Satu Jalas: experiences with my teacher Arthur Grumiaux

I have lived in Belgium for almost five years, and during this period, from 1970 t0 1975, I learned to know Arthur Grumiaux, at first participating in his Master Class in Namur, after which he accepted to give me private lessons during these years, usually twice a month, except during the tournees or registrations he had each year.

These lessons lasted generally a whole morning or a whole afternoon, and instead of concert programs, we decided to go through the most important repertoire, violin concertos, sonatas and virtuoso pieces.

The Prelude from the third Sonata in C major for solo violin of Bach has been the first piece which I have studied with Arthur Grumiaux, and with great emotion I listened to his registration of it at the beginning of his funeral ceremony in October 1986.

As to his biografical material, the principal source is nowadays of course the Internet. His violin teachers were Alfred Dubois and Eugène Ysaye, and his main teacher of pianoforte and composition was the famous George Enescu. By the way Grumiaux was an excellent pianist – p.es he accompagnied me during my lesson with the sonata of Cesar Franck, and he has registrated the A major sonata of Brahms with both the instruments.

His large concert repertoire consists of various compositions from baroc to the second half of the 20th century. His principal registrations were edited by Philips, and there you can find more than 30 CD. By Mozart there are all the concertos, and the sonates with the pianist Clara Haskil, the great concertos of Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Brahms, and the sonates for solo violin of Bach which are of a special interest.

As to his instruments, the most important ones were the Stradivarius "ex generale Dupont" of the year 1727 and the Guarneri "La Rossa" of 1744. At his home he often had other instruments, and I also could try many of them. I remember a Hieronymus Amati and several Vuillaume's. Grumiaux examined also modern instruments, but changed them often. However, his prefered one was the Guarnerius.

He had different bows in prove at his home. He prefered his own Tourte, but had in his property also a Sartori. For me we chose together a beautiful bow Nuernberger.

As to me, I moved to Belgium with my young family, because my husband who was a mathematician, was invited as visiting professor in the University of Louvain, and we stayed there in all almost five years, from 1970 to 1975. Here I got my opportunity to go to Maestro Arthur Grumiaux. After an audition I was lucky to be one of the eight students he accepted for hìs two weeks course in Namur in 1971.

For me it was very useful to take part in his lessons among other students, as I could notice very many important observations also from others, and realize his way of teaching with different personal caracters. After this I understood much better his way of teaching with me too.

As a teacher he generally was very reserved how to treat these young violinists, and pointed out details in a way that the students after a slight indication had to find almost by themselves how to play better. And this was because he wanted to see how ready and mature the student was for this. Usually he said only once his opinion, and it was then the student's duty, not to forget it. Once, when he explained a rather banal musical detail, the student did not understand and played the passage again as before, Grumiaux said:"He did not understand – worse for him.." We had to be all the time very careful and listento all these indications, and we had an extraordinarily rich Master Class.

Now I try to point out the most important musical and tecnical ideas which came out in his lessons:

<u>Balance between the weight of the left hand fingers and the bow hand</u>

1. **<u>The left hand</u>**
   -Try to have the fingers as well balanced as possible. Don't press too much the first finger, because it needs really little pression and often causes tension in the thumb.

   -Keep the same natural weight between all the fingers playing harmonics or octaves.

-Help the fourth finger with the third one, which in most cases should be in the main position between the fingers. .

-Keep the inside of the hand open so that the fingers are free to move.

-With double stoppings it is important to choose one finger as support and look that the position of the other fingers is light and does not prevent the freedom of the wrist. Usually it is better to have more pression on the lower string.

Position changes

It is always necessary to distinguish between an extension and different types of position changes, even in the case of half tone. Grumiaux insisted to use instead of a superficial extension, always a small position changement, if the following notes are in a new position -. There is no half-way between these possibilities.

Vibrato

"Vibrato has to be balanced with the same attention as a pianist uses the pedal.

Technically it is important to choose the most suitable way between the arm – hand – or finger vibrato.

Take care of vibrato when changing strings or position."

