

A Year in Oaxaca

Finding Community through Suzuki

by [Aubrey Faith-Slaker](#)

August, 2021. Everything was put in storage. The cat was with parents and my grand piano was safe with a student. We sold or gave away most of our furniture and we gave up our Chicago apartment. With only three suitcases between us, my partner and I moved to Oaxaca, Mexico, for a year on a grand experiment to bring formal Suzuki instruction to the community. The city was gorgeous, but there would be challenges beyond the experiment itself. The mosquitos were horrendous. The water was scarce. My partner didn't speak Spanish. And there were no pianos to be found—I was only able to access a keyboard for my stay. Were we crazy?

The feel of Oaxaca life was very different for us at first. The colors, the noises (there was a sound for every public service and it took us weeks to learn the clang of the garbage truck letting us know to rush out with our bag), the differences in food and routine were so overwhelming, yet amazing. In our first week, we were so excited just to see a *calenda*, a raucous, colorful, traditional Oaxacan celebration parade, usually for weddings. We couldn't have predicted that by the end of the year, with mosquitos conquered and the water situation managed, we would find ourselves dancing through the streets, surrounded by friends, carrying decorated candles, as a part of a calenda. How on earth did we get there?!

The search for Suzuki in Oaxaca had brought up nothing in the years that I had been visiting a childhood friend who lives there. When I arrived in August 2021, Suzuki in Oaxaca amounted to just two people and a wish: a father who became



A view from within a calenda, a traditional celebration parade in Oaxaca, Mexico. Photo by Aubrey Faith-Slaker

Image by Andrew Braddock

enamored with the philosophy and wanted to learn to play, teach, and open a school; a young violinist with some Suzuki training, minimal teaching experience, and few (traditional) students remaining after the pandemic; and the wish of a resolute mother searching for formal music lessons for her five-year-old son and finding nobody to teach him.

Only able to commit to living in Mexico for one year, I was eager to jump in—to work with all of them, to develop a community, and to build a base for the Suzuki Method in Oaxaca City. I started by taking Suzuki guitar lessons myself. I offered informal teaching strategies classes to the violinist as well as to a student of his that he brought along. (It was happening already! We were multiplying!) And I opened a piano studio out of my apartment—for just that one child.

While my history, passion, and expertise were primarily at the piano, when faced with two eager violinists, ready to learn, I had to ask myself if I could imagine the Suzuki Philosophy and my place in it . . . *without* a piano. I (gulp) went full-steam ahead—we met bi-weekly at my apartment, sitting on the floor in my *sala* and snacking on *churritos* and amazing Oaxacan chocolate, drinking copious *agua fresca* during the hot months of April and May. I was just starting out, but looking back, I'm grateful to this little group, the "Oaxaca Suzuki Club" as it was called on my home calendar. Because while Suzuki Piano had a slow start in Oaxaca, I was able to launch this unconventional version of the teaching strategies course right away. It taught me that I do not need my own instrument, nor the Suzuki repertoire (or even my own language) to be a Suzuki Teacher.

Life in Oaxaca had its obstacles beyond the logistics of living. As a liberal, independent woman from Chicago, I found it difficult to handle such things as men not making eye contact with me. There were aspects of the culture that I didn't understand. And my poor monolingual partner was unable to step in when I started a conversation with a man who would then only speak to him. Could I reach the people I wanted to reach and make the difference I wanted to make if I couldn't even get half the people to "see" me? Or if I was giving offense without realizing it?

I found myself overseeing a Zoom call with five piano teachers from all parts of Mexico. It was the Diplomado course, part of a program put together by Araceli Lugo Oliva, the president of AMMS (Asociación Mexicana del Método Suzuki). This project, called Diplomado: Camino a Excelencia, is meant to raise the quality of teaching across the country. The diploma these teachers earn will create a standard in the field not previously established in Mexico. I was one of a handful of teacher trainers on various instruments who would be involved, and I was excited to begin working closely with my group. Again, I was faced with the need to be creative as I wrote the curriculum and syllabus for a course I had never taken myself—sometimes thinking in English and translating, and sometimes thinking in Spanish. A couple of the books I wanted to use had Spanish translations, but not all, and since I hadn't included my extensive physical library in those few suitcases we brought, I had to sift through pedagogical literature on my tiny Kindle. I don't recommend it, and concentration in this new raucous environment was difficult!

“Moooooo! Gas de Oaxaca!” It was part of the soundtrack of our daily life— everything having a recognizable sound around town. The recycling truck, the garbage pickup, the water delivery, the knife sharpener: they all had sounds that peppered our days with an awareness of what was happening outside our home. And the workday was often interrupted by various complications. Rain during the dry season, for instance, would send us scrambling to get buckets and tubs into place to collect the water we needed to wash vegetables, clean dishes, and water plants. Another time, in the midst of baking a cake, we had run out of cooking gas, and thankfully now the delivery truck was (loudly) announcing the arrival of the replacement gas tank.

All this while I was yearning for piano students. I had Luken and his mother María (the mother who claims to have manifested me to Oaxaca with her wishes, and I believe her), who were doing great. They were enthusiastic, dedicated, and experiencing the typical ups and downs of practice at home. But a piano student in front of you in a lesson is already a sprout. In order to really make things take root and grow in Oaxaca, I needed to concern myself with seeds.

