

Questions for Lenneke Willems

By Fredrik Ström, ESTA Sweden

About Mini Violin

- When and why did you decide to make Mini Violin?

It was in the year 2000 that I decided to make Mini Violin in order to meet the demands of my ever younger pupils. Of the twelve violin teachers working at my music school, the two Suzuki teachers would invariably get the youngest students, while in my opinion, clients should always be offered the choice of either Suzuki or a more classical way of teaching. Unfortunately, the latter simply did not yet exist for this particular age group. All existing method books went too fast and note images were too small.

- Is the book inspired by other materials in the same vein, or perhaps by a lack of similar materials?

In the first few years I made the lessons myself and tested them with my own classes. My goal: there shouldn't be any difference in teaching a single student or a group of six. After one year, the quality of playing should be the same in both cases. To achieve this: In the first year, especially with young kids, a thorough way of learning the posture, stance and position is essential. The basics of violin learning are very important and should be done with great care!

My book is inspired solely by Qui van Woerdekom's method of violin teaching. I think his exercises are essential in getting off to a good start.

- What is the difference between your way of teaching groups and the way of other existing methods such as the Suzuki method?

Suzuki's method has a song as starting point. The goal is learning the song. My method works on all occurring elements one encounters while studying this instrument.

There are a lot of left hand and right hand exercises that return in every lesson, of course in a playful way. Clapping exercises and plucking songs occur frequently. Bowing exercises on open strings return regularly.

I also believe singing is very important during the first year. The singing part of the lesson allows children to express their musical feelings.

Learning notes is no problem. First, the children just clap the notes. Later on, they pluck the notes. You see, a child's visual capabilities and auditory receptivity are equally strong. And they like it! They are proud to have a book with notes like grown-ups. Each lesson has a five minute moment to play (in the sense of a game) with notes.

- How does the "preliminary talk" before the course work more specifically? How long is it and how do you go about getting the information you need about the child? How

often does it happen that a child starts and it later turns out that it is not actually ready? Are there any problems with parents when you tell them that their child is not ready to start yet?

I invite the parents and child over for a talk. A small violin is on my table. From the moment they enter the room I watch the child. How eager is he/she to hold the violin. While I talk alternately with the parents and the child, I assess the willingness of the child.

Will he try to keep it on his shoulder, does he want to use the bow? Why does he want to play violin? All kind of questions and try-outs will give me the answer.

I don't test musicality, only willingness.

Of course, there are kids who will quit after a few lessons or a few months for different reasons. Often the parents are the problem, because they neglect to rehearse at home frequently. Another reason can be that the child just doesn't enjoy it anymore, which often has to do with the previous reason. All in all, one could say that even older children or adults can't foresee if an instrument will meet their expectations, so why should kiddies?

Whenever I tell parents their child is not ready to start, they'll usually agree with me. They were, after all, present at the first acquaintance to witness their child's lack of enthusiasm or total disinterest. Of course, they will be disappointed, but they will accept it.

- Have you previously had parents present doing group teaching and then made the decision that it is better to leave them out, or have you always done it that way?

I've always done it that way. At the music school, in other teachers' violin classes (including the Suzuki classes), parents would also be present. I never liked that. Why? Because for instance, whenever the teacher asked a question, children would be turning their heads looking for an answer from their parent. They were not free in reaction. Also, parents would intervene when their child wasn't behaving, things like that. I need more rest in my class in order to get better concentration. More importantly, I want intimacy. I want them focused on me (excitement, what are we going to do?!) and their mates. I like to create an atmosphere of friendship and pleasure.

- Not having their parents present during group lessons, do the children remember more complicated things like bow and violin hold well enough to be able to do them correctly at home?

This was indeed a point of considering when I started the method. Suzuki teachers expect parents to take all sorts of notes during class. I wanted it the other way round. When children come home, they take pride in showing their parent what they have learned. For instance, a parent doesn't know the 'Caterpillar' and asks, "Wow, what is that?". The child will happily show the exercise. Children remember more than you think and if they don't, no problem, we'll do it again next lesson.

The bow and violin hold are complicated, but the abundance of exercises in Mini Violin will enable each child to master them (providing they practice at home of course!) At the end of the lesson, when parents enter the classroom, I take a moment to give them specific instructions.

