

Edward Kreitman

Interview by Minette Joyce

Ed Kreitman's teaching is mesmerising. I have had the pleasure of observing him teach several times at Bryanston and other Suzuki workshops in the UK and recently had the chance to pin him down for a chat about his work, his book and his plans for the future.

Ed was a clarinet major at Western Illinois University in Macomb and fully intended to become a high school band director. Doris Preucil, one of the American pioneers of Suzuki, arrived there to start a Suzuki pedagogy programme at University level and Ed happened to be in her violin methods class. She introduced him to the violin using the Suzuki method and about midway through that semester she brought her studio of violin students to play a concert. This group included William Preucil (now concertmaster of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra) who was 11 years old.

"I remember he played Bach Chaconne – and it was completely life changing for me. I had never heard anything like that and I hate to say this, but they played better than any of the violin majors at University level. I thought, this is the cutting edge of music education so I immediately went to her and said I want to work on this. She was a very visionary person and so I joined the class with the intention of learning about the method with a view to adapting it for the clarinet. But then I took up the violin and I realised that if I was going to teach the Suzuki method I would switch to the violin".

Ed learned about pedagogy from Doris, observed her teaching and taught under her supervision for the next four years. A year later Roland and Almita Vamos came to Ohio and Ed's life changed again.

"I developed this incredible personal relationship with them and I really considered them to be like my musical parents. I spent so much time in their home and I had the opportunity to watch Almita's lessons and to really see how she built technique and how she approached teaching the instruments. One of the best things about it was that in the very beginning I saw the highest standard of teaching and so that was my concept of Suzuki teaching."

However, arriving in Chicago to set up his teaching practice, Ed found himself a little disheartened by what he saw.

"I had no idea that there were Suzuki students who didn't have beautiful posture and didn't play really well and in tune because that's all I had ever seen; the touring group from Japan, Doris' studio – my view of Suzuki was so narrow. I wanted to tell people that it wasn't quite right! But I just stayed away from it all because I didn't want to have to try and convince or convert anybody. I just knew what I knew and I just wanted to do my own thing."

Ed went on to start up the Western Springs School of Talent Education in Illinois which today is one of the most respected Suzuki teacher training

colleges in the USA. The WSSTE has recently expanded and now has a sister school, the Naperville Suzuki School.

“Last April, our school celebrated 25 years and we commemorated this by giving a concert at Orchestra Hall in Chicago, inviting all of the alumni of the school to come back. It was just so great to see, many of them are violinists and many are not and some came back and played and some came back and did not play, but they just wanted to be at the event and it was just incredible to have the whole school and all the faculty and all of our support people. Helen Brunner came over from the UK and that helped to make it a very special occasion. It was an amazing concert!”

Ed is the author of “Teaching from the Balance Point” which is a widely respected guide for parents and teachers alike. Many teacher trainers also recommend the book to their trainees. He was inspired to write the book after many comments that his way of thinking about and teaching the violin were very organised and clearly broken down.

“I’ve observed a lot of what I thought were wonderful lessons but the student totally didn’t get it because it was explained in a way that wasn’t clear, so I guess that’s always been a part of my teaching that has been successful; breaking things down and explaining, particularly the technique of the instrument in a way that the students and the parents understand. So the initial intention of the book was as a guide for the parents and that’s the reason that it is written in that style, but as we have discussed it has become much more of a text for teachers which is great – I’m thrilled about that. The really interesting thing is that every single thing in the book is what I tell parents, there are no secrets and I think in order for the teaching to be really successful, the parents need to have that much information, otherwise you’re doing things in the lesson and the parents are sort of in the dark. When I started doing teacher training, people asked me if that was different or difficult and I just said no – it’s exactly the same – every time I start a new student, I’m training a new teacher – I’m training this parent to be the teacher of their child at home”.

Ed tells me that he has two other books in him waiting to be written – he even has titles – but I think we’ll have to keep that as an exclusive for a later edition of Ability! The next book will definitely touch on the subject of energy. This has been inspired by Ed’s work over the last few years with a woman called Barbara Brennan, with whom he has been studying energy healing. This is something which very much comes across in Ed’s teaching and seems to have his pupils almost spellbound.

“My teacher training has really taken on a different level and so has my understanding of what’s going on energetically between the parent and child, and the child and teacher and how to use that to the greatest advantage and work with the natural flow of energy. One of the of the reasons I wanted to go to the Brennan school was because I knew that something energetically was happening between me and my students in the lessons, but I didn’t know what it was, didn’t have a name for it. Now I’ve learnt how to control it, how to

regulate it, how to use it, I've become very skilled at it. It's a very powerful teaching tool and it really helps the teacher to learn how to regulate their own energy field. It enables you to create a place that's very connected to the earth, very grounded and very centred and children are incredibly attracted and drawn to that energy. And I really think that is what Suzuki did as well. I recognise now when I look back on the time I worked with him that he had an amazing energy”.

Moving on to the future, next year will see the introduction of the pilot program of the new teacher training model which Ed has designed with permission from the SAA. It will be piloted at the WSSTE with a starting class in autumn 2008 and if it proves popular and successful, will be available in other teacher training venues across the USA. Currently in America there are three different ways to undertake teacher training; as part of a University Masters Degree, Apprenticeship training or, by far the most popular format, the intensive summer institutes.

“I think the summer institutes work really well as an introduction or review. But what we are creating is a model where you can come from anywhere in the country for a two year program, much more similar to what you do here. There will be 10 weeks of on site training and observation and written work will be done during the course. So this is something really new and very different for us. What we are also excited about in terms of curriculum is that in addition to Suzuki pedagogy and philosophy, we are also including things like child development and family psychology. It's been a big task, but something tells me that this is going to be my contribution – creating this course. We are one of the biggest Suzuki centres so we do a lot of training already and I have a really great faculty on board which I am very excited about”.

It has controversially been said that “The best Suzuki teaching in the world happens in America and the worst Suzuki teaching in the world happens in America” and there are certainly differences between the attitude towards the Suzuki method in Europe and the USA.

“I think one of the big differences is that Suzuki is pretty well known to the general population in America. The standard at the top end is just unbelievable and just continues to go up and up. Because of that top end producing what it has for the last 25 years, most of the students that are entering conservatories and university music majors are from Suzuki training, so the respect for the method in the collegiate and traditional community is really profound. We have conservatory professors contacting our school to see who we have graduating. At the other end of the scale, Suzuki's belief was that each individual would seek the best for himself and his students and historically that's why we have this very open policy, but we have many teachers who do not take the training and just use Suzuki materials off the shelf and they produce students who are not shining examples of what the Suzuki method can achieve. Having said that, as the higher end is more and more visible and as more teachers are achieving that standard, I believe the overall standard has gone up.”

And with that concluding a very enjoyable interview, Ed signed my copy of Teaching from the Balance Point and we both went back to work – he to teach and I to unscramble my copious notes!

Edward Kreitman is the founder and Director of the Western Springs School of Talent Education in Illinois. He received his undergraduate degree from Western Illinois University where he studied with Doris Preucil and Almita Vamos. In 1986, he studied at the Talent Education Summer School with Dr Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan. He has served the Suzuki Association of the Americas in many capacities including a member of the Board of Directors, Violin Committee, and Coordinator for several Suzuki Method Teachers Conferences. Presently he is a member of the SAA teacher development team.