

## That Hard Passage by Karen Kubin

It has happened twice already, this week.

The first time was with my almost-thirteen-year-old daughter, who was working on her new piece and balking at the thought of working out a new passage. "It's too hard!" she complained. Somehow I managed to get her to play through it slowly, to prove to her that it was, in fact, playable. Then she realized she already had it in her ear. She got excited, and she started working in earnest. Soon she was racing through those few new measures, thrilled at how fun they were to play. I will not pretend it is always this easy—it rarely is—but I love being able to show my children and my violin students that finding and mastering Those Spots You Would Rather Avoid actually makes playing the violin a lot more fun for everyone. This is one of my major goals in teaching.

The second time this happened was when I pulled out a new piece to work on myself. During my initial play-through, I hit some measures with double stops that required awkward—quite awkward—fingerings. I was annoyed. The rest of the piece was pretty straightforward, and I could almost hear the voice of some of my students in my head: Really? Why here? With all my heart I wanted to ignore those measures. There was no getting around the work, though, so after my play-through I went straight to those annoying measures. And as I practiced those awkward shifts over and over, smoothing them out, adjusting the intonation, I started to get lost in the sounds—their quality, their character. The intervals were subtle, mysterious. This awkward, annoying passage was strikingly beautiful.

I admit it. Even though I spend a considerable amount of energy bringing my students straight to the Hard Passages, I still balk at them myself. The work, before it is begun, is still (always!) distasteful. The difference is that I know how and why to confront these passages; it is a discipline I learned well. At first it was imposed on me, simply a part of practicing with my mom when I was young. Of course I fought it—it was work, hard and exacting, and different from anything expected anywhere else in my life. As I got older and more independent in my practicing, I avoided the work more and more. My father, a patient and kind man who was also my violin teacher most of those years, did not say much about the fact that I sight-read etudes in my lesson, or made little progress from week-to-week on my solo repertoire. Instead he bided his time, waiting for a key moment. His patience paid off. I can still picture the part of the highway we were on, coming in to Minneapolis from the west on Highway 12. Minnesota Public Radio was on, and a violin concerto was playing. It sounded . . . fancy. Brilliant. My dad turned it up.

"Do you like this?" he asked. At the time I was heavily into The Beatles and 80s Top 40, but this music definitely caught my attention.

"Yes!"

"You could play this," he told me. I was flabbergasted.

"Really?!"

"Of course. But you would have to practice hard, and you would have to do it exactly the way I tell you to."

And with that promise—that this incredibly adult-sounding, flashy piece was within my range if I approached it correctly—I began to learn how to practice. I did everything my dad said. Worked slowly, note by note. Drilled passages with a metronome over and over. Mastered each phrase before moving on to the next. Tore the difficult passages apart, rebuilt them, and tore them apart again. I know now that this was a continuation of the method used from my very first days as a Suzuki violin student—everything broken down into its simplest form, all the repetition and review and step-by-step work—but it was also a new stage in my development. The student was learning to become her own teacher. I learned to play that concerto well and completely changed my concept of what I could do in the process. Thank you, Viotti. Thank you, Dad.

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There is plenty of research out there covering grit and determination and hard work. Hopefully it is a no-brainer by now that private music lessons have much to offer in terms of teaching critical thinking, problem-solving, and the value of hard work. These things are important, and cannot be ignored. But there is something else happening when we practice that is easy to overlook, and also quite profound: the discipline of beauty.

And no, I do not mean the beauty of discipline. That is inherent, of course.

Take that awkward passage, those out-of-tune measures, That Part You Want to Avoid, and turn it into something smooth, ringing, beautiful. This is the bread and butter of musicians' work. It is what must be done. We train our minds, our ears, our fingers and wrists and arms to turn all the hard stuff into near-perfection.

There is great wisdom in this.

There is life-transforming power in this.

