoto, *Teikin Ujō*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> Akakabe, *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>16</sup> Matsumoto, *Teikin Ujō*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Akakabe, *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya*, pp. 80-81. (Yoshisuke Matsuoka is the grandfather of anthropologist Kunio Yanagita.)

<sup>18</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 60, 66-68.

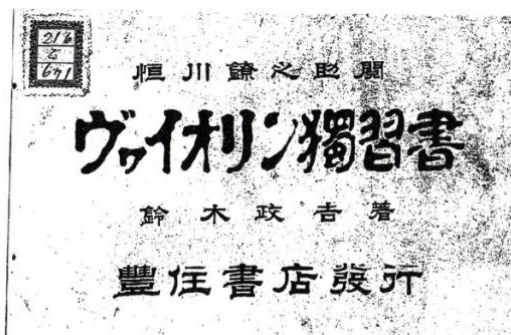
<sup>19</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>20</sup> *Constellations of Industrial Modernization Vol. 3: Tales of Predecessors Woven by the Heritage of Industrial Modernization* (Tokyo: Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, 2008), p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> *The Power of Inventions as Seen in Official Documents: Industrial Technology and the Inventors of the Meiji Era* (Tokyo: National Archives of Japan, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 89-91.

## Masakichi's Violin Primer



(Cover of *Self-Study Guide for Violin*, National Diet Library Collection)



(First scale in *Self-Study Guide for Violin*, National Diet Library Collection)

We turn our attention now to the *Self-Study Guide for Violin* authored by Masakichi in 1902.<sup>23</sup> The cover shows that the booklet was “reviewed by Ryōnosuke Tsunekawa,” Masakichi’s former vocal music teacher. The booklet is 12×19 cm and has 44 pages.

The first page describes how to hold the instrument, the left-hand position, standing posture, the bowhold, basic bowing techniques, and resin. It is followed by illustrations and detailed tuning methods on pages 2-3.

Sheet music begins to appear from page 4. Interestingly, the first exercise starts on the E string. Page 6 illustrates the finger positions on the fingerboard, and we find the A major scale in Exercise 4.

Considering the fact that the mainstream violin education at the time was the Hohmann method,<sup>24</sup> the idea of starting with the A major scale must have been extraordinary. It may not be purely coincidental that the Suzuki Method, an internationally acclaimed music education program later founded by Dr. Shin’ichi Suzuki, presents its veritable theme song, the “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star Variations,” in A major. An etude in A major follows the scale.

Exercises proceed to D major, G major, C major, F major, E major, B flat major, E flat major, and to A flat major in the identical method. The last four pieces are duets.

The structure of this textbook, though perhaps lacking in complexity, is very practical. It is not hard to imagine that the book must have been invaluable to violin enthusiasts at the time of its publication, since its record has survived to this day. In addition, we can verify that Masakichi himself played the violin. This is because his name, along with that of his voice teacher, Ryōnosuke Tsunekawa, is mentioned as a “violinist” in the program of a “Nagoya City Music Federation Concert” held in 1986.

◎名古屋音楽聯合會  
四月廿六日名古屋音楽聯合會は第二回演奏會を食誠館に開かる演奏會者殆んど名古屋に連大の會なりき此演奏會目は次の如し

十、獨唱	プラチヤアネ氏	十一、管絃	式部重晴氏
十二、長唄	竹屋實徳二三氏	十三、獨奏	尺八(四調々々)
十四、獨奏	吹奏樂(各團々々)	十五、獨奏	華山山(櫻)
十六、獨奏	八重琴(朝大君)	十七、獨奏	六段
十八、獨奏	雅樂(抜頭)	十九、獨奏	雅樂(林申夜弄)
二十、獨奏	長唄(前名小町)	二十一、獨奏	三曲
二十二、獨奏	上唄(富士太鼓)	二十三、獨奏	ハイヤン

