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*“PROYECTO BUENOS AIRES”*

Frequently in our lives, we plant a seed not knowing if or how it will grow, hoping for bounty and beauty. We do what we know to nurture its growth, but must leave much to chance and contingency, and wait to see what fruit our efforts might bear us. This is the story of a seed I have planted, and how it grew.

My story begins in Lima, Peru in January 2005, where I attended the XX Festival Suzuki as a teacher trainee. I was the only *gringa* in my violin book 10 class, aside from our teacher trainer, Doris Preucil. Both Doris and myself were moved and impressed by the dedication, passion, caliber, and talent of my classmates. In addition to sharing music, ideas, and laughter with violin teachers from Colombia, Perú, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile, I also met many teacher trainees of other instruments. I became good friends with one in particular, a flute teacher named Fernando Formigo, who lives and teaches in a small mountain town in Patagonia, Argentina called San Martín de los Andes.

PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA, USA APRIL- SEPTEMBER, 2005

Following my two weeks in Lima, Fernando and I exchanged occasional e-mail messages, and at some point in April he mentioned that he was undertaking to raise 8,000 *pesos* (approximately \$3,000) in order to take his students to an upcoming Suzuki Festival, to be held in October 2005 in Buenos Aires. My first thought was, “wow, that’s so amazing! I’ll have to send him \$100.” Several thoughts later, I wondered how on earth, in an economy still recovering from the 2001 devaluation of the Argentine *peso*, he would manage to accomplish this in 6 short months. One sleepless night, I decided I would not send him the \$100, but instead use it to help him raise the funds here in the US and Canada. Then and there, I ‘woke’ my computer, navigated to the SAA web site, and collected e-mail addresses of every flute teacher I could locate. I wrote to this group of teachers, outlining my purpose and idea; I asked every teacher to solicit nominal moneys from each of their students, and with the proceeds to sponsor one of Fernando’s 30 students, attaching a photo he had sent me of one of his group classes, which they call “*ensemble*.”

The wholeheartedly positive response to my initial online inquiry was gratifying and inspiring, an impressive 15%. Now feeling that this little dream of mine could possibly become a happy reality, I decided it would be safe to share my idea with Fernando. His effusive gratitude both

terrified and motivated me. I am not an experienced fundraiser, and I was terrified of making a promise I could not keep, and at times it was this fear that kept me at it over the next several months. I felt that I was not doing enough if I did not knock on every door I could find. In my copy of the SAA directory, I highlighted and counted the total number of teachers, and determined that if 15 percent of the 240-plus registered teachers responded, I could raise everything Fernando and his students needed. I half jokingly named my project *Proyecto Buenos Aires*, and began the tedious process of printing, addressing, sealing, and stamping more than 200 “snail-mail” inquiries. And then, I waited on tenterhooks. Here and there, an e-mail message or a phone call from one more interested colleague served to keep my hopes up, and the project began to have it’s own shape and form. All told, I received pledges from 11 North American flute teachers who were happy to participate. To each teacher, I sent a photo and a brief letter from one Argentine flute student, with a suggested goal of raising \$100, in whatever fashion they preferred.

As I forwarded these photos and translated the letters with my rudimentary Spanish, I became more and more interested in the children, and more and more intrigued by their lives in San Martín de los Andes. At last, my emotional involvement in the project overcame me, and I determined that I would visit the town, hand deliver the proceeds of my fundraising, ride the bus 1000 miles with Fernando and his students, and attend the *Festival* with them in Buenos Aires. As I planned my adventure, my excitement grew, as did my conviction that my little project was meaningful and important, irrespective of its ultimate outcome.

SAN MARTÍN DE LOS ANDES, NEUQUEN, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA, MARCH-SEPTEMBER 2005

Over the weeks and months, Fernando recounted the highlights of their own fundraising projects, as well as all the practicing aimed toward their sojourn in Buenos Aires. More than once, they performed in a local *Galeria* of shops, taking in up to \$40 in an hour of playing. A very successful bingo game at the local casino brought in six times that amount. In an even larger project, they brought in *Puente Celeste*, a well-known world-music group, from Buenos Aires, adding the proceeds from this concert to their coffers. Most impressive of all, Fernando and a handful of parents and adult students organized the *IVth Encuentro Internacional de Vientistas*, a three-day festival of performances and presentations ranging from Tango Flute to Digeridoo to Sikus (the indigenous Andean flute constructed of cane) , bringing in representatives from all across Argentina and Chile. The work to put on this *encuentro* was gargantuan: advertising, bringing in presenters, and preparing and serving food for all of the 180 participants.

For six months, 30 students of all ages met every Friday to prepare their ensemble pieces. In the absence of a piano accompanist, Fernando himself arranged more advanced second and third parts to many of the book 1 and 2 pieces. They also prepared the Boismortier a minor concerto for five flutes. As he outlined to me later, the first challenge was to organize the group, establish the routine of regular rehearsals, and convince everyone of the importance of their individual contribution. In this small, isolated mountain town, there is only one Flute teacher, only two Suzuki teachers, and only one ensemble of its kind. It is not difficult to imagine the sometimes Sysuphusian battle of gaining and maintaining support for such an ambitious project in such a new climate. It is to every parent and student's credit that they remained open to the entire undertaking, and pursued it with such perseverance and dedication!

