

# Randy Stenson, Coon Rapids High School, Class of 1975, Vocal Music Teacher, St. Mary's International School, Tokyo, Japan

Friday, August 25th, 2006



*[Editor's Note: As the Anoka-Hennepin School District begins its 53rd year, one of its great legacies is the number of students who have gone on to become teachers. Randy Stenson is part of the multitude whose experiences in classrooms of this district played a role in their becoming teachers. There are many like him. They work throughout the world, around the United States and many in our own schools.]*

Randy Stenson's first memory of music at school was sitting on little carpets in kindergarten at Northdale (now Sorteberg) Elementary School as Ms. Eventyre played piano. "To a five year old, she was a brilliant piano player and the best singer I had ever heard. What I remember most were the Spanish tunes. We learned 'Happy Birthday en Español' and we sang it for every kid on their birthday."

Even as vocal music director for the St. Mary's International School in Tokyo, Japan, and a composer and arranger, Stenson draws from his formative music experiences in the Anoka-Hennepin School District. "We learned great literature and excellent fundamentals for singing" in Betty Axtel's concert choir at Coon Rapids High School, he said. "Today, I use a lot of the music with my own students that

she introduced to us."

Stenson teaches the vocal music classes and handbells at the International School, a private, Catholic boys' school with students from 70 different countries whose families live in Tokyo because of business or foreign service. "Many of the students will have their entire education in international schools as their families are transferred to various locations," said Stenson. St. Mary's most famous faculty member is Yoko Ono, who taught there prior to meeting Beatles' guitarist John Lennon.

Stenson came to the International School after working for a year in Bird Island, Minn., prior that district's consolidation. The superintendent there worked in schools overseas and recommended the experience to Stenson and his wife. Taking that advice, they attended the large international school fair at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. They had a couple of interviews, and St. Mary's offered him a job. The school is on nearly the same schedule as American schools, so Stenson's family spends summers in Minnesota. "I guess we consider both Minnesota and Tokyo our home," he said. "When half your life has been spent in one location, it tends to become home. However, like all expatriates, we know that where one comes from is even more important."

It is the touring choirs Stenson directs that have brought him wider recognition. In 1985, after one year on the faculty of St. Mary's, he founded the International Show Choir, made up of students from various Tokyo international schools. In 1999 he started the Varsity Ensemble, a group of St. Mary's students who rehearse during their lunch hour. With these two choirs he has taken students around Asia and the United States and has performed with opera stars Plácido Domingo and Jose Carreras.

"Being at an international school in one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world has some great advantages in terms of venues and opportunities," Stenson said. Both Domingo and Carreras were great to the kids. It inspired many of the students to consider music on a higher level and the possibilities of pursuing a career in music."

Due to the success of the choirs, Stenson and his wife, Rachel, have been given opportunities to edit music for publishers of vocal music. "We have worked with several composers who have written terrific pieces for male choirs, but haven't had the opportunity to get their music into print. My mission, if you can call it that, is to bring their music to a large audience," said Stenson.

Like many international schools around the world, St. Mary's offers the International Baccalaureate Program. Stenson started the International Baccalaureate music program at St. Mary's. The original purpose of International Baccalaureate was to provide a consistent curriculum for children of ambassadors and employees in international business who changed schools frequently. It still does that, but it has been adopted by non-international schools around the world because of its challenging coursework and prestigious International Baccalaureate diploma.

Champlin Park High School opens this fall with an IB program option, having received approval by the International Baccalaureate Organization. There are two levels within the IB program. In one, students can take IB courses and not take the final exam. The higher level

program prepares students for rigorous exams in each subject. Stenson related how extensive the IB music exam is at St. Mary's: It is the culmination of two years of work and students must prepare a 20-minute solo, complete three extended musical compositions, write a 1,500 word, multi-media project and complete a music listening test. While highly rigorous, the payoff can be worthwhile if a student scores high on the exams. Stenson mentioned a colleague whose son recently completed the IB diploma program. Ivy League school Brown University granted the student nearly a year's worth of course credit based on his IB exam scores, saving the family a significant amount on the cost of tuition.

Stenson's students have gone on to an array of work in the music world, including Broadway musicals, Japanese pop stars, choreographers, music engineers and businessmen in the music industry. They have all taken different paths, and Stenson says that "doors will open if you take a chance, work towards a goal, and be willing to go anywhere to make it happen."

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