String Pedagogy and Musicianship Teaching in Hungary, Eastern Europe and Finland:
A Comparative Study Trip

Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship
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April 2006
Aims and scope of the Fellowship
This Fellowship was designed to investigate the relationship between musicianship teaching, in particular the Kodály system of music education, and string pedagogy, in particular the Moscow School, in a number of countries encompassing Hungary, the former Soviet Union, and Finland.

Background
The links between Kodály methodology and string teaching are well-established, with many exponents in the UK: Sheila Nelson and the Stringwise group of teachers, as exemplified in the publication of the Essential String Method, the Colourstrings organisation, whose teachers draw directly on the inspiration provided by Géza Szilvay (see below); within conservatoires, including the First String Experience course at the Royal Academy of Music, the String Training Programme at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Royal Northern College of Music’s own Junior Strings Project (all of which I have direct experience of); and in the practice of numerous private and peripatetic teachers throughout the country.

This strand of the Fellowship involved starting at the Kodály Institute in Kesckemét, Hungary and finishing at the East Helsinki Music Institute in Helsinki, Finland where Géza Szilvay (himself Hungarian) has developed an inspirational blend of musicianship and instrumental teaching, embedding both within the curriculum of an ordinary state school.

The second, perhaps more complex, strand of the Fellowship was designed to investigate string teaching within a cultural and musical context far removed from that of the UK, namely the “Moscow School” (considered by some actually to have its origins in Ukraine) and its influence throughout the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Eastern European string players are renowned throughout the world for their virtuosity and the thoroughness of their technical grounding, and this Fellowship sought to tease out some of the factors contributing to their achievements.

This second strand of the Fellowship involved visits to the Krushelnitska Special Music School in Lviv, Ukraine, a meeting with teacher trainers in Gomel, Belarus, to the Moscow Conservatoire, SEMSHA and the Mersyalovskoe Uchilishche in Moscow and, on a supplementary trip, to the Estonian Academy of Music and Drama in Tallinn, Estonia.
Hungary

First impressions
Arriving in Budapest and travelling across town to take the train south to Kecskemét in the spring sunshine, first impressions were of a country with a fundamentally healthy social environment. There was something in the way people comported themselves on the streets, in the easy relaxed atmosphere, that gave a sense of people who know how to be happy, who respect themselves and see the worth even in strangers. Everywhere there were visible signs of the value put on culture, and, it seemed, particularly classical music, though that might of course just have been reflecting my personal interest. Walking along a back street in Budapest suddenly, through a window open to the warm spring weather, I heard the sound of a piano and saw a sign announcing the Ferenc Liszt School. It felt like a sign.

Life in Kecskemét itself seems to have a timeless quality. The huge open town square with its seven churches dedicated to different religions, or branches of the same one, the classically influenced architecture, and the beautiful clock with its particular chime all combine to create an atmosphere of space and beauty.

The Kodály School, Kecskemét
Zoltán Kodály (1882 – 1967) deeply believed in music education not only as an intrinsic aim in itself, but also as an indispensable means to becoming a human being and realizing one’s full human potential. He believed that musical activity has a positive and transferable effect to learning other subjects, to one’s whole personality development, and to the life of society as a whole. He therefore advocated that music, largely based on classroom singing, should form a large and integral part of every child’s education, seeing it, and in particular genuine Magyar folk music, as a way of reconnecting a population, living under foreign rule for most of his own lifetime, with its national identity and birthright.

The Kodály School in Kecskemét is directly descended from the first Kodály song-school, established by Márta Nemeszeghy Szentkirályi in 1950. It is currently housed in an elegant classical building used by the Russian army as a barracks until the collapse of the Communist order. The original barracks form three sides of a large courtyard, the fourth side formed by a spacious new building that contains most of the classrooms and two concert halls. The barracks themselves have been restored to provide dozens of soundproofed instrumental teaching rooms. The entire school is light, airy and friendly, and has an excellent reputation, with fierce competition for places.

Children at the school follow a standard curriculum of subjects, and in addition have four music lessons per week, following the Kodály method. Each year group has a choir, and there are several additional choirs that also rehearse, including the “Miraculum” Children’s Choir. Evidence of their outstanding achievement is celebrated in posters announcing concerts and competition entries (and successes). The walls are also hung with large black and white pictures of poets, writers, musicians and artists, to inspire emulation and set the tone.

The school day begins at 07:45 and lessons follow one after the other with only short breaks until about 13:00 (14:00 for the older children), after which point children are free to pursue extra-curricular interests, including instrumental music lessons (typically two 30-minute lessons a week). Children wear uniform pale blue smock-like shirts, and discipline in lesson time is old-fashioned. During break times the children “own” their classrooms, and teachers ask permission to enter. The children thereby police their own behaviour, controlling the point at which they are ready to learn. In this context, it is also interesting to note that water is readily available at the front of the classroom, and that the food available to children in their short breaks is “proper” not junk food.
There is a very open atmosphere in the school, which is obviously used to numerous visitors. Neither teachers nor children were unduly interested in me or my scribbling and I therefore felt absolutely neutral; neither a threat, nor a matter of any undue interest.

Sadly, Kodály’s influence has been almost entirely excised from Hungarian education system except in Kecskemét. Teachers spoke with dismay of the encroachment of a more US/Western European style curriculum.

General observations of classes:
- Quiet studious atmosphere
- Children confident and putting up their hands often to answer questions
- Plenty of solo opportunities, giving children a chance to "perform" and the teacher enough time to assess their understanding easily
- Lots of memorisation/internalisation to develop inner hearing
- Music in English was a class to do with learning musical terminology in English, thereby reinforcing knowledge of the classical tradition and canon whilst extending linguistic confidence. Children were also getting to know American and English folk idioms by subjecting them to analysis, of an extremely sophisticated kind
- Activities all very teacher-led, with a directive teaching style
- Early familiarity with range of modes
- Alongside folksongs, repertoire is drawn primarily from classical, then baroque eras
- Children often stand to sing, giving sense of performance and occasion, even informally
- Work is very detailed and technical, with a good deal of explanation
- Attention given to quality of singing
- More girls than boys in every class observed
- Even spoken rhythms are performed with phrasing and musical shape
- Teachers say thank you each time after children sing, and communicate musically, often singing to initiate activities, and maintaining a pulse. This affects the quality of the working atmosphere very positively
- Limited material and easy questions in the early stages to build confidence
- Teachers carry tuning forks to ensure correct intonation is developed from the beginning
- Teachers are clearly following a strongly internalised lesson plan - very professional/knowledgeable - with a close conceptual relationship between activities
- Some very impressive singing following a pointer on the stave, building both relative and absolute pitch
- Focus on accuracy throughout, without teachers seeming to nag
- Large amount of repetition to reinforce understanding and confidence, allowing time to work on actual performance
- When singing in choirs, the children’s facility, range and diction are all extremely impressive
- All boards have a music section and are well lit
- Lessons strictly timed, and no deviation from curriculum
- By the age of 13, children are doing both melodic and harmonic dictation, also performing in two parts e.g. singing the melody and signing the bass simultaneously
- “Honesty box” approach to homework not completed - children stand and are listed for some form of mild punishment - no sense of guilt
- In this environment, children seem happy to let the adults be adults and allow themselves to be taught/led

Instrumental lessons:
- Scales generally performed with excellent intonation and a good full sound
- No squeamishness about telling pupils they are wrong - just repeat and have another go
- Aiming at standard “professional” technique from the outset
• Very traditional lesson style and format – music stand central throughout
• Small amount of repertoire covered
• Some reference to Kodály-based learning but only in very early stages

Kodály Pedagogical Institute, Kecskemét
Tucked down a side street in the town centre, a stone’s throw from the central pedestrianised square and twenty minutes’ walk from the school, the Institute is housed in a beautiful building, a former Franciscan monastery. Its primary aim is to train music teachers, both Hungarian and from overseas. A typical group on a year’s course there might range from recent graduates, to those with years of teaching experience. Students come from all over the world, particularly America, Canada, Japan, UK, Mexico, Ireland, with a wide range of abilities, but everyone is united by a desire to understand and practice the Kodály method.