- Do you teach the parents any basics to be able to help their children at home?

No, I do not, but should they ask for more instructions, sure, I'll provide them. I will however keep reminding them to practice every day. If I see this doesn't happen, I'll tell them it won't work and the child can't keep up. They know I am strict and they appreciate that.

- What is the difference between having a parent present during an individual lesson as opposed to a group lesson?

When the child is 4, 5 or 6 and there are no other children in the lesson, I think it's better to have the parent present. The lessons will be different, but it's the best alternative.

- Do all the parents take sufficient time with their children at home to help them with their homework lesson?

No, unfortunately not, but as I said earlier, I'll be frank to them about it. Sometimes it works and they make progress, but sometimes a child quits because of a lack of practice. I tell the parents the best time to practice is before dinner. After dinner they are too tired. Another solution is to practice while the parent is cooking. If there is enough room in the kitchen, this can be very enjoyable. The parent will have time enough to read the parent page and watch the progress at the same time.

- At the end of the book, there is quite a lot of practice time each day. Do the children generally practice 20–30 minutes a day at this point?

At the bottom of the parent page I prescribe more time than I think they'll do. When I write 20 minutes, 10 minutes is probably what they'll do. But of course no need to tell them this.

- Do the children in your groups also have individual lessons?

For a duration of two years, while following the Mini Violin classes, there will be no individual lessons. After that, they will be 7 or 8 years old and it is time to switch over to individual lessons.

- For how long will your pupils be playing in groups? When do they, in general, need individual lessons? For how many years do they normally study with you?

The Mini Violin lessons are made for the average music school student.

If a child is talented, I may recommend individual lessons after one year, in agreement with the parents.

Students with no intentions of becoming professional violinists may stay with me for a long time. But at the age of around 18, when they're off to college or something like that, they usually leave me.

- Are there more girls than boys in your groups? If so, is it because boys mature later, because fewer boys are interested or because of some other reason?

Yes, there are more girls. But the boys I do have are really interested, do very well and don't mind sitting in a class with girls.

- One hour is quite a long time for small children. How is it possible to keep them concentrated and motivated during that time?

I always deal with new and difficult things in the first half hour of the lesson, when concentration is at its best. Components like doing something with the wand, the bow hold, the violin hold, exercises for the left hand, plucking or clapping rhythms, reading notes, a bowing exercise, learning a new song or playing old songs are divided into parts of circa 5 minutes each. Halfway or near the end of the lesson there is time to relax. Singing the songs with piano accompaniment is a joyous moment. The children will gather around me at the piano. I encourage the children to sing out loud. At the first lesson, they'll be very shy, but once I start singing, they'll enjoy it and join in. Generally, the children will sing and clap with abandon. We do sometimes stop to have a chat or a pee pause.

- If one or a few children start wandering off, joking around or “misbehaving” for whatever reason, how do you handle that?

This is the method I always follow: Sit down on the floor in a very small circle. In this way, you can reach the child while he sits next to his mates. It is very intimate. Then you tell the group it's nice to have fun and joke and that you like to do that as well. But when you ask them to do something (difficult), they should always pay attention. Ask them if they can agree on that. Then reach out your hand and say ‘agreed?’ and they will reach out and shake hands. Sometimes you may have to repeat this in other lessons, but most of the time it stops.

- If a group for some reason is not working well, what do you do? Or if a pupil is not sufficiently interested and not practising enough at home?

This is a problem which is easier to solve at the music school where switches can be made among classes to ensure an equal pace. With private lessons this is not possible, so whenever a pupil isn't sufficiently interested or isn't practising enough, I will talk to the parents. When after, for instance two months, there is still no improvement, I advise the parents to look for another activity for the child.

In the Strad, I once read these words from a teacher: if you don't want to practice, don't practice (in other words, give up the violin and find something else to do.).

- Did you have the magic wand ordered especially for you, or is it available somewhere in its current form?

I buy them at a party shop.

- Where do the pupils get their instruments? Do they buy them or rent them?

They can rent one from the violin shop. I always advise to rent them.

