

To Mary West, everyone was her “baby” or “sweetie.” With patience and tenacity, with her warm smile, gentle spirit and encouraging words, Mary inspired, motivated and educated more than 1000 violin students in Minneapolis over 50 years. Mary passed away in June at the age of 97, still teaching a full studio of students (about 45 hours a week) until a few months before her death.

Mary’s magic (besides incredible knowledge and skill) was her love for her students. Every student felt they were her favorite. Mary’s love inspired each one to do their best every day for the next lesson. She was devoted to their progress and committed to their development as people. To her students and colleagues Mary was a mentor and a valuable friend.



Mary West

“Love your violin.” “Let your bow be your voice.” All Mary’s students have a beautiful sound and excellent technique, but they all sound different. Mary’s gift to her students was helping them find their unique voice on the violin, so that each one could truly play from their heart and fulfill their own artistry.

Mary set high standards. She said she didn’t expect all her students to become professional violinists; she just expected them to play like professionals. And they did. Mary West’s students routinely won local, regional, state and national competitions. They entered prestigious music schools and major universities and now have performing and teaching careers, from local freelancers to orchestras as far away as Australia. And those who have careers outside music still value the life skills Mary taught them — anything is possible if you practice, practice, practice.

Whenever there was a problem with a passage, Mary searched for the technical reason holding the student back. Her amazing ability was to watch and listen and zero in like a laser beam on that spot that was causing the problem — a shoulder a bit too tense, or some imbalance in the hand. Then Mary would give a specific exercise for fingers, or positions or bow to be practiced for

correction and improvement.

Students were never told just to practice “more;” they always went home knowing what needed to be fixed, and how to practice to accomplish it. One student remembers eagerly practicing in the car on the way home from lessons — because the instructions were so clear and the improvement so obvious.

Lessons were always positive and encouraging. Mary always commented first on what had improved, and then drew the student in with questions about areas that needed work. She could teach forever and never say “no.” Mary’s knowledge of the repertoire and student personalities allowed her to choose repertoire that challenged without overwhelming, and would bring the student to the next level. Before every audition or competition Mary would call to say, “O baby doll it’s going to be just fine. You’re going to do just great.”

Mary was tenacious. Technical development was never “good enough for you” — there was always room for improvement and there

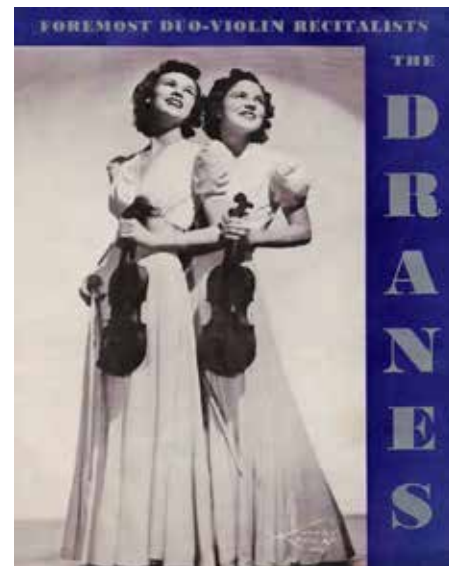
were no short cuts. No student was exempt from Sevcik, Whistler, Trott, Kreisler and Flesch. Every lesson (for 10 or more years!) would include tiny adjustments to the bow hand or left hand. Mary was constantly fixing things, adjusting the finger placement or the balance to help a student improve.

Mary was patient and knew the importance of repetition.

She was willing to say things over and over and work on problems again and again without letting up. “Hold your violin up.” “Relax your bow arm shoulder.” “Keep your shoulders back.” “Vibrate continuously.” “Play *in tune* sweetie.” “Be proud! You’re a violinist! Stand tall!” “Look like a violinist!”