Kodály himself was adamant that music teachers should be musicians of the highest calibre, and to that end, students follow a very full programme, attending well over 20 hours of classes per week including piano pedagogy, folk music, solfa, Kodály philosophy and methodology and choral conducting. Since its foundation 30 years ago, classes have always been taught in English, the aim being to disseminate Kodály’s ideas as widely as possible.

Whilst there, I met three serving UK teachers who had taken a year out to refresh their skills and immerse themselves in Kodály methodology and practice. One, M, was there on a quest to reenergise her teaching, asking some basic questions about where musicianship fits in with instrumental teaching. Interestingly she is a cello teacher (Colourstrings, see later) but chose to attend the course as a pianist. Perhaps it makes it easier to approach things anew untrammelled by one’s relationship, often fraught, to one’s first instrument. A second, S, I met over a cup of vanilla bourbon tea in the elegant café opposite the Institute. She was working in the London Borough of Haringey, teaching piano and flute, and like M, had decided to take a career break to try and reenergise her music. The third, J, had moved her entire family to Kecskemét for a year, her two children also attending the Kodály School. Given the close links between The Institute and the School, both in terms of their philosophy and because a fundamental part of the Institute’s programme is to observe Kodály teaching in practice, her immersion was almost total.

General observations:
• Sense that although improving, students are inadequate, falling short of an ideal
• Something really attractive to musician-teachers, some perhaps jaded, about sitting in a beautiful room singing beautiful music, with the window open, outside world going on as usual (basketball game in the background) and striving for excellence
• Use of traditional repertoire - Mozart, Mendelssohn alongside the works of Kodály. Because most of it is religious in origin it stimulates the mind to higher things, and sets a humble mood of striving
• Teaching rooms are all really attractive, symptomatic of what happens when you give something priority, and when it is culturally valued
• Many English speakers, many American accents
• Feel of positive energy
• Disciplined atmosphere, almost a sense of acolytes being initiated
• Garden outside invites contemplation
• All teachers observed had a strong sense of personal energy
• Lots of demonstration
• Teaching posts are highly sought after, and go to only best students NB faculty all Hungarian
• Generally a very pacy approach - confidence plus sense of urgency, in terms of scale and complexity of work in hand
• Mostly women, just 4 men amongst students. Cf. classes at school (NB This is replicated almost everywhere else visited, raising a question of selection (self-selection?) and at what stage)
• Students start with Bach then move on to Mozart
• All eventually references back to the real repertoire, which is rehearsed as music for performance
• Almost all music studied is choral. Does this go back to older ideas of choral music being purer?
  Unmediated, human and used in church services: powerful spiritual associations
• Familiar processes, often automated in the learning of an instrument, are being scrutinised, made complicated and unfamiliar in order better to understand the underlying principles. This is a great strength of the Kodály system for practising musicians - it enables them to fill in gaps they have probably been glossing over for years - and is essentially an artistic process, to do with seeing the familiar anew, and with utter clarity of understanding
• Close analysis of all musical material, from the folk songs at the school to Kodály's own Te Deum studied by a class at the institute, enables systematisation and ordering of material for clearly sequenced learning at whatever level

**Orsolya Szabo's piano pedagogy class**

• Open and closed phrases
• Need to hear the inner lines in the harmony
• Linking aural experience with muscular memory e.g. when playing 9ths
• Intervals as both an aural and a physical event/phenomenon
• Bring something to consciousness and immediately invent a little exercise
• Playing as handwriting
• Play things so that they are clear enough to write down as a dictation
• The "music clock" - an absolute accuracy of rhythm, particularly important to Bartók

**Conducting lab with Professor Erdei**

Professor Erdei is the director of the Institute, and so his ethos will undoubtedly permeate the whole institution. I was therefore looking forward to seeing his conducting class, and to our subsequent meeting. A rather artificial situation, the conducting lab consists of the class acting as choir for the trainee conductor with Prof. Erdei correcting the hapless learner as they go on, often with a distinct lack of consideration for their sensibilities!

Some observed features of what is happening:

• Complete and abiding respect for the subject of study
• Recognition of a very small number of experts, mainly indigenous
• Shared canon of valued works, initiation to which begins early
• Requirement that learners be utterly humble and ready to take any number of knocks on the road to perfection
• Disciplined atmosphere
• Mode of delivery of the knowledge often preserved and recreated alongside the body of knowledge itself
• Associated with a larger educational or philosophical project
• Values direct lineage and/or contact with original sources
• Little place for individual expression or response, rather greater or lesser degrees of competence/seniority
• End result has aesthetic worth recognised by the wider community, possibly internationally, and therefore the ends justify the means?
• Atmosphere of quasi-monasticism and/or physical austerity

**Meeting with Prof. Erdei**

3 main things came out of this meeting:

• The way that Kodály's system can inform instrumental teaching and learning is through selection of material. Instrumental teaching is for specialists, whereas the Kodály concept is for all
• Kodály’s system is as much about establishing national identity as about music. Before finding out about anyone else’s music (and by extension anyone else) we must first know who we are
• The mission of the Kodály Institute is to "maintain and disseminate" the Kodály method ("after all, Kodály is dead"). They run a wide range of courses both for foreigners and for Hungarian teachers. Faculty members undertake exchanges etc. including via Erasmus programme, since the Institute is now a department of the Liszt Academy in Budapest
Ukraine

First Impressions
Lvov (or, more properly, Lviv), is very dominated by cars, and particularly marshrutki, hybrid bus-taxis which ply their routes chaotically and noisily, demanding a large amount of interaction between driver and passengers as picking up and stopping off points are negotiated. There is a wonderful quality of light, very similar to that in summertime Odessa, perhaps something to do with the particular angle it strikes the earth at this latitude? Lviv is a city undergoing a rapid and invasive period of restoration, viz. digging up of major roads (see right), and one clearly in a period of political change, viz. a resident protest group camping out in tents outside the government building.

People were incredibly helpful (conveniently forgetting the border guard who clearly hadn’t received the telegram telling her that the Soviet Union was no more): the tourist office worker who assisted me even though his office was closed, and the tourist agency which helped me for no money, a vital fax telling me not only just how welcome I was, but perhaps more importantly where and at what time, having gone astray.

Specialized Secondary Music Boarding School named after Solomia Krushelnitska, Lviv, Ukraine
The School was founded in 1939 by V. Barvinskii, a famous Ukrainian composer, pianist, teacher and author of a rich and extensive pedagogical repertoire. It counts amongst its alumni many prominent musicians, perhaps most famous amongst them internationally, violist Yuri Bashmet.

40 children each year are admitted to the school at the ages of 6/7 by competitive audition. Those not from Lviv can live in the boarding house, which forms part of the school building, and which has an enviable canteen. All the teaching here is derived from Moscow and follows a rigid orthodoxy which I hope to follow to its source in a few days’ time. Children are here to learn how to be professional musicians. Years 1 to 3 undertake 3 tests per year, requirements for which are laid down much like our system of graded examinations, with scales, technical work and repertoire specified. The Accolay A minor concerto (somewhere around UK Grade 7) is standard repertoire for years 4 – 5. There is one more critical assessment at the end of year 4, then another at the end of year 8, at which point a decision is made as to whether that child will be a professional musician or not. If not, the child goes elsewhere. All those who stay on win a place at a conservatoire, some even beginning orchestral careers at that point. The children themselves usually own their instruments.

Standard classrooms for non-music lessons are reasonably austere. There is not a computer in sight, and the only objects decorating the room are typically an icon, a Ukrainian scarf, a picture of Shevchenko, a few books and some natural objects. Rooms for music lessons are more luxuriously appointed, with many grand pianos, plants, pictures and concert posters.