- What do you use in terms of chin and shoulder rests?

The little ones have a sponge and a common chin rest.
Some children have a Wittner chin rest.

Older children mostly have a Wolf or Kun shoulder rest.

- Are the children involved in the tuning process?

I do it the way Paul Rolland recommends. Rolland let his pupils shoulder their violin while he adjusted the fine-tuners, thus involving them in the tuning process. However, sometimes the fine-tuners turn heavily in which case I 'd rather just take the violin and tune it myself.

- Are the melodies the children play and the “sing only” songs all your own compositions?

The ‘sing only’ songs are Dutch traditional children’s songs. The other melodies are mine.

- Do you sometimes have a “break” in the lesson where you do something completely different, like a more physical exercise or a game?

We do a dance to shake arms and legs which is a lot of fun. Or sometimes I play them something from a CD. A very fast piece of Roby Lakatos is a favourite or a beautifully played piece from another top violinist. But always very brief.

- What main problems deserve special attention when working with children as young as this?

It’s all about the parents. If they don’t do their job and practice with their child daily, the lessons will fail. You can’t lay the blame on these young children. I think that is the main problem.

- Does using Mini Violin demand a similar setup to yours? Say a teacher only has access to 40 minutes of lesson time, with ten or more pupils, would it still work? In a lot of schools, at least in Sweden, testing pupils before starting is a highly controversial issue, so a teacher also runs the risk of having several pupils not ready in the groups.

There is always a risk. One can't know everything beforehand. You'll have to come to some sort of agreement with the music school. Finding the right solution will benefit both school **and** the student.

Testing children’s eagerness makes more sense than testing musicality.

I think it ridiculous to teach 10 or more kids ages 5 in 40 minutes. This age group needs a lot of help during lessons. When working at the music school, I had a class with 10 children between 7 and 10 years old, but at that age they are more self-sufficient.

Mini Violin should be taught to no more than 6 children in 45/50 minutes.

60 minutes is comfortable, with time for relaxation.

- Are piano accompaniments/chords for the songs the children play available or should the teachers make those up themselves?

Most teachers are able to play a few chords on piano, I think. But I am working on piano accompaniments.

- Have you had any thoughts about including a CD to use as help when practicing?

No, I think the method as it is will do. Playing with CD works better for older children.

- What advice would you give Swedish string teachers who like to use the material even though it is not in Swedish?

Children at age 5 cannot read the text, so that is no problem. For them, the pictures and notes are important. And when parents are able to read English, there is no problem either. But one thing is essential: you'll need a songwriter to translate the songs into Swedish. Either from English to Swedish or from Dutch to Swedish. These songs come back in part two; in part one they are only sung and in part two they are played. So the children need to know them. On top of that, rhythms of the songs are used for bowing exercises.

You could copy the translated texts of the songs for the teacher.

- What is it like to publish your own material? What are the advantages/disadvantages?

In Holland, many teachers use my method. On my Dutch website, www.miniviool.nl, there is a page with all the places where teachers are working with Mini Violin.

I know all the teachers, which is nice. They mail me for advice or tell me about their progress in classes or with individual students.

The Dutch edition differs from the English version in that it is a binder notebook with loose pages in transparent sleeves. Each week, the children receive a new page to put in their notebook. This system keeps them curious and excited. The parents buy the whole notebook at the start, but the teacher keeps the pages in a box. This is an important feature of Mini Violin, but unfortunately, the notebook was much too heavy for shipping, so I had to change the concept.

- When will Mini Violin volume two in English be available? Is it structured in the same way as volume one? Will there be a volume three?

Mini Violin Volume two will be available around march 2014 and is structured in the same way as Volume one.

After finishing Volume two, I continue with 'Play the Violin' part 1 from 'De Haske'.

The first half of this book is full of nice pieces to play and the children can consolidate their level with this new material. Also, the print images of the notes are smaller, so they can get used to that. The book comes with two CD's and it's a good time to start with that. Most of the students move swiftly through the first half of the book, which is a great stimulus. This works really well, so I have no intentions of making a Mini Violin Volume Three.

- Are any retailers selling your books or is the only way to get them from your website?

Not yet, maybe later. Until then, the website is the way to go.