

My Suzuki Voice Level Four Experience Level Four Essay

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My decision to pursue ESA Level Four Suzuki Voice training arose principally out of a self-realization of the amount of pedagogical growth resulting from completing Levels One through Three during my excursions to Finland and Australia under Dr. Kukkamäki's overall supervision. A new Suzuki Voice teacher's acquisition of new students is a slow and difficult process. The ability to personally use multiple students of all ages in a Teacher Trainer's own studio and to have your teaching skills immediately and constructively critiqued through 'teaching-in-practice' opportunities accelerates the 'experience' process by which any teacher grows and improves. The intense personal training offered by the ESA program accelerated pedagogical understanding. The high standards demanded by the program fostered professional growth. The friendships developed and memories acquired through the training and travel experiences, fulfilled and developed me as a human being.

An additional motivation for pursuing Level Four training was my increasing realization of the very young student age possible for Level Four: that because of this my Suzuki Voice students would be with me longer than traditionally expected; and that, consequently, I would very much be needing to teach more advanced repertoire on a regular basis and for much longer. My students were going to need me to be both technically knowledgeable and well-versed in appropriate literature for their voices to a degree much different than before.

I was inspired also by the self-realization that my own instrument had grown through the process of completing Levels One through Three. Any level of vocal 'expertise', however high, does not necessarily require a thorough understanding of the physiological implications of that expertise. For this reason I found the ESA Teacher Training requirement of "Voice Lessons" from a Suzuki Voice teacher to be paramount to a successful training process. Even a teacher with a pedagogical or a performance degree from a typical USA University will not have the optimal kind of in-depth understanding of vocal technique because "traditional" teaching expectations are geared toward a much older age beginning student.

A truly in-depth physiological understanding of the vocal instrument and a sense of 'clarity' in regard to the technical process is an absolute imperative for a Suzuki Voice teacher especially in respect to teaching the youngest ages. Vocal technique must be so well understood that the technical process of singing can be broken down at a moment's notice: adapting it to each child and each situation; creating new exercises as needed for each situation; and being able to recognize quickly when any kind of damaging use of the instrument occurs. I considered then, that technical understanding at sufficient depth to be

the best possible teacher for my students logically implied continuing on to Level Four — to essentially push myself beyond the ‘beginnings’ of understanding and to pass into a more complete understanding. I ask from my students “the best” they can give. I owe to my students “the best” that I can give. I understand this attitude to be part of Dr. Suzuki’s wonderful contribution to the worldwide pedagogical community. I owed to my students the very best possible. Therefore, it seemed imperative to continue my Suzuki Voice training to a more advanced level.

My initial ESA Level Four Studies took place in Melbourne, Australia, during the 10th International Songs for Sharing event organized by Teacher Trainer Katrina Pezzimenti in January 2012. It followed as a direct outcome of my successful completion of ESA Level Three Examinations during the same event. It was of great value to me to be able to begin Level Four “observation” requirements in the truly international environment of a ‘Song Sharing’ event presenting a wide spectrum of children, ages and levels being taught, both individually and in groups, as well as a variety of fellow teachers and Teacher Trainers from different cultural backgrounds and circumstances. The cross-cultural understanding that developed even among the very young children in the ‘Song Sharing’ environment was an invaluable and difficult-to-duplicate learning tool for their future development as singers, especially given the singer’s unique ‘multi-language’ technical challenge. Being able to establish communication and relationships with such a widely diverse group was incredibly valuable and enriching. It was a wonderful “kickoff” to my Level Four studies.

My first step after Melbourne was to consolidate my Australia experiences, recover from the trip, and to organize in my own mind the ESA Level Four requirements — specifically creating a personal plan of study and a clear timeline of goals. My first organizational task was to create a notebook of 10 Antiche Arias and a listening CD for ready reference. For each Aria I included a copy of the score from several different available editions, including primarily Ricordi, Schirmer, Peters, and Alfred. This allowed easy access to the specific Antiche Arias under study in order to begin to evaluate each one and to begin to write lesson plans. My second organizational task was to create a list of teacher memorization requirements. An in-depth examination revealed many areas of possible overlap between the two major lists of required materials for memorization — ‘*Memory test of repertoire requirements*’ and ‘*Recital to public requirements*’ — making the task much less daunting than I had originally thought. I then presented a proposed list to Dr. Kukkamäki for approval before beginning the long task of memorization. All other Level Four tasks were slowly developed over the long term, with a goal of taking ESA Level Four examinations at the World Convention in Matsumoto, Japan, in March of 2013.

