

## Suzuki Voice Level 4 and Its Impact on My Teaching By Kari Weldon

In 2014, I was approached by a family with a four year old, seeking voice lessons for this child. Having taught academically for over 13 years and predominantly voice for the remaining 2 years up to this point, I realized there was a huge gap in my teaching skills. I had experience teaching small children and experience teaching voice, but I had no experience or training in teaching young children voice! This led me to explore the world of Suzuki, knowing that it was a method that was productive in training young children instruments. How excited I was to find that, indeed, voice was a viable instrument included in Suzuki and that it had been researched and proven throughout 30 years of Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki's doctoral process.

Since my acceptance into the Suzuki Voice Teacher Training program in 2015, I have been actively training and teaching Suzuki Voice for all ages. In January of 2016, I received my Level 1 Teacher's Certificate, followed by Level 2 in July of 2017 and Level 3 in April of 2019. Through my training in these 3 levels, I gained an enormous understanding of how the underdeveloped voice works, as well as how to communicate pedagogical ideas to children. Through my training and the well constructed repertoire, I have witnessed my students developing in the most natural and beautiful way in their exploration of their own voices and in appreciation of classical vocal music.

Moving into level 4 was in many ways a big leap that I did not fully understand until I began my instruction time with Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki. The program progresses from the common curriculum approach to a more personalized and individualistic focus for both teachers and students. My journey from picking music for my recital, planning a production for my students, determining repertoire that best suits my students, and more independently studying the Antique Arias has helped to broaden and deepen my approach to studying and teaching music. These tools and practices will allow me to grow and expand my studio along with the individual growth of each student.

In June of 2019, I was able to take my students to Poland where we did a series of concerts throughout the country, using music from all Suzuki levels and incorporating multiple instruments. It was a wonderful cultural experience for my students and myself as we learned Polish music and customs along the way. One of the greatest highlights was singing with the students of Suzuki Voice Teacher in Training Edyta Karska. This trip allowed her to get her studio up and going and established good relations between our two studios. For me, this trip and production experience helped me to learn many do's and don'ts in planning and enacting large productions, including good communication, good rehearsing, flexibility, stage organization of multiple instruments, sound management, and time management.



Kari Weldon Level 3 Recital



Concert Tour in Poland



Concert in Poland



Poland Rehearsal

In January of 2020, I was able to join the Suzuki Voice Community again at our 15th International Songs for Sharing in Melbourne, Australia. I was able to observe all teacher trainers work with Level 4 students in group classes, as well as lead the entire group in different songs. The opportunity to interact with the different teachers from around the world, learn from their experience, and enhance my personal studio with beautiful elements of each teacher's culture did much to broaden my understanding of Level 4 and its focus on International Art Songs as well as strengthen my concepts of Levels 1-3- especially in learning "Twinkle" in Polish and "Honey Bee" in Japanese. Now I am looking forward to the 35th anniversary of Suzuki Voice in 2021!



15th International Songs for  
Sharing, Melbourne, Australia  
2020



Student Level 3 Recital

Yet the core of Suzuki Voice is the individual lesson. From this blooms all other aspects of group singing, concerts, recitals, and home practice. It has been in the private lessons that I have learned more about the goals of each level of the Suzuki Voice method and how the repertoire and teaching points are constantly directing students to develop the ultimate goal set forth by Dr. Suzuki, "Wish for beautiful tone, beautiful heart" in their own tempos.

### The Benefits of Levels 1-3 to Level 4

As I ascend in the Suzuki Voice levels, I see even more clearly the value of the earliest levels and the importance of laying such a good foundation in these levels. One of these areas is in developing note accuracy and solid intonation. As early as Level 1, the repertoire is establishing interval and intonation integrity. In my studio, I have had the privilege of training many young boys who came to my studio around age 4 or 5. One young boy had been told by his school music teacher that he could not sing in tune and was tone deaf. The mother's greatest dream was that her son would be able



Level 2 Recital



Students Level 2 Recital

to sing and learn to love it! I had a good suspicion that Suzuki Voice would be the solution for him. Sure enough, within just a few weeks of lessons, he was singing "Cindy went to Shower" with fantastic intonation! It has been delightful to see him build his vocal skills all through the levels that he has accomplished, but even more heartening has been his love for music and singing! Yet without the Suzuki Voice emphasis on Listening, Imitation, and Repetition, as well as the team of the Suzuki Triangle, established in Level 1 and continued through the Level 4, this

student would not have experienced the joy and success in his own abilities and would have lived life thinking he was “tone deaf”. Working now with students in Level 4, as they combine challenging musical lines with challenging accompaniment lines, the confidence they established in the early Level 1 and 2, combined with the growth of other instrumental accompaniments in Level 3, has enabled them to sing more confidently in Level 4.