演奏會者  
 獨唱：プラチヤアネ氏、式部重晴氏、竹屋實徳二三氏  
 管絃：式部重晴氏  
 尺八：尺八(四調々々)  
 吹奏樂：各團々々  
 華山山：華山山(櫻)  
 八重琴：朝大君  
 雅樂：抜頭、林申夜弄  
 長唄：前名小町  
 上唄：富士太鼓  
 ハイヤン：ハイヤン

演奏會者  
 獨唱：プラチヤアネ氏、式部重晴氏、竹屋實徳二三氏  
 管絃：式部重晴氏  
 尺八：尺八(四調々々)  
 吹奏樂：各團々々  
 華山山：華山山(櫻)  
 八重琴：朝大君  
 雅樂：抜頭、林申夜弄  
 長唄：前名小町  
 上唄：富士太鼓  
 ハイヤン：ハイヤン

演奏會者  
 獨唱：プラチヤアネ氏、式部重晴氏、竹屋實徳二三氏  
 管絃：式部重晴氏  
 尺八：尺八(四調々々)  
 吹奏樂：各團々々  
 華山山：華山山(櫻)  
 八重琴：朝大君  
 雅樂：抜頭、林申夜弄  
 長唄：前名小町  
 上唄：富士太鼓  
 ハイヤン：ハイヤン

(Zenzō Matsumoto, *Teikin Ujō*, p. 76 fig. 22, from Nagoya City Federation Concert program [arrow inserted by the author])

<sup>23</sup> Masakichi Suzuki, *Self-Study Guide for Violin* (Nara: Toyosumi Shoten, 1902).

<sup>24</sup> Matsumoto, *Teikin Ujō*, p. 12.

## The Development of the Violin Factory

As the Russo-Japanese War began in 1904, the demand for violins as educational instruments increased. Moreover, Masakichi also began producing mandolins and guitars in his factory, thus becoming a comprehensive manufacturer of stringed instruments.<sup>25</sup>



(Collection of the Talent Education Research Institute)

In 1910, delegated by the Ministry of Education, Masakichi traveled to Europe and attended the Japan-British Exposition held in London during the tour. He sailed from Tsuruga Port to London in March, and, after visiting England, France, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Belgium, apparently returned in August to Japan via Siberia.<sup>26</sup> Masakichi was the first Japanese to visit Cremona, and his visit to France allowed him to improve the quality of his varnish upon returning to Japan.<sup>27</sup>

During his European tour, Masakichi's violin received an honorary grand prize at the Japan-British Exposition, and this led to a sales contract with Murdock Trading Company in London.

The tour also resulted in an unexpected encounter. Masakichi crossed paths with Nobu Kōda (1870-1946), who had previously written a letter of recommendation for his violin.<sup>28</sup> Kōda was a professor of piano at the Tokyo Music Conservatory, but she was on a leave of absence, visiting European cities to further her studies.<sup>29</sup> This encounter would alter his son Shin'ichi's path in subsequent years.

In 1917, Masakichi was awarded the Medal with Green Ribbon, a medal of honor bestowed by the emperor upon individuals who "have made remarkable accomplishments in years of social service activities." In the 1919 edition of *Apotheosis of Great Achievements under a Magnificent Imperial Reign*, Masakichi is described as "gentle in nature...and his good deeds were commended with the Medal with Green Ribbon, bestowed upon him for his remarkable accomplishments."<sup>30</sup>

Masakichi's violin factory grew steadily over the years. His humble workshop in Nagoya had started in 1890 with only a handful of craftsmen, but by 1897 he employed fifty craftsmen. In 1903, operations were expanded to Matsuyamachō in Nagoya.

