

The left hand

Kato Havas New Approach to the left hand is indeed quite unique.

She was convinced of the importance for violinists and indeed all string players to become more and more "left-handed" and frequently exclaimed "the music is in the left hand!" to her students.

In the Khana Newsletter Vol28 number 2, Kato Havas put it in this way-

"The very foundation of the New Approach: the rhythmic pulse with the inner song and the dancing, swinging intervals in the left hand".

So why is this over emphasizing of the left hand, you may ask, when surely the right arm has tremendous importance in tone production, phrasing, articulation and musical expression?

While this of course is very true, I think there is one thing we all would tend to agree upon, something has to lead!

"The right arm goes this way, the left hand that way and I am in the middle trying to survive", was Kato's humorous description of a worst-case scenario during performance on stage she had witnessed frequently.

Science confirms, that the human brain is simply not designed to multi task but can only really focus on "one thing" at a time.

Kato Havas was very aware of this and set out to organize violin playing in such a way that the "one thing" that should lead is the music, or the inner song and the rhythmic pulse directed very strongly to the left hand.

Now in order to do this, it is necessary to really know your right arm movements, so it becomes self propelled in a sense, and can respond perfectly and easily respond to the lead of the left hand.

Roberto Moro explained very well in his article the feeling of "no bow" and how to establish a free, balanced and somewhat "floating" bow arm full of energy, and not pressure.

It is very advisable to focus on where the movement of the bow stroke initiates, that is the shoulder hinge and elbow hinge, and any finger and wrist movement should only be a follow through.

This does of course require great training.

I always do a great deal of open string work with my students, also with very advanced players, and in my experience, it really pays off.

So, this very focused simplification of the right arm movement enables the right arm to "take care of itself" and then and only then is the left hand free to lead.

Another thing which is essential for the left hand to experience freedom, is a natural positioning of the violin, or rather a feeling of "no violin".

I have traced many a problem seemingly in the left hand to an unbalanced and rigid violin hold.

Everything starts with a feeling of balance and fluidity in the body and the weightless cradle sensation of the left arm where the instrument can find its place naturally.

Having established this, we can now focus entirely on the left hand and its dancing swinging intervals.

A great left-hand technique as we all know consists of good intonation, articulation, vibrato, perfect shifting etc. but alas we are always talking of tone production.

Kato as I mentioned before writes about dancing and swinging intervals, and hopefully as I go along, we will see how this simple phrase says it all.

We tend to think in single notes and give our all to make each note beautiful and of course each finger perfectly in tune but- where is the music, where is the enjoyment let alone the ease?

I so far haven't met anyone who wouldn't I like a soft but powerful hand, an elastic and musical hand.

You may have noticed I am talking of the hand, not fingers because the finger movement initiates in the base joints, or if you like in the back of the hand.

Focusing on these base joints counteracts excessive finger pressure and is necessary to create freedom and elasticity between the webs, the kind of freedom that will in turn make it possible to play intervals and express the drama of these intervals, rather than playing single notes.

But let's have a look at the positioning of the left hand itself.

The traditional violin school teaches the wrist to be in a straight line with the arm, and Kato in her first book "A New Approach to violin playing" which is full of revolutionary and wonderful concepts still goes along with all this.

I think a truly gifted teacher is always learning and by the time she wrote her book "stage fright" her concept of the left-hand position had matured and was not always met with great emphasis by the very traditional violin world in the beginning.

Kato had started to question, what would my wrist do naturally if I wasn't playing the violin, of course always in search of those singing swinging intervals and a beautiful singing tone she admired so much in Fritz Kreisler.

Of course, the Gypsies in her native Hungary where she was a child prodigy left a deep impression on her as well.

According to traditional schools these Gypsies defiantly had the "wrong" left hand position but nevertheless played with great technical ease, compelling singing tone and certainly were free of any kind of tension.

Could it be that part of their ability to play with such wonderful ease and throbbing tone is precisely BECAUSE of this "wrong" left hand position and not DESPITE of it?

Now if we lift our left arm as if we were going to play and then allow the wrist to fall were it would like to fall naturally, we will notice the wrist curving slightly inwards in the first position, creating what Kato called the "giving hand."

This has a double meaning, indicating not only bending or giving with the wrist but giving the music to the audience.

Returning to the dancing swinging intervals this relaxed wrist makes it possible for the fingers to approach the string in a horizontal swinging way rather than hitting the string from on top with a vertical finger action.

This horizontal sliding (it's good to practice sliding and connecting the notes, which of course when playing should become inaudible), makes it possible to form intervals rather than single notes.

After all the music is always between the notes, made possible by this constant sensitive search with the fingertip placed in a lateral position.

Thereby simultaneously the overtones are enhanced, intonation becomes very accurate and a natural vibrato can develop.

The hit or miss approach is replaced by a constant sensitive search, an elastic and fluid hand enabling the string to vibrate freely.

The finger pressure is minimized and a feeling of playing with the whole hand is born, the whole hand including the thumb that no longer has to serve as a counter pressure, but rather a counter balance and is free to move.

This mobile thumb becomes especially important when playing the fourth finger and allowing the thumb to move forward slightly eliminates a stretch to reach the fourth finger.

This is really a very important balance to develop, and certainly changed many violinist's life for the better, including mine.

Again, there are many specific exercises to work on all but all this which would be too expansive to put in an article.

It would take a whole book or a series of lessons, but nevertheless I hope to outline the most important aspects here.

Perlman said „when it feels good, you know you've got it" and this explains very well the nature of this kind of work.

So rather than our practicing to become better it's important to exchange this to practicing to feel better, and this feeling better in my experience goes a long long way in the training and nurturing of

a fully fledged musician, able to transmit the music and of course able to play free of any tension or pain.

I would like to finish with my favorite quote from Kato "There is no such thing as I can't do it, or I have learned it.

So, working with Kato Havas New Approach whether you are teaching, practicing or performing becomes a never ending, exiting road of discovery.