General observations of class teaching:
- Year one class studying the difference between major and minor tonality with the major like the sunshine outside
- Only one evidently hyperactive child
- Use roman numerals in a similar fashion to the way hand signs are used in Kodály
- Individual performances by choice
- Singing in general very accomplished, with quick accurate pitching of intervals
• By no means all children in the year one class coping with quite complicated leaps, e.g. d – f and f – l, but expected to keep up nevertheless
• Beginning to develop some harmonic sense by picking arpeggios out of the scale
• Use folksongs to reinforce certain intervallic relationships e.g. d – m – s
• Because of the selection procedure that happens at 5/6, there are more girls than boys in the school (this traditional method of teaching doesn't suit either of the boys in a particular year two class, and they tend to get ignored – perhaps because the presence of an outsider in this cultural environment requires the children to produce instant results?)
• Teacher reflects after lesson that she knows that in America they have more things like computers to appeal to boys (and "difficult children") and also that the boys need more time to develop
• High energy teaching style
• Use fixed doh
• All year two children on task throughout lesson, and all coping with the full diatonic range
• Book in use up to year 4 contains material for sight singing, to illustrate various points. It is based around introducing various keys one by one, but does not include any part-singing
• Internalisation is quick – even year one children have the material from memory after 4 to 5 repetitions
• Desks have special foot rests for the younger children
• It is considered necessary for a violinist to possess perfect pitch
• Teacher reflects that talented children are often "all over the place" in terms of focus
• All stand up to "perform"
• No uniform
• No question of why children are here, just a solid professional job to be done
• Children who graduate from specialist music schools do not achieve any form of diploma, whilst those who attend "colleges" (14 plus) do, despite the fact that the former tend to arrive at conservatoire at a higher standard
• The emphasis is on accuracy, neatness and getting it "right", not on individual imagination and expression
• This is the kind of discipline (drilling, even) that is missing, and hard to achieve, in the UK, the part conservatoires often complain about students not arriving with, and is not generally given weight in the National Curriculum
• General acknowledgment that this kind of education is very expensive – one good thing about the Soviet Union – and a hope that the new government will maintain current funding

Instrumental teaching:
• Teacher uses student's own violin to demonstrate
• Importance of being able to play exactly in time, not putting in rubati due to technical defects or quirks of individual expression
• Culture very much one of "my student", though the end result is the same (community of fellow professionals, with common understanding/knowledge)
• Teacher "plays" the child more than the child plays alone in the early stages
• No shoulder rests for the younger children, instead "podushki" tied round their necks
• Teacher sits to teach younger children, putting his face close to the level of the child's
• Mode of discourse very "grown-up" from the beginning
• Children play with a full, strong sound, using lots of bow
• Child plays or is played almost constantly in lessons, with teacher talk often simultaneous with playing
• Perhaps because of the number of people living in close proximity and not being so precious about practice or indeed individual interpretation there exists an absolute openness in this environment on the subject of relative talent and achievement. You can either do it or not: everything else is just flummery, and so much posturing

The way instrumental teaching progresses is very much on a constant honing model, requiring huge amounts of time input from individual teachers. As the Director said: "You have to sit for years, with your child (his son, a violinist, is currently in the UK, studying at the Royal College of Music) to understand this school of violin teaching. Otherwise all you see is the professor sitting, saying "Yes, that's very interesting. One more time.""
Belarus

The trip to Belarus was a short one on the way to Moscow, but left some strong impressions. I travelled to Gomel' in the heart of the area affected by the Chernobyl incident, and where incidence of childhood diseases are distressingly high. In particular the incidence of thyroid cancer incidence in Gomel' is currently about 100 times higher than before the accident (WHO). Whilst there, staying in a family with one ill child, I had the opportunity to visit a music school (Muzikalnaya Shkola No. 1 im. P. I. Tchaikovskovo), the Gomel' State Pedagogical College (Gomel'skii Gosudarstvennii Kolledzh im. L. S. Vygotskovo) and an ordinary state secondary school (School No. 61) with its extraordinary cultural flowering - in this case not musical but in the visual arts.

Music School No. 1 is one of many throughout the country where children, having finished their normal school day, attend specialist institutions to pursue their interests, much along the lines of music centres in the UK. There were a variety of instruments being taught at a range of levels, including an excellent young accordionist – folk instruments tend to be taught alongside mainstream classical ones far more than in the UK. I also observed a violin class in typical Moscow School formation – piano in the centre, and about 20 young violinists performing mainly unison repertoire from memory, with a great sense of enjoyment and community.

My visit to the Gomel' State Pedagogical College, which specialises in early years, primary, physical education and music teacher education and has trained upwards of 16000 teachers since its inception in 1914, was fascinating. First the entire cohort of trainee music teachers put on a concert, with a whole range of different music, followed by an interesting question and answer session. Next, lunch was laid on and I had the opportunity for further discussion with the teachers, who were eager to hear about the UK system. What emerged was that although they were envious of some of the freedoms and opportunities our students might have which theirs did not, and by the obvious differences in relative wealth and access to resources, they valued above all their cultural heritage and the hardworking ethos of Belarusian students. I, in turn, was envious on behalf of many UK teachers of the compulsory CPD they enjoyed, with outside experts coming in regularly to help them refresh their skills and discuss new ideas.

School No. 61 is a remarkable place. As soon as you walk in you are greeted by a giant statue, a classically styled nude, and from then on it seems wherever your eyes rest is another fine art work, almost all paintings by current students. Some of the images are distressing, and clearly represent children’s attempts to come to terms with the catastrophe that befell them either directly, or in terms of their wider community. All were powerful in their intensity and remarkable for their maturity of both conception and execution.

There is a real sense in Belarus of a country trying to clean itself, to recover and be healthy. From the real plants in window boxes on the train from Lviv, to the bright colours that were beginning to appear on shop fronts and blocks of flats, to the wooden representations of vegetables laid out in a children’s playground. One day of my visit coincided with a “subbotnik” where all the members of the community come together voluntarily to improve their physical surroundings, perhaps a continuation of the old Soviet “brigade” system. They clear away rubbish, plant trees, repaint peeling woodwork, epitomising the kind of stoical self-reliance and hope that will aid that recovery.
Russia

First impressions
Emerging from the overnight train into a bustling Byelorussia Voksal - full of people from old men balancing improbably large amounts of luggage on impossibly small trolleys to smart businesswomen clamped to their mobile phones - a vast wave of memories and emotions washed over me. Whilst some things, notably the brightness of the colours, the ubiquitous adverts, the confident eye contact of the young, had changed, this was still somehow recognisably the same city I knew in an earlier incarnation when a year-long stay in the then capital of the Soviet Union culminated in, unforgettably, watching the Berlin Wall come down on the equivalent of the 9 O’clock News - Vremya.

I was about to renew acquaintance with this curmudgeonly old friend, by turn fantastically inspiring and indescribably frustrating, looking forward to it with a familiar mixture of anticipation and nervousness.

Pedpraktika Department, Moscow Conservatoire
In Russia, the pathway into teaching is more closely allied with students' own performance skills than is currently the case in the UK, and so the conservatoires are the natural place for future teachers to train. At the Moscow Conservatoire there is a Pedpraktika department devoted to this, where student teachers give lessons for free to members of the public of all ages under the close supervision of an experienced teacher, who alternates leading the lesson him/herself with observing the student doing so. The emphasis is on passing on an orthodoxy in relation to technique, repertoire choice, even the way of relating to the student, all of which is a far cry from the kind of teacher training we are used to in the UK with its focus more on the individual student.

The lesson I observed was led by Olga Victorievna (supervising Galina, a trainee teacher). The student, Volodya, was one month into his lessons, having recently finished his compulsory national service, where he was playing wind instruments in a band. The three goals for him to review in order to regain his former prowess were intonation, bow changes and shifting.

