

## **The first British Suzuki Institute National Graduation**

by Helen Brunner

In the hallowed surroundings of St. John's Smith Square, the beautiful 18<sup>th</sup> Century church in Westminster ("a magnificent example of the English Baroque") we had our first BSI graduation concert on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005.

Dr Suzuki wanted to change the lives of the Japanese people when he went to test his theories of music education in Matsumoto, soon after World War II. He absolutely believed in the concept of Talent Education and wanted to prove to the rest of the world that if you have nurtured by love, much can be accomplished. To that end, he quickly established the idea of motivating students by graduating them through the violin repertoire. They would submit recordings of performances at five different levels – from *Twinkle* to the *Mozart Violin Concerto*. By 1953 there were 195 Suzuki children bravely entered for the first graduation ceremony in Tokyo – four hours train journey from Matsumoto. They performed the graduation pieces from the top as a group concert, all from memory, with more children added at every level. For Dr Suzuki graduation was a big deal and he always said so.

When I first studied violin in Japan with Dr. Suzuki in 1979, he was already listening to literally thousands of graduation tapes sent to his home from teachers all over Japan. Each morning he would rise at 4.00 am, and spend the next few hours or so listening to the tapes and adding a personal comment for each student. His tender encouragement and insightful exhortations were adjudications highly prized by the home teachers as well as the children. In the 1986 Graduation Ceremony another of Dr Suzuki's dreams was realised: the marathon concert had grown to 14,200 children no less, who performed music together in the famous Tokyo Budo-kan. Violins, violas, cellos, pianos, kotos and flutes were represented that day. Rather like a Japanese Wembley stadium the Budo-kan is a massive performance space. Teachers give an enormous amount of time to marking out the floor,

colour coding the groups, carefully preparing the hall, and the children, for this impressively seamless annual event. Of course the hard work of studying and memorising the chosen pieces and committing the performances to tape has already been done weeks before. Dr Suzuki held firmly to his conviction of the 'no fails' policy. If ever he received a graduation tape which was not quite up to scratch - and it did happen very, very occasionally - he would simply return the tape to the errant teacher (harsh words there I believe) and ask for another improved tape to be sent to him asap.

One of the outstanding memories of my life in Japan took place in March 1983 when the Matsumoto ken-kyusei (teacher trainees) were invited to perform in the Budo-kan graduation ceremony with the advance students in a mass performance of the third movement of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. The 139 players included me. That day I thought I had died and gone to heaven....the excitement, the performance, the build-up, the countless hours of practice, the musical momentum and then the brilliant rehearsal techniques of Professor Hirose, and we were away! Note perfect and impeccably together, we had wings, and I felt that I could fly right inside the spirit of the music itself. I knew I wanted my students back home to share a little bit of that experience and I vowed to put my energy towards it.

Now at last it can begin in the UK, through the BSI and our inspired piano teacher Grant Mead, who has spearheaded the British graduation process and was the mastermind behind our event. Grant comes from Australia, a country which has had the graduation system in place since 1978. In his words: *"Annual graduations have played a significant role in raising the level of Suzuki teaching throughout Australia. The graduation concerts form the highlight of the Suzuki year. Over the last 27 years, tens of thousands of children have participated, firmly establishing the Suzuki Method as a respected and integral part of the Australian musical establishment."*

We know that the BSI Graduation Concert will be the first of many. As a teacher I am convinced that it will have a resounding effect on all our work. I confess I found it really quite scary to make recordings of Gossec gavotte with my somewhat unreliable seven year olds, at the same time being aware of the BSI panel of teachers who would be listening and judging my students. Even with the prospect of the most positive and encouraging adjudication, (from my own friends to boot!) it made me feel properly responsible to do even better next time.

This year we had 136 candidates in violin, cello and piano, from a handful of teachers YOU WERE THE FIRST IN THE UK (and indeed Europe).

Congratulations to you bold pioneers! And I suspect those first edition graduation certificates will quickly become an important part of the BSI archives, so guard them well and don't sell them on eBay too soon. Who knows? If this really takes off, by 2012 in London the BSI graduation might be sharing a stage with the Olympics!