Violin

Buried Treasure: The Genius of Past Pedagogues

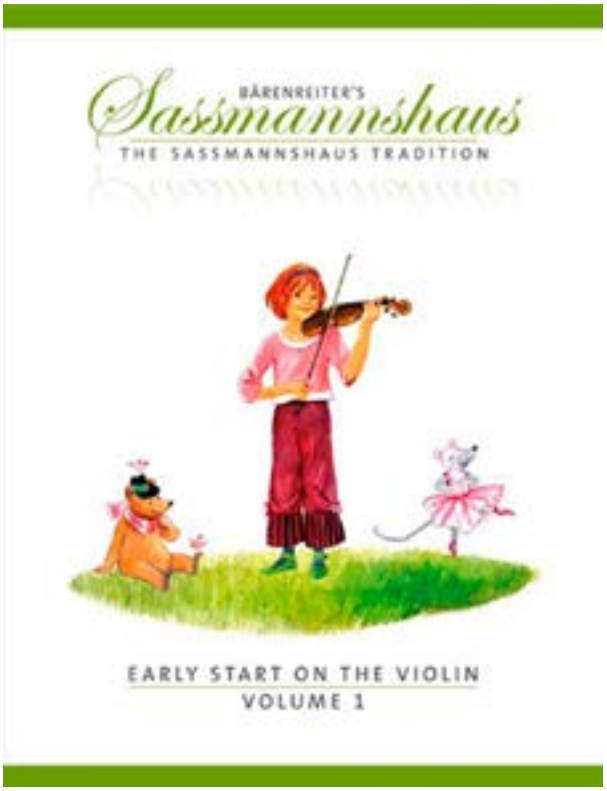
Part 2: Egon & Kurt Sassmannshaus

by Katie Gustafson

In the fall 2020 issue of *String Notes*, I embarked on a mission to research the work of prominent violin pedagogues for our readers. In this issue, I will explore the Sassmannshaus method which rose to prominence in Germany in the late 20th century and has begun growing in popularity in other countries as well. Egon Sassmannshaus was a German violinist who developed innovative instructional methods for young children. His method books and teaching strategies rose in prominence throughout German-speaking countries, until his son, Kurt, eventually translated them into English. Kurt Sassmannshaus is now a renowned pedagogue in his own right, teaching at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. He also developed a website for violin tutorials called violinmasterclass.com, which features short videos on focused elements of violin technique and skill development.

The Sassmannshaus method book series has four volumes, and is best known for being a method for young beginners that emphasizes note reading from the very start. It is recommended particularly for ages 4-10, and has colorful illustrations and large print notes in Volume 1 to make it attractive and easy to read. It also provides simple lyrics to each tune so that it can be sung prior to playing. This not only helps the children learn the music more easily, but also systematically ties ear training into the practice routine. It is worth noting, that the range of notes covered in some songs might not fit comfortably within the vocal range of many young children (or some teachers, for that matter). However, in most cases, the lyrics would still be a helpful resource.

Volume 1 devotes a fair amount of time to open string playing and string crossings, allowing time for the student to develop a strong stance and right arm technique before introducing the left hand. When the left hand is eventually introduced, it begins with the second finger, and soon after, the fourth. The reasoning for this is to capitalize on the frequent use of thirds and triads in children's folk songs. Since a child's ear will recognize those intervals easily, it is a natural choice for introducing left hand fingering. The introduction of new fingers and new notes happens very gradually, giving ample time for the child to master each new skill.



One interesting choice the author made was to emphasize finger patterns more than key signatures. String method books often address the two together, but more typically we see an introduction of the key, and then an explanation of how the key dictates the finger patterns. In the Sassmannshaus method, it is reversed. The units are introduced as "Open string is the tonic," or "Third finger is tonic," which leads to a particular finger pattern. After the student practices the finger patterns, the relevant key signatures and scales are eventually introduced. One can debate the merits of each option, but a strong case can be made for the value of "experience before theory." That is, allowing a student to experience a new skill aurally and kinesthetically before explaining the theory behind it.

Another noteworthy feature of the Sassmannshaus method is that he encourages teachers to introduce higher positions at a young age. In Volume 2, the music is specifically written so that different units can be relearned in second or third position. Because the students have already learned the tunes, the transition to the new position is much smoother. The earlier emphasis on finger patterns also is helpful in higher positions, providing a visible and tangible guide for students to follow as they find notes in new places.

Because students spend a considerable time Volume 2, Sassmannshaus provides supplemental literature in Volume 3, to be used in tandem with Volume 2. All of the repertoire is organized by finger pattern, so that the teacher can easily choose complimentary pieces that will reinforce the finger patterns being learned in Volume 2. Volumes 3 and 4 also introduce new intermediate material such as more keys, rhythms, bow skills, ornaments, shifting practice, double and triple stops, and more repertoire.

Some consider the Sassmannshaus method an alternative to the Suzuki method because it emphasizes note-reading from the beginning, but it could easily be seen as a complement to Suzuki for the same reason. The introduction of new skills happens at a similarly gradual pace, and like Suzuki, Sassmannshaus encourages teachers to review old repertoire for the purposes of refining technique and even introducing new skills like position work. A Suzuki teacher might find this method helpful when they are ready to introduce a student to note reading.

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Teachers who chose this as a primary method for their students might want to investigate supplementary materials for music theory. There is very little time devoted to explaining music theory elements, and no time at all to counting rhythms.

One other small item of note: there are a few instances where symbols or terms are different than we see in most methods. For example, instead of using a flying comma for a bow lift, this method introduces lifts with the up-bow symbol in parentheses (V). This is a helpful way to explain a bow lift, but the comma is never introduced, even in later volumes with more advanced literature. They also choose to use a plus sign + to indicate where mordents or other ornaments should be played, instead of the usual symbols. This could cause some confusion when a student encounters other literature where the + is meant to indicate left hand pizzicato. These small issues could easily be addressed by the teacher but are worth knowing about.

Most of the information in this review was drawn from the four volumes in the method book series, and the website www.violinmasterclass.com. If you are interested in learning a few pearls of pedagogical wisdom from Egon's son Kurt Sassmannshaus, I strongly recommend the blog series about him on www.violinist.com by editor Laurie Niles. In her series, she reports on his lectures from the 2019 Starling-Delay Symposium on Violin Studies at Juilliard. This resource would be particularly helpful for teachers of intermediate and advanced students.

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