

About Suzuki Voice

My Experience As A Suzuki Voice Teacher And What It Means To Me...

by Katrina Pezzimenti B.Mus. (Melb), Assoc. Dip. A. Opera (VCA)

My introduction to Suzuki Voice

As I completed Level Five Advanced accreditation in Suzuki Voice in Finland, I ponder the events which led to my becoming a Suzuki Voice teacher and head of Suzuki Voice in Australia. I was an enthusiastic singing teacher and a member of the Opera Australia Melbourne Chorus when I met Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki, the founder of Suzuki Voice. Since that time I have been to Finland three times for European Suzuki accreditation, taught students from before birth to early teens and organized Suzuki Voice teacher training in Australia.

Meeting Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki

I first decided to go to the Pan Pacific Suzuki Conference in Brisbane in January, 1997 at the suggestion of Carolyn Coxhead and the insistence of my husband that I should see if this method of teaching suited me. I had long held an interest in Suzuki philosophy and while studying voice at university in 1986, I completed part of the Suzuki Piano teaching course. My skills were far greater in singing so the piano teaching was set aside. By 1997, I was teaching singing and performing regularly. I was also a Suzuki parent with my son Lee (aged nearly five) learning piano. At the conference, I observed Päivi's enrichment singing classes and loved what I saw. She was teaching children much younger than I had ever taught. She sang naturally and without effort at class after class. I sang for her and she asked me to come to Finland. Since then it has been a most interesting experience with many highlights.

My Suzuki Philosophy

Dr Suzuki's idea of creating the right environment to enhance learning has always struck me as ingenious. It develops the whole being rather than simply studying an instrument and begins an appreciation of classical music which lasts a lifetime. The Suzuki 'mother tongue method' of learning music by listening, imitation and repetition is perfectly suited to the singer who has always learnt by ear. With Suzuki Voice I found a way to encourage good vocal habits earlier and a natural approach to vocal expression creating freer voices with less tension. Most singing teachers are used to the seventeen-year-old students beginning formal training with preconceived ideas of singing and a body often filled with tension due to their own efforts to sing. Perhaps this doesn't happen as much in instrumental teaching because it is necessary to have the instrument before learning. The voice is with us already and allowing it to be relaxed with free natural tone is an opportunity many teachers never encounter. Starting students younger allows an introduction to classical singing to both the child and the family. Some students never hear any classical music until a teacher suggests they have a good voice and perhaps they should do some exams! It can be an uphill battle starting late as many of the subtle understandings of the classical voice can be missed. The classical singing student is often well behind students of other instruments, lacking formal music skills: reading, theory knowledge, music styles. Lessons are devoted to creating the right sound and this doesn't

allow time to learn the basic skills of music. Also the need for technique “catch-up” doesn’t encourage performance practice as most students feel they are not yet good enough to perform. Positive performance experience at an early age is invaluable in gaining confidence to sing in front of people and learn the skills of entertaining.

Teaching Suzuki Voice

After my first meeting with Päivi, I went home to teach my daughter (then 2) and a group of her friends so I could learn how to teach Suzuki Voice through experience. I sent many videos of my teaching to Päivi for feedback and guidance and she was eager for me to go to Finland for more individual training and examinations. I was one of the first teachers to be examined so I had added requirements. I had to make sure the Book 2 and 3 texts were translated into singable English and I had to record my own Suzuki Book 1, 2 and 3 tapes for students to listen to. My teaching style changed and all my students benefited - even my traditional students. I learnt to describe what I wanted less and model singing more. I began to expect more and therefore was given more from my students. The love of singing was contagious and the rewards were obvious. I created more performance opportunities for all my students and requested single item concerts from one student to the next. The harmony and respect between students grew and their motivation was enhanced. I became more precise with sections I asked to be practised and encouraged parents to take more interest in the home routine.

My Travels

In 1999, following a Suzuki Pan Pacific conference in Adelaide, I went to Finland for a month leaving my two children (aged only 3 and 7) at home with their Dad while I pursued Suzuki accreditation. Despite thinking I would be observing, I taught all of Päivi’s students from about the fourth day and some of these students I taught in my examinations. Päivi gave me feedback and I adjusted my teaching accordingly. I took voice lessons with Mette Heikkinen and learnt many new skills to assist me to be a good example to my students. One of the most beneficial aspects of teaching the Finnish students (particularly in Book 1 and 2) was the need to limit verbal explanation in lessons. This was necessary due to the language barrier and I was forced to model everything far more than I had previously. One amusing situation occurred when a child even copied me scratching my head in thought...I didn’t do that again!

Each level examination consisted of teaching one group lesson and one individual lesson plus a recital in front of a panel of three European Suzuki teacher trainers. All recitals have been accompanied by piano except Level 3 which uses a six-piece instrumental ensemble. At that time I was the first person in the world to do the Level 3 teaching exam.

My second trip involved less emotional upheaval although much more organization as I took my new baby, Lucinda, and my mum with me. I taught and trained for the Level 4 teaching examination and recital. The performance requirement for teachers is an important part of Suzuki training because of the need to be a model for the student. In contrast to traditional teaching circles, the teacher’s performance and teaching skills are continually maintained and nurtured along with the students.

The Joy of Singing

What I have always enjoyed about the Suzuki philosophy is the nurturing of the family unit through teaching music. A love of singing is developed and the whole family can join in even if only one child is learning. Many students who started with me in those first classes are still learning and some are my advanced students in Level 4. Together we have had many singing highlights and strong friendships have been formed. One highlight was the 2001 Autumn Suzuki School in Melbourne (just before my second trip) when 15 of my 22 students including two babies (aged five months) attended classes with Päivi. This was the first time Suzuki students had been taught at a major conference in Australia. It gave the teachers-in-training valuable observation time. Teacher training and exams were also held prior to the conference and three new teachers were accredited to Level One – two from Australia and one from New Zealand.

Recently I attended the Western Australian Suzuki Spring Festival organized by the WA Assistant teacher trainer, Laura Bernay. Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki had been invited to teach and train teachers including four newly accepted teachers-in-training. It was an exciting event and the first time all five levels of Voice were being taught at an Australian Suzuki workshop. An advanced stream of master classes was run for the Level 4 and 5 students from Finland and WA. I was involved with teacher training and teaching. Seventeen-year-old Finnish singer, Markus Karvinen performed with orchestra in the Gala Concert and, following his Perth experience, Markus came to Melbourne to have lessons with me.

Looking further ahead, a student/teacher workshop in Melbourne in association with the Autumn School in 2005. This will involve lessons for children from around Australia as well as observation opportunities for teachers-in-training. It will also provide teacher training with Dr. Kukkamäki and, for those who have satisfactorily completed requirements, teaching examinations. This may involve teachers from countries other than Australia and it will be very exciting for us to host this event. I anticipate many new and exciting events for my students and their families and look forward to the challenge of passing on Dr Suzuki's philosophy to voice teachers and singers around the world.

Katrina Pezzimenti