The Russo-Japanese War broke out in 1904, and, between the waning popularity of traditional Japanese musical instruments and the economic boom after the war, the number of workers at Masakichi's factory rose to 350. Due to the national mourning period (one year with no musical performances) after the demise of Emperor Meiji in 1912, the production of violins dropped sharply. Nevertheless, Masakichi sent out a catalog in English, showcasing his career, awards, the excellent quality of his instruments, and more. His aspiration to export his products is evident in the publication.<sup>31</sup>

After World War I broke out in 1914, Masakichi's factory was inundated with orders from England, which had previously relied on imports from Germany. These were

followed by additional orders from the United States and other countries around the world. Masakichi expanded and augmented his factory, and, according to Dr. Suzuki, in his peak years had approximately one thousand craftsmen with annual orders averaging one hundred thousand violins, five hundred thousand bows, and more than one million bridges.

In comparison, the violin factories in Markneukirchen, Germany, Schönbach, Czechoslovakia, and Mirecourt, France, that Dr. Suzuki visited during his studies in Germany had at most only seventy to eighty craftsmen.<sup>32</sup>

Records from circa 1926 show an annual production revenue of 700,000 yen (equivalent in 2019 to approximately 1.15 billion yen) from the sales of violins, mandolins, guitars, and various accessories, and an additional 200,000 yen (equivalent, again in 2019, to approximately 330 million yen) from other furniture items.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Suzuki Violin Company website, “The Story of Founder Masakichi Suzuki.”

<https://www.suzukiviolin.co.jp/about/history/> (Last viewed June 1, 2024.)

<sup>26</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 98-100.

<sup>27</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>29</sup> Yukiko Hagiya, *The Kōda Sisters: Nobu Kōda and Kō Andō Who Carried the Nascent Western Music Era in Japan* (Tokyo: Chopin Co., 2003).

<sup>30</sup> *Apotheosis of Great Achievements under a Magnificent Imperial Reign* (Osaka: Seidai Iseki Hōkan Editorial Bureau Kansai Branch, 1919).

<sup>31</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 60, 122, and 124.

<sup>32</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 111.

<sup>33</sup> Akakabe, *Tales about the Successful Entrepreneurs of Metropolitan Nagoya*, p. 90.

## **Portrait of Masakichi**

What kind of man was Masakichi? Let us take a look at some of the descriptions of him found in the records.

“Ingenuous, extremely gentle, never condescending, always treats others politely and kindly—a humble gentleman.”<sup>34</sup>

“Never deviates from business ethics, extremely honest, humanity personified, indomitable, a man worthy of respect who has achieved success through every kind of hardship imaginable.”<sup>35</sup>

“Treats his craftsmen with the kindness of a loving mother, sets righteous rules before them like a strict father, a man capable of seamlessly setting hundreds of his men to work as if they were extensions of his body, a feat unmatched by others.”

“Pours his heart and soul into his work to make a difference in the world.”

“The Suzuki violin is exquisitely crafted, and this is because the craftsmen who make it work for their own self-esteem, not for wages. Their mindset speaks volumes about the character of the man at the helm.”<sup>36</sup>

“Has nothing despicable about him, so not a merchant. Has no strategies, so not an entrepreneur. The most accurate description of him would be an inventor. An honest man with integrity and a samurai temperament. A truly fine man whom no one can criticize or resent.”<sup>37</sup>

Dr. Suzuki’s memoir, *The Path I’ve Taken*, contains the following passages about Masakichi: “My father taught me a lot of things. One of them is, of course, inexhaustive curiosity for learning, and another is a lesson that we must be sincere in every situation.” He writes, “my father showed and taught me his way of life daily since my childhood. I’d say the teaching continued until his passing at the age of eighty-six.”<sup>38</sup>

He also states that his father “had an old-fashioned samurai temperament” and was “an unwaveringly stubborn man of the Meiji Era” who hated “overindulgence and waste,” but on the other hand, he was “very straightforward” which he considered “the most important principle to live by.” Dr. Suzuki reminisces that even when his father faced difficulties, “he thought it was all right to fail so long as he gave it his all and took responsibility. His unflinching way of life made a great impact on me.”