Technical hints (for collated technical hints from the Moscow School, see Annex Two):
- Lengthen the first finger before a downward shift
- Practise studies legato in order to hear out of tune bits more clearly
- Play with a marked detaché, even in Mozart, to develop tone production
- Always play scales from memory

General observations:
Teacher’s attitude (rather “Soviet”-style approach):
- Student often an object of ridicule
- Very little encouragement
- “You must not play out of tune – you should be ashamed”
- “You should smile less in lessons – you can smile at the girls instead”

The Central Music School of the Moscow State P. I. Tchaikovsky Conservatory (Tsentralnaya Muzikalnaya Shkola pri Moskovskoi Gosudarstvennoi Conservatorii imeni P. I Tchaikovskovo), commonly referred to as SEMSHA
Founded in the 1930s, the school numbers amongst its alumni such internationally known artists as Gennadii Rozhdestvenskii, Leonid Kogan, Mstislav Rostropovich, Eduard Gratch, Tatiana Nikolayeva, Igor Bezdorodni (see Annex One), Mikhail Pletnev, Natalia Gutman, Oleg Kogan, Victor Spivakov, Vladimir Ashkenazzii, Igor Pogorelitch and Viktor Tretyakov. The school self-avowedly prides itself on providing an old-fashioned form of early professional training, formulated in the 30s. Children enrolled in the school have classes in solfeggio, theory, harmony, composition, analysis of musical forms/works and history. A major source of pride for the school is that more than 500 young musicians from the school have been
prizewinners at various competitions over the past years. It is a multinational community, where children from Russia and the ex-Soviet bloc work alongside significant numbers of their peers from e.g. Austria, China, Croatia, France, Germany, Korea and Vietnam. The faculty includes many teachers who also teach at the Moscow Conservatoire.

Rhythmics classes with years 2 and 3:
- More dance work than expressive
- Lots of gender stereotyping, including costume
- Lots of emphasis on presentation
- Use of ballet positions
- “Singing hands”
- Rehearsing until exercises are “byez oshibok” (without mistakes)
- Children visibly thrive on competition
- As children get older, classes are more gymnastically orientated
- Byeli tanets (white dance) is when girls can ask boys!

General observations of instrumental lessons:
- Needs to be “right” every time – professional performance standard encouraged from the outset
- Information about technique and interpretation often given simultaneously
- Need for artistic presentation perhaps somewhat overplayed?
- Everything encouraged as coming from the brain first – importance of intention
- There is a non-negotiability about the work set
- Teachers know all the music they are teaching off by heart and in depth, including fingerings and bowings
- Not just musical intelligence operating here but some form of physical/coordination (kinaesthetic) intelligence
- Teacher and student alike are just as ready to demonstrate technical work as repertoire, which shows how much it is valued
- Repertoire studied is predominantly concerti and virtuoso pieces
- Very little praise
- Students, even young ones, address the teacher using the formal “vy” rather than informal “ty”
- Every teaching room has large windows, plenty of space, and a piano
- In many rooms hang concert posters advertising the performances of that teacher’s class. These are produced in exactly the same format as those used at the Conservatoire for both student and professional performances – as also in Lviv (see picture p. 8)
- Children study rhythmics until the fourth class (9/10)
- The older the child, the further they stand away from the teacher
- Technique develops in advance of repertoire
- Students encouraged to discover for themselves the merits of various fingerings but tend to work from rather old-fashioned and over-edited editions
- Shoulder rests are generally high, with the violin quite strongly angled downwards, with the end button visible, rather than as in UK/US where it is usually buried in the neck
- One has the clear sense that a lot of work is going on elsewhere: what goes on in the lesson hardly seems enough (combination of talent, excellent tuition, parents and time spent practising)
- Child in charge of how much s/he is prepared to present
- Exam piece in the 9th grade (14/15) is the 1st movement of the Tchaikovsky concerto, the same year that solo Bach is usually introduced
- Materials for youngest students home made and decorated with child-friendly pictures, which are also stuck on the pages of the (home-made) study book
- Students generally play with a full, artistic sound throughout, each note clear
- Free use made of 2nd position from early on, with all fingers equal and no avoiding the 4th
- One teacher, Galina Stepanovna (teacher of Repin and Vengerov, amongst others) emphasised the need for youngsters to train on music written by composers with a developed understanding of the instrument, rather than those, like Prokofiev, who make musical sense but write “nonsense” as far as the violin goes
- It is important that the teacher says nothing whilst the student plays through, however hard that might be: “some, even experienced ones, try to make remarks right up to the last moment before performance, which is pointless, since by then all the reflexes are hardened” (GS)
- Use of recordings to get to know the accompaniment
- Need for a little “brain break” in the lesson
• The lesson performs a different function when the child is working as hard as this, and the notebook can become a list of wrongs to correct, though not one student appeared discouraged by this approach.

**Mersyalovskoe Uchilische, Moscow**

Existing in parallel to SEMSHA, and housed in a building only ten minutes' walk away, the Mersyalovskoe Uchilische also has a number of teachers in common with Moscow Conservatoire, and represents an alternative route into a higher education in performance, this time for older children aged 14 – 18. I attended the class of one legendary teacher, Maia Solomonovna Glezarova, respect for whom is enormous, and whose students are known for their high achievements. She is also clearly valued by colleagues, and more than one other visitor was also present at various times in the room, which was another large room with grand piano, large windows and green plants, but in this case poor soundproofing.

Following the first student’s technically proficient, though not enormously exciting performance of Tzigane, the first words I heard were "Bozhe moi" (Oh my God), "shto takoye" (What was that?), "shto c toboi" (What's wrong with you), "shto delat’" (What are we to do). There was an unhappy atmosphere in the room, with the accompanist joining the teacher in criticism of the poor student, who showed immense strength of character and played with a full tone throughout.

"Mnye eto yzhe nadoyelo etot svuk" (I'm just completely fed up with the sound you're making). "Protivno" (It's disgusting). "Uzhas" (Horrid). "Ya bolshe ne mogu obyasnit'" (I just can't face explaining it again) "Ya nye v sostoyanii..." (I just don't have the strength). The barrage went on and eventually the student retired, packing her violin away to a recital of all the faults, some of them moral, that must be remedied before she presented herself again.

Lessons appeared to be based primarily on one point, to which the teacher kept returning. Her teaching style appeared almost entirely reactive rather than proactive. At one point the teacher refused to answer a direct question about how to correct an identified fault, and there was little or no evidence of her changing the model, reframing questions or approaches to aid student understanding, or wanting to engage in mutual problem-solving. There was throughout the morning a sense of barely controlled rage at successive students' failings and lack of work. Most got neither greeting nor farewell.

And yet the teacher undeniably has huge skill, knowledge and charisma. Perhaps, in its presence, the student's need to have the teacher's approval (which, on this occasion, was consistently withheld) means miracles can happen. This experience marked the biggest culture clash of the trip so far, and I emerged from it with a huge number of questions burning in my brain.

**Estonia**

The way it was planned, Estonia formed a natural geographical and cultural bridge between Moscow and Helsinki. The way it worked out, and as I should have known, the country was far more attuned to our Easter than the Orthodox one. Everyone was on holiday, and I realised that I would have to return on another occasion in order to be able to gain insights into its musical life. As luck would have it, when I made contact with the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre I discovered that the 34th International Conference of the European String Teachers' Association was to be held in Tallinn later that year (see Annex One). Having noted the dates, I then took the opportunity instead to soak up the culture, reflecting on the huge difference between the pale, pinched place I had visited sixteen years before, still under Soviet rule, and the vibrant, self-confident capital of one of the EU's newest nations I saw this time.

These few days also gave the opportunity to reflect on the experience so far, and ponder some of the issues that had come up, both expectedly and unexpectedly. I had expected, for example, to be knocked sideways by the levels of musicianship demonstrated by the children of the Kodály School, but I had not expected to discover that this was not regarded as in any way related to their ability to perform on instruments, except in preparing them for it in the most basic way, and aiding aural training and reading ability. I had expected in Belarus to be struck by appalling levels of poverty allied as so often in such situations with amazing examples of the survival of the human spirit and the instinct towards beauty. I had not expected the way in which the combination of inspired artistic leadership, enlightened management and huge talent amongst the children, many of them facing depressing prognoses in relation to their health, would result in an astonishing artistic flowering at school no. 61 in Gomel'.
I had expected to discover terrifying levels of achievement in very young children at the specialist music schools in both Lviv and Moscow, and found it. I had also expected to find a comparatively harsh teaching regime, lack of access to clean editions and modern day performance practice, particularly in relation to classical works, all of which I did. What was gradually crystallising in my mind, and something that although obvious as a premise for such a trip, was only now apparent through lived experience: education is almost entirely culturally-specific, and music education is no exception. The kind of treatment the children, and perhaps even more significantly, their parents, were prepared to accept from teachers in Russia would have probably provoked litigation in the UK, particularly if in a state-funded context. However, the degree of investment in hugely resource-greedy specialised training for the few is seen in Eastern Europe, in the institutions which I visited, as entirely justified by their talent, and because the support comes from the state, there is no question of provision being mapped onto affluence, as so often in Western Europe.

