

Suzuki Journal Tribute in memory of Doris Harrel  
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When you think about Doris Harrel you can think about her Juilliard education, her long beautiful marriage to Ralph, her family, and her career as a college teacher. You can reflect on all her performance experiences. And of course, you can think about her life as a Suzuki Piano teacher trainer. You can read the obituary written by her family, where so much of her long and productive life is detailed.

Mostly though, when we think about our musical mentors, we think about our own personal journey with them, our own experiences, and their huge impact on our own lives. Doris had that impact on me and on countless other students and teachers. Everyone who knew Doris has a personal story.

I met Doris in 1990 in the lobby of the University of Texas music building. We walked over to the basement cafeteria to get a cup of coffee. A friend had said I should consider doing pedagogy training with her, but it was a big commitment. We sat down and Doris started talking about the mother tongue method and Dr. Suzuki's insights into nurturing the whole child. Before the coffee was cold, I knew I had to do this training and I knew I had to do it with Doris.

She offered long-term teacher training in her home in San Marcos, Texas. We would meet on Monday afternoons. When we arrived, she would greet each of us at the door with a hug. We would make our way to her kitchen, getting hot coffee, tea or water. She showed us where things were the first time but after that we would make ourselves at home. She would serve a simple snack, often toasted bakery bread with jam, and we would gather around the table. Learning together in her home studio we trainees became lifelong friends. She would talk about the outline for the day and share articles for us to read, and we would ask questions about the observations we were doing. Once again, before the coffee was cold, we were heading to the pianos.

At the pianos everybody played everything and she showed us the touch she was after by borrowing our hands and playing on our arms, learning through our senses. How did it feel? How did it sound? She knew when you understood it in your mind, when you internalized it in your playing, and most importantly, when you heard the right tone. She didn't stop until everybody HAD it.

Musical expression for Doris was everything, but it wasn't a mysterious thing that only elite musicians could achieve. She broke it down for us, teaching classes like "How Do You Know That?" where she helped us find clues for interpretation in the music. She loved the pedal and taught

specific workshops on effective pedaling. The end goal was always the message in the music, but in order to get there you needed intellect as well as the right physical approach. Mind, body, and spirit all worked together, years before that was a thing.

Musicality was taught from Book One. Especially from Book One! She taught us that even very young children could express music with nuances. For Doris, it all came from the ear. Harmony, rhythm, balance, and voicing were all approached solely by listening. There were no little tricks or gimmicks to make the melody sing over the accompaniment. The teacher simply traded back and forth, student playing right hand, teacher playing gentle left hand, until the student had the correctly balanced sound in his or her ear. The hands will do what the ear requires, Doris would always say.

Doris loved teaching. She taught at countless institutes. I don't recall a class ever finishing on time. I remember the sign she used to pull out of her briefcase: "Beware the Attack Musician." We listened to Alicia de Larrocha and Mitsuko Uchida playing Mozart and compared the nuances of their sonatas. Nuance was a special word for Doris.

Doris loved learning. For her, there was always more to learn. She was always introducing her trainees to new ideas and new people to learn from. She attended

Taubman sessions in her eighties. She was open minded and was never afraid to say she changed her mind after learning something new. Last fall in her nursing facility, she attended the recital of her colleague and family friend Tim Woolsey and had many insightful reflections for him. Even at age 93 she was still all about the music.

Doris loved music. Her love was contagious. I can still hear her voice asking “Don’t you just love that?” regarding a deceptive cadence in a Mozart sonata or a chromatic harmony in a Chopin prelude. She talked about the universal impact of music, how after 9/11 people expressed their grief with music. She shared with us how while fighting pain in the hospital, her husband Ralph hummed a Beethoven bass line to help sooth his pain.

Doris loved people. She saw the spark in everyone and fostered the careers of so many of our great Suzuki piano teachers. She brought teachers from Austin, Houston, San Marcos and San Antonio together, creating a beautiful Suzuki piano community. We would gather in her home for dinner after weekend workshops. Trainees, trainers, and students were all there sharing a meal and a glass of wine, building lifetime friendships. She believed in all of us.

I consider Doris to be the single most influential mentor in my musical life. I know I’m not alone. She embodied the

Suzuki philosophy to nurture the whole child. She nurtured each and every trainee and every student in her path. Her classes were the way I want my studio—actually my whole life—to be, an environment where everybody is loved and respected, where everybody grows. Doris gave us unconditional approval and affection, while setting the highest bar in service to the music. She reached out her hand to lift us along our musical journey. She blessed us so that we in turn can bless our students. Her life, her service, and her belief in us all, are to me, the greatest example of Dr. Suzuki's words: *where love is deep, much can be accomplished.*

We are so grateful for the life of Dr. Doris Leland Harrel.

Sara Stephens Kotrba