Lessons with Mary had a simple structure — start with the scales and technique. She knew the students were going to practice their pieces. And when students realized that they weren’t going to get to the pieces in lesson until the technique was covered, they started practicing the technique too. Even with recitals or auditions approaching, the technique came first in lessons.

Mary was eager to learn from others, and was eager for her students to learn from others. Whenever students got comments from a competition, those comment sheets were



Virginia and Mary Drane

## Remembering Mary West

*“Baby doll — don’t you think that could be better in tune?”*

*“Sweetie — let’s practice that a little slower.”*

on the music stand at lesson for weeks afterwards — until every point suggested by the judge had been worked through and improved.

Mary was a generous and inspiring mentor to her colleagues. Teachers could talk to her about a problem a student was having and she had very helpful suggestions. She would also hear students that colleagues brought in and give suggestions on how to work on problems. She was encouraging to other teachers and made each one feel they could improve as teachers.

Friends and colleagues loved Mary’s sense of fun and the mischievous gleam she would get in her eye. She played a mean game of ping pong (until she was

95), with a wicked serve and a snap return that left her (much younger) opponents diving hopelessly for the floor in the hope of getting it back. Mary invited friends over

for poker parties — and she was good at it! She enjoyed playing the slots at Mystic Lake, and once won \$1000 at a casino in Las Vegas. Just for fun, she had a ball appearing in TV commercials. There was one part she didn’t get though — at age 95 she auditioned for an “old lady” part, but was turned down because she didn’t look old enough!

Mary was born to the Drane family in New Orleans in 1909. When she was 5 years old she attended a musical show where she all but ignored the performers on stage for the musicians in the pit.

Afterwards she begged for a violin. She got a ukulele instead. She stuck it under her chin and stubbornly scratched the strings with a stick until her mother gave in and Mary got her first violin. She not only practiced, but after every lesson Mary fled to the attic where, in secret, she taught her sister to play. After a year the sisters held a surprise performance for their astonished family. It was the beginning of a remarkable career.

Mary and Virginia studied at the Kansas City Conservatory, and then Juilliard, and with Louis Persinger, Mischa Mischakoff, Hans Lets and Otakar Sevcik. In the 1930s they toured the east coast as The Drane Sisters, advertised as identical

twins. They performed as a swing duo, with prestigious dance orchestras and various conductors including Duke Ellington. But when invited to perform for President Franklin Roosevelt in 1938, they played what they loved best, classical music.

Mary married Bob West in 1942 and continued to perform until the family moved to Minneapolis in 1951. While raising her family, Mary started private teaching. She became a professor at the University of Minnesota and taught at MacPhail Center for Music from 1968 until her death.

In her distinguished career, Mary received many honors including Outstanding Teacher of the Year (MN ASTA), Teacher of the Year (Schubert Club) and Special Ser-



“I won \$100 !!!”

vice Award (MacPhail Center). In 1991 the Governor of Minnesota officially declared October 6 to be “Mary West Day” in recognition of her musical contribution to Minnesota. In 2006, ASTA honored her with the Rabin Community Service Award. In accepting the Rabin Award, Mary said, “I feel so very, very fortunate and appreciate the honor so much. All that I ask of my students is that they reach as high as they can and play the violin as best as they can. And I can honestly say, so far, they all have.”

Mary’s zest was remarkable. She loved music and she loved helping people become who they could be. When asked about her philosophy of life, the secret to her success, she replied, “I can say that I have truly loved every moment of my life.”

Mary has gone to that place where all the bow arms are beautiful, all the pinkies are curved and everyone plays from the heart. May all of us be inspired by her example to enjoy every moment of our lives, to strive for lofty goals and to practice, practice, practice.

*By Faith Farr. Since 1980, Faith has had the pleasure of being Mary West’s colleague at MacPhail Center for Music. A version of this article appeared in the August 2007 American String Teacher. ‡*



Casting photo — age 95. Didn’t look old enough for the part!

Photo by Barbara Shelton