

Lasting Impressions

My Studies with Shinichi Suzuki at the Talent Education Institute, Matsumoto

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(Translated by Ursula Müller-Gäbler)

Following my graduation from the Cologne College of Music, I had an opportunity to study at the Talent Education Institute, Matsumoto, during the years of 1980/81. These two years were among the happiest and most intense in my life. At the time, the majority of students at the Institute were young Japanese violinists, pianists, cellists and flutists who spent three to five years to gain the Suzuki Teachers' Diploma. There were also 15 foreign students (3 Europeans, 11 Americans and one Australian) as well as some short-term foreign visitors, mostly orchestral players touring Japan and using the opportunity to get an insight into Suzuki's work.



During later years, I returned to Matsumoto altogether six times for several weeks to improve my knowledge and abilities, and to show Dr. Suzuki the drafts of my future teaching materials. There is no doubt that Dr. Suzuki was the most important person at the Institute. Of course, there were other lecturers to back up and complement the curriculum which comprised individual as well as group lessons, and training courses on interpretation and orchestral playing.



The „Monday Concert“ had a long tradition. It took place every week, and during three to four hours each student was given the chance to perform at regular intervals. Between performances, Suzuki often came onstage, made some remarks and gave encouragement, or sometimes voiced criticism, too. Occasionally, a student had to play a certain piece of music on six or eight consecutive Mondays before Suzuki was satisfied with the result. Each concert piece was recorded on a cassette or video disc. Listening to and analysing these recordings meant in most cases being confronted with one's own shortcomings, which was more effective than any criticism by word of mouth.

Every morning there were two hours of group lessons which Suzuki almost always started with the words: „Good morning! I've got a new idea for today's lesson!“ And a few minutes later one would see one student after the other coming forward, stepping onto a small pedestal and trying out the „new“ exercise. For a particularly good result he sometimes would hand the student a cookie from his ever-ready cookie tin and add with a roguish smile: „I think I should rather rename the Talent Education Institute „Cookie Conservatory“. It could happen, however, that he would ask an inept student, in front of all the other students and the audience, to leave the room: „Go and practice! Come back at the end of the lesson and play the same exercise again – only better!“ If Suzuki then was still not satisfied he ordered the student to come to his room at two-hour intervals, when he checked his progress, and after some brief instructions sent him away for further practice. Next morning, the student had to prove in front of all the group members that he had improved in this particular field. Even if the atmosphere during the lessons appeared to be cheerful and relaxed, at some time or another every student would feel very clearly Suzuki's dynamic leadership and his high demands on the future teacher.



In addition to Suzuki's individual and group lessons, we received tuition from other teachers on practical teaching methods. During individual lessons with Yoko Mori I systematically worked through all pieces of the entire teaching repertoire. She explained to and rehearsed with me the preliminary exercises for the difficult passages, breaking down each piece to small and smallest teaching units. The details were important, e.g. consideration was given to the extent of mobility of pre-school age children. The student had to try to play all beginners' pieces with this special „child-like technique“. Everybody knows about the importance of the teacher's exemplary function also in this matter. In children of pre-school age the fine-motoric abilities are not yet fully developed; therefore, for the time being, the large muscular system should be used for certain movements. Meanwhile the fine-motoric abilities will constantly be trained through exercises and therapeutic games. Each Suzuki teacher should strive to treat a pre-school age child differently from a schoolchild, not only from the point of view of educational psychology but also for physiological reasons. Subjects of this kind were carefully worked through and trained.

A rather unusual subject for a conservatory, and for foreign students in particular, were the lessons in „calligraphy“. Some people may ask what the art of writing beautiful Chinese and Japanese characters has to do with training instrumental teachers. Suzuki used it to demonstrate to his students the analogy between instrumental performance and artistic brush-work. When using the brush, our efforts and the degree of our manual and artistic mastery become visible for everyone. Similarly, when playing music we should strive also for the right personal approach and technical perfection, thus avoiding the risk that our performance becomes an unprofessional mess. We should also realize that it is impossible to reach an artistic level without first having detached ourselves from hectic daily life. Suzuki was convinced that his students learned more during these lessons, where hardly a word was spoken, than from some lectures on theory.