However the kind of training on offer is narrow and traditional in its base. Repertoire is mainstream, and for the children being trained the process is more one of initiation into the adult world of professional classical music making, rather than a voyage of personal discovery. But the results, if not speaking the whole truth for themselves, nevertheless clearly have something to say.

The trip from Tallinn to Helsinki is an epic one during the winter months when one ship a day bravely plies the route, keeping a narrow channel open in the ice. In April the ice was still present to lend the experience drama, but was breaking up into smaller and smaller pieces by the day.

**Finland**

**First Impressions**

Arriving in Helsinki, again not for the first time, marked a definite turn towards home. After the relative privations and unfamiliarity of Lviv and Gomel’, the overwhelming edginess of Moscow and the picture book medievalism of Tallinn, Helsinki was a marked change to the relatively familiar.

**East Helsinki Music Institute**

The East Helsinki Music Institute (IHMO) founded in 1999, but building on a heritage stretching back to 1971, is housed in a “normal” school in a suburb of Helsinki. Children are chosen to enter the school after an introductory two-day workshop (there were 41 children on the waiting list for September 2006 applying for a total of 30 places), where they take part in musical activities and are assessed for their maturity and level of musical motivation. They then form a class that follows a “normal” school curriculum (the school currently goes up to year 7) and in addition have three solfa (general musicianship) lessons, three instrumental lessons in small groups (note, no individual tuition) and an ensemble session. Of the 30 children that started in the first year of the school, 26 remain in the current year 7. The school is almost entirely state funded.

**Colourstrings**

The Colourstrings approach to music teaching was created by Csaba and Géza Szilvay and is based on Kodály principles. It is a child-centred approach that, rather than moulding the child to the needs of the instrument as conventional methods do, instead “domesticates” the instrument and the teaching to meet the needs of the child.

Publications *Little Rascals, Singing Rascals* and the subsequent instrumental tutor books form a three-step approach that starts a child on his/her musical path at an early age, and develops uninterruptedly in a logical sequence. Melodies and rhythms learned at the *Little Rascals* stage are later brought into consciousness and eventually develop into a complete musical understanding. This repertoire keeps appearing in new guises, from clapping games to fully worked orchestral arrangements.
General observations:

- Group performances mainly in unison, with some chamber music
- Sense of standard carefully guarded by frequent concerts in which all participate
- Sense of shared purpose, with both principals and most teachers present at the frequent concerts, both within the school and elsewhere - indeed written into contracts that the children should not perform without them present
- Playing style consistently strong and confident, with impressive intonation
- Children seem to have less trouble playing in keys when they are familiar with the relative doh system (only one plays B flat by mistake)
- Generally playing on smallest possible size violin
- Some rudimentary use of vibrato evident from approximately yr 4
- Frequent use of 2nd position
- Class generally plays without teacher, led by a student, including intimations of rubato
- Big full sound, demonstrating feeling and fluency
- Teacher corrects as the student plays, avoiding interruption of “flow”
- The children really play as a group, with a remarkable degree of mutual awareness
- All have a serviceable “professional” technique, and there are no “bad” players, though clearly some find it easier than others
- No anxiety in either teacher or children about working at something until it is right
- Individual contributions are echoed by the group, which supports when an individual has a tricky moment, like the call and response form of the Kalevala (see Year One solfa class below)
- Real sense of community as they work together on something that is acknowledged to be hard
- The process is clearly as important, if not more so, than the end product
- Wide range of skills exhibited, and playing always musical
- What is really impressive is the general level of achievement, not the peaks
- Because these lessons are an almost daily occurrence, there is no sense of pressure - acceptance that for all musicians there are good and bad days
- Preparation for different performance situations is comfortably accommodated within the group lesson
- Plenty of time allocated to each activity, and very good quality of listening
- Teacher has ownership of teaching space, keeping own resources there
- Group work helps establish sensitive intonation collectively, better than individual work?
- Good sense of openness established – all aspects of playing are open to scrutiny
- Lesson style very traditional – teacher plays along, repertoire-led
- No sign of “attitude”

Classes:

Year One Solfa (taught by Director, important that both Directors teach):

- Children sing me, soh and lah individually then as a sustained chord
- Using full diatonic scale, singing Mozart with Finnish words
- Reading from hand signs in two parts, including suspensions
- Lah, soh, me song working out the solfa names: A call and response song based on the style of Finnish epic, the Kalevala
- Naming intervals: whole tone, minor third and perfect fourth
- Key awareness, drawing on subconscious awareness of fa for flat keys and ti for sharp keys
- Writing these on a five line stave using large coloured pencils

Side trip to Music School based in Espoo Cultural Centre

Finland, in common with many countries, has a system of music centres that operate after the school day finishes, where children can receive instrumental tuition that is either subsidised or fully funded by the state. This school was housed in a cultural centre in Espoo, near Helsinki, where many doors are labelled with the names of composers, some in common with groups on the Junior Strings Project at the RNCM back home in Manchester – Nielsen, Offenbach and Prokofiev.
Technical hints:
- The sound must be in your head – you can’t talk about it
- Sound is either “light” or “dark”
- Music and technique should go hand in hand
- Nathan Milstein used hardly any bow
- Zino Francescatti played sharp

General observations:
- Hardly any playing on the part of the teacher (remember Russia – violin not even present in room)
- Scale and sight-reading workshops: Scales and sight-reading have been taken out of individual assessments as being too scary, replaced with a group workshop (students undergo assessment roughly every 3 years, but music centres have the freedom to invent their own assessments if they like)
- Scales are performed from memory, in unison, slurred in 3s and 5s
- Sight-reading task is an ensemble piece in 3 parts, so ensemble skills tested as well as sight-reading – valuable exercise

Some collected thoughts of Géza Szilvay
- Light music is like Agatha Christie – good for a plane journey but you don’t need lectures on it
- Adults’ responsibility is to teach children what is sure, what abides, like Bach and Vivaldi
- There is a large picture in Géza’s office of the children’s orchestra taken in 1982. Almost all the children in the picture are professional players now, but the underlying importance is that they should have a choice, though sometimes it is difficult to find a balance between practice and other parts of the curriculum, particularly when children are talented
- If children can work on quality in music they will transfer this to other areas of their lives. Music education is not just about entertainment: classical music in particular takes work and needs parental support.
- Tests should not be something to fear, but a celebration like Christmas
- Importance of wooing potential teachers away from performance jobs
- Teachers work in teams so that each pupil is not just the product of one teacher
- Teaching privately, Géza had maybe 5 “stars” out of a class of 30. Now in the school there are not so many “stars” but the general level is good and “no one plays badly”
- Anecdote of the Japanese student who said, following a master class, that she wanted Géza to be her teacher because he wouldn’t beat her!
- Authority comes from knowledge, not from an authoritarian approach
- Has sought to establish a very child-centred environment, where no children are thrown out for not practising etc. It’s fine for it to be a hobby and not a profession
- Rather shocked by the Russian/Ukrainian approach whilst acknowledging that the children can play! “But it wouldn’t work in our hemisphere!”
- Music was an asylum for those living under Soviet rule – remember that Ukraine was part of Hungary once
- What’s the point in giving everyone a chance when some are simply not interested?
Conclusions

Having undertaken such a complex and multifaceted exploration, what conclusions could I begin to draw based on the experiences I had been privileged to have over such an extended period? At first sight it seemed impossible to draw any at all, as all seemed to founder on the issue of cultural difference, but then, slowly, some points began to persist, to form some kind of sense. In the main they are prompts to further thought, and research.

