

KATA AS MUSIC. By Dr. Wolf Herbert.

I started Karate when I was 15 years of age, JKA at the time, earned my shodan under Sugimura-shihan, when I was 19 (after failing once, which was the most important experience in my life!). I was active until I was 28, running a dojo, competing etc.... Family, professional career and political squabbles among Karate organizations compelled me to just get some distance from Karate (organizations!) and I did not go to a dojo for a long time, although I never quit Karate in my heart and I kept training my body, calisthenics, muscles, kicks etc. I went to see Kanazawa soke 8 years ago in the Honbu-dojo after not having seen him for around 20 years (he was kind of my mentor in the 1980s). Not only did he remember all kinds of things in incredible detail, he asked me to open a branch for the SKIF in Tokushima, since he had no branch on this island (Shikoku). That is why I run the dojo, without Soke's backing I would never have thought of it.

"Without music, life would be a mistake."

This is arguably one of the most well known quotes or quips attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche. Now, Rick Hotton, whom I unfortunately never met in person, likes to refer to music when he explains certain points concerning the execution of Karate techniques. Coming from a family of musicians this immediately struck a chord in me. Hotton's aesthetic code in his movements is the implosive relaxation after building up high tension. This does not only make every sense physiologically; it is also very beautiful to watch. Personally it was the beauty of the moves in a Karate Kata that attracted me to it in the first place.

Before I started Karate I trained in apparatus gymnastics, which I loved for its elegance and visual appeal. When I was fifteen years of age I saw a Karate Kata performed live before my eyes for the first time. It was demonstrated by Sugimura



Author, Wolf Herbert (centre) and students in his dojo in Tokushima, Japan.

Koichi in such a smooth and still powerful way that was completely captivating. I gave up gymnastics and started to train Karate practically the following day.

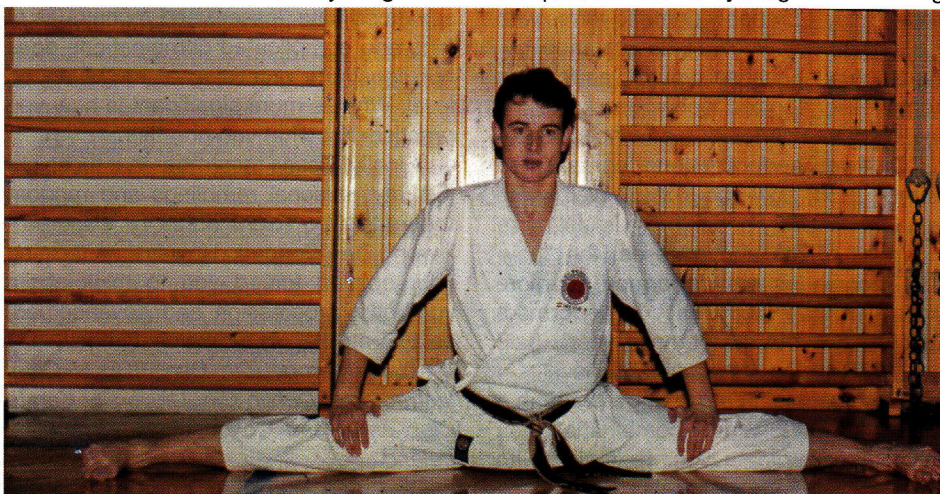
But let's go back to music. I also played the violin which I ultimately gave up too in favour of Karate. However, playing the violin taught me that it is constant and daily exercise that leads to progress and the ability to play the instrument. The very same goes for mastering (a) Karate (Kata) and it is also true for the practice of basic techniques (kihon). It is like going through the scales in music. Diligence through constant work and discipline are the virtues you acquire by learning an instrument as well as by learning Karate.

In classical music you have a sheet from which to play the music. The notation tells you which note to play and annotations give a space for personal interpretation. Everything concerning

a performance of written music can be transferred to a Kata. The notation, in the case of the Kata consists of the set pattern of movements it requires to be performed correctly. Annotations in music inform you about the volume of the sound you want to make and goes from pp (pianissimo) to ff (fortissimo). You can also play with fat vibrato or very straight in baroque style. In analogy to the Kata it is how much force (kime) you put into every technique and this can go from very relaxed to extreme tension of the whole body for one instant. In music *rallentando* or *rubato* leave it to your discretion to slow down or expressively quicken or slacken the tempo. This allows for personal rendition and interpretation.

Murakami Manabu Shihan 8th Dan, a senior instructor of SKIF, who by the way is a remarkably good Karaoke-crooner, likes to illustrate the personal expression given to a Kata by its performer to singing. In Karaoke, the same song will sound different depending on the person who sings it. It is not only the colour of the voice that differs from human being to human being but more so the expression and emotion that goes into the interpretation of the song. This is true for the performance of a Kata as well. Or as Rick Hotton puts it: *"Horowitz (is) not playing the piano, Horowitz is playing Horowitz using the piano ..."* In Karate our instrument is the body, thus we should express our individuality through it.

There are pieces of music or composers we particularly like or dislike for that matter. It's a matter of taste, predilection, deep inner resonance or a spontaneous being in accord with a melodic line. Likewise there



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are Kata which suit us well and others which make us feel gauche and are hard to perform. Everybody has their favourite Kata, which they make their tokui. i.e. speciality. These preferences may and do change over ones lifetime. In the world of music many virtuosi specialise on a period of time, a geographical region or specific composers and mainly perform pieces accordingly.