Calligraphy is the art of writing. A contemporary definition of calligraphic practice is „the art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious and skillful manner“.

Musical practice has also to do with craftsmanship. The stroke of a brush like the stroke of a bow may be executed in a fine or a coarse manner, depending on our desire to create a beautiful effect or, otherwise, the lack of personal participation, i.e. performing a mere routine action.

This was illustrated by a story which happened during an individual lesson. Susan, a 17-year-old American girl, intended to study at the Institute for a few months. In American Suzuki circles she enjoyed an excellent reputation as a violinist.

With great self-confidence she stood in front of Suzuki and was ready to play the third movement of the violin concerto by Beethoven. As soon as she had played the first note, Suzuki stopped her. Susan did not understand why, and started anew. With a smile, Suzuki stopped her again and again. After about the 20th attempt he stopped her even before she put the bow on the string for the first note. Susan who was accustomed to receive attention, praise and recognition grew increasingly restless, then felt disappointment and rage.



After a relatively short time she could not stand Suzuki's behaviour any longer; sobbing and stamping her foot, she left the room. After a some further attempts she left the Institute within a few days, never to return. We, the other students, asked ourselves why Suzuki had acted in this way. Some days after Susan's departure he explained: „Anyone wanting to play great works of music should not start before he has concentrated fully on the spirit of the music. Thinking of other things would hinder this process. Contemplation BEFORE starting to play is an absolute „must“ when performing serious music. No good teacher may accept his students being concerned with their own effects on the audience, or with any other superficial ideas . . .“

There were lively activities in the many rooms of the adjoining building where children of almost any age were taught by approx. 20 teachers. Every day we had the opportunity to visit the children's lessons. We saw good lessons and others; teacher, parents and students of different mentalities; and many variations of everyday teaching practice.

On Sundays, usually some particularly gifted children and their teachers arrived from different Japanese towns. They played before Suzuki who gave valuable advice to them and their parents and teachers. The students in the audience and the foreign guests were surprised and thrilled by the mostly excellent performances given by the visiting students.

A seven-day week was nothing unusual for Suzuki or his students. Usually, the students spent their whole „working day“ – practice, lessons, meals – at the Institute. Even when Suzuki went abroad for one or two weeks – he visited different workshops and conferences several times a year – the students were at the Institute from morning till night. Before leaving, he always set us a task – one for all students together and one for each student individually. E.g. he would ask the violin students to practice the „Rumanian Folk Dances“ by Bartók in his absence and to play them for him on his return. Of course, everything had to be played by heart. He expected the ensemble play as well as bowing, fingering and dynamics to be flawless. Those foreign students who were acquainted with the demands on ensemble play from orchestral experience only, i.e. from rehearsals of the individual instrumental groups, would soon be at their wit's end solely by the requirement of playing by heart. Anyway, it was good exercise for us to work through a complete piece of music, including all its movements, to practice daily within the group and with piano accompaniment, and after one week give a performance under Suzuki's watchful eye.

On completion of my first year at the Institute I was allowed to take part in the weekly lessons which actually were held only for the teachers of the Nagano prefecture. Dr. Suzuki told me: „You must develop strength in many different ways because there will be important tasks waiting for you in Germany. We shall start with your thumb.“ He showed me that he was able to break a wooden chopstick in his hand by pressure of his thumb alone, without using the other hand. I was to do the same, but could not. Every day I had to try it in front of a large group of spectators, but without success. In the same way I had to demonstrate for weeks during the teacher training lessons how weak my thumb was. Smiling, Suzuki came joined me and, within a few seconds, broke the chopstick, earning great applause. After many weeks – my thumb had turned green and blue long ago – I finally succeeded to solve this apparently inartistic problem. I had learnt more than just to strengthen the muscles of my thumb. This had been a practical demonstration of how to face again and again one's own weak points, never to give up even if laughed at, and to continue working . . .