SAN MARTÍN DE LOS ANDES, OCTOBER 2005

The town of San Martín de los Andes (commonly referred to as SMA and not to be confused with San Martín, a suburb of Buenos Aires) is breathtaking. Situated in a valley at one end of a meandering glacial lake, *Lago Lacar*, with the dramatic backdrop of the Andes visible from every angle, it is a place that inspires daydreams of staying there forever. There are no stop signs, and no neon signs, no billboards, and no buildings over three stories high. The predominant architectural style favors that of the Swiss Alps, lending great charm to the already exquisite setting. I had arrived in spring, and the newness of the season added to the excitement of my unprecedented visit and the upcoming trip to Buenos Aires.

My reception in SMA was equally breathtaking. While I have always known that the teaching I do impacts my students positively, I have never been made so keenly aware of the meaningfulness of my actions to others. Here, I felt like royalty, as I was treated to homemade pizza and *empanadas*, taken on excursions in the mountains and on the lake, and offered an apartment to live in for my week-long stay. The children were equally warm and receptive, asking all manner of endearing and surprising questions about California, my students, the English language, and all of them so eager to play their flutes for me, to share and communicate through music. Hearing them play, it seemed to me that joy was everywhere. As I observed lessons and classes, enjoyed typical Argentine meals, and chatted in my comically bad Spanish, I began to fully understand just how important this trip was to each and every student and parent involved.

Fernando is one of many music teachers who teach in the *Escuela de Musica*, a largish house converted for the purposes of private lessons as well as various types of ensembles and theory

classes. One evening, I was energetically interviewed by three teachers, who were very interested in the music education system here in the States. I was surprised and impressed to learn that in Argentina, public music schools, although separate from regular public schools, are funded by the province, and students attend these schools free of charge. What a perfect environment for the ideals of the Suzuki Method -- *all* children *can* learn to play an instrument, without a financial sacrifice for their families!

At this time, there is no violin teacher in SMA or its environs (nor has there ever been), and I was invited to play for three schools, a newly established private music school for children under 9 years old, a small rural school in the town of Meliquina with no music program at all, and a private arts-oriented school where Fernando's 11 year-old daughter is enrolled. At each school, my instrument and I were warmly and enthusiastically received, and the children were fascinated, many of them seeing and hearing a violin for the first time. Fernando later commented to me, "To the people here, I am Flute; you, Violin." Music is such an integral, central part of their culture, and of human nature, and yet instruments like the violin and flute, that we here take for granted, are rare and cherished, as are opportunities to study them.

In addition to the very important purpose of giving his students the opportunity to attend a festival and be exposed to other teachers, other students and other instruments, one major purpose of the trip to the Buenos Aires Festival was for Fernando himself to give a workshop presenting his ideas and experiences as a Suzuki flute teacher to other interested flute teachers new to the method. A significant component of this workshop was to allow the workshoppers to observe Fernando teaching his students, to see the method in action, and to enjoy firsthand the results of his teaching. Not only is his flute program unique to San Martin de los Andes, it is unique to Argentina, and possibly all of Latin America. As our departure date neared, I began to sense an added urgency and focus in his efforts to prepare for the trip: this was monumentally important not only to the children, but also to my friend and colleague -- as a teacher and as a unique representative of the Suzuki community, philosophy and method.

ON THE BUS, OCTOBER 10-11, 2005

The morning of our departure was sunny and cool, with a wind coming off the lake. As we waited for our bus to pull in, entire families -- parents, siblings, and grandparents -- arrived to see their flutists off to the capital. A sense of adventure and anticipation came over me as I watched the family groupings waiting together and observed the excitement of the children. Somehow, we all managed to check our luggage and settle ourselves on the bus. These buses are like none I'd ever seen, with fully reclining seats, movies, and hot meals. I had had horrific

visions of bumping tortuously along in a school bus, and this was superior in comfort to an airplane. I had also spent a lot of time wondering how the students would entertain themselves for the 20-hour ride through the highlands and across the Argentine desert. I should not have worried. After perhaps an hour, when simply looking out through the windows provided no more excitement, the instruments began to come out of their cases, and music full of eager delight filled the bus. Just as I had been earlier at their school, I was again enchanted by the joy with which all the flutists played their instruments, young and old, beginner and advanced, coming together to connect on their journey and to pass the time.

Later, sitting next to an adult student, Iris, I asked her about her flute studies. An artist and a former volleyball player, Iris was raised in SMA on a berry farm. She had taken a few flute lessons years before, but hadn't connected with her teacher. With Fernando, she has been studying for about a year, and is clearly blossoming as an amateur musician. When I asked her what her thoughts were regarding the trip and the Festival, she responded with a shrug and a smile, "I am like a child." She did not know what to expect, and wanted to remain open to the possibilities.