Dr. Suzuki concludes, “The most important reason I respect my father is that he not only instilled curiosity for learning and sincerity in me but he also showed me how to put them into practice.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Masuo Tejima, *A Critique of One Hundred Nagoya Men* (Nagoya: Chūkyōdō, 1915), p. 118.

<sup>35</sup> Inoue, *The King of Japanese Violins*, pp. 60, 122, and 124.

<sup>36</sup> Zanbaken Oyamada, *First-class Individuals in Nagoya* (Nagoya: Tōka Shoin, 1918), pp. 14-16, 21-22.

<sup>37</sup> Sekisei Baba, *New Tales of One Hundred Men in Nagoya* (Nagoya: Sangosha 1921), pp. 18-19.

<sup>38</sup> Suzuki, *The Path I’ve Taken*, pp. 36-38.

<sup>39</sup> Suzuki, *The Path I’ve Taken*, pp. 13, 37-40.



## **A Magnificent Innovation: Sai-in**

In the “History of the Violin in Japan” section of the previously cited *Chamber Music*, Dr. Suzuki has written about Masakichi’s final years as follows: “My father began making violins that were truly works of art about ten years ago [author’s note: Dr. Suzuki was writing in 1932]. Dissatisfied with the idea of producing factory models only, he committed himself for the first time to the notion of making instruments worthy of preservation for future generations.”<sup>40</sup>

When Dr. Suzuki briefly returned to Japan in 1925, bringing his Guarnerius home with him from Germany, Masakichi was astonished by its mechanics and the beauty of its sound. Setting everything aside, he threw himself even further into his study of violinmaking. Dr. Suzuki further notes that “in 1927, Masakichi announced the first of his series of self-named instruments. Two of his violins from that time period were sent as gifts to Professors Karl Klingler and Josef Wolfstahl (Prof. Wolfstahl passed away two years ago) in Berlin. In response, Masakichi received letters from them expressing gratitude and exclaiming over the superb tone quality of the instruments.”<sup>40</sup>

According to Dr. Suzuki, his father “invented something remarkable by happenstance” during his period of intensive research leading up to the making of those instruments. Dr. Suzuki describes it as “an invention that freely allows the user to alter and improve sound quality and volume,” and although Masakichi initially dubbed it “a sonar invention,” he ultimately decided on “sai-in” (literally, “refinement of sound”).<sup>40</sup>

What, then, is “sai-in”?

Masakichi found that when he took “audiograms” of his new violins versus the Guarnerius, the resulting soundwaves in no way resembled each other. He writes in the May 1940 issue of *Promoting Industry* (published by the Nagoya Association to Promote Industry), however, that once he applied “sai-in” to his instruments, their soundwaves were “nearly identical to those of the Guarnerius. When I checked mathematically, I found that the overtones were perfect. I took heartfelt joy in seeing with my own eyes the achievements I had set out to attain.”

Masakichi also notes, “We can say that ‘sai-in’ is the act of precisely setting up the frame of an instrument under molecular and structural conditions that enable the production of overtones such that the entire instrument resonates.” He continues: “And what is the method I used? We must first understand that when it comes to the violin, say, sound is produced by increasing the vibrations of the strings. We want to increase the number of vibrations—and based on my experience we need to be able to identify and

balance hard versus soft vibrations. Because my understanding comes from experience rather than theory, it is extremely difficult for me to fully express and explain myself.”

From the foregoing, we can surmise that Masakichi’s innovation had to do with a technique for significantly enhancing the sound quality of musical instruments, but unfortunately for us, he states in the article that he has no intention of sharing the details: “I am unable to reveal my sai-in methodology, as I plan to pass it down only to a chosen heir rather than apply for an exclusive patent. Nevertheless, I will mention that what caught my attention about the great instruments, played and handed down through the centuries, was the subtle variations present in the wood grain of their necks and bodies.”<sup>41</sup>

In the previously cited *Chamber Music*, Dr. Suzuki writes with admiration that “thanks to his innovation, the sound of Masakichi’s recent violins resembles that of the exceptional, ancient instruments with their truly mellow resonance, powerful sound, and lucid tone.” At the same time, though, he points out that there is still room for improvement: “I have faith that if Masakichi delves even further into his study of varnish, his instruments will indeed be flawless.”

