

Margery Aber's Continuing Legacy:

An Aber Suzuki Center Experience, from a first timer's point of view

By Iain Macpherson

Stevens Point, Wisconsin, didn't really mean all that much to me as I boarded a plane in Ottawa, Canada, heading for a week-long Suzuki Voice teacher training course. I never expected such a "small city" to have such a "big heart." At the heart of the city is the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where I had the opportunity to work with the biggest heart of them all, Mary Hofer.

Upon arrival at the Central Wisconsin Airport, after an unscheduled four hour layover in Chicago, I had little hope that anyone would be waiting for me; nevertheless, I was greeted in the baggage area by the kind, smiling face of Mary Hofer. Mrs. Hofer, a Suzuki Voice specialist and my teacher trainer for the week, had been instrumental in making this experience possible; not only had she kindly agreed to offer this course outside of the regular teacher training schedule, but also to offer it on a one-on-one basis—I was the sole teacher trainee for the duration of the week—which was only a glimpse into her sense of dedication and hospitality.

We soon headed for the university, as Mrs. Hofer was to teach a lesson a mere twenty minutes after my (late) arrival. We made it, somewhat behind schedule, for her 5 p.m. student, who was waiting patiently outside the studio along with her mother. After exchanging pleasantries, I then found myself plunging into the first of many lesson observations—three that first evening. Although tired, I was thrilled to get right to work, and was immediately impressed by the quality of the singing and teaching.

A long day over, Mrs. Hofer took the time to drive me to meet my hostess for the week, Santha Bickford.

Santha's "home away from home," a recommendation of Mrs. Hofer, was mere minutes from the university by foot—a convenience I benefited from the whole week.

Each day, I was engaged in multiple hours of observation, both live and recorded, of Mrs. Hofer's teaching. It was also arranged that I observe some of the great violin and piano teaching from the many other teachers of the Aber Suzuki Institute. I found myself in an environment full of high standards, engaging lessons, creative

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projects, fun activities, talented students, and rich experiences of every kind. As I was the only teacher trainee at the time, I received a great deal of personal coaching from Mrs. Hofer, and enthusiastic support and encouragement from the rest of the staff as well; what's more, she even went as far as to organize a private coaching for me with her own long-time voice teacher, Marjorie Kampenga—96 years young—who shared with me her depth of wisdom and experience in music—something I hope never to forget. Thank you, Mary.

Throughout the week, I grew as a singer, which to me was phenomenal in itself; most importantly, I thrived as a teacher. I observed private lessons, group lessons, and early childhood education classes, and through this, grew to understand how to adapt lessons so as to become successful with students of all ages. The importance

of an engaging learning environment, masterfully executed throughout the engaging and action-filled exercises presented by Mary, and its potential to inspire students, was continually impressed upon me.

By the end of the week, I had observed more than forty lessons in voice, violin and piano; had discussed vocal pedagogy and its application to the Suzuki method of Talent Education for several hours; had discovered more freedom and flexibility in my own singing; had experienced an atmosphere where students, teachers, faculty and parents seemed truly nurtured by love; and felt I had discovered the knowledge, confidence and inspiration I would need to develop a similar tradition of excellence in singing back at home. As Dr. Suzuki said, "Where love is deep, much can be accomplished."

In addition to a well-run program, where excellent teaching and a thriving atmosphere of success and ability seemed to blossom, the Aber Suzuki Center hallways and studios were lined with quotes, sayings and posters in support of the vision of excellence Dr. Suzuki held for all children. For example:

"Don't lower your expectations to meet your performance. Raise your level of performance to meet your expectations."

—Ralph Marston

"Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you."

—Robert Fulghum

Student work was proudly displayed on the walls throughout the center, as were exciting and engaging musical opportunities, past, present and future,

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in which students could take part, or would soon. One display in particular caught my attention—a photo display of the life and achievements of Dee Martz, a long-time program director who, sadly, had recently passed away. In the center of the display was a letter, describing the life and work of this extraordinary woman, and the heartfelt appreciation for her efforts. This display of appreciation, in addition to the numerous displays mounted in tribute to Marjorie Aber, the program founder and first person to hold an institute in the US, were inspiring. Personally, I am always inspired by those individuals who find a way to make the world a better place through music. At the Aber Suzuki Center, such people were everywhere.

On my return to Ottawa, I truly felt that I had experienced a full ten days of what it means to be *nurtured by love*, and thanks to that, I look forward to further experiences as a teacher of Suzuki Voice. I hope to bring back a little bit of the community spirit I discovered at the Aber Suzuki Center, and to share it and build upon it with my colleagues at Ottawa Suzuki Strings. I am sure my students and their parents will only benefit from what I have learned, as we continue to strive toward our personal best in music and in life. ☞



Mr. Iain Macpherson received his Bachelor of Music degree (Honours) from Wilfrid Laurier University (2001) and an Artist Diploma from the University of Toronto (2003), both in voice performance. Following his musical studies, he went on to receive his degree in Education (2004) at Ontario's Institute for Studies in Education, again at the University of Toronto.

Thereafter, he returned to Ottawa, where he has worked in music as a performer, teacher, conductor and choir director. He is currently a faculty member, and school coordinator, with Ottawa Suzuki Strings, where he teaches Suzuki singing and violin; he also runs teaching studios in Ottawa and Gatineau, and is concertmaster of the Kanata Symphony Orchestra.