The place of improvisation and composition

None of the institutions I visited devoted time to the study of either improvisation or composition as a natural part of an instrumentalist's development, whereas in the UK both are greatly valued in a general music education and, increasingly, in instrumental tuition. This shift can be seen in changes to examination syllabuses (often the arbiter of what goes into individual instrumental lessons) and in a number of newly available publications. The issue in 2002 of *A Common Approach* (Federation of Music Services) further signposted this development, its schemes of work including both to a significant degree. It also chimes with the general shift in perception in the UK of the value of music education as being about personal development more than skill acquisition in its primary focus.

Nevertheless both improvisation and composition have a long history amongst artist-performers of the classical tradition, and therefore it is interesting to note that in these pockets of excellence in string teaching they are almost entirely absent. I wonder what place experimentation and individual discovery has when working in such a narrow and traditional area? Is it necessary/advisable to exclude it in favour of a rigorous training, to avoid confusion and dissipated focus? Could improvisation in fact have a role to play in enabling students to explore beyond the repertoire they are currently learning, and assimilate a greater range of styles? Further, might this better equip them for a potentially increasingly mobile professional career?

Relationship between musicianship training and instrumental teaching

Given the range of institutions and situations observed, this was hard to pin down. In Kecskemét I saw a robust approach to music education, but one not necessarily impacting on instrumental development. At IHMO in Finland I saw a coherent relationship between the same theories of general musicianship and instrumental development, closely allied to my own experience and working practices.

However in the others I perceived a lack of integration between the two. Music often remained a reified system, full of mysteries and arcane theories, rather than a logical language to be explained and experimented with. I wonder whether sometimes a lack of conceptual coherence in the teaching of music is sometimes masked by selection, in that children being assimilated to it are already highly musically motivated, and bring an unusual degree of skill. It makes a huge difference whether you are planning a music curriculum for all, or for selected specialists, and for this reason I found the work of the Kodály School and IHMO of most interest and potential future development in terms of relating the two areas.

What does it mean to be the guardians of beauty, of aesthetic worth and sensitivity, and furthermore to pass it on to the next generation?

Cultural ownership and the confident passing on of a tradition whose value was unquestioned was a common feature of all the places visited. Coming from a culture in which classical music education is often perceived as under threat, and for which it sometimes seems necessary to apologise, the experiences of this trip were refreshing. Reflecting on my observations at the Kodály Institute in particular, I wondered whether part of the attraction for Western visitors was a yearning to see celebrated a medium that they love and which they find increasingly marginalised? All the institutions visited were unashamedly teaching classical music and for the most part training classical musicians, the important thing here being that this specialist tuition was either completely or almost entirely funded by the state.

How does teaching style affect the result of instrumental tuition?

A major issue here is one of teachers' self-image, since it would seem that the higher the concentration on skill development within the teaching, the more the teacher is in complete control, and can pursue a directive style of teaching with little place for individual expression. Further, how does the subtle chemistry between expert and apprentice musicians work? In the presence of some people musicians flourish, in others wither, and this is not always entirely explained by the teacher's own skill level, or even level of personal involvement with, or sensitivity to, the pupil. Wherever I went people were completely sure of what they were doing and proud of it to a degree
unusual in teaching in the UK, where particular schools are often regarded with suspicion, and each person’s path is more akin to a voyage of discovery than assimilation to an existing tradition/body of knowledge.

In Russia, the use of the phrase “We are working together” (My s nyei zanimaemsa) expresses a different relationship, perhaps a more equal one, than in some other of the situations I observed, one where the teacher is releasing potential rather than just directing specific learning. However the teaching style I observed in Russia did little to reflect this difference. When teachers take on board an orthodoxy, with its sense of having gone on for years, it is a process of initiation rather than individual discovery for the student.

It is surely true that the influence of particular schools of teaching is nowhere more likely to perpetuate itself than in instrumental tuition. Add to this fact that teachers are very likely to replicate the way they were taught, passing on an undiluted, and in many cases unquestioned, individual influence. The subject is old-fashioned by its nature, and often its subject matter – perhaps old-fashioned teaching methods are best?

At no point during the trip did I see any part of an instrumental lesson, apart from scales, performed without reference to the music stand, a paradigm that we are increasingly trying to move away from in the UK. I wonder whether in part this represents a certain lack of confidence in our pedigree in this area? If we know excellence lies elsewhere will we ditch the methods as well as the attempt to achieve end results? It was interesting to note that the most valued teachers in Espoo were all of Eastern European extraction, something which is frequently the case in the UK as well.

How does student motivation work when the teaching style is so seemingly harsh?
A large part must surely be to do with sheer pleasure of the doing, of being involved musically and socially. Also I would suggest that some of the achievement, and therefore student involvement/motivation comes from expectation, from the institution, the parents, society at large, the children themselves, not just input plus work. There is also something to do with the sheer grit determination to get on and succeed in a selective environment, one that gives access to privileges such as foreign travel, and a collective pride in and value for the work involved, and its products. As more than one Finnish teacher remarked to me, hearing of the trip I had made: “Russians can withstand hardship and reversals; Finns are a bit “softer”!” Géza Szilvay, who lived much of his early life in Soviet-ruled Hungary, made the interesting observation that the Finns, with their population of only 5.2 million, did not regard their people as so “expendable”.

How does a national style development, a collective relationship to string sound in particular?
What would Vaughan-Williams and Walton sound like in a concert entirely performed by Finnish musicians, I wondered as I sat in my seat at the Tapiosaali waiting for the Tapiola Sinfonietta conducted by Olli Mustonen to begin their concert? How do we establish and transmit a national sound? Or are all orchestras increasingly international enough now to negate this effect? Is that a good idea anyway, given the cultural highlights of, for example, the almost entirely Russian Marynskii Theatre Orchestra under Gergiev, or the Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven and Bruckner? How do Eastern European trained musicians cope with joining this maelstrom?

Children everywhere I went were playing with a consistently good strong string sound, which led me to ponder how sound, or an imagination of one, is transmitted? Do we in the UK perhaps lack a collective feeling for it, therefore chasing an unreachable dream?

Other cultural features
In all the environments in which I was observing, the most obvious factor shared with the UK was that of fewer boys learning, though it was striking that this was happening at an institutional level. A secondary feature and not so obvious given the specialist nature of many of the institutions, was the dropout rate from 13/14, though this was referred to. Children observed learning seem to have a higher boredom threshold than is usual in the UK, showing no sign of being off task despite often slow pace. They also demonstrated a high level of respect for their teachers. Both the children and the work they were engaged in was accorded a high level of value in terms of the resources available to it: space, good quality equipment, light. At the end of the day, it is all about priorities.

In those countries which had undergone many and recent hardships, it occurred to me that music was in part a way of escaping from unpleasant daily reality, a way of entering a world with rules in the face of a daily regime in which people did not have control over their lives and destinies. Let us not forget also the importance of the
international possibilities of a musical career; perhaps particularly in countries whose borders have been matters of so many disputes?

It was interesting also to note, in the context that instrumental playing can be seen at least equally as a craft as well as an art, that all the countries visit all put great store by their indigenous handicrafts, as a vehicle for cultural dissemination, particularly Estonia. In Finland handicrafts are also on the curriculum. In all countries, I had the general impression of a good deal more physical ease and trust between teachers and students, making the job of the instrumental teacher easier.

What can you really learn from watching lessons in an alien culture, sometimes in a language you can’t understand?
It means relying on the non-verbal clues that give us such a huge percentage of all information, and also leads to a far greater concentration on the actual musical results and feedback from the student. Further it allows the mind to range a little further afield, to some of the more complex contextual issues.

