

The Frog in the Well

The frog lives deep in the well, the only place he has ever known, and looking up at the bright circle of sky he thinks to himself“ I am king of the world and I see and understand all”

This year is the 20th anniversary of the death of Marcel Moyse. I was a student in Moyse’s class in Boswil for several summers and the experience, both painful and wonderful, was the catalyst for a dramatic change of attitude and direction in my playing and my life. With hindsight, it was a kind of therapy. This therapy began with the most crushing and unflattering observations about my ability and over the following three years progressed to one of the most cherished compliments of my life.

I remember so well, boarding the train at Waterloo at the beginning of my journey to Boswil. I was 18 years old and alone, sitting up all night, as I could not afford the more expensive day fare on my student grant. I certainly could not afford to fly. The seats were horribly uncomfortable and I had very little sleep. I was thinking about the class and how I was going to impress this old French flute player I had heard about! I was going to play Roussel’s Joueurs de Flute. This was my first Master class and I had no idea who would be there. I was not briefed! I was in my third year at the Royal College of Music with John Francis, a marvellous teacher who was like a father to me and who had taught me from the age 11 years old. His praise and kindness had overwhelmed me and in a dizzy state I had fallen into the well.

On arrival in Boswil I was collected by one of the students and taken to “Die Sterne” guest house. Then I made my way to the little deconsecrated church where the class was to take place. As I approached I almost bumped into Marcel Moyse, looking distinctly like an onion seller and smoking the biggest pipe I have ever seen. I confidently introduced myself. He wasn’t impressed.

Picture of Marcel Moyse with pipe

As soon as I could, I jumped up to play for him. The little altar platform was bursting with revered and reverent flute players from around the world, most of whom I did not know and had not heard of, because I had been a “frog in a well” for so long. And so I gave my rendition of Pan from the Joueurs.

Silence. Silence for what seemed a lifetime.

Then the great maestro said very loudly “ you tongue like a duck”.

Silence. “ You tongue like a duck” – again and again in dismay.

Nobody spoke. It was a serious situation. My entire world closed in on me and my legs were reduced to jelly. He was of course right. I had not been taught to tongue in that marvellous light “French” style, but how was I to know? Now I did! There are many accounts of Moyse as a teacher, describing him as cruel and crushing. My own view is that his English was limited and often the criticisms he made came at you like

nuclear war heads, but it was his only way of getting his point across. And he certainly did. After a gruelling lesson in front of players such as James Galway, Michel Debost and William Bennett, Moyse suggested I saw him for a lesson privately after the class. This long lesson was spent helping me to understand the “French “ style of articulation. He did not charge me for this extra time. I was indebted to Jimmy who gave me much good advice and suggested that the time had come to study with Geoffrey Gilbert, who was so wonderful at diagnosing problems and giving you the right practise technique.

Anyway, I was a plucky young thing so I decided I would again play for Moyse during this course, but this time something which showed off my finger technique. And so I played Andersen’s study opus 15 no 3, rather fast. “Well” I thought “ I may not have got the hang of the tonguing yet, but I shall show them I can move my fingers!” Was I nervous! But up I got and rattled through it.

Silence.

Moyse - “ Why you play so fast?”

Silence. “Why you play so fast?”

“Damn this” I thought. “ I’m nervous Mr. Moyse”. I said boldly.

Silence “ Why you nervous?”

Answer that!

Well he gave me a great lesson on the Andersen, making it sound like music rather than sport, and after three weeks of saturation in his presence I went home humbled but inspired, armed with many notes and much to think about. During the next year I continued with my teacher and mentor John Francis, who was a truly wonderful man and musician, and at the same time I tried to continue to learn from the teaching of Moyse, helped by my notes and my memory- my memory of his inspiring interpretations. The next year I travelled to Boswil with different expectations. Cautiously I stood up to play the Ibert Piece. I was very frightened. “You have changed school?” asked the maestro after I had played. “Not yet” I said, “but I found teachers among my peers”. That year at Christmas he sent me this card.

Card reads “ Meilleurs voeux- sante- success

picture

I remember very well – piece par Jacques Ibert

Et brillant scale in 3rds (drawing of scale)

Do not be so nervos,

Best souvenirs

Marcel Moyse

After graduating from the Royal College of Music, I took a post graduate year of study with Geoffrey Gilbert at the Guildhall School of Music, helped and encouraged by Jimmy and William Bennett. This year was to be Geoffrey’s last in the UK before he began his work in Stetson, so I was lucky to catch him. During the year with Geoffrey I did not play a single piece of repertoire, only studies and scales, exercises and analysis. It was intensely hard work, with a great flute player and teacher.

The next year I played for Moyse in Canterbury, when he was first invited to teach in the UK. Wonderful Clifford Benson was the pianist and we played the complete Suite by Benjamin Godard.

Silence. Moyse said, with his bright blue eyes twinkling, “ What has happened? You are the real artiste.”

Silence. A dream, come true.

I attended the Marcel Moyse courses in Boswil for some years. Even when I was in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, I would try to see him, if only for one day.

Picture of Sue with Moyse 1975,

I shall never forget his voice with its rich French timbre and colourful pitch, his directness, honesty and his kindness, his dancing, his enthusiasm. However unkind he may have appeared, if he respected a players talent and potential he would not just publicly demolish them, but would also publicly rebuild them and inspire them with poetry and colour. He was not a technical analyst, but a musical poet and a painter of emotions. He worked with visualisation and sound and on a musical level he was the greatest inspiration of my life. Now, many years on, I still see him dancing to Doppler’s Hungarian Fantaisie and praying in Gounod’s Ave Maria, and I never once play the Godard Suite without seeing his face and hearing his voice.

The moral of this story is:

There is a big world outside the well. Go and look and listen, before it is too late.

Web site

For Sue’s recordings and publications and other information

www.master-classics.com

For broader profile

Larry Krantz Home Page

Susan Milan Corner

Master class

2 week Summer festival – all instruments, July/August

www.ticinomusica.com