

Colourstrings & Géza Szilvay in Australia

Colourstrings has had a long history in Australia. Readers might be surprised to learn that the teaching philosophy first began to be practised as long ago as 1980. The standard of Australian Colourstrings teaching is high, due to four main reasons:

- 1) Most leading teachers had already established significant careers prior to coming to Colourstrings, either as performers (violinists/violists, conductors) or as composers or music education academics.
- 2) Despite the geographic distances that separates them, most Colourstrings teachers have well-established collegial relationships and friendships that in many cases pre-date their involvement with Colourstrings (although there is no formal aspect to these relationships, e.g. by way of professional association, society etc).
- 3) During the past three decades Australian Colourstrings teachers have made more than 40 visits to the East Helsinki Music Institute to observe at first hand the work of the Szilvay brothers and their colleagues. All describe their first visit as a life-changing experience, and most of the leading teachers have made multiple visits (I have been 10 times). Three have also taught in Finland, in Kuhmo – Celia Egerton, Yuri Djachenko and Sally-Ann Djachenko.
- 4) In 2005, coinciding with Fennica Gehrman's release of the new edition Colourstrings violin ABCD books, Yuri and Sally-Ann Djachenko returned to Australia after several years in Edinburgh and London before Kuhmo, to establish their business Colourstrings Australia. Its agenda is to promote Colourstrings activity in Australia through teaching children, teacher mentoring and training, and importing and distributing Colourstrings materials.

In September/October last year, Colourstrings founder Géza Szilvay made a 7 week tour to Australia. Although his fifth visit to that country, it was certainly his most successful.

In 2009, close-working colleagues Yuri Djachenko and David Banney agreed that the time was right to invite Géza to Australia again. The invitation was immediately accepted by Géza with great enthusiasm, so 18 months detailed planning got underway for a truly national tour. Although Géza gave courses and spoke at events run by professional associations the Australian String Teachers' Association (AUSTA) and the Kodaly Music Education Institute of Australia (KMEIA), and at Universities and Conservatoria, it was Colourstrings Australia which underwrote the costs of the tour. While the tour certainly made no financial profit, it was an astounding success in terms of Géza being able to inspire so many new practitioners to his methodology. He was able to work with University and Conservatorium students and professional players and teachers not just in terms of violin pedagogy but also through directing string orchestras. The tour also gave enormous opportunity for the students of the Australian Colourstrings teachers to work with Géza. Through this work, Géza was able to directly audit the quality of the work of the local teachers.

Géza visited Brisbane, Toowoomba, Newcastle, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Perth. In the first three of these centres, he gave 1:1 lessons to more than 70 students of 7 Colourstrings teachers. He also worked with the children, parents and staff in the Colourstrings programme at Griffith University's Young Conservatorium. With the assistance of Yuri Djachenko and/or David Banney, Géza presented 7 Colourstrings courses in the following centres:

- Brisbane (Griffith University – 1 afternoon)
- Brisbane (AUSTA Queensland – 4 days)
- Newcastle (Conservatorium – 1 afternoon)
- Sydney (Conservatorium – 1 afternoon)
- Sydney (KMEIA – 5 days)
- Canberra (Australian National University – 1 day)
- Melbourne (KMEIA National Conference – 4 days)
- Perth (AUSTA Western Australia – 4 days)

More than 200 teachers attended the various Colourstrings courses given in each centre. Many especially University/Conservatorium pedagogy students were so captivated by Géza and his work with the demonstrating children that at short notice they attended a second course in a different centre, e.g. Canberra followed by Sydney, Melbourne followed by Brisbane, etc.

Géza's tour was also planned around the 2010 KMEIA national conference in Melbourne, to which he was invited as Keynote Speaker. The committee for this event, in conjunction with Yuri Djachenko and David Banney organised two children's string orchestras for Géza to work with over the 4 days. A pre-rehearsal was conducted by David Banney. The groups were augmented by Yuri Djachenko's student ensemble, all but one of whom flew from Brisbane to participate. The ensemble was tutored by a team consisting of the leading Colourstrings teachers from around the country – their first ever collaboration. The string orchestras performed at the closing ceremony, during which Géza was invited to become KMEIA's inaugural Patron.