This, maybe, is what Suzuki was getting at in *Nurtured by Love* (revised edition) when he said "art is the person." From the very first lesson, we as musicians strive to turn our harsh sounds into ringing tone, our awkwardness into ease. We learn to seek out what is hard and craft it into beauty, even though the beauty was always there on the page and it was really our own ability that was lacking. We learn to listen in order to be changed, to seek out an understanding of each piece of music we encounter and then align ourselves with it technically and expressively so others can hear, as well. We learn to translate and share, and show, but each encounter touches us, first. This is spiritual practice that transcends theology, this art of transformation. If we learn to do it so faithfully in our art, I suspect there is no choice but for it to seep into our lives.

And this is what I want my students to understand, what I want my children to understand, what I want to keep understanding better, myself. I think of all the stories I have heard, and the stories I have told, about practicing: the tears, the violin thrown to the floor, the sheet music violently scribbled over in ballpoint pen. Yes, that hard passage is sometimes that hard. Yes, that thing in your life, or that thing coming directly towards you from the future, it might be that hard. And yet, you have been practicing. You are adept in this discipline of beauty, and you have been practicing at being changed. This skill will serve you. It will follow you through your life. It may be an easy thing to forget, but take heart. Even when you forget, even before you knew, you have been practicing this.



Karen Bjork Kubin has lived life on all three sides of the Suzuki triangle. She grew up in the Suzuki program at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis, studying violin with her father, Mark Bjork. She holds a B.M. in violin performance from UW-Madison, studying with Vartan Manoogian, and a M.M. in performance from Northwestern University, studying with Gerardo Ribeiro. Past teacher trainers include Mark Bjork, Craig Timmerman, Alan Lieb, and Alice Joy Lewis. She has taught in the pre-college music programs at DePaul University and Wheaton College, and with the Copper Country Suzuki Association in Houghton, Michigan and was founder and director of The Violin Project in Kirksville Missouri. Currently she maintains a private studio and conducts the Kirksville Community String Orchestra. The mother of two Suzuki violinists and a singer, Mrs. Kubin writes about the intersection of the arts, education, and life at <http://www.kbkubin.blogspot.com>.

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**Karen will perform on the Saturday, January 6, 2018  
Suzuki 50th Anniversary Gala Alumni Recital, 7:00 pm, Antonello Hall**

**Message from Former MacPhail Suzuki Cello Teacher Michael Murray:**

I send my heart-felt congratulations to the MacPhail Suzuki Program on its 50th anniversary! It was my pleasure and honor to have been a member of the Suzuki faculty, teaching cello, developing a chamber orchestra and coaching string quartets, from 1979-1983. It was a very exciting time for the organization and Mark Bjork's leadership and vision for the program made it all possible. During this period we hosted Shinichi Suzuki during what I recall as being a massive festival at Northrup Auditorium that attracted families across the region. I've never tuned so many cellos! My terrific faculty colleagues and I played a great deal of chamber music together and I learned so much about teaching from my students and the parents who were so supportive of the program. It was my first teaching job and I couldn't feel luckier for having had that experience. May you have many more 50s!

-Michael Murray, DMA, Professor of Music-Cello, Missouri State University

**Message from Former Suzuki Cello Student Naomi Welsh:**

My father is friends with Mark Bjork and forwarded me info that you are looking for stories for the 50th anniversary of MacPhail. My siblings took violin from Mark, but I was one of the first Suzuki cello students at MacPhail, in 1975-1978 or so, until we moved away. I was also part of the 1977 American/Japanese Suzuki talent education tour to Carnegie/DC/etc. along with fellow MacPhailer Kari Jane Docter.

I have warm and fuzzy memories of Suzuki lessons, but specific things I recall include learning all the Suzuki rhythms in Japanese (Yoio to demashita? Jozuni? Yokatta?) and cello group lessons. And the tour.. I have one photo attached here from the tour (I am far right, Kari is front center), and have since connected in various ways with a few of the other cellists in the photo. (I think my parents have some other photos from those days of cello, but I can't find any actually at MacPhail)

Presently I play and teach cello in Grand Forks, North Dakota and am the executive director of Northern Valley Youth Orchestras, a nonprofit youth symphony and chamber music program serving the upper Red River Valley of Minnesota and North Dakota. I appreciate the experiences and opportunities my start at MacPhail made possible.