Dr. Suzuki mentions in same work that the sai-in technique was a major innovation capable of “making an instrument’s tone quality soft and velvety without sacrificing volume.” It could be applied not only to violins but to “the shakuhachi, shamisen, koto, guitar, mandolin, gong, and flute,” and, by extension, “the gramophone soundbox and radio cone.”<sup>42</sup> In the end, though, that technique was never documented for posterity.

On June 3, 1926 (the 15th year of the Taisho era), a recital was held at the Peers’ Club “under the auspices of Marquis Yoshichika Tokugawa and composer Sakunosuke Koyama, and with the purpose of seeking the critiques of numerous experts” regarding the violins that were the output of Masakichi’s research. In the audience were highly regarded musicians, including Nobu Koda (1870-1946), Ko Ando (1878-1963), Hidemaro Konoe (1898-1973). In addition, about forty up-and-coming violinists were invited. After Masakichi addressed the audience and shared his trials and tribulations in getting his business off the ground, Dr. Suzuki performed on four different violins (one a fine, old instrument) and asked the audience to assess each one. According to an attendee’s writeup, the resulting consensus was that “although there were some differences from one instrument to another, those differences should be appreciated as the unique qualities of each instrument rather than as a measurable superiority or inferiority between any of them,” and that “the audience, moved as one by Masakichi’s achievement, had nothing but praise for him.”<sup>43</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, with violin lessons becoming a popular extracurricular activity at primary schools in the city of Nagoya, violin playing as a pastime spread to girls' schools and was also taken up by corporate employees. The Suzuki Violin Company had been making small-sized violins since 1912, but there was not yet a national market for them.

In the late twenties, the production volume of violins fell steeply. By 1930, the number built apparently was at 9% compared with the era of peak demand, and production revenues fell as low as 6%.<sup>44</sup> The criticism was leveled, in later years, that Suzuki-made violins were nothing more than cheap, machine-made instruments, but Dr. Suzuki has clarified as follows: "I would like to emphasize that machine-built violins are, in fact, an impossibility. Violins simply cannot be built by machines exclusively, as lay people may be imagining. Even cheap, so-called factory-made violins are nearly all hand-crafted instruments."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 114.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in "The Discovery of Master Luthier Suzuki," *Current Events* [a news bulletin] (Kobe, Kobe University Economic Research Center, 1939).

<sup>42</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> "Masakichi Suzuki's New Violins Unveiled," *Music Graph* [an industry bulletin], July 1926 issue (Music Graph Co.).

<sup>44</sup> Inoue, *The King of the Violin in Japan*, p. 277.

<sup>45</sup> Saitō and Suzuki, *Chamber Music*, p. 110.

## **Masakichi's Twilight Years**

The Great Depression of 1929, a global phenomenon, caused economic upheaval in Japan. Indeed, with Japan's increasing militarization after the 1931 Manchurian Incident, Masakichi's business collapsed. The family lost its home and property, as well as having to sell Dr. Suzuki's exceptional violin, a Villaume, and Waltraud Suzuki's Bechstein piano that she had brought over from Germany.<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Suzuki writes in his memoir that Masakichi expressed his position during that time as follows: "I am the president of the company, and as such all responsibility lies with me. Both the company's success and my personal wealth are thanks to the hard work

and goodwill of all our employees. I am going to put my money into the factory until I have no assets left. I won't let a single employee go until then. This is nothing more than paying everyone back for what they helped me build." True to his word, Masakichi first gave up his own landholdings and then sold off his son Shinichi's house. Gradually preparing the craftsmen in his employment for the transition, he ultimately moved his operations into a small factory.<sup>47</sup>

Despite experiencing such obstacles, the Suzuki Violin Company managed to overcome them due to the skills of its craftsmen and the trust of the public. The company was forced by wartime exigencies to halt the production of instruments for some time, but in the end all of the sacrifices made by Masakichi and his employees laid the foundation for the company's success, which has continued to this day in the post-war era.

