

# 1989 to Present My Experiences as a Suzuki Voice Teacher in Central Wisconsin

by [Mary Hofer](#)



Mary Hofer directing during the monthly marathon, 2009

I realize how much my life has been affected by all of the wonderful people I have met while learning and teaching Suzuki Voice, and I am very grateful. One day my former students Daniel and Anna called me to have lunch with them while they were home from college on their holiday breaks. They live an hour away but still they wanted to visit with me and I felt honored. When I returned from lunch, there was a card in my mail from the parents of Karl, a Suzuki voice student of mine who graduated three years ago. Recently I went to a birthday party for the father of another one of my students, Johanna, who graduated five years ago. That evening, I had coffee with Sheila, one of my students who graduated two years ago. She was to leave soon to spend a semester in India!

It has always seemed so natural to combine the teaching of voice with the ideals of the Suzuki philosophy. Singing is an extension of speech and a natural to almost every human being.

My longtime voice teacher and mentor Marjorie Kampenga loved all of the different voices she was teaching. She always worked hard to find music that suited each of those unique voices and personalities. Her approach—her love of the human voice and the art of music—continues to inspire me daily. From Mrs. Kampenga, I inherited my belief that all children have the ability and the right to learn to sing well. Later, the fact that this very belief is embedded in the Suzuki philosophy has continued to impress me profoundly. While we are not all blessed with a Stradivarius instrument, we have all been endowed with a voice which can be a means of communication and self-expression. In his book *Nurtured by Love*, the parents bring their child to Dr. Suzuki and ask him if the child will amount to anything. “No, but he will become something ...,” replied Dr. Suzuki. “... he will become a noble person through his violin playing.” (Suzuki, 1969, p. 25).

All of my former students are fine human beings, and I believe the Suzuki philosophy played an important part in their development. As a Suzuki voice teacher and parent I have learned much and continue to marvel at the wonders of such a simple yet demanding method.

## My History with Suzuki Method

I was first attracted to the Suzuki program in 1985. I was teaching elementary music (preschool through grade eight), and I had students who took Suzuki violin lessons and also excelled in academic studies. I found this very interesting. Then my sister started her son in Suzuki Violin lessons when he was three years old. I began to hear about what was happening in his weekly lessons. Soon I met my school children’s Suzuki violin instructor

Patricia D’Ercole, who encouraged me to create a Suzuki voice program. Ms. D’Ercole went to Finland and observed Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki’s voice program and brought back a video of it for me.



Dr. Kukkamäki and Mary Hofer, 1997



Students with Mary Hofer and Dr. Kukkamäki, 2006 Teacher Training

Then I went to see Margery Aber, the founder of the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point Suzuki program. Ms. Aber encouraged me to begin a voice program and introduced me to Dee Martz, the director of the UWSP Suzuki Program. Mrs. Martz encouraged me to audit Ms. D’Ercole’s Suzuki teacher training and observe several Suzuki instructors at the American Suzuki Institute—Kyoko Fuller, Alice Joy Lewis, Kay Sloan and several others. As a result of these observations, my bachelor’s degree in music, my experiences teaching music to elementary school children, my experiences teaching private lessons, plus my background in performance and the private voice lessons I continued to take, I felt ready to begin a Suzuki Voice program. Professor Emeritus Marjorie Kampenga, my voice instructor and long-time mentor, also encouraged me to begin the program.

In 1989, two years after Dr. Kukkamäki began her program in Finland, she sent me a copy of her Suzuki Voice program with ten young children ranging in age from three years to nine years. Students attended individual and group lessons. Parents attended the lessons and practiced with their children at home. Students also attended a monthly Saturday morning group class.

Some of my goals were and continue to be:

- To use the Suzuki philosophy as a means of teaching voice. The need to express one’s self using the human voice instrument is rooted in basic primal sounds. The singing voice is an extension of the speaking voice, and, as a result, it is very natural to begin voice lessons at a very early age—prenatal, if possible. I strongly believe every child can learn to sing well.
- To help children use natural vocal production. This includes encouraging children and parents to feel comfortable singing and to use their singing voice as a means of self-expression. We do this by providing children and their families with models of healthy vocal use.

- To expose children to the world of classical and folk vocal music. As with the other areas of student study, children learn and perform a wealth of literature thereby keeping both repertoires alive. Voice students are exposed to the poetry of the texts, and they are also given the opportunity to communicate the written text and develop an understanding of many cultures. Students learn to translate songs and to sing in a variety of languages. Currently my students have learned to sing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star in Japanese, Korean, German, Hindi, Italian, Finnish and Chinese.

A booklet and audiotape of folk songs provided the first repertoire. A copy of the booklet and a tape were given to each family. Dr. Kukkamäki generously shared Suzuki Voice Books One, Two and Three with me. The books contained many folk songs known throughout the United States as well as Finnish and other international folk songs. While Book One had been translated into English, Book Two was primarily in Finnish. Fortunately, Sisko Hyvonen, a Suzuki Violin long-term teacher training student from Finland, was studying at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and she helped me translate some of the songs in Book Two from Finnish to English. In addition, with Dr. Kukkamäki's encouragement, I selected American folk songs that are an important part of our American heritage. Book Three is comprised of simple art songs from Baroque and Classical composers. As with the first three books, the developments of Levels Four and Five have benefited greatly from the collaborative assistance of teachers from around the world. I am truly grateful for this multicultural team approach to selecting repertoire for the Voice program.