MACPHAIL CENTER FOR MUSIC

# SUZUKI 50TH ANNIVERSARY GALA ALUMNI BENEFIT RECITAL

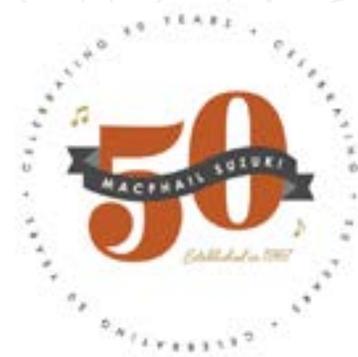
Saturday, January 6, 2018, 7 p.m., Antonello Hall

\$25 ADULTS, \$15 YOUTH (AGES 6 THROUGH 18), \$5 FOR CURRENT SUZUKI STUDENTS

(DONATION TO BJORK/PEDERSON SCHOLARSHIP)

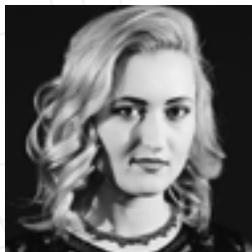
## Join us to celebrate 50 years of Suzuki at MacPhail!

The concert will feature Suzuki program alumni performers: Michael Sutton (violin), Katherine Bodor (composer), James Waldo (cello) and Alyona Aksyonova (piano), Kirsten Docter (viola), Xavier Jara (guitar), Henry Johnston (guitar), Brooke Knoll (harp), Karen (Bjork) Kubin (violin), and Travis Anderson (piano), and Heather MacLaughlin (accompanist). The program will also feature remarks by Suzuki alums and former directors of the program. *Pre-concert music will be provided by current Suzuki students beginning at 6:30.*



Tickets may be ordered by calling 612.767.5250 or by stopping by Student Services at MacPhail locations in Minneapolis, Chanhassen, Apple Valley or White Bear Lake. Advance purchase is recommended. All tickets are general admission. Seating is subject to availability. Reception of heavy hors d'oeuvres and wine to follow, hosted by the MSA.

**Get your tickets now!**



# MacPhail

### UPCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday, January 3, 2018, **Kelly Lehr Suzuki Violin Studio Recital**, 6:30 pm, Antonello Hall  
 Friday, January 5, 2018, **Suzuki 50th Anniversary Current Student and Alumni Honors Recital**, 6 pm, Antonello Hall, Performers Include: Ravi Chepuri, Sophia and Emily Alexander, Jannine Libbus, Annabelle Larkin, Anthony Chen, Riley O'Neil, Sonia Driskill and Lukas Murdych, Annie Amen (Alum), Bella Horton (Alum, Claire Miller (Alum)  
 Saturday, January 6, 2018, **Suzuki 50th Anniversary Gala Alumni Benefit Recital**, 7 pm, Antonello Hall  
 Friday, January 12, 2018, **Suzuki Strings Winter Workshop MasterClasses** with Katie Bast, Mark Bjork and Andrea Yun, MacPhail Minneapolis, 4-8 pm  
 Saturday, January 13, 2018, **Suzuki Strings Winter Workshop** 9:00-12:30, De LaSalle High School - See Group Class Handout or December 22, 2017 Suzuki Dept Email.

Thank you to the **Jaden Ma** for performing a piano solo at the MacPhail Annual Dinner for Donors on Thursday, Dec. 7, 2017.



