

Suzuki Double Bass in Europe for the first time

Written by Peter Strøm Skriver (DK)

Many years have passed since Shinichi Suzuki's student days in Europe. First the violin followed by the cello and finally by the viola, have been taught on the continent for many years, using the Suzuki Method, but not the double bass! What is a string orchestra without a bass? Picture it! Suzuki orchestras need basses! To make a long story short, in 2003 I discovered the new Suzuki Bass Method with that same fantastic progression as the upper string methods and all in the spirit of Suzuki and his philosophy.

In 2007 I went to the United States to train in the Suzuki Double Bass Method with Virginia Dixon. I was in Chicago and Stevens Point, Wisconsin for one month and it was fantastic!! Then once at home again in Denmark I thought that Europe also should have Suzuki double bass teachers. I contacted the President of European Suzuki Association, Haukur F. Hannesson and he was already very interested. After a bundle of e-mails here and there as well as some meetings, Virginia Dixon from Chicago was chosen to be the first Teacher Trainer. Here in Europe we only have long term courses and then normally with 5 – 6 weekends over a period of a year or more. For the double bass course, we chose a more intensive three times with four days each followed by an exam to achieve level 1. This includes fundamental pre-book skills, the philosophy of the method and the tricks of teaching a young student to play, as well as the Book 1 repertoire.

The Danish Suzuki Association, with Marianne Rygner, has arranged the course together with the European Suzuki Association Secretary, Birte Kelly. It was planned to be at my workplace, the Music School of Albertslund, a suburb of Copenhagen about 20 kilometers from the city center.

A colleague once asked me: "What do you do with a 5-year-old bassist? Do you start with reading or playing melodies – or what? They only can concentrate for about a minute, and then their eyes and thoughts are out of the window....." That question was answered during the first four days of the course. In more detail: We were doing what we call Pre-Twinkle things – fun and games all designed to build basic skills. Although his question was answered, we now still must integrate it in our own home classes and lessons.

November 1 was a cold Scandinavian day when Virginia Dixon landed in Denmark and emerged from customs with a big smile ready to go.

The following morning we learned how to set the height of the endpin, how to roll the double bass up and put it down, all in a fun way but with the goal of preparing for Book 8! And how do you pick up the bass with the bow in your hand? Is it possible to do it when you are six years old? Yes! And how about ski jumps on the bass? Standing with our new very good friend (many of my students give their bass a name) on our shoulders we take a ski jump from the nut, up the fingerboard toward the floor, and out into the air ... Oh this is great! Or we make rainy weather sounds on the top by tapping all of our small fingers to feel the body of our new-found friend and

finish by giving it a hug. How do we stand with this instrument? You see, it is very important to do this in the right way from the start. I often say that our body is the first instrument, and our double bass the second. We must explore how to work well together without disturbing either instrument! From here on many students will have to deal with their basses for many years, months, weeks, and hours of playing. In our Suzuki training class Virginia showed us many things in many different ways for students to reach that goal! She made a game called “in the stomach” where the teacher gently pushes on the bass so the student can feel the back edge of the instrument inside of his pelvic bone to find the right position. Then down again with the instrument on the floor!! “.....Oh no!! We have to pick the double bass up again” and in that way the games continue and the student senses how fun it is to play the bass! As a great educator, John Holt, once said, when he saw smiling faces in a classroom, he knew that learning was in the air!*1 That is great, but now our job is to translate this idea to the bass, and Virginia has a lot of good things hidden in her bag, many more than I already have mentioned.

On the second day Virginia taught some of my students between the ages of five and eight, and they had great fun. I can tell because afterwards they confessed that they wanted more games. Okay, here I go! For instance I already invented “Plastic Bag Bow Game”, where plastic bags are placed all over my studio and then the students have to put all the “dangerous” bags in the big bag with their bows without touching the bags with their hands. It was a really big hit.

On the third day, four of my older students had a master class and a group class. They played from Books 2 and 3 and learned all about the relationship between themselves (the first instrument) and their basses (the second instrument).

Each day Virginia gave two of us, the trainees, hour-long lessons. Did the rest of us find the wait boring? No, of course not! We talked about our basses, our students and played quartets! Nicoline de Waal- Asberg from Holland had brought some which we read along with mine, and ideas sailed through the air. This time together gave us the wonderful opportunity to exchange ideas with our new-found European friends. We were nine participants all together from Italy, France, Switzerland, Holland, Britain, Iceland and Denmark. Because many questions came from watching my students being taught, we all gained from discussions between Virginia and the course participants.

.After the four intense days we returned home with many new ideas in our heads and a pile of notes in our books to try on our own students. Now we all look forward to see each other again and working on the second installment of our course: Playing the pieces in Book 1 and discovering the line of pedagogy that weaves the book together.

*1 from an article by Barbara Schneiderman in American Suzuki Association magazine Vol 35, no. 4.