

**CT:** Kato Havas, welcome to *Beyond Stage Fright*. As a violinist and teacher, you've developed what you call 'A New Approach to Violin Playing' which is an effortless and natural way to play the violin to release tension and anxiety. You then discovered that this physically free approach helped violinists release emotional and mental tensions as well and had a big impact on alleviating stage fright. You've written a number of books, including one of the first for musicians on stage fright, first published around 40 years ago. At the age of 95, you're still teaching. You started off as a child prodigy in Hungary, playing in front of musicians such as Kodaly, Dohnanyi and Bartok, and you gave your debut recital at 18 in Carnegie Hall, New York. What did you discover from your own experiences of stage fright in those early years?

**KH:** Well, that's a good question because when I was very young I had no stage fright at all. I was seven when I gave my first solo concert. I was told I had to go on no matter what happened and that I must imagine the people as cabbages. And when I came out I didn't understand why I must think of them as cabbages, I wanted to play for them. I loved them, I wanted to show off. And lo and behold the lights did go out, and I was told to go on no matter what happened, and I heard the pianist say in Hungarian "My God, my God!" But I finished, and I loved the applause, I basked in it.

I began to have stage fright when I entered the holy of halls, the Royal Academy in Budapest and I was the youngest, and I had to be good. Until then, I just loved it, I didn't have to be good. And I was good, and at 18, as you said, I played at Carnegie Hall. But I thought, this is no way to live and so I had sense enough, and got married, had children and withdrew from the professional world. And that's when I began to think - because with children I didn't play, I was very happy to be a mother and be normal - then it occurred to me, why did the Hungarian gypsies, in my day, look so happy and play like angels. There was a village where I spent my summers. Chiko, the leader of a gypsy band and I made great friends. And I had to practise of course, and in the little summer house, I practised in my bathing costume and I saw his dark face in the bushes listening to me. I pretended I didn't see him and picked up my violin and played Paganini. In the evening, we had supper in the little inn where he played and he noticed me, and he played like an angel. I would have given 10 years of my life for his freedom, for his heart in it, his joy. I still remember his lovely smiling face.

Then when I had this lull in my playing, I thought what does Chiko look like and I realised certain things. You see we violinists, the stage fright starts because of the unnatural movements we have to go through. We pick up the violin and have an enormous optical illusion. The innocent lovely looking instrument lying there, becomes a monster with a long black fingerboard and we have to turn the fingers to the left to be able to put the fingers down. We have to hold the violin, it might fall down. It becomes a monster, and then we have to hold the bow. I was lucky, I started as a young child, I didn't have these problems, I just loved it. Then I developed the preventive exercises. I realised that if you were very stiff in your body and unnatural, you can't make music, and we all really know it. People have enormous technique, and play well, but they have no music in them. The composer guides and we have the notes and not the magic of music. And so I developed the idea that the music is (???) because once I was happy I didn't rest until I was happy again. My children also grew up and I was free. I realised that the fingers move from the hand not from the tips. I was told this by a man called David Mendusa who was a conductor and became

friends with me. And it was like heaven opening up, and I realised that's where the music is, the intervals, the drama of the intervals.....And we realised that there are only three intervals in the back of the hand and it's the space that counts and not the movements. Anyway, I could go on and on for hours. I developed exercises and that's how the New Approach was born and what I am teaching now. And also when you are free physically, that's just the beginning, that's when the real work starts. Am I answering all your questions?

CT: Absolutely

KH: Shall I go on?

CT: Carry on please!

KH: I realised that people are so anxious playing well, that they forget the music. They are so anxious not to forget things, not to make a mistake. So my training starts with music, singing and the rhythmic pulse. And when I say rhythmic pulse, I don't mean the beat, I mean the pulse. Each pulse leads into the next one, and then the next one and each composer has his own rhythm, each poet has his own words. You have to sing it the way you hear it. So I train the ears first, the era when it was written. I like my pupils to imagine a composer's life: did he like chocolate cakes? Was he married? Who was he? Not how many sonatas he wrote and this or that. Our job is to transmit the composer's music, not to play him.

Then there are my heroes like Vengerov who plays music and goes to the heart of people. That's my aim and that's what I teach. In my lessons, sometimes I have people I work with for two hours – I don't do two hours anymore, I just do one hour – and when I work with them they don't touch the violin because I realise their voice doesn't work because we are all shy and reserved. You must learn how to give and how to communicate. I teach people to sing the composer in style and then mime it without the instrument so it's in your body. The point is, the instrument is a conveyor, a transmitter. So I make them sing to the left hand and mime the intervals like a ballet dancer. Each interval goes on to the next one, and then the next one, and not hold it and shake it to make a lovely vibrato. I ask people to please make a mistake, I will love you if you make a mistake. But if you do that, and of course there is the bow, it comes from the inside out and not just playing with the bow, down and up. So everything is horizontal and moving, moving, moving, and if you do that and participate in that, you simply have no time for stage fright.