Inclusion v. selection
From a UK perspective, naturally one of the most striking features of the trip, and one which prompted a good deal of thought, some of it rather uncomfortable, was the emphasis on selection and instruction rather than inclusion and encounter, and the resulting high standards. Maybe there was less poor technique on show because less children, or only selected children start, and more give up. But does it therefore follow that bad technique must be a by-product of inclusive system? Surely not, but there is food for thought in the idea that in many cultures there is not the same imperative, educationally speaking, to include everybody in everything all of the time, regardless of ability, interest or inclination.

As Géza Szilvay put it, “What’s the point in giving everyone a chance when some are simply not interested?” Or, put another way, why are we trying to educate so many young violinists in the UK when opportunities for them to play are limited, and it is such a hard instrument to make real progress on? Is there a “hierarchy” of instruments in relation to this? Have we just made teaching too “complicated” for ourselves? Is trying to make everything available to everybody a bridge too far?

Also from a UK perspective, the very low levels of discipline problems observed were enviable. Does it therefore follow that music fosters this atmosphere, or is it rather because the disciplined ones choose it? Are the undisciplined simply excluded? If there is the upside that discipline is improved by only having those there who want to be there, this is surely at the expense of a rich experience for everybody, and therefore undesirable. But it seems to so many serving teachers in the UK that much of their work is about capturing rather than maintaining and developing interest, or is this something different? Certainly it would seem that at least part of the success observed was to do with the fact that there is no sense in which pupils are evaluating the activity in hand. They are already engaged before they start.

Does this mean that in the UK the best we can therefore do as instrumental teachers to offer a broad non-specialist instrumental education on the principle that we will “do no harm”? To lay the same groundwork each time in case a “talent flower” sprouts? Is this work truly worthwhile in its own right? Or is it best as in current practice to focus on the transferable skills/development of self-esteem/creativity? And if this is the case, where does training for our future professionals rightly belong?

So what seemed to be working, in the institutions observed?
When it works, there is a clear sense of ongoing progress, not just for the individual child, but also in terms of maintaining the standards of the collective as a whole. What many of the places visited had in common was a less conceptual approach to instrumental teaching, with more time devoted to developing individual or group performances in a very direct, “hands on” way, including learning from role models and listening to one another. There was in all cases a great respect for the music being studied.

Very little equipment was needed to produce staggeringly high results. Rather the emphasis was on time spent and access to highly skilled musicians as teachers. There was a high level of teacher direction, but this did not seem to stifle individual response. In a class situation I wondered whether this was at least in part because the controlled structure created an envelope for individual thought, whereby the children felt secure, and therefore knew when they needn’t attend. In every case, teachers being musical with their pupils always created a positive working atmosphere.
How do we know when we are in the presence of a good/effective instrumental teacher?
Based on the observations made on this trip, a certain cluster of features seemed to emerge:

- Basic setup and posture consistently good
- Intonation above average
- Demonstrable commitment
- Focused, professional sound from earliest stages
- Left hand works as a disciplined unit
- Decent quality instruments
- Good timekeeping
- Technical difficulties approached as a series of increasingly complex exercises
- Element of “training”
- Rehearsals valued as preparation for performance
- Pupils capable of sustained performances, often from memory
- Complete involvement of teacher in pupil’s development, above and beyond paid hours
- Pupils not precious about their own performing ability as they are aware that they are one amongst many on a long path
- Following an established school/method
- Self-sufficiency – making it all happen
- Respect for the musical text

Features that appear to be irrelevant/less important in the majority of observations:

- Ability to work with groups
- Flexibility in approach
- CPD
- Planning
- Clear conceptual framework to lessons
- Awareness of a wide range of repertoire and styles
- Use of own instrument/skills in lesson
- Use of modern technology
- Ability to lead composition/improvisation activities

Implications for the organisation of teaching:

- Vastly time-hungry
- Mixture of small group/individual and large group experience valuable
- Frequent and generally understood assessment
- Shared repertoire and ethos

Other, perhaps more controversial/less consistent features across observations:

- Respect for student
- Pedigree

Interestingly enough, the qualities listed under less important/irrelevant are those to which so many INSET hours in the UK, as well as on training courses including PGCEs for instrumental teachers, are devoted.

Final thoughts:
Classical music education, and specifically string teaching, is in crisis in the UK, if you believe the scaremongers. With our focus on inclusion, and nurturing creativity, it is sometimes difficult to see a place for a form of learning that demands inordinate resources, and dedication on the part of the pupil far above and beyond that which they are required to demonstrate in any other sphere, except competitive sports. No one is denying the value of learning of a musical instrument as a powerful vehicle for personal development and one rightly enshrined by government as a right for our primary school children, but how do we handle our specialists, our future professionals?

Travellers’ tales are notoriously wild, and the ones in this report may seem wilder than some: an ordinary non-selective school where singing is on the daily curriculum, and children sing in world-beating choirs as a matter of right; specialist boarding schools for talented young musicians where even school meals are free; a comprehensive school producing art, much of it created by children whose lives have been blighted by Chernobyl and its aftermath, showing a staggering maturity and beauty of expression; a school where selection at 5/6, more designed to discover inclination than aptitude, entitles children not only to a full education but daily instrumental lessons, resulting in a school string orchestra filled with accomplished players, recently, and poignantly, rehearsing Vaughan-Williams’ Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.

Two of the schools exist in the current EU, the others, particularly those in Ukraine and Belarus in countries struggling with the shadow of the ex-Soviet Union and newly defining themselves in relation to Europe. All are state-funded. Perhaps we have something to learn from our increasingly close neighbours. At very least there is an extremely interesting debate to be had.
Annex One

Notes from the 34th International Conference of the European String Teachers’ Association (“The World of Strings”), August 8th - 13th 2006 in Tallinn, Estonia

Main theme: Relationships between Eastern European and Western European schools of string teaching

Tallinn was a particularly good choice of venue to explore this subject, as links with Moscow and St. Petersburg, with their proud histories in the Eastern European string tradition, were already well-established through the structures of the former Soviet Union, and its geographical proximity to Helsinki provides it with a window on examples of excellent practice more familiar in Western Europe.

Conference host:
The conference was hosted by the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, a thriving conservatoire with a very outward-looking philosophy and which participates in numerous international collaborations, including 60 Erasmus agreements (including one with RNCM).

Highlights:
• The opening concert featured two recipients of the ESTA student of the year award, one from the UK (Jeanine Thorpe, 17) and one from Germany (Hwa-Won Pyun, 24)
• A master class held by Edith Peinemann of the Frankfurt Academy of Music, incoming President of ESTA
• A lecture recital on the work of Igor Bezrodnii of the Moscow Conservatoire and Sibelius Academy, virtuoso and pedagogue
• A large number of concerts given by a large number of very talented young Estonian string players, demonstrating a remarkable level of achievement, particularly considering the country has a population of only 1.5 million
• A concert-lecture on Hindemith’s Solo Sonata No. 1 Op. 25 by Bruno Giuranna, full of insights not into only the work in question, but performance practice in general
• Concerts featuring contemporary music of the Baltic states, including organ and string music and cello duo
• A concert-lecture on the Grieg sonatas for violin and piano given by Irina Bochkova, one of the top teachers at Moscow Conservatoire
• Anja Maja from Helsinki on approaches to teaching young cellists
• Valentina Yakubovskaya from St. Petersburg with some insights into the teaching of 3-year olds
• Dermot Crehan (UK) on creating the music for the film “The Lord of the Rings”