Eventually, word got out. I met and talked to friends of friends over *chiles en nogada* on Mexican Independence Day. I struck up conversations at boardgame-for-foreigners night. I got to know the people in my community. One lovely woman I met (now a Suzuki mom and friend) designed my infographic and disseminated it through a mom’s group on WhatsApp. I was doing my best to adjust to how much of life in Mexico is handled via cell phone and Facebook! Slowly, and without completely understanding what they were getting into, new families came inquiring—“I heard you’re in town,” “I want this for my child,” “When can we start?”



Aubrey Faith-Slaker practicing piano in her apartment in Oaxaca, Mexico.
Image by Andrew Braddock

Now with four kids and several parents in lessons twice a week, passing my one copy of *Educados con Amor* from one parent to the next, learning the difficulties in finding a good instrument, making group class games out of pesos and egg crates, and trying to find a carpenter to make me footstools, things began to take form. More and more easily, my tongue said things like, “Buen trabajo mano derecha!” and to parents, “No te preocupes. Lo estás haciendo genial!” and, “¿Cuándo puedes escuchar la grabación (el CD) durante el día?” I was feeling like a Suzuki Teacher again.

In February, the gods had dropped a new piano teacher in my lap: Saraí Hernández Castro (who is now the first Suzuki Piano teacher in Oaxaca!). Originally from Oaxaca, Saraí had studied in Mexico City and returned. She was eager to pursue more training after her first experience taking the filosofía course (the ECC of Central and South America). We started up right away and so went my newest run-through of the Twinkle Variations. I was having so much fun with the teacher training: with the violinists, the teachers in the Diplomado, and now with Saraí. I was continuing to work to build the Suzuki community there—gently, and organically—with lots of tortillas and mezcal and rambling conversations, as is the style there, both personally and professionally. I was feeling stimulated and satisfied, but my goodness, I had never been so tired! That Suzuki ball was rolling fast and getting huge. When was I going to have time for *tetelas* at Itanoní, my favorite restaurant?! What about hiking outside of the city? What about all the churches and the museums and the parks and the festivals? This is where you say, “seasons changed” to indicate that time passed, but they didn’t. There were no autumn leaves or snow and no dreary days without sun, and I lost track of time. Before I knew it, it was the summer of the next year!

It had been decided that the Third AMMS National Encuentro (meeting) would be held in Oaxaca this year, thanks to the enthusiasm and hard work of the AMMS president, Araceli Lugo Oliva. I couldn't believe it—my people were coming! The city that currently held a mere four or so Suzuki practitioners was soon to be flooded with Suzuki teachers, trainers, over 300 students, and families. It was a beautiful gift and an amazing success.

I had the opportunity at this event to teach the first filosofía course in Oaxaca at the Facultad de Bellas Artes. It was a chance to share what we do as Suzuki teachers and what we love about the method with thirty-five new teachers. I bought a new outfit (it was really the best excuse, and Oaxacan design is so cool), worked hard on my slides, compiled videos, got my students and their families involved, reached out to students of mine in Chicago for demonstration lessons online to be projected in real-time to my class, and showed up, heart pounding, for my first day of class. What an amazing experience it was, to bring Oaxacan culture and the Suzuki Method together.

That week, one of the last before we packed up our three suitcases to return to Chicago, was so full. So full of work, of socializing, of fantastic teaching and learning moments, and so full of energy. The course ended and the festival continued with classes for kids—how fun to see Luken, my first Oaxacan Suzuki student, wide-eyed and thrilled by the musical environment—classes for teachers—how amazing that Alan Rivera, the violinist I had been working with, had the chance to take classes with an amazing Suzuki violin trainer in Oaxaca—and performances in incredible historic venues.



The name "Suzuki" emblazoned on marmotas (calenda balloons) during the calenda celebrating the Third AMMS National Encuentro in Oaxaca, Mexico, in August 2022.. The name "Suzuki" emblazoned on marmotas (calenda balloons) during the calenda celebrating the Third AMMS National Encuentro in Oaxaca, Mexico, in August 2022.

That very first week we were in Oaxaca, we were so excited to get to see a calenda, and this last week in town, we all got to be IN a calenda. All my students and their parents gathered in the drizzle at the beginning of the parade. The *monos de calenda* (giant paper maché puppets of a pianist and a guitarist) and the marmotas (giant balloons, emblazoned with the Suzuki name for the first time) were ready to go. The *chinas oaxaqueñas* (folk dancers with baskets on their heads) and the brass band playing the traditional calenda music (that my students were learning to play in lessons) formed up. The enthusiastic, music-loving, nurturing, inspired, noble group of Suzuki musicians and teachers and families that had all come to Oaxaca for a week of Suzuki gathered, smiles on their faces, arms linked, cameras snapping, and we were off! From Santo Domingo Church to the Zócalo we whooped and danced in a celebration that, for me, was about everything that brought me to this beautiful city, and will keep me returning—for the music, the food, the challenges, the colors, and mostly the *people*.

What am I without my instrument? Without my repertoire? Without my language or my country? I'm still very much a Suzuki Teacher. 🐼

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Piano Pedagogy instructor at Roosevelt University. Having studied Music Therapy in grad school, Aubrey continues researching and exploring music as a means of healing. Aubrey travels between Chicago and Oaxaca, Mexico bringing her Suzuki experience to new teachers and families while continuing to be amazed at everything there is to learn.

[✉ Send a message to Aubrey Faith-Slaker](#)