As a conductor, Géza rehearsed and performed in Newcastle with that city's professional Chamber Orchestra, the Christ Church Camerata. At the Australian National University in Canberra, Géza conducted the University's Chamber Orchestra in a programme of Finnish Music. Both concerts were received with wide acclaim.

During the course of the tour, Géza also gave three radio interviews, for ABC Radio National, for 4MBS in Brisbane, and for ABC local radio in Newcastle. On ABC Radio National he was interviewed by Australian composer Andrew Ford, himself a champion of the Finnish Music scene having had works premiered in Kuhmo at the Chamber Music Festival. That interview can be heard at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/musicshow/stories/2010/3006007.htm>

Award-winning Hungarian-Australian film-maker Akos Bruz also produced a short documentary film about Géza and the tour. This can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMLUEAoToq8>

Géza also was guest speaker for the Sydney-based Hungarian cultural organisation, Deák Kör.

The logistics for the tour were formidable. For those who have not travelled to Australia or within it, the huge distances between centres are difficult to imagine without experiencing them. Géza's base was Brisbane, which made sense, as around 50% of the Colourstrings teaching in Australia occurs in Brisbane and South-East Queensland.

Besides the long international flights, Géza was booked for 7 domestic air journeys, making a total of around 17 hours flying time – much the same as the one-way international leg from Finland to Australia! Over 5000km of road travel was also accumulated during the tour, mainly undertaken by Yuri Djachenko. A car was necessary to transport the heavy and bulky supplies that were impractical to carry on a flight – mainly books and publications, although some were air-freighted directly in advance.

Géza Szilvay possesses an extraordinary work ethic. During the entire 7 week tour, although there was generally one day every 10 or so scheduled to contain no work or travel, he generally gave students lessons during most of these days and in fact only took one day off. That day happened to be his birthday. A party was graciously hosted by Elizabeth Morgan, founder of AUSTA, Géza's Brisbane host and long-time friend. For the record, there were also parties hosted by student families in Brisbane and Newcastle, and a farewell party hosted by the (then) AUSTA National President, Andrew Patrick, at his home in Perth, attended by both the local Finnish and Hungarian Consuls.

There have been several positive events arising as a consequence of the tour. Three teachers have since made visits to Helsinki, including Canberra cellist Lindy Reksten, for her second visit. Canberra violinist/composer Leanne Bear was so inspired not just by Géza during his visit last year but by the enthusiasm of other Australian practitioners and the skill of their students, that she has since made two visits to Helsinki in the last 9 months. Elizabeth Morgan travelled again to Helsinki in July this year, with five of her more advanced students to take part in the chamber music course run in Nurmes by Géza's daughter Réka Szilvay. Although not a Colourstrings teacher, Elizabeth is one of the leading supporters of Colourstrings teachers in their work around the country.

In terms of courses, the Australian National University is looking at establishing a Colourstrings pedagogy programme. A private training organisation, the Cuskelly College of Music in conjunction with KMEIA, has commenced delivery of a formal Australian Kodaly Certificate accredited Colourstrings course. Delivered initially by David Banney and leading international Kodaly practitioners, it is hoped that Géza will return to Australia regularly from 2013 to teach in this course, possibly also with Csaba Szilvay.

Book sales are always a good barometer to test the lasting interest of Colourstrings teachers. As Director of Colourstrings Australia, I would estimate that there are at least 100 new book customers arising since Géza's visit, with most of these making repeat orders.

For Géza's next visit in 2012, we are hoping that the budget will extend to bringing his brother Csaba as well. This would make it possible to augment the current handful of relatively isolated Colourstrings cello teachers with more colleagues committed to this very successful way of teaching.

The tour could not have happened without so much willing assistance and cooperation given by so many people. Fennica Gehrman also did their bit in terms of arranging so many advance book shipments, and also advancing the release of the Colourstrings Violin "Yellow Pages" series.

The Australian teachers, parents and children who met Géza were unfailingly moved by his incredible energy, his commitment to and love for others, his modesty, and his insistence

that “only the best is good enough for children”. String teaching in Australia owes the Szilvay brothers an enormous debt.

Yuri Djachenko