At this point, sometime in March of 2012, I made a conscious decision to consolidate other areas of my professional life in order to allow personal focus to center on Level Four studies as exclusively as possible. For me this meant primarily three things. First, I chose to

limit my public performing to my regular paid position as church soloist for the months remaining until the Matsumoto event. Second, I made a concerted effort to ‘finish’ the first step of an already existing CD production project, using the remainder of Spring 2012 to complete my work on the repertoire leading to a final recording-studio date in August 2012. These two decisions allowed my principle repertoire focus to be on the Suzuki Voice Level Four repertoire beginning by September of 2012.

Also during the summer of 2012, I began work on the third element preparatory to focused Level Four studies: the process of transforming one of my adult voice students into a true ‘Suzuki Voice’ student so that she could assist me in doing Level 4 teaching activities. This meant teaching an existing Traditional student, Ms. Laura Lokey, in the Suzuki Voice manner from the beginning volumes of Suzuki Voice and additionally requiring her to perform Graduation Recitals in September of 2012, DVDs of which were sent to Dr. Kukkamäki. I am intensely appreciative of the sacrifice and hard work that Ms. Laura Lokey gave to me so willingly in spite of her busy work schedule and am additionally gratified that she has now become a very enthusiastic member of my local Suzuki Voice Family as a result of her experience. Laura’s own technical growth while working on the Suzuki Voice early repertoire additionally impressed upon me the caliber of the teaching materials included in the beginning Suzuki Voice volumes.

I also considered that Level Four activities should include whatever I could do to continually improve and expand the learning environment for my own students. With this in mind, my summer activities also included responding to the invitation of Lisa Murray, a Level One Suzuki Voice teacher living one hour 15 minutes away, to join any of my available students with hers in her Suzuki School’s End of Year Recital. Special preparation for the event meant learning ‘*Onegai*’ (in Japanese) in addition to specific Volume One Suzuki Voice songs. Unfortunately, because of scheduling conflicts, only one of my students was able to go. However, for her and her mother this was a truly inspiring and exciting experience, especially to be able to join in singing with all the other instruments at the final school ‘play-down’. A DVD of this event was also sent to Dr. Kukkamäki.

Additionally over summer of 2012, I began work on developing a more extensively staged acting/singing production for my own voice students. This eventually became a short (15-minute) December 2012 Studio production titled “*Princess Cavalcade*,” including props, costumes, personal microphones, and all ages of my Suzuki Voice students — from my two 3-yr-olds to my adult student Ms. Lokey. This accomplished a tremendous amount for both myself and my students. Not only have I now established the equipment and experience base to produce similar events in the future, I have also realized how incredibly motivating this kind of work is for my students and how much wonderful learning development occurs. I hope to make this kind of event a regular occurrence in my studio and to include some acting-singing and stage-presence development activities in their group class experience.

That production was later videotaped and a copy sent to Dr. Kukkamäki as part of my Level Four work. I sent her also an additional DVD of the only prior production I had accomplished (with only 4 students) in December of 2011. My video editing software of that time had not been capable of processing the raw footage; I had since upgraded.

In September of 2012, directly after my adult student Ms. Lokey's Graduation Recitals, I began videotaping her Level Four lessons — in the end, a total of 10. Videotaping continued throughout the Fall and into January of 2013. Each lesson was accompanied by a 'Lesson Plan' written in advance of the lesson with additional comments and self-critique written after the lesson was completed. Each recorded lesson was transferred to DVD and the whole package — DVD, lesson plan and comments — was sent to Dr. Kukkamäki, who reviewed each one and then e-mailed her feedback. During the Fall I also shared some details of the ongoing 'Princess Cavalcade' production as well as my ongoing memory work. I felt it was important and to my best benefit to keep close contact and to keep the Trainer fully informed regarding my Level Four activities.

Also sent to Dr. Kukkamäki in early Fall was a DVD of my Vaccai memorization requirements (the first 10 pieces in the volume), a task made simpler by using a recorded piano accompaniment rather than hiring a live pianist. I did this early in the Level Four process so as to be able to pay special focus to the other more complex repertoire memorizations required. I was also teaching Vaccai to my Level Four student. I have come to appreciate Vaccai as an excellent tool for a singer's technical growth and admirably suited to the Suzuki approach: each piece with a very focused teaching point and each demanding the development of very solid Bel Canto technique.

By the end of October, I also completed a DVD of the required five Antiche Aria memorizations, also using a recorded accompaniment rather than a live pianist. This meant that from that time forward I could focus my memorization task completely on my Exam Recital requirements. Later, in January, I realized that there was an error on one recording, and re-recorded one of the arias, sending a new DVD to Dr. Kukkamäki to replace the incorrect one.

The early weeks of November were spent working very heavily on memorizing my Exam Recital requirements so that I could take best advantage of an upcoming trip to Finland, including an opportunity to perform publicly with the accompanist who would be with me in Matsumoto. That task was not totally completed by the time the airplane took off from the United States, but I had made great strides in that area so felt very good about my progress overall. I made plans also to have another opportunity to perform the recital in front of my students before going to Matsumoto. Before the trip to Finland I also prepared a notebook of all the scores for my Exam Recital in order of their performance for my accompanist's use.

