

In writing this book, I do not mean it to be a guide into the classical Zen teachings in its many forms, nor do I wish it to be a book about how to play the violin. This is a book that deals with the philosophical approach to playing and practising the violin with some, perhaps more mundane, advice. This book is about sharing thoughts and ideas. Perhaps you'll find some of it helpful as you strive to master the instrument and yourself

The Samurai practiced their weapon skills for many hours a day but also took time to develop numerous other skills. They followed a rigid code of conduct based on a philosophical view of their part in the world, wrote poetry, developed concentration, extreme form of suicide based on a state of mind, open hand martial arts as well as military tactics and strategic skills. This was the difference, in their eyes, between the true warriors and any soldier who could wave a weapon.

I believe that what surrounds the teaching of the violin separates the true violinist/musician from just any guy who can "play the fiddle".

To some extent, we, the musicians, are like the Zen monks. We too seek enlightenment and understanding through practising an art, following a rigid code of daily physical routine and mental exercises. This enlightenment is apparent to us yet cannot be seen, felt, reached by some specific way or even defined. Only few reach the stage of enlightenment but those who do cannot explain what it feels like or even how others could reach it.

I think every musician (and perhaps any artist) could find some helpful advice in this book but this book is mainly directed at violinists (and viola players) because the understanding I have reached has come through playing and teaching the violin. A lot of the advice and examples here come from the point of view of a violinist. If you are an actor reading this book, I would not assume my advice could be somehow relevant to you, but only hope that it may.

Anyone who strives for a better understanding of practising the violin might find this book helpful, no matter what age or level of advancement. However, the teaching of this book is beneficial mainly to students who are at an advanced stage of practising the art, seeking support and knowledge from a perspective, which is different from and can be a supplement to the important direction you receive at the instrumental lesson from your personal teacher.

WHAT IS ZEN?

The word Zen baffles many of us, especially in the western world. It has a mystical allure of old wisdom and a way for happiness bordering a state of nirvana. Most of us imagine at some stage a bald old man clad in robes or a string of ancient proverbs. I have read many books with the word Zen on the cover, from light reading of westernized Zen Koan stories to the more scientific approach to the culture of Zen. Yet no one could really explain to me what Zen actually is or what does it feels like. What path should I

follow in order to reach enlightenment? In fact, most serious books on the subject made me feel that by trying to reach a certain “Zenish” state of mind one actually further oneself from the goal. A farmer who leads a simple life on his land could become enlightened while a student of philosophy who is searching for enlightenment might never reach understanding. I have known a few musicians who have reached the top of our profession, some of them were almost musically ignorant. I know many incredible musicians, sensitive and knowledgeable individuals, who never had a successful career as a performer. Understanding does not guarantee success or happiness.

The teaching of Zen is not a religion. It does not promise a better life, rewards in the afterlife, it even nor does try to answer philosophical questions other beliefs find important (“is there a god?” for example).

Zen does not try to give you answers but it might make you ponder the questions. I feel Zen is there to heighten our ability to perceive and accept the world we live in.

This book is about my own way, my own interpretation of Zen. It is not about how you could reach any form of your own enlightenment, but perhaps it could lead you to think of a way.

For me, the word Zen means reaching a state of understanding, acceptance and fulfillment. Understanding the principles of the instrument, as well as the Art of practising, is the key to mastery. Zen is also acceptance of who you are, where you are at the moment and knowing that the way is long and difficult. My own happiness comes from knowing I could touch people with my art and help students develop their own talent.

Although there are many suggestions written in a definite way, this is not a book about absolute answers; “follow this” or “do and you shall receive”. Even what I refer to as a “must”, or state as an absolute, is only written in relation to me. Take anything I have written here and ponder about it for a while. Find out if it relates to you in any way and see where it leads.

The practitioners of Zen use Koan, a phrase that embodies a state of mind, to be pondered upon and help guide them on their way to enlightenment. The sentences that are written in italics are not unlike Koan, for I believe they are the core ideas this book is based upon. Those sentences are sometimes quotes (or hearsay) from great masters of the art. Others are ideas, my own as well as from others, which I managed to put into words. The advice I give here does not consist of only original ideas. You may have read, been told or heard something similar (or even opposite) before. This is a good thing.

On our long journey we meet many people who could help us; I call them the Teachers and Guides. A teacher, in this case, is your instrumental and musical instructor. He tells you what to do and how to do it. A guide could be anyone who can influence and help you reach your goal. He may or may not be a musician: he can be family, friend or a stranger. One of my most influential guides was a guy I used to practise Aikido with; another was a doctor I met on a train. Both were not musicians.

Like you, I have struggled to find my way and suffered frustration and failure. Like you, I have found my own guides (many times by accident) and teachers and they have helped me to understand. I developed and grew from the knowledge and guidance of those people. They, in turn, have benefited from their own guides and teachers. Perhaps you can do the same with this book and me. The more similarities you find between my words and the words of others, the surer you can be that the advice is good for you.

Many students believe that there must be only one way to achieve mastery of the art. Whether it is the way to hold the bow or to interpret Bach. Consider this: there are so many schools of playing, so many outstanding musicians and performers throughout the ages who still speak to us through recordings, books and legacy of their own students, how can it ever be only “one way”?

If you read any advice contrary to what you have heard before, know that there are many ways to reach the same goal. Perhaps my way could work for you, and perhaps some other way is better. Simply by thinking about any of the aspects I bring here will develop your awareness, whether you accept the advice or find another way.

There is no ultimate truth. There are only points of view.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I am lucky to be born to a violinist who is one of the leading violin teachers in the world today. From an early age I was exposed not only to music but also to students. I have offered many nervous students a glass of water before a lesson or showed them the practise room as they waited for their lessons with trepidation. I have heard lessons from behind the closed door, walked in on lessons and, later in my life, sat in lessons. At the age of seventeen I became an assistant to my father and began teaching my own students as well.

From a very early age I encountered students of all levels. Many of my father's students felt relaxed enough with me to share thoughts or problems they found unthinkable, or a waste of time, to share with my father (after all, I was "just" the assistant). Many of them were not happy with their own playing or progress. That is the nature of our art.

However, a lot of the problems the students shared with me were not purely "violinistic", which is why they (wrongly) assumed they should not share them with my father. The main issue the students raised was (and is) nervousness in performance situations. This book began as a way of explaining this phenomenon and to try to help students who are facing this problem.

In the past few years I have been lecturing about stage fright and found this subject to be relevant to almost everyone. I thought that by committing what I know to writing I could help more people (and avoid repeating myself all the time). As I wrote notes on this subject I realized that there are other issues I have had experience in dealing with, which are a cause of concern to many, but do not fall into the category of a violin lesson.

I have encountered many students and professionals who suffered from mental anguish, or made wrong choices in choosing their teacher, a career move or a school. These choices or attitudes meant, more often than not, the end of their career. Many talents were never fully realised because of a wrong choice, a negative attitude, a fear or a lack of inner peace. I have seen many talented students suffer and fail because they lacked the mental stability and philosophical attitude or awareness to expand beyond the fingerboard of the violin.

I do not yet have the experience of an old man but I have seen enough people struggle to gain understanding and very few who can transfer these ideas into written words. This is what I am trying to do in this book.

I hope I can help you find some answers, or at least point you in the direction that would help you the best.

Take what you need, discard all else