

## Sprezzatura Assembly

Welcome back to you all. I hope that you have had a wonderful break and that you return full of optimism, enthusiasm and energy. In particular, I would like to extend a warm welcome to those who join us in the Thirds and the Fourths. We look forward to your contribution to our community; each one of you has something unique and special to bring to Merchant Taylors' School. Each one of you is extraordinarily talented; I hope that you find ways to express your talent both in the classroom and beyond it.

For those, slightly more experienced members of the school, I offer an equally warm welcome back. This New Year will bring fresh challenges and new excitements - I hope that you seize every opportunity in the months ahead.

And it has certainly been an eventful summer break. In the weeks since we last gathered there has been much to celebrate. I hope that you, as I did, thoroughly enjoyed the Olympic Games. Team GB showed the world the talent and determination that characterise our islands. Our athletes put on a magnificent showing to finish second in the medals table. We should celebrate that, but even more importantly, the spirit in which they approached the games and the manner in which they supported each other were a credit to our nation.

Speaking of highly achieving young people, who approached a difficult task with exactly the right spirit of determination, ambition and resilience, we had our own high performers in the A level and GCSE examinations. The current Lower Sixth can look back on their GCSEs with a great deal of satisfaction. This year the boys have slightly improved upon last year's high standards.

We were able to scoop up the top grades: half the year group did not fall below an A grade in any of their subjects.

50% were awarded 7 or more A\* GCSE grades, and most of that number did even better - 44% achieved 8 or more A\* grades and nearly 30% could add a ninth A\* to that tally. It is very difficult to achieve the consistently high standards that bring in a clean sweep of 10 A\* grades: we are very pleased that that 24 pupils – nearly a fifth of the year group - hit that height (Clap).

Our A Level students have left us for their universities, but in their absence we should also recognise their great achievement. With 10 students achieving 4 or more A\* grades, we equalled our highest ever figure, set in 2012. At 31%, the percentage achieving A\* grades is on track to be our second best ever. 67% of exam entries were awarded A\* or A grades.

And whilst everyone was recovering over the summer break from the exertions of last year, there has been a great deal of activity at the school to make some improvements for your return. I hope you will appreciate what the Bursar and his support staff have done for us. The toilets in the Music Department have been refurbished; the sound and lighting here in the Great Hall had been upgraded; the Lun has been developed into an attractive coffee shop with a wonderful new menu. Finally, I hope you enjoy your refurbished, impressive new Dining Hall. If you do appreciate any of these developments, please pass your thanks on to the Bursar and his team as you see them around the school.

So today we should look forward to the year ahead, encouraged by a great deal of satisfaction in the achievements of the year that has passed. In preparing this assembly I thought hard about what I would wish for you.

I wanted to find just one or two words to place before you as guide and perhaps even as a sort of mantra. Those who have long memories may recall that I have shared an enthusiasm for words in previous assemblies. I must get round to picking out words in the English language, as up to this point I have mainly focused upon foreign words that are of interest or value.

In previous word assemblies, I shared the following interesting words from other languages: (Japanese) **tsuji-giri**, meaning.... 'to try out a new sword on a passer-by.' An interesting concept but hardly a verb that I would wish you to be inspired by. I have also previously mentioned **neko-neko**, Indonesian for.... 'someone who has a creative idea which only makes things worse.' This is also a nonstarter - this year I wish that you are able to improve things with your creativity. Finally, there is the verb **Tingo**. From the Pascuense language of Easter Island it means.... "to borrow objects from a friend's house, one by one, until there's nothing left." That won't work either - at MTS we work together in friendship rather than against each other.

Finally, I hit upon a word from another language that I feel I can recommend to you. It is a word invented by the Italian writer Castiglione for *The Book of the Courtier*, which he wrote at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *The Book of the Courtier* was a sort of instruction manual on how to impress at a royal court. It was translated into English in 1561, a suitably auspicious date for our school – it rapidly became *the* book on how to be a gentleman and was hugely influential. So what was the word? It is "sprezzatura". What does it mean? Well, it is pretty close to untranslatable: certainly there is no one word equivalent.

Sprezzatura is defined by the Castiglione as "a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all hard work and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it". Nonchalance isn't right – that suggests that the calmness is because one doesn't care, but with sprezzatura one does care, one just doesn't want to *seem* it. Here is a better definition: sprezzatura is the ability of the courtier to display "an easy skill in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them".

This has become one of the characteristics of a gentleman – to do difficult things with an easy grace that does not show the effort that went into the mastery of the skill, whatever it is. A kind of casual brilliance. So to approach life with sprezzatura is to be able to perform a task with fluency and style.

It is to be able to play music with easy grace and expression, it is to be able to pull off a difficult manoeuvre on the sports field or a tricky speech on the stage. It is a certain style in public and a way of carrying yourself to make an impression. We have no equivalent in English – 'cool', 'stylish', 'classy', even 'gentlemanly' do not quite cut it. In French, 'panache' is almost right, but it is a little too showy; 'elan' is good, but a little too energetic. The idea I am describing is all about elegance and a certain grace.

In summary, Castiglione tells us that if the courtier wants to attain grace – *grazia* - and be esteemed excellent, it would be in his best interest to have this appearance of easy style. By applying *sprezzatura* to his speech and everything else he does, the courtier appears to have *grazia* and impresses his audience, thereby achieving excellence and perfection.

Now, I suggest we make sprezzatura our goal this year. In all that we do, but especially in speech and personal presentation, I would like us to operate with a calm and easy grace. Whether in the orchestra or the 1<sup>st</sup> team, whether in writing for The Dependent or in performing in Faustus, whether giving a tour of the school or answering a question in class, let us do it with an easy elegance that does not show the effort that went into mastering the skill.

And let us present ourselves in a similar fashion, smartly and without ostentation. You cannot have sprezzatura if your shirt is hanging out or your top button is undone – whatever it is that you look like, it isn't a gentleman. We will have none of that and we will make presentation a focus for the term ahead and the year ahead. Your teachers will ask you to meet the high standards of the school, and I expect you to please them.

Whether in the school, or travelling to and from it, I will expect you to meet superb standards of personal presentation and behaviour – in order to present yourselves as the gentlemen you are.

We had a great year last year – I look forward to an even better one this year. And this year we are going to do it with even more style.