In the few weeks before going to Finland I began the process of locating a performing ensemble to accompany my Level Three graduating student Madeline Eckhardt whose recital would take place in January 2013. This involved meeting with the local High School teacher who was very pleased to be able to offer this kind of quasi-professional paid opportunity to her better students and I was very pleased to be able to show respect for their years of study by paying them. This worked well for all. I very much like the idea of using young people for this activity, as I think it suits the Suzuki Voice idea very well. Since the area in which I live does not have a strong Suzuki 'center', locating specifically 'Suzuki' students for this task would have required a lot more research and time than I had available. I am indebted to my church organist who assisted me in this production as well. I am also very heavily indebted to my Level Three student Madeline. In September her father was in a serious accident from which he was still hospitalized and recovering even as late as January 2013. The family spent the entire Fall under much stress, but still committed to helping me achieve this important requirement for my Level Four. I am continually amazed at how strong the bonds of caring become in a 'Suzuki' relationship. Madeline's Graduation Recital was videotaped, and a DVD with program and comments sent to Dr. Kukkamäki in late January.

My trip to Finland, over the Thanksgiving holidays, coincided with the Finnish premiere production of a new operetta composed for Suzuki Voice, *'Snow White and Rose Red'* (*'Lumivalko ja Ruusunpuna'*). During my first week in Finland I participated heavily in the production of this wonderful event, working as stagehand through several rehearsals and eight productions and watching enthralled while numerous wonderful children of all ages performed beautifully, with impressive tone and stage-presence and always with great joy and support of each other on and off stage. This being my third trip to Finland over the years, seeing and hearing certain children's faces and voices felt like a true 'homecoming' to me — so wonderfully beautiful to see each child grow up. Also present in Finland for this event was Jaume Fargas Fernandez, Level Three Suzuki Voice teacher from Catalonia. Jaume and I had already been in e-mail contact in regard to Catalan pronunciation for a beautiful song by Eduard Toldrà that I had selected to include in my Exam Recital. Now, in Finland, Jaume generously gave me an extensive amount of time personally coaching me in the Catalan pronunciation. Jaume, Dr. Kukkamäki and I were also able to have some time during this week to discuss together the developing state of Level Three repertoire and Dr. Kukkamäki at this time also requested that, as part of my Level Four studies, I research and make recommendations towards the American listings in the 'Songs for Sharing' Level Four list. This task I completed very shortly after returning from Finland and before the Christmas holiday in late December. During this week were also scheduled several individual voice lessons with Teacher Trainer Mette Heikkinen. Additionally during this first week in Finland Dr. Kukkamäki and I were delighted to be able to accept a dinner invitation from Teacher

Trainer Analía Capponi-Savolainen resulting in relaxed and pleasant discussions regarding Suzuki Voice teaching and training in general.

My second week in Finland was shared with Masayo Okano from Japan who had come for some additional Level Two training. I had met Masayo originally in Australia, so this also felt like a small homecoming. Week two was heavily scheduled with teaching observations, teaching-in-practice (individual & group), child development discussions, and rehearsals with accompanist Marjaana Merikanto. Because the time was also shared with Masayo Okano I could also observe some Level One and Two teaching which, because of my Level 2, 3 and 4 training, I saw with 'new eyes'. I was also able to 'practice' teach with the Finnish student Tiia Ruikkala who would be my individual exam student in Matsumoto. At the end of the week both Masayo and I were able to perform our exam recitals before a small audience of Suzuki Voice families and teachers.

My immediate task on returning from Finland was to complete Analysis and Teaching Points of now 11 assigned Level Four Antiche Arias, completing them and sending them off to Dr. Kukkamäki before Christmas. The most difficult part of this task for me, was simply finding sufficient uninterrupted time and I was glad for the work that I had done early on in organizing a notebook with the Antiche Aria scores. In depth analysis of prescribed repertoire is an excellent exercise and preparation for teaching the repertoire. I know that I will refer to my own notes many times in the future, appending and improving them as I grow as a teacher. Before Christmas my studio also performed the '*Princess Cavalcade*', which was then created to DVD and sent, with comments, to Dr. Kukkamäki.

The first Level Four task of the New Year was to create a hard-copy of my Exam Recital program for Dr. Kukkamäki to review and approve. This included a brief 'bio' as well as full texts and translations and Dr. Kukkamäki was kind enough to 'proof' the Finnish titles and text. Other tasks of the New Year for me were to coach Madeline Eckhardt through her Level Three Graduation Recital performance, committing it also to DVD, and to compose this essay of my Level Four training 'adventure' — an incredible journey of growth and experience complemented by the joy of a deeper and deeper adoption into the international Suzuki Voice family.