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2. The bow hand

"The contact with the bow must be soft. The weight and the force come principally from the upper arm and not from the hand or from the fingers. Most of the impurity of the sound depend on a wrong balance between the bow hand and the left hand fingers.

"Let the bow go with its own weight horizontally. The vertical pression does not let the vibrations of the sound come out.

"Take care of the inclination of the bow and its position which must always be controlled between the bridge and the fingerboard. This is the second reason to impurities of sound "

" Take care of how to divide the bow, and notice that the weight of each finger is always equal in the middle of the bow. Here is the point to spare bow. In the top or in the frog you need more bow to have a beautiful sound. For example a whole bow with 16 notes should be divided not in four but in three equal parts: 4 + 8 + 4."

"By changement of the bow direction it is important to use the same velocity in both the directions, and this independent of the length of the note."

Usually, even though one of the most appreciated qualities of Arthur Grumiaux was the long bowing also with many notes, he preferred very large bowings and divided rather often long bowings especially in the violin concertos with the orchestra. In any case, he was very strict in respect to the text and examined seriously all the manuscripts which were possible to find.

3 Interpretation

During the Master Class we worked among other compositions all together in turn on the Brahms concerto and the Mozart G major concerto, the Chaconne of Bach and the Tzigane of Ravel as many of the participants have prepared these pieces for the course. We also played Beethoven and Brahms sonatas.

The pianist of the Master Class was Maestro Riccardo Castagnone from the Conservatory of Milan, and also former cembalist of the ensemble Virtuosi di Roma, With him Grumiaux has played numerous duo recitals.

It was very interesting to follow the teaching of Sonatas , comparing their interpretation to that of concertos, which were more common in the Master Class.

Strictly observed was the problem of a correct intonation, different with piano from that of violin solo or with other instruments. Grumiaux insisted to prepare a good conducting line in the whole composition with long musical phrases, without exagerations in not essential crescendos or diminuendos which so often appear by a not controlled bowing or a not controlled vibrato. A very significant example was the construction of long crescendos alternating bars in the piano and violin part, especially in Brahms sonatas.. As to the sonatas, I have played with him Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Franck, Ravel, Prokofjev. At first we worked the violin part. He did not suggest his own fingerings or bowings, and changed those which I used only if something did not go well. It was marvellous, when he then sat by the piano and I could play duo constructing and living the music with him.

Private lessons

After the Master Class in Namur I asked him if he wanted to give me private lessons, and he did. So for all the years I lived in Belgium I went generally twice a month to his home.

My first impression of his personality was characterized by a fine quiet voice and expressive eyes. He did not talk much, but very well what was necessary. He was reserved in his behaviour, but also very gentle and generous. In the first months I had to use the train, and he was so kind that he himself waited for me in his car at the station and brought me to his beautiful home in Rhode St. Genèse near Brussels. Sometimes he invited me to stay for lunch, too.

It was not always easy to be relaxed in front of such a personality, even if he always was very delicate in his comments. During the lesson he often played the part in unisono with me, in order to let my playing become more free and spontaneous. Then he listened, and never said it was "good", but "better". He did not praise the student, and did not want a musician be satisfied with "good" because we must always try to do better. The first composition he wanted me to study fundamentally was Bach: Sonata C-major . There he began to work with the balance of the sound, and also with the balance of the left hand. I had a very week fourth finger, and my thumb was placed too much forwards to allow the complete and relaxed opening of the hand. Correcting this, in few lessons he had given me the force to my fourth finger which I always avoided to use, loosing with extensions of the third finger too much for the sense of positions.

He also gave me the way to get both my wrists free so that the whole arms were directly and elastically connected with the fingers.

After the Prelude, , we worked a lot especially with the Fuga. Particularly important were beautiful sound and the harmonic expression in the accords and their combination to form long phrases in a constant and serious tempo for the choral theme. In the Largo he underlined the basso as much as possible, and in the last movement he pointed out the genial Bach bowings and their good distribution.