The emphasis on correct language pronunciation is very necessary moving into Level 4. I have learned sometimes the hard way that it is best to learn the diction correctly the first time than to develop a bad habit that will need to be corrected in the future. As my students struggle through German in Level 2, I sometimes found myself being too forgiving as they were “trying hard”. But my students are so brilliant and I cannot underestimate their ability to learn correctly! As we begin to study more intricate German Lied in Level 4, it is so much easier for them to have success in these pieces if they have already developed a good understanding of the German sounds. Thus as I work with the Level 4 repertoire, I am realizing the necessity of being more careful with the Level 2 and 3 languages.



Group Class 2019



Happy Suzuki Triangle

Review and Repetition of the the Level 1-3 songs has been so vital in training Level 4! I have seen the need to keep review of early repertoire very much a part of every lesson. The pieces in Level 4 are so much longer and have so many complicated elements to them, yet when I bring a connection to an early level song, immediately the movement is so much easier. Teaching Vaccai vocalise is much easier when we think of “Manca sollecita” as the big brother to “Cindy went to Shower” and “Semplicetta” as the big sister to “Cuckoo”. Continuing to reinforce the confidently learned early repertoire and threading it with Level 4 repertoire has helped my students to find big successes in tackling these larger pieces!

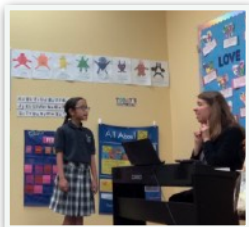
### Training to Teaching

In 2017 I began training and studying for Level 4. Dr. Päivi Kukkamäki has very carefully and masterfully walked me through each process of each Suzuki Voice level. Her wisdom and experience in creating this program and implementing it for many decades has been an invaluable source of knowledge and help for me! As I approached Level 4, initially I was very overwhelmed! There was so much repertoire and now each student has more individual voices and many of them will be experiencing some minor vocal changes on top of everything else! Students are also maturing and becoming more independent in their approach to music. Already I had been seeing some of this in my older Level 3 students and felt the awkwardness of how to transition from puppets and stuffed animals to this age group that wants to be sometimes more adult, but still needs the positive environment and communication of pedagogical concepts in a way to which they can naturally connect.



Level 4 Student

Understanding how to use the recommended repertoire of Level 4 was an important first step. Transitioning from shorter composed pieces in Level 3 to larger art songs, lied, and antique arias combined with Vaccai vocalizes, as well as not requiring each student to learn the exact same repertoire, proved to be an exciting challenge! What helped solidify this transition was the opportunity to learn from every teacher trainer in the ESA. Dr. Päivi Kukkamaki taught Japanese and American art songs, as well as



Level 4 Student

the Songs for Sharing songs, Mette Heikkinen taught Vaccai vocalises and Antique Arias, Katrina Pezzimenti taught Australian art songs, Analia Capponi-Savolainen taught Argentinian and other Spanish art songs, and Mervi Sipola-Maliniemi taught Finnish art songs. As they highlighted

trouble areas, language details, and culturally distinct musical sounds, I was also gleaning the differences of each of their teaching styles and energies. I took this training and put together ideas of songs that I felt would

be valuable to my students vocal growth and diversity. The ideas of clean vocal tone and technique, full body engagement, historical relevance, musical and

compositional background, emotional expression, and the fun of teaching were all elements that I was able to learn from each teacher and apply more deeply with my students in their understanding of the level 4 repertoire. One way that I implemented the cultural and musical heritage of music was by hosting a Mystery Composers group class. We had a game where we guessed which song came from which country and



Sibelius Storytime

composer, and then each student read something interesting about both. This helped students gain a deeper knowledge of the Suzuki repertoire beyond just words and notes. We ended the night by my reading a book about Jean Sibelius and drinking tea from Finland.