There is one story in this respect, which deeply struck me. It is in a YouTube clip about the last public recital of Nathan Milstein in Stockholm in July 1986. At the time he was 82 years old and he had played professionally since the very early age of ten. He was reciting Ludwig van Beethoven, Violin Sonata Op. 47 No. 9, the "Kreutzer Sonata". This Sonata is one of the most beautiful masterpieces in the piano and violin literature, but also one of the most difficult. Nobody knew that it would be his last interpretation of the "Kreutzer". Shortly afterwards he had an accident afflicting his left hand, which ended his long career. The commentator in the clip made an invaluable remark: "Nathan Milstein has known the 'Kreutzer' for nearly seventy years and has never lost his passion for it!"

In a flash I thought: That's it! That is exactly what makes a great and real musician, and a real Karateka too! Never lose the passion for your favourite piece of music or Kata, even after decades of "knowing" it. Having this kind of passion allows you to hone and shine and polish your music or your Kata during your whole lifetime. And it will always be new and fresh, regardless of being the same "old" set pattern. Moreover exercise or training will never be boring. There are always new things to discover, to refine or reform. Indeed, working on e.g. the Heian Kata over and over again never loses its excitement.



"Everybody has their favourite kata, their tokui, their speciality." (Photo By Yoko Kubokura).



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Nowadays the technical level – in classical music as well as in Olympic Karate – has become enormously high. It is all about perfection. Every child prodigy plays a showpiece like Ravel's "Tsigane" technically absolutely flawlessly. But they sound almost eerily the same!

The same can be said of Olympic Kata performance. It is perfect, machine-like, with scant personal expression. Expression only comes in the distorted form of exaggerated grimacing and an excessively prolonged shouting of the kiai. Distortions can also be seen in regard to rhythm: in Olympic Kata endless pauses are made, followed by – forgive my expression – spastic explosions. The fast movements come in a sharp staccato, slow moves are relentlessly dragged out resulting in an unnecessary overdramatization. It is all for show and show effects.



*"Kanazawa Soke asked me to open a dojo in Tokushima."
(Photo By Yoko Kubokura, SKIF-Headquarters 2011).*

empty. It is soulless.

In order to perform a Kata vividly and decisively, you should know the meaning of every move and how it could be applied in a confrontation with an opponent. It might be a bit of a stretch of the analogy to music, but knowledge in music is also helpful. To know in which epoch a piece has been composed, what its genre is and at which occasions it was originally performed (think of a missa (Mass), minuet or a march) or what the intention or mood of the composer was, when he was creating the piece, can help to render it with the right expression.

For musicians all of the above are essential considerations in making a personal interpretation. And like every piece of music has its own soul, so does every Kata. They may have been created with a certain objective or just in order to delight us. Kata are works of art – body art in its true sense of the word.

It is everything about the soul or heart of a Kata – or "essence" as John Cheetham puts it, if I understand him correctly. The soul or quintessence of a musical composition or a Kata reveals itself to us only after long practice. The time we learn a new Kata we might break it up to remember the single moves and turns. This is the phase, when we may cling to the one or other detail. But once

we have mastered the basic pattern and memorized the complete sequence we should exercise the Kata as a whole repeatedly without command and in different tempi. We should perform the whole piece in order to find our very own rhythm and expression.

The Kata will – as a phrase in German puts it – *"seep into our flesh and blood"*. At this stage the soul of the Kata can be grasped – or rather will grasp us – viscerally and spiritually. The Kata will get a gestalt, it will then always be more than the sum of its parts. And this gestalt or entelechy will be present in form of a subtle perception of the whole (Kata) during its performance – from the start to the end and beyond. With the opening move the whole Kata becomes present in your consciousness like the whole flower is already present in its seed. The Kata thus unfolds naturally and with this specific gracious flow which I ascribed to masters Kanazawa or Asai above. Personally I can only aspire to come close to their level, but their embodiment of the soul of a Kata enables me to visualize where the path leads to. I believe that we should perform our Kata like singing a song, with our own voices. Although I do not believe in the Christian concept of God – we can readily replace the term with cosmic order or power – this is a neat quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

"A man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul."

For us Karateka I would like to add: *"And perform a little Kata ...!"*

If in comparison you looked at the Kata performed by e.g. Kanazawa Hirokazu or Asai Tetsuhiko: they have a rhythmical accentuation but there is a constant flow. They have a Gestalt and a distinct personal flavour! I think, the performance of a Kata should resemble Taijiquan rather than Hip-Hop-dancing.

Hopefully this is not an old man's view, but I have an ally in John Cheetham, who has stated quite the same in his article "Expression over Precision" (Shotokan Karate Magazine Issue 127, April '16, p. 18). I am in total agreement with his observations: *"When I watch a lot of the kata now, either live or on YouTube, it's obvious that the majority are overly obsessed with the details, to the detriment of intention. Which is why so many kata look robotic! ... the general performance of kata has changed so drastically during the past 30/40 years. Nowadays, to me, they all look the same. And that is no exaggeration, be it Japanese, German, Italian or whatever nationality. Whereas 30/40 years ago every top kata performer were totally different in style, presentation and interpretation. Osaka's kata, Yahara's kata, Frank Brennan's kata and many more had a real style of their own."*

I think this is due to their grasp of the inner meaning of the Kata and its execution as an embodiment thereof. They see Kata as an artistic tool for self-expression rather than a technical exercise. That is why something remains in the air, after they have finished their Kata. There is a reverberation or aura that lingers on, something that touches us and touches upon the Platonic idea of beauty. The aftertaste of a perfectionist "Olympic" performance of a Kata in comparison is bland and vapid. It vanishes like vapour and leaves us in momentary awe, but



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