The second composition was the Poem of Ernest Chausson, where very many different atmospheres show how the various technical aspects remain on the background and the violinist's main thought goes at once to the musical expression. How the composition begins with nothing, and how after many hesitations with a theme of double stoppings the long frases gradually increase their force, and finally return smoothly to the silence of the beginning .

One of the most important things he said to me was that I made too many small crescendos and diminuendos in my bowings or with vibrato, so that the development of the whole frase could be disturbed. And the choice of this composition was ideal for me.

After Chausson came the Mozart G major concerto, I composed also the cadenzas to it with him, and he was really interested also in this work.

Later on we worked also the concertos D major and A major. His particular elegance especially in Mozart is certainly very much due to the fact that he defines with extreme perfection the tempo and ending of the staccato or détaché notes as well as the long notes.

We studied a lot the Beethoven Concerto, which Grumiaux said to be the most difficult concerto for him, because of the long phrases to balance in turn with the orchestra, and the violin remains almost alone in the solo parts.

The same principles came out very clearly p. ex. in the concerto of Mendelssohn, and with the grand legato in the Adagio of Brahms concerto using important string changes also in high positions. We studied these concertos very intensely.

We have here too little time to go through everything, so I have to give only some details about other compositions I studied with Arthur Grumiaux.

Other concertos I played with him were the concertos of Bach, especially the a minor, which I played with the Belgian Radio Orchestra, and also the Sibelius concerto which he never played in public, but he had studied it and gave very good technical and musical advice following the principles we just talked about.

Between the concertos we studied for solo violin the Bach sonates, several caprices of Paganini, particularly the 11 and the 17, the IV sonata of Ysaye , Recitativo and Scherzo caprice of Kreisler , and some virtuoso pieces, especially the Tzigane of Ravel, and the Introduzione e Rondo capriccioso of Saint- Saens.

As to the sonatas, I have played with him Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Franck, Ravel, Prokofjev. At first we worked the violin part. He did not suggest his own fingerings or bowings, and changed those which I used only if something did not go well. It was marvellous, when he then sat by the piano and I could play duo constructing and living the music with him. But now,

let us listen to the last movement of the Sonata A major of Brahms, where our great musician Arthur Grumiaux plays both the parts!

A typical example of his way of teaching came out in a further lesson during his tournee in Parma, when I played a Mozart sonata with my pianist. He only smiled and said :"Very well thought…!" After this we were rather embarrassed, noticing that this comment was enough to understand that we were too much thinking only of the preparation. So the music was in prison and did not come out. Then he asked us to play it again, and it was much better.

In the last months when I lived in Belgium, we began to work the Concerto of Bartok, but I had time only for the first movement to be prepared, before I had to move back to Italy . I heard him play this concerto with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Haitink, and there was such a great inner force that it remains to me his final masterpiece. What a pity that he did not registrate it.

During his tournee in 1983 with the Orchestra Artuto Toscanini of Parma he played the Bruch concerto. As I have earlier played in this orchestra, I asked Grumiaux if he would like me to play in the orchestra during this one week tournee. So I followed him in many cities hearing the Bruch concerto every time different in various circumstances, even in Bologna in a church, where the first movement and the Adagio sounded as a religious Choral and the last movement as a Gloria. I had never thought of this kind of interpretation for this concerto, and he also played it differently in other places. " It is so important to adapt the interpretation to the atmosphere of the concert place", he said to me afterwards.

It was a fascinating period, when we discussed together not only about music, but also about other arguments. I had also the opportunity to play for him between the rehearsals, and I also took a little care of him in practical things.

My last opportunity to play for him was in 1985 before I had to play the Mendelssohn concerto in the United States and in Finland. So interesting new details came out, even if we had worked it really a lot in the last years.

Arthur Grumiaus, my dear teacher, lives now together with us in his beautiful interpretations of his numerous registrations, but during many years we had a special friendship which I never can forget

(From a written part of my lecture in Bruges (Belgium) during the international congress of ESTA 2010 - without the musical examples ecc.)