Hours later, flutes packed safely back in their cases, many of the younger children heading towards slumber, our seemingly wonderful bus broke down. A clamor of young voices erupted into the darkness at this turn of events. After multiple unsuccessful attempts to quiet the excited children, I told them I would play my violin if they would only try to be quiet. The silence was immediate and magical. I started with Brahms' Waltz from book 2, and then his famous Lullaby, trying to still the energy on the bus. After each piece, they applauded and I encouraged them to clap silently, gently tapping their fingers to their thumb. It may have only been 20 minutes, but it seemed to me I played for hours, anything I could pull out of my dusty memory, to a hushed group of children, in the darkness of night without lights, four hours away from any town, stranded on the infamous Argentine *pampas*. Much to our surprise and consternation, we were still there the next morning, after a restless night. While waiting in the cool morning for our relief bus, the other passengers, parents and I were treated to an early concert and a group class. If not for the flute, we would not have been there in the first place, but if not for the flutes we had with us, we would not have weathered the 12 hour delay nearly so well.

BUENOS AIRES, OCTOBER 11-14, 2005

We arrived to our destination 11 hours late, tired, hot and dirty, falling into our beds after the long journey. Unfortunately, Fernando and his students had missed the entire first day of the four they were scheduled to spend at the festival. This, however, made the remaining three

days that much more meaningful, and much was accomplished. The ensemble performed an outstanding mini-concert on the following day, and while Fernando presented his workshop, many of the students had master classes with Gerry Carey. I was able to sit in on some of both, and both were well worth all of the effort. The workshop participants were impressed by and interested in the Suzuki Method, and clearly enjoyed the presentation as well as the performance. Gerry's remarks and manner with the students were warm, interested and encouraging, and they clearly benefitted from the first outside input most of them had ever received. In a particularly moving moment, one bright and spunky young student was brought to tears by the transformation he heard in his own sound. Watching the children respond to and absorb everything that was new and exciting to them was almost like being one of them myself.

The first evening saw dinner and a group class in the courtyard of their hostel; the second evening was all too sadly my last in Argentina. On the rooftop deck of our host and hostess, both Suzuki cello teachers in Buenos Aires, I observed one last *ensemble* rehearsal, ate one last *empanada*, sipped one last glass of Argentine wine. As the evening wore on, a violin teacher trainee from Cordoba treated us to a beautiful concert of solo Bach, and I offered an imperfect but heartfelt farewell performance of *Zieguenerweisen*. As I kissed and hugged each new friend goodbye, I wondered why I was not sobbing, my heart felt so full of love and wonder. And I realized that, contrary to my intentions, I had gained more than I had given. I knew I might never see any of these wonderful people again, and that was a great loss, but I had been offered the ultimate gift of being unconditionally welcomed into their hearts and their world, all from one small moment of inspiration. My little seed was already bearing fruit.

PALO ALTO, NOVEMBER 2005: "WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?"

I have always admired the eloquence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and while technically speaking his concerns are not our concerns, I believe it is fitting to quote him here, for his famous question is always relevant. Like Dr. King, Dr. Suzuki had a dream, a vision of forming connections across artificial boundaries and borders, a vision of elevating the spirit of his people and of humankind, and a vision of a better world tomorrow for the children of today. And in my own small corner of the garden, I am growing my own small vision: that one day, every Suzuki student in North America will have a fast friend in another country, and that every Suzuki teacher will have a strong, joyful, and reciprocal relationship with a foreign colleague, and that when they finally meet, they will recognize and know one another first and foremost through their music. It is often the gift of music that draws us to one another; may it be music too that keeps us together.

Where do we go from here? Many places, I hope. Many towns, many bus rides, many *proyectos*, many festivals. There are enthusiastic, loving, talented Suzuki teachers all across Latin America, I have seen them with my own eyes. And because of these special individuals, there are many more lovely young musicians growing in their teachers' care. But there is also much work to be done before we can consider our Suzuki Association to be "of the Americas," truly and equally. If one small, solitary seedling can grow and bear us fruit, why should we not cultivate an entire garden, even an orchard? As I see it, the possibilities of where we go from here are limitless.

In closing, I think it is important to emphasize that this project was entirely a homegrown endeavor, not backed by any recognized or official organization, and that the level of trust required by those who took part, to send money to a complete stranger is huge. Together, we raised \$1000, or one third of the necessary funds, thankfully making my story a "success story." My gratitude to all who contributed is immeasurable; it was my honor and privilege to represent each and every one of you in San Martín de los Andes and in Buenos Aires. I would like to formally recognize the following wonderful teachers and their students, without whom my seed would never have pushed through the soil: Kelly Williamson (Quebec), Virginia Thigpen (California), Tricia Snell (Oregon), Karen Perkins (Utah), Junie Turner (Florida), Eleanor Farjeon (Colorado), Joyce Davis and the Suzuki Music School, Inc. (Indiana), Vicki Blechta (Ontario), and Sasha Garver (Colorado). I envisioned and planted the seed, but you covered it with warm earth, watered it, provided nutrients and sunlight, and gave it the chance to grow. Some plants live only for a year or a season, others become great trees, capable of outliving us, bestowing their fruit upon generation after generation. My fervent hope is that this will prove to be the latter.