Selected insights:
From the presentation on the work of Igor Bezrodnii, including:
• The main point of a concert is to say something important, to present a complete thought
• The importance of connection with other areas of artistic activity, with composers and other artists
• Need to find the “focal points” of the work i.e. The link between composer and performer, and performer and audience
• Analogy between symphonic forms and film
• The suggestion that demonstration is anathema to artistic development, that there must be no copying, even if the process takes longer. The point is the development of individual artistic vision, Bezrodnii did not even take his violin to the lesson (a feature of much contemporary pedagogical practice in Eastern Europe to this day)
• “The teacher must find the very centre of a student’s talent, the place where the student has something to say.”
• International competitions, whilst good for raising profile and career building, can nevertheless militate against artistic development because of the limited stylistic range expected
• The idea that one can “cautiously take a risk”, for example win a couple of competitions then pause to allow the development of “ethical and aesthetic energy”
• Bizet’s idea of the “talent that not even the best teacher can ruin”
• Need to remember that the violin is primarily a “singing, speaking instrument of the soul” – importance of spiritual element
• Music does not allow a person to become indifferent and rational
• The violin forgives neither insincerity nor lack of clarity
• Only by active interaction between artistic analysis and active imagination will the audience be engaged
• “All music is programmatic”, sometimes hidden, sometimes symbolic, but always there
• A musician needs a talent not only for music but also for seeing the world
• The idea of “collecting explosive matter for creative work” (Stanislavskii)
• The stimulus itself is not important, be it colour, sculpture, architecture. They suddenly play their role in performance, and at that moment it is not important that the audience sees, or the listener recreates, the same image. What is important is that those recalled details release a feature in the performance that otherwise would not have been there
• Bezrodnii was particularly visually motivated, with a well-developed ability to relate faces to musical themes
• The aim is to create “honest” players who can create art of value
• Never forget that the violin is, above all and by its nature and purpose, a singing instrument

From Bruno Giuranna:
• The vital importance of the difference between a theme and a melody, and the danger of evoking completely the wrong effect if you mistake the two

From Valentina Alexandrovna Yakubovskaya:
• The rationale behind teaching 3 year olds is basically humanistic: a child at that age is a mirror of all the potential psychological problems which may deepen later, also posture problems, deviations in development, behaviour and articulate speech
• The violin can act as an exercise machine for development in all these areas e.g. the sensation of fingers going down on the strings sensitises receptors in the brain
• (Acknowledging Suzuki) Communication at this age is in emotions, not in words; therefore the focus should be on the sensual pleasure of holding the violin, the aesthetic appearance of the instrument, which appeals to the child like an attractive toy. Initial joy in both of these will provoke an emotional response to the instrument
• The first lesson (c. 20 mins) is spent admiring and learning to handle this beautiful instrument (remembering that just taking the instrument out of its case is a complex action for a child this age). The child controls the situation throughout since s/he only understands his/her desires i.e. what they want or not. Therefore lessons are an improvisation. Sample activities: “Hello/Goodbye my violin”, caressing the bow with the right hand (a movement which can later be used in bowing)
• Importance of correct physical modelling, using the child’s own body
• Lots of singing, starting on one note, then extending the range using a song about wind
• The problem children have sustaining long notes - lots of work on this, including using the hands, either holding them together or creating a long gesture, again later useful on the instrument
• Importance of not sticking to formal rhythmic structures, but rather allowing natural caesurae, and a breath between each phrase, in order to form the basis of expressive rhythm in music
• Importance of maintaining courtesy in the lesson, correct greetings, smiles etc. as the basis for developing articulation later
• Not allowing parental nerves to intrude, a gentle insistence being maintained
• Standing exercises: “soldier”, “sailor on the deck of a ship at sea”, “violinist”
• Coordination exercises: marching (crossing the midline), flicking fingers, fingers tapping on the thumb, fingers jumping over the thumb (bow hold development)
• Violin not held under the chin to begin with to avoid the reflex whereby child turns its head towards a foreign object
• Influence of relationship between child and parents who are often over-protective, and anxious if the child does not obey
• Need for child to learn to show appreciation, modelled by teacher in always showing encouragement
• Importance of a quiet environment
• Starting early may influence quality of parental involvement in the later stages of development NB parents often the first to give up wanting to wrestle with particular developmental problems
• In no sense designed as an early professionalisation, rather solving developmental problems through the medium of the violin
Annex Two
Collated observations on the Moscow School of violin technique

General:
- The left hand needs to be strong, the right hand soft and gentle, using fingers to guide the bow strokes
- Need to articulate individual fingers, not use the hand as a whole
- Need to look at the violin when playing, not at the teacher for approval
- At the end of a double stop, leave the bow on the note which is melodically significant (with particular reference to Bach)
- There is a tension in Bach between exactitude and freedom
- Need to get rid of unnecessary accents
- Don’t make crescendi to upper positions, particularly on the E string
- Holding the violin high looks more artistic
- Fear nothing – ever!
- You need to understand everything you do on the violin
- Clean your strings with eau de cologne
- Need to get the hands right at the beginning, and teach them to think for themselves
- Hands must always be active and breathing
- (1st grade student) Need to play “without the face (byez litsa). The minute you feel your face you can’t feel your fingers
- Free up for a crescendo, don’t push harder

On scales and arpeggios:
- Use Flesch arpeggio patterns, but generally with a different fingering
- When starting fingered octaves go from 3rd, not 1st position
- All scales go d t, d then up
- Better to keep scales, other technical work and pieces in the same tonality to start with
- Scales slurred in an exact division of the beat
- Diminished 7ths use 1 3x4 fingering rather than 1 3 1 3
- Scales prepared in 3rds, 6ths, octaves, 10ths and fingered octaves
- In scale playing, once you get to the semiquavers there is no time for micro-corrections. The fingers MUST go down accurately
- When playing 10ths, straighten the little finger to avoid stress
- Don’t lift the 3rd finger when placing 2 and 4 in scales in 3rds
- For 6ths, it is better to slide into them, unlike 3rds which are to do with accurate placement
- 2nd grade student Practising 4-octave scales, in 3rds, 6ths, 8ves and 10ths

On quality of sound:
- Everything depends on the quality of sound
- Sound lives where the end of the f holes are
- Piano is forte from a distance
- Richochet is best confined to a very small area of bow
- Trills likewise, to sound bright
- When you reduce the amount of sound, don’t slow the bow down
- Emphasis on a “soft” sound
- There is a big difference between playing piano and playing “without sound” (byez svuka)
- If you work on the tone, the intonation will sort itself out – it comes from the sound

On establishing good RH technique:
- You should practise without vibrato to encourage the full expressive use of the bow
- Don’t always have to use full bows for a forte
- The bowing arm is a whole, you can’t isolate fingers, hand, elbow etc.
- Technical exercises on open strings include crescendo and diminuendo
- Need to play with active fingers, and not with your whole elbow
- 2nd finger in control of bow
- Little finger should be off
- "Without your right hand, you are not a violinist"
- Sound should be an "aaaa" or an "ooo" not an "eee", because with the former two, your whole throat opens. This is to do with how the knuckles are: if you depress them then the sound becomes depressed
- Articulation happens through the first 2 fingers on the bow, with the 3rd and 4th passive
- When playing smooth string crossings, watch the top of your hand for activity in the knuckles
- When performing collé, it is all in the movement of the fingers "allowing" the bow to go to the string
- Martelé should be "broad", using lots of bow
- Your right hand needs to say "I love the violin"
- Learning to come RIGHT in to the heel
- Use a finger stroke on the bow to avoid an ugly bow change at the heel

On establishing good LH technique:
- The hand never puts the finger down, the finger works by itself
- Playing "deep" into the fingers, not on their ends
- Accents in the bow should all be supported by the left hand
- Emphasis on diction - finger first, then bow
- Vibrato (NB still 2nd grade) should be more intense, and tighter (narrower) when playing piano
- Large shifts are aided by the eyes
- 1st to 3rd position is not the same as 3rd to 6th
- You should take your fingers off the string just the same way as you put them on - happily
- You need to think about WHAT you are vibrating (NB 1st grade)
- Reduce the amount of vibrato as the bow does a diminuendo

On musical intention:
- Need to listen through to the end of the note, sustaining both sound and thought throughout all long notes
- A sense of forward motion is always necessary, building exciting crescendi, including carrying musical thought through rests
- Need to hold whole phrases in your head, not think forwards
- Need to make it obvious who you are "throwing the ball" to
- Don't make empty gestures, don't think too much in advance, just listen to the music
- Most important thing is always the clarity, the openness of intention - there is no room for a particular personal intention in the moment, rather your playing should be the product of awareness, and intensive thought