Due to the unique inflections and pronunciation of each country's language, every Suzuki voice instructor must record their own listening tapes of the songs. This process can be difficult, time-consuming, and costly. Fortunately, I have an excellent, technically advanced set of parents that help me with this process—Kay and David Holz.



The first prenatal class in 1991



Dr. Kukkamäki teacher training Book 1, 2006, Stevens Point, WI

My first prenatal Suzuki Voice students began in 1991. Two families participated—moms, dads, a seven-year-old sibling, and a grandmother. The two families came together once a week to work on songs they would sing to their babies still developing in uteri. Another focus of the lessons was to help the entire family feel comfortable using their own singing voices. Once the babies were born, the families came back to weekly classes and also joined the monthly Saturday morning group classes. There were then 25 Suzuki Voice students.

I began the second baby class in 1994 with five infants ranging in age from three to five months. At this point, there were a total of 35 students ranging in age from three months to 17 years of age.

With time, the older students' advancement and changing voices were important considerations that needed to be addressed. It is crucial for a voice teacher to understand students' vocal and emotional needs. Students need

to feel comfortable with the words and ideas that they will perform. As a result, for Books IV and V, Dr. Kukkamäki, Mette Heikkinen and Suzuki Voice Teachers from around the world, have developed an extensive repertoire from which each instructor can choose songs most appropriate for their individual students' needs and interests.

In 1990, I was invited to speak at the 1990 SAA convention in San Francisco, where I met Dr. Kukkamäki for the first time. I observed her teaching, attended all of her presentations and spent time speaking with her about her program. In 1994 I met Dr. Kukkamäki again in Chicago where I did a presentation and brought several of my students to perform. In 1997, through the generous help and support of the Aber Suzuki Center, I organized and presented a workshop and invited Dr. Kukkamäki to be a presenter. She brought several of her students to Stevens Point to work and perform with all 48 of my students. We had two days of master classes and rehearsals, and then we began touring schools and performing concerts in Stevens Point, Marshfield, and Junction City, Wisconsin.

In the summer of 1998, Dr. Kukkamäki returned to Stevens Point to teach my students at the American Suzuki Institute and continue my teacher training. In 1999, 20 of my students and their parents went to Finland for two weeks. My students and Dr. Kukkamäki's students prepared individual solos and group music before gathering in Finland where each of our students performed in concert as soloists and in ensemble. In 2001, Dr. Kukkamäki again returned to Stevens Point with some of her students and our combined students performed concerts together in Madison, Wisconsin Rapids, Marshfield, and Stevens Point, Wisconsin. This exchange of music, language, culture and friendship has been extremely rewarding and valuable to all of the students—truly an example of Dr. Suzuki's belief that the sharing of cultures and music can promote worldwide peace. In October 2003, the International Suzuki Association approved the study of Suzuki Voice.

The summer of 2007 marked the 18th year of our Suzuki Voice Program at the Aber Suzuki Center of the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point.



American and Finnish voice students performing in Finland, 1999

### **My Suzuki Voice students enjoy the following opportunities:**

- Monthly recitals combine violin, viola, cello, piano and voice students. Students perform whenever they have polished their songs. The combination of instruments at these recitals gives my voice students and their parents the opportunity to experience a variety of Suzuki program instrumental and classical music. The Aber Suzuki Center has a fine staff of cello, piano, viola and violin teachers. They and their students provide support and inspiration for the Suzuki Voice program.
- Musical theatre is a very important part of American culture. Almost all of our high schools and community theaters do musical productions yearly. As a result, each year my students pick out a musical theatre song appropriate to their age and voice. They research the character and the story and they act out their songs during the performance.
- At monthly marathons, we review music from the Suzuki repertoire and supplementary group songs. Students are encouraged to sing solos they may be working on during an informal recital included in the marathon.
- Each year there are two important events combining all of the disciplines in the Aber Suzuki Center: Music of the Masters and the spring Festival Concert.
- Voice students also perform at community and charity events.
- Almost all voice students in grades 6 through 12 compete in local, district, and state school solo and ensemble contests. Each student chooses music from a list of repertoire. Students in grades 4 through 12 also compete in Wisconsin Music Teachers Association local, district, and state contests where students are required to sing three songs, each from a different time period, and take a music theory test.
- Senior high school students often choose to perform a Senior Recital to celebrate the culmination of their Suzuki experience. This is a very big commitment for each senior student as they are often members of their high school choirs and participate in the school musical and other extracurricular activities.

### **Some of the most important lessons I have learned and cherish about the Suzuki method include:**

- The importance of the parents attending each lesson is immeasurable. When a student does a small task well, the priceless look of pride in their accomplishment passes between the child and the parent.
- Camaraderie develops between parent and child when they have practiced and accomplished a task together. The look of joy is so wonderful to witness, and the sense of confidence both the student and parent feel is important.
- The naturalness of learning music by ear and repetition is incorporated into the Suzuki method and is particularly well suited to learning to sing. Over my years of teaching Suzuki Voice, I have been amazed at how quickly my students learn different languages, analyze tone quality, and catch musical nuances. I love my students' enthusiasm for going to YouTube or iTunes and listening to classical music.
- The significance of repetition and of taking time to learn are also very important Suzuki principles. Sometimes we are in such a hurry to get things completed that we forget to value of the process of learning—that daily practice and repetition are the best way to learn not just music but to also learn how to learn. The Suzuki philosophy reminds me in my teaching and in my family life to slow down and enjoy the process of learning. Suzuki is not just a method for teaching my students, but also a way of parenting my children.