You can't get rid of stage fright, we all have it, but you don't have time for it, because you participate, and you don't have time to think 'I'm no good, can I do it, will I remember it, will I make a mistake.' You have no time for it. And that's my story in a nutshell.

CT: Why d'you think so many musicians do have stage fright?

KH: Because of that. I don't know about other instruments but the basic thing is because they have to be good and they are terrified they will make a mistake. Mostly they don't sing, they don't have an inner song. The instrument is just a transmitter. Horowitz said once "I don't know why they make such a fuss of me. I just hear it and my fingers play it." The music

is there, and that's what's missing. And then of course you have stage fright, because you are blocked.

CT: I remember you wrote about Kreisler....

KH: Oh yes, Kreisler. Well you see, I am very old now, so I was fortunate enough to hear Kreisler as a child many times. He and the gypsies are the reason I am giving you this interview. They made one happy. By the way, Kreisler looked like a butcher and when he came out, he slung his violin by his side and looked at the audience for a long time: do I know anyone here? And then he started and of course magic came. We couldn't let him go for an hour sometimes, and in Hungary there are very good audiences, very receptive. It was a musical country, alas since changed. When I was a child I was very lucky.

CT: And what about Heifetz? I know you heard Heifetz too. How did he manage stage fright?

KH: That I don't know. All I know is – d'you want a story? Heifetz frightened me. He didn't move me, he frightened me. He was wonderful, he was a king. And then it so happened, that his assistant, a woman, came to one of my workshops in America. I invited her to come over to England and have a 12 lesson course with me. While she was in England, Heifetz called her every day. He couldn't bear his assistant to have lessons with somebody else. She said that Heifetz got up and practised every morning before he gave a lesson. He was a very unhappy man. He was a sacrifice to the violin, but no denying, he was a king.

CT: I wonder whether he had his own secret problems with nerves...

KH: Oh, I'm sure he did, I'm absolutely sure he did. He stopped playing when he was 60. He had aches and pains, I'm sure of that. That's why he didn't move (people). He created admiration not heart.

CT: It's different, isn't it?

KH: Yes...but there's no denying it, he was a king – nobody can take that away from him.

CT: What are your views about practising and how we can alleviate practising in that way?

KH: Oh well, I'm glad you asked me this question, because practising is deadly. We practise our problems, on and on and on. It gets a little better and in the morning you have the same problem. So I advise people to sing. Sing to the window, sing to a painting, to always get it out. Sing to an imaginary audience, play to an imaginary audience. This is another problem because we soloists lead such solitary lives and then suddenly we are in front of a lot of people. Now I have to begin. So we get used to playing always out to somebody, the passer-by, the postman, you play it out, out, out. Enjoyment is the basis of it all. I tell my pupils if they don't enjoy the preventive exercises, they won't do it. It's the whole idea of being a privilege of being the emissary of a composer.

CT: What would you say to musicians who suffer badly from stage fright? What would be your key tips?

KH: What I have said before. Stage fright starts in childhood because if you are good, you are loved more. You get a sweet if you're good. I think being good is the bottom of it all because that immediately stops you from giving. It's the wrong behaviour, because on the whole people have a big heart, they are good people. I believe everybody has a gift, to different degrees of course, but they have a gift and if that gift can't come out, it works awful things inside you. I've also learned from teaching that a lot of people think very little of themselves, they don't like themselves, and that is also very important. Self worth – yes, I do this because I love it, that is why I do it. You can be a very happy doctor or lawyer or something else. They do music because they have music in them, but if it can't come out, it punishes you very badly. A gift is not 'I'm gifted,' a gift is a great responsibility. If you don't let the gift through it can have all sorts of terrible psychological effects, not only physical. That's why I called it the 'New Approach' and not 'New Method' – how do you approach the music.

CT: Is there anything you'd like to contribute that I haven't asked you?

KH: Enjoy. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy...and give. Give energy. The rhythmic pulse in singing...and sing, and sing, and enjoy...and give.

CT: Kato Havas, thank you very, very much. I've really enjoyed talking with you.

KH: It was my pleasure, thank you!