

Questions for Lenneke Willems

By Fredrik Ström, ESTA Sweden

Biographical questions

- Where were you born and raised? Was there a lot of music in your family or your surroundings when you were growing up?

I was born in The Hague and lived there all my life. My mother played the piano fairly well and I loved listening to her playing Chopin, Schubert, Debussy. At the age of seven, I started playing the piano myself. There were no violinists in our family, only piano players, so when I turned eleven and asked for a violin, my father said: 'You'll have to save up and buy one yourself'. I did all sorts of chores until, after nearly a year, I had 35 guilders (€17,50) saved up. My father bought a violin from a colleague for 90 guilders and I gave my father my 35. I was so happy!

- When and why did you become interested in playing the violin?

I became interested in playing the violin when visiting a youth orchestra. I liked it so much that I couldn't wait to join.

- What were your early violin/music studies like? What materials were used? Have any of these early experiences influenced the development of Mini Violin?

Unfortunately, my first violin teacher was not a lucky choice. He was friendly, but lacked teaching skills. He used to play everything together with me and only once showed me how to hold the bow, at the first lesson. Nevertheless, my experience on the piano enabled me make steady progress in my violin study. My second teacher, Mr. Broer van Dijk, was really good and had played in the Residentie Orchestra, one of Holland's best orchestras, for 45 years. He was retired, but still had lots of students. A repertoire of etudes by Wohlfahrt, Mazas, Kreutzer, Fiorillo was studied along with scales, Sevcik and a great variety of other pieces. I particularly remember Mr. Broer van Dijk's lessons, but as I was already a bit older then, they were of no influence on the development of Mini Violin.

- When did you decide to have music as a profession? Was it an easy choice? If you hadn't, what would you be doing now?

After a few years of violin study and playing in Hofstads Youth Orchestra, where I was concertmaster, I dreamed of once playing in a professional orchestra. Yes, it was an easy choice. My world was music and I had music friends.

Should my study at the Conservatoire have fallen through, I think that I may have wanted to study autism, a phenomenon I've always been interested in and have read many books about.

I actually had a few students who suffered from a form of autism, one of whom studied with me for 18 years.

- What was it like studying at the Conservatory? When you started, were your intentions primarily to later work as a musician or as a teacher?

My primary intention was to try and join an orchestra, but when I was nineteen I started teaching a few young children whom I'd recruited from the youth orchestra and it immediately grabbed my interest. I must admit that I was very lucky with my first pupil. She was extremely gifted and it was a great pleasure to teach her.

- When and why did you become interested in teaching?

During my study I had about 10 pupils. My teacher methodology was Qui van Woerdekom. He often asked me to bring one of my pupils along to learn things like vibrato and would show us all kinds of exercises. My interest in teaching was growing.

- You studied methodology with Qui van Woerdekom. I did not know his name, but searching the Internet I found he must be quite an important person in the Dutch string teaching community? What was it like studying with him? Were any of his teachings specifically aimed at the ages 5–6 and/or group teaching?

Having someone like Qui as methodology teacher was a blessing as his enthusiasm for the subject was very infectious. In those two years, I was thoroughly taught everything one needs to know about teaching beginners. Qui's teachings were not specifically aimed at young ages. He started a big project of group teaching in his hometown Amersfoort and taught at the conservatoires of Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague.

Each of Qui's students would have two pedagogical pupils for a period of two years. We all had teaching rooms along the same hallway and Qui would hop from one to the other to watch and offer support. I took great pleasure in attending his lessons and it was during this period that teaching became more important to me than wanting to join an orchestra.

Ever since those days, I've regularly consulted Qui and asked for his opinion.

I went to him when I made my first book 'Double Stops' (published by Broekmans and van Poppel) and later, after finishing my Mini Violin Method, I was very happy to show him the material derived from his lessons.

- Any other persons that have been major sources of knowledge and inspiration to you?

Yes, my teachers Mrs. Davina van Wely and Mr. Nap de Klijn who, each in their own way, have affected my vision on how to teach.

Later on, the videos of Paul Rolland were an great inspiration for me.

- Where and in what forms have you primarily been working in your career? And how is your current working situation?

For a few years after finishing my study at the conservatoire I travelled and toured through Ireland, Denmark, Switzerland and Germany with friends. We made a record in Dublin, called 'Morning Dew'. We also made two albums for the Swedish company Opus 3 and an album in Holland.

After five years of adventure, it was time to rekindle my teaching aspiration. I became teacher at the Koorenhuis, center of art and culture in The Hague, where I taught for twenty years. Shortly after I left, the school became victim of the subsidy cuts and ceased to exist. Nowadays I give private lessons at home.

- What type of students do you have (ages/levels)?

Every year I start with a fresh Mini Violin group of pupils aged 5 or 6, but since most of students stay with me for many years, I also have teenagers.

- How long are the lessons you give?

Since I give private lessons, it is possible to consult parents about the duration of the lesson. Advanced students will have 45 minutes or 60 minutes.

Beginners have 30 minutes.

The Mini Violin class has 60 minutes by 3 kids or more.

- How are the conditions for string teaching in the Netherlands? How have they changed through the years?

Most of the music schools are having a hard time making ends meet. Over the years, teachers are having to deal with more students in less time. Many music schools had to close down.

As of September 2013, music teachers of the former Koorenhuis of The Hague have formed a collective and started a school without subsidy.

- What is the difference in teaching children now from when you started working, both in terms of working conditions and changes in society?

Things were different when I started teaching. First of all, students were not as young as they are now. They used to start at ages 7 or 8, while 9 or 10 was also normal.

Nowadays, parents often bring kids aged 4 or 5 and sometimes even younger (which I won't accept). It also used to be a lot easier to place a child (Monday till Saturday) and even Wednesday afternoons were never a problem. Now I'm often told by parents that one specific day - Thursday for instance - is the only possibility, as they work the rest of the week and want the Wednesday afternoons kept free.

Organizing rehearsals is also way more difficult than it used to be. Most children have other clubs, lessons, sports etc. and aren't able to attend.

There is however no difference in behaviour or eagerness to learn.

- How long have you been a member of ESTA? Have you been engaged as a lecturer at conferences nationally and/or internationally?

I joined the ESTA approximately 6 years ago.

At the 2007 ESTA conference in Cremona, I gave a lecture and did a workshop with Italian children.

At this conference, I met the group of Italian children who had rehearsed the music I'd sent them in advance. I worked with them for four days and on the last day we gave a performance for a large audience (the members of the congress).