In the midst of that very war, Masakichi died in 1944 at the age of 86, having dedicated his life to exploring the violin from the moment he first encountered one.

<sup>46</sup> Waltraud Suzuki, *My Life with Shinichi Suzuki* (Tokyo: Shufu no Tomo Bunka Senta, 1987).

<sup>47</sup> Suzuki, *The Path I've Taken*, pp. 38-39.

### **Masakichi Suzuki's Awards and Honors**

1890 Third National Industry Exposition: Third Meritorious Prize

1893 Columbian Exposition, Chicago: Honorable Mention

1894 Fourth National Industry Exposition: Third Prize for Progress

1900 World Exposition, Paris: Honorable Mention

1903 Fifth National Industry Exposition: Second Prize

1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific World Exposition, Seattle and Yukon: Gold Cup

1910 Tenth Kansai Exposition: First Prize for Viola, Second Prize for Cello and Violin, Third Prize for Contrabass and Mandolin

1910 Japan-British Exhibition: Honorary Prize

1917 Medal with Green Ribbon (bestowed by successive Japanese emperors to "morally remarkable individuals who have actively taken part in serving society")

### **Dr. Suzuki's mother, Ryō (? – 1928)**



(Talent Education Research Institute archives)

The maiden name of Dr. Suzuki's mother, Ryō, was Fujie. Dr. Suzuki later claimed the first character of her surname, "Fuji" [wisteria], as part of his art name "Fujinae" [wisteria sapling].<sup>48</sup>

According to Evelyn Hermann (1923-2009), an American violin teacher who was close to Dr. and Mrs. Suzuki, Ryō was born into a well-to-do family and studied traditional Japanese arts such as nagauta, shamisen, flower arrangement, and tea ceremony. She was also enrolled in a vocal music program. At eighteen, she married Masakichi.<sup>49</sup>

Ryō was not Masakichi's legal wife. However, at the time (and even until recent years), it was not uncommon in Japan for wealthy men to have de facto marriages with women other than their legal wives. In such circumstances, it was customary for the secondary wife or wives to live in separate residences. In the case of Masakichi's family, not only his legal wife and mistress but their respective children lived cordially together in the main house.

Some writings state that Ryō was a geisha.<sup>50</sup> The source of that information is unclear, but in that era, following the 1871 abolition of the feudal system, it was not unheard of for daughters—either of warriors who had lost their employment or wealthy merchants who were impoverished because of bad debts owed to the domains—to work as geisha by leveraging the artistic skills they had acquired as part of their education.

To elaborate, the profession of geisha (a.k.a. geigi) emerged during the Edo period (1600-1868). In its original form, working as a geisha was a way for high-born women to earn a living through their artistic skills. It is said to have been strictly forbidden for a

geisha providing entertainment for banquets at the officially sanctioned pleasure quarters to be involved in amorous relations. The exception was if she had the backing of a specific patron, and as a result it was far from unusual for geisha to marry politicians, wealthy elites, or nobles (domain lords of the feudal era).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Shinichi Suzuki, *Fujinae* (Tokyo: 1958, Zen-on Music Co.).

<sup>49</sup> Evelyn Louise Hermann, *Shinichi Suzuki: The Man and His Philosophy*. Translated into Japanese by Nobuaki Hatano (Tokyo: Shufu no Tomo Sha, 1984), pp. 27-28.

<sup>50</sup> Eri Hotta, *Suzuki: The Man and His Dream to Teach the Children of the World* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> Aisaburō Akiyama, *Geigi and their Origins* (Tokyo: Tokyo Books, 1933), pp. 76 and 78.

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