While observing both individual and group lessons, I noticed a more keen attention to the students building upon their more highly trained ear to better page awareness (sight singing) of music. They had the ability to intelligently mark and notate accurate musical symbols in their own music, as well as challenge themselves to sight read new music. It was fun to see one of Päivi's students sight read "Peace Round" with us and immediately put it into the canon form. Seeing this activity emphasized for me the importance of stronger page awareness transitioning in Level 3 so that the learning is very personal and successful in the Level 4. There was also movement and activity, though. Students would still hold up hula hoops, bounce balls, and definitely stretch and physically experience the vocal work that the body is doing. When I started teaching Level 4, I did not realize how quickly I moved away from this and emphasized too much "fix this jaw, fix this tongue, stand like this". I was shocked when my student looked at me after a very unsuccessful class and said "This is really hard!", with a very discouraged face. The positive, happy environment was gone. I went back to notes from my observations and realized that joy and happiness bring forth the best singing results. Thus, I brought back more imaginative ideas for the student to focus on for relaxation, posture, vocal production, and more. Then after the success through the imagination, we could discuss how that felt differently than before. This slower transition from Level 3 to 4 I believe was more consistent with what I had been taught in Suzuki Voice and made the harder repertoire more attainable and fun for the students.

After this warning in my individual lesson, I strove to not repeat this in my group class. I had a very large range of students. I was challenged with how to make the learning process interesting for adults and teenagers, while keeping it imaginative and natural also for the younger students. I also found it important to tap in more deeply to the emotion and expression of music in preparation of their doing larger productions and operas. We take the time to listen to accompaniments and try to



Mystery Composers Group



Group Class

grasp the idea of the song or the word picture it paints for us, then “can we sing with this same idea”. In teaching part songs, watching how Päivi handled teaching the different parts one at a time was very helpful to me to understand the importance of still taking the step by step approach even in a group that sings multiple parts. This has been very successful and also fun for my group as they get to experiment with learning different parts too. I also experienced the necessity of having a pianist for group classes. My first group class was very unsuccessful as I attempted to play and sing different parts together. Once I had a permanent pianist available, we were able to accomplish so much more. My students have blossomed in their group environment, understanding more about their personal voices and how they can bloom with the combination of other voices.

### My Goals for my Level 4 Experience

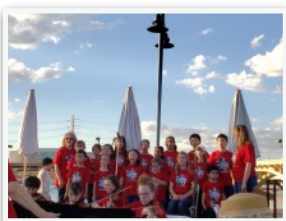


Freedom Concert 2019

I want nothing more than to have my students fall in love with classical vocal learning and performing. Yet even more deeply, I want them to find the ability to connect to music and the message of different songs personally and be able to share that message with an audience. Music is personal expression and I want each of my students to be able to express themselves on a personal basis. As I study more into Level 4, its training and expectations, I began to realize this is core to this specific level. Each teacher has now the chance to design a musical path based on the recommendations presented, not only to bring out their students individual needs and likes, but the teacher also is now showing what they love, how they want to express this training level, and what is important to them. With the design of a teacher recital, studio production, walking through a students recital theme and ideas, now we are making Suzuki Voice personal. This is where buying a book off of a shelf or sitting in a classroom cannot duplicate the invaluable one on one experience in Suzuki Voice training. Particularly in Level 4. I have seen where my gaps are as a teacher, performer, and vocalist, as well as where my strengths are. I am working to make more thematic recitals and productions to allow my students to express emotions more specifically in a fun, positive way. I am also seeing the value and fun of using supplementary material to keep learning fresh and exciting.



Christmas Concert 2019



Freedom Concert 2019

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Music Charades

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What started out as an overwhelming idea has turned into a very thoughtful approach to training and teaching Suzuki Voice. We are individual teachers with individual students, and now in Level 4 we get to celebrate the individual desires and needs of both! I am so grateful for the one on one training I have received and the specific tools I now have to take myself and my students to our vocal and personal best.



India Festival 2019



ASA Play in 2018