

OBITUARY : JUDITH BERENSON

The death of **Judith Berenson** from cancer took place on 14th December, 2004, at her home in Lauderhill, Florida. She was 76. Her future as a violinist had been assured when her musical talent at the age of 7 was brought to the attention of Jascha Heifetz, whose subsequent gift to her of a half-size violin and a tuition scholarship at the New York Music Settlement led to her lifelong love of the violin. Born in New York into a close family of Russian immigrants, she continued her musical studies at the New York School of Music and Art, winning a coveted place in the National Orchestral Association in New York, conducted by Leon Barzin, at the age of 15. Her subsequent advanced instrumental studies were with Sascha Jacobsen and chamber music with Toscha Seidel, both disciples of Carl Flesch, while she was majoring in music and educational psychology at UCLA. At that time her career was primarily dedicated to performance, and she played with leading symphony, chamber and theatre orchestras in the USA and subsequently in Europe, after her husband's career brought about her initially moving there in 1953 for a few years, followed by a brief return to New York, and then a second family move to Geneva in 1959. Her husband died in Geneva in 1968, but Judith remained there until returning to the USA in 1995, where she continued giving of her experience and passionate interest in the musical education of young violinists until her death.

Thus it was in Europe that Judith Berenson's name and renown in the world of Suzuki pedagogy made its mark. Her first experience in 1967 of hearing a 5 year old Suzuki student in New York playing the Vivaldi A minor Concerto, followed by her meeting with the most outstanding disciples of Dr. Shinichi Suzuki in Crans, Montana in Switzerland in 1972, led to her life-changing decision to become a follower of Dr. Suzuki's teaching principles. At the invitation of Dr. Suzuki to begin a Suzuki Violin Programme in Switzerland, and after attending teaching courses in the USA, she introduced Suzuki Violin at the Conservatoire Populaire in Geneva in 1973, continuing her training related to the Suzuki Method of teaching over many years of summer courses with leading Suzuki teachers in the USA. The Director of the Conservatoire Populaire fully recognized the merits of Suzuki education and was very much in favour of including the Suzuki Method in his conservatory, but Judith encountered opposition initially from some of her conservative teaching colleagues who felt threatened by the differences inherent in this new style of teaching that had been "Made in Japan", to quote Dr. Suzuki's own words. Undeterred, Judith's immersion in Dr. Suzuki's pedagogy grew stronger as she went on observing his charismatic style of teaching and way of developing talent and self-confidence in children from all over the world at numerous conferences and workshops in Europe and the USA. In 1980 she spent time following his teacher training sessions in Matsumoto, Japan, benefiting immeasurably from the experience and happily bringing back new ideas to her growing numbers of

enthusiastic students in Geneva (both in her Conservatoire class and in the private programme she had started simultaneously, all of her students coming together for workshops and concerts). It is undeniable that Judith's students profited greatly from a most valuable combination of her own early traditional educational experience, with its emphasis on the highest of standards, ongoing hard work and strict discipline as far as technique work was concerned, and her total commitment to Dr. Suzuki's philosophy and principles that included joyful learning along the way. Her years of Suzuki teaching were marked by much success, as her students made steady progress and both she and many of them took part in numerous public performances and concerts, both in Switzerland and at Suzuki conferences and workshops in Europe, the USA and Australia, several of her students won prizes in the Swiss Youth Competition, her Conservatory students passed exams with merit, and the Conservatoire Populaire honoured her achievements on the 20th anniversary of the beginning of her Suzuki Violin Programme by organizing a special concert in 1993 at the Radio Geneva studios at which some of her outstanding students were invited to play. It was during these years too that Judith, once again on the invitation of Dr. Suzuki, had been instrumental in co-founding in 1989 the Suzuki Institute of Switzerland with Lola Tavor, Director of the Suzuki Piano Programme in Geneva since 1982, membership of which includes Suzuki teachers and families of students in a number of other towns and cities in Switzerland where Suzuki programmes had become established from 1976 onwards.

It is a fitting tribute to the fine quality of Judith Berenson's teaching that so many of her students are now pursuing careers as professional violinists in orchestras and respected teaching institutes, both in Europe and in the USA. Her lasting gift to them, and to all the young people she taught, was the basis she applied to her own life and constantly tried to convey through their musical education, of never being satisfied with less than the best they could do, illustrating very well Dr. Suzuki's wish that his teaching method would enable children to "continually strive for higher levels of achievement and thereby become wonderful human beings".

Sheila Barnett