The knowledge and experience gained at the Talent Education Institute is still so vivid and diverse that it would be impossible to give a comprehensive account of it here. In preparation for later professional requirements we, the students, received instruction not only in the fields of instrumental technique and in methodology and didactics, but also on artistic matters. The principal aim, however, was not to train as professional instrumentalists, but to gain an insight into the essence of art while at the same time getting acquainted with the advanced teaching repertoire. In other words: If a student worked on the Mendelssohn violin concerto it was for the reason that he should later be able to impart to his little students from the beginning a feeling for beautiful sound and lively expression. He would also understand more easily that basic techniques have to be taught most conscientiously to serve as a sound foundation for advanced techniques later.

There would be many more things to write about, e.g. about the active participation of all students during two summer courses at Matsumoto! We took over countless greater and smaller tasks and in this way learned „from scratch“ how to organize a large-scale event with usually more than 1.000 children and their parents.

Twice I was able to take part in the four-day annual national Suzuki Teachers' Conference. All teachers from Japan met here. Suzuki was always eager to keep the teachers „on the go“. Every time he played lottery with them – like with children. Some teachers drew a card and within three seconds had to play the beginning or certain parts of the piece that was written on it. Even though there were hundreds of teachers in the conference hall, each one of them was highly concentrated. Because all of a sudden Suzuki would have the teachers aged between 20 and 30 years come onstage, then those between 70 and 80, and finally all above 80. There were still 10 of them in the last category, and each one had to perform.



At the Teachers' Conference 1982 with Hirose Sensei

We, the foreign students, were no better off. We, too, had to come forward and prove to the ever cheerful Suzuki our individual capabilities. The large audience commented our efforts either with applause or, as the case might be, with loud laughter. . .

Another inspiring and motivating situation occurred every two to three days. In the middle of a lesson the door would open suddenly and Mrs Suzuki's head would appear. Often she joined us; sometimes she just gave me a brief, cheerful look meaning: „Do come and join me for a cup of coffee in Suzuki's office when you can.“ Since the two of us were the only Germans far and wide, we always enjoyed a little chat. On those occasions I learned much that later helped me to a better understanding, e.g. about problems with the introduction of the Suzuki method in other countries. At other times she would speak to me of very personal details of her life, like how she would sometimes overcome Japanese courtesy rituals by her typical Berlin vivacity, and how she never lost her sense of humour and her optimism in spite of some hard personal experience. Without her active support in the background, especially during the years after the war, setting up and spreading the Suzuki method would have been less successful.

And there was so much for us, the students, to learn when Suzuki was sitting in his lecture room drinking tea with us and talking about subjects which were particularly close to his heart. He often talked about questions of education for children and of self-education, about the purpose of art, the necessity of understanding one's own role in life and living accordingly, about key experiences in his life, important words of great personalities, and much more. Now and then, tears might come to his eyes and he, who usually was so cheerful, would struggle for words.



Suzuki wanted to give his students more than mere facts and instrumental technique; he wanted to prepare them for the responsibility required by their profession, and for an understanding of higher values. With his unorthodox ways he tried to encourage us to think about the questions behind our visible actions. Because only those who are concerned about the meaning of life will not lose sight of their personal course even in difficult times. In addition, he gave individual guidance to his students.



He did it smilingly, without exerting any pressure. Only those of them who lived long enough within his sphere of influence started feeling an indirect pressure which might lead to a change of character. Students who were taught by him only for a few days, weeks or months were usually treated with kindness and encouragement. In this way, each student received helpful impulses and impressions which he could take home and use for a positive start of his own teaching activities.