### BUDDY PARTY: SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2017, 4-5 pm

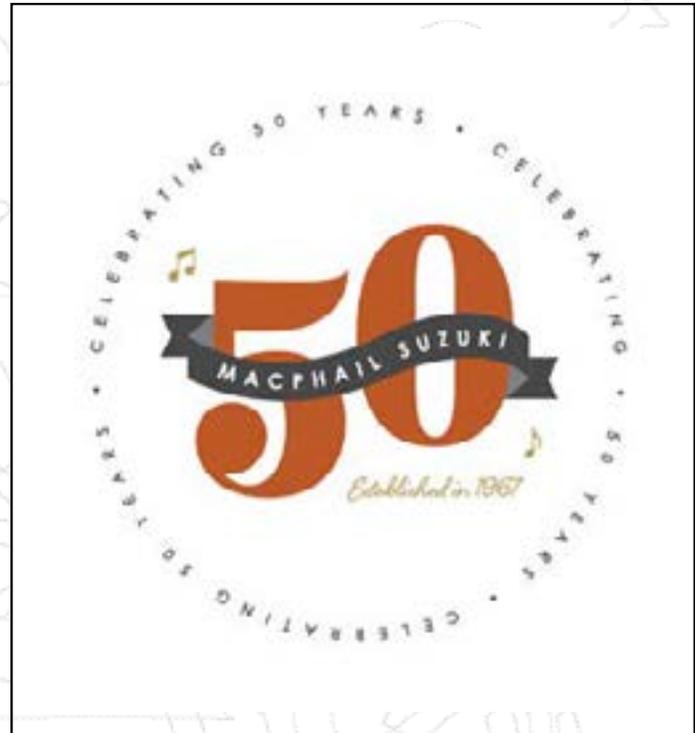


**Suzuki Current Student and Recent Alumni Honors Recital**

MACPHAIL CENTER FOR MUSIC

**SUZUKI 50TH HONORS RECITAL  
FEATURING CURRENT STUDENTS & RECENT ALUMNI****Friday, January 5, 2018****6 pm, Antonello Hall****Free, Open to the public**

We hope current and former Suzuki students, teachers, parents, family and friends can come together to celebrate the rich history of our program. Come and listen to current Suzuki students and recent alumni of all instruments and levels. Reception to follow provided by the MSA.

**Featuring Current Students:**

Emily Alexander, Sophia Alexander, Ian Bromander, Anthony Chen, Ravi Chepuri,  
Sonia Driskill,, Lili Kareken, Annabella Larkin, Janine Libbus, Kyle Machalec,  
Silvia Miller, Lukas Murdych and Riley O'Neill, Olivia Rapp

**Featuring Recent Alumni:**

Annie Amen, Bella Horton, Claire Miller

# MacPhail

## VIOLA WINTER WORKSHOP WITH GUEST CLINICIAN KIRSTEN DOCTER

MACPHAIL CENTER FOR MUSIC

**MASTER CLASS WITH KIRSTEN DOCTER, VIOLA****Friday, January 5 and 6, 2018****Free for MacPhail students and faculty**

## Schedule:

Friday, January 5, 3:30 – 5:30 – Viola Suzuki student Master Classes in Antonello Hall, MacPhail, Minneapolis

Friday, January 5, 7:30 – 9:00 – Viola Suzuki student Master Classes in Antonello Hall, MacPhail, Minneapolis

Saturday, January 6, 10:00 – 11:00 – Viola Choir Coaching, Room 308, DeLaSalle High School, One DeLaSalle Drive, Minneapolis

Saturday, January 6, 1:30 – 3:00 – Chamber Music Coaching, Room 124, MacPhail, Minneapolis

Saturday, January 6, 7:00 pm. Ms. Docter is a featured performer on the Suzuki Gala 50th Alumni Benefit Recital. Tickets \$25.00 Adults / \$15.00 Youth (ages 6 – 18).

Kirsten Docter is a 1988 Graduate of the MacPhail Suzuki Program. She earned her BM in Viola Performance from Oberlin Conservatory of Music and completed her AD in Viola Performance from Curtis Institute of Music. First-prize wins at the Primrose International and American String Teachers Association Viola Competitions launched Kirsten Docter on a career that includes a 23-year tenure with the Cavani Quartet. She currently is on the Viola Faculty at Oberlin, the Perlman Music Program and the Madeline Island Music Camp.



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