

SAA Leadership Retreat at Asilomar, California May 2005

By Felicity Lipman

Asilomar is a stunningly beautiful venue. These early 20th Century buildings, truthful to the style of the Arts and Crafts movement, were built of the surrounding Monterey pine, cedar and stone. So sensitively crafted throughout, they emanated a harmony and peace, integrity with the surrounding nature. The houses were set amongst the sand dunes bordering the Pacific Ocean; each one had a sitting room with a log fire, the soul of the building, ideal for informal gatherings at night.

Haukur Hannesson, Christine Magasiner and I were invited to share our experiences of the development of Suzuki teacher training in Europe. Haukur gave an amusing and insightful talk, "Keeping the sparkle going", showing us strategies on how we can maintain enthusiastic careers within a balanced life. Christine gave an upbeat illustrated talk, "A View of Suzuki Piano in ESA". I felt honoured to give the address, "Suzuki, the Man". I also gave a practical session on interpretation, how to unlock the spirituality of music making. Together we talked about the "ESA and How It Works", with Haukur leading the session.

This retreat offered a plethora of riches in each hour, so unfortunately, choices had to be made. The SAA has been working exhaustively to set "Descriptors" (Guidelines) to assess those wishing to qualify for teacher training status. Now they are addressing the content of teacher training units (week long training courses) to develop a uniformly high standard of Suzuki teaching throughout USA. Nancy Lokken led a popular session where trainers split into three groups to discuss specific aspects of their training units and then reported back. This was so helpful that many trainers continued informally throughout the Retreat. Trainers were interested to know how we have tackled the same issues in the ESA and noted particular differences in the European system: - that the whole training of each trainee

is in the hands of one director of the course; the comprehensiveness of course content; that so much of the course at every level is practical, enabling trainees to demonstrate the living sound; that every piece is memorised at each level; and that we have exams at each level.

Pat d'Ercole and Gilda Barston facilitated a session where trainers could bring a specific idea or problem to air. I was struck again by the sincere, positive and mutually supportive tone of these sessions. I felt certain that such leaders would find the best solution for the unique conditions of Suzuki in the USA.

For the last four years, Allen Lieb has been running an exciting project in four primary schools in Newark, New Jersey – an economically and socially deprived area. A hundred children took violin classes, starting at 7 years old, with no prior testing. Each one was given a toy to take home and bring back to school each day for two weeks, to teach them responsibility before being given a violin. Their class teacher played them the recording each day. Allan taught the school music teachers and New Jersey Symphony Orchestral players the most basic steps for beginner violinists in the Suzuki method. The latter also received guidance in how to control such a large number of children together. The school music teachers taught the children twice a week and the orchestral players came to teach the teachers and the children twice a month. A TV station gave money for 250 violins. I loved this aspect too, the co-operation of a corporate body, professional musicians, school teachers and private teachers all working together for the success of the project. The entire class was always taught together for 50 minutes. After three years of this, the results were conclusive all round! The children's work in all subjects showed a 25% improvement. The parents reported that the children showed more responsibility at home and had gained in self-esteem. The Principals said parents/carers seemed to show more interest in all aspects of the child's work at school. It's wonderful to have conclusive evidence, with a control, to support all the benefits of Dr Suzuki's philosophy

of education. Allan has now been asked to expand his work to other deprived cities. He is, understandably, wondering how much more he is able to take on.

There were so many sessions with impact to inspire us. An excellent session on facilitating – how to lead people by respecting and harnessing their individual strengths to solve problems, by Jeffrey Cufaude, an “Ideas Architect”; a confirming address by Richard Miller of Olin College of Engineering, Massachusetts, whose very special philosophy is closely aligned to Dr Suzuki’s; Caroline Fraser, a Suzuki piano teacher gave an illustrated talk on the very natural way of teaching theory by using the invaluable aural bank that our Suzuki children have; Barbara Balatero showed heart warming footage of a cello pupil (7 years old) who went through major surgery and despite a whole body plaster cast insisted on playing her cello to help amuse and heal other children as well as herself in the hospital; Doris Preucil, Lorraine Fink and Joanne Martin spoke sincerely and personally of their experiences with Dr Suzuki in the 1960’s and expressed their concern that, in our “development” of the Suzuki Method, we need to take extra care to keep the essence of his teaching, repertoire, Tonalisation, memory training, ear and brain development, supportive parental involvement to keep developing a joy in learning “for the happiness of all children”.

My appreciation and thanks to SAA for their generosity in inviting us to this beautiful coastal retreat and for the opportunity of sharing and learning together with our American colleagues.