

# **Working with Dr Suzuki: A Talk by Yuriko Watanabe**

**By Mysie Ferguson**

It is easy to become weary when you spend many hours each week teaching. The average teacher has spent many years from a very early age studying for as near perfection as can be achieved. Conservatories train their students to become soloists and then we end up spending most of our lives either on our knees teaching pre-twinklers or trying to inspire little “Johnny” that practice would be a good idea!

Every now and then however something happens to make us reassess and put things back into perspective. Listening to Yuriko Watanabe talking to the trainee teachers during the National Children’s Workshop at the Royal College this Easter was for me one of those occasions. Yuriko who worked as Dr Suzuki’s assistant for many years had been invited as guest teacher at the workshop.

Yuriko spoke little or no English and everything she said was excellently and sensitively translated by Ruth Miura. In many ways however Yuriko didn’t have to speak. Her very manner, facial expression and tone in which she spoke conveyed to us her sincerity and the feeling behind her words.

I understand that Yuriko went to Matsumoto to study with Dr Suzuki in the way that many teachers did at that time, planning to stay for a few months and then go home to teach. Dr Suzuki must have seen in her the special quality of communication that came over to us in London. He took her under his wing and trained her as his assistant. Although she was a gifted musician in her own right and well capable of sustaining a career as a violinist she stayed on for many years working alongside Dr Suzuki and latterly helping him when he became less able.

She shared with us some experiences of working with Dr Suzuki telling of how she saw him change over the years from a very dynamic force...always searching for a new idea. (He researched for 40 – 50 years and never stopped searching)...to the frustration of knowing that his physical health was failing and the apprehension that he would run out of time to pass on his message. Yuriko explained That Dr Suzuki had a belief that each person had their own personal “road” of study through life. The three main elements to guide our journey are: 1) Respect 2) Trust 3) Service to Others.

Dr Suzuki respected people not for who they were or what they had achieved but for their very “life force”. Out of this grew his belief that all babies have the same possibilities. There were no artificial differences created by how long a trainee had studied with him or where they came from. He trusted completely that each teacher would learn as much as they could and then return to their own country to share their knowledge. For this purpose he filled them with as much knowledge as was possible. There was no set time for a trainee to

study at Matsumoto. Dr Suzuki would decide when they were ready to graduate.

Dr Suzuki encouraged them to clear away anything that made them feel embarrassed or conceited to make way for what they could do for others and for the world. He came over as being a very humble man who, although he was a very important man in the school, seemed unaware of that and was prepared to turn his hand to anything no matter how menial if it was what was most needed at the time. Yuriko told us how he believed that we should stay very aware of others needs. He is often quoted as saying "Where love is deep much can be accomplished" Yuriko says that he always implied that this went on to say "So we should not be neglectful." His advice to students was to do the most important thing for the moment.

Education is not limited to music. Suzuki's aim was to create human beings with high qualities. When asked what he disliked most his reply without hesitation was "Out of tune music" and when asked what his dream was he answered "A world without war."

Yuriko went on to talk about some of the more technical aspects of teaching. She explained how the term "Tonalisation" grew out of the term "Vocalisation" used by singers. Trainees were encouraged to distinguish between the beginning of tone and the release of sound. Dr Suzuki advised the use of open string notes and harmonics to explore the purity of sound and to search for their best tone before playing. There was a lovely image of the elastic power at the tip of the bow drawing the sound out like taking power from an electric field. Yuriko through demonstration showed us that no matter whether playing at an elementary or advanced level, the preparation must be the same. The rule must be Finger / Bow / Start.

In talking of Casals Tonalisation children were encouraged to experiment with 1) Changing bow speed 2) The amount of weight into the string 3) Explore different points of contact. Students were asked to play with their whole body and spirit and the importance of breathing was explained. The invaluable advice: "Go ahead and be embarrassed" was also one of Suzuki's favourite sayings. He would encourage pupils to communicate..."Reflect on what you have...Everything that you have, give...open your heart and communicate". Teachers were encouraged to be open to change and to keep experimenting. They were told that " Music is not isolated from what you are...as you change your tone will transform."

It is easy to think after working in Suzuki circles for some years that you have "heard it all before". Well I certainly hadn't heard it all before but even if I had, the sincere and genuine way in which Yuriko talked was enough to re-inspire me for many years. I felt very glad that the trainees on the course coming from all over the UK had the opportunity to hear this talk as part of their introduction to the Suzuki world...What better way to start?