Cello

A Profile of Rochester Cello Teacher Carolyn Mead

by David Holmes

Over my 17 years in Minnesota, I have had the pleasure of running into Carolyn Mead in a variety of venues. We've crossed paths at Suzuki graduation at Orchestra Hall, at Stevens Point, WI (home of the American Suzuki Institute, where I have observed her teach), and at the Chicago Suzuki Institute as well. I have heard her give lectures at the Suzuki National Conference here in Minneapolis, have taught her students in Rochester, and have engaged in a number of interesting conversations with Carolyn on the topic of cello teaching. I have always been impressed with her depth of pedagogical knowledge and with her intense and unwavering commitment to life-long learning. Despite her reluctance for the limelight, this "out-state great" generously agreed to share her insights on cello teaching with me and with String Notes.

DH: How long have you been living in and teaching music in Rochester, MN?
CM: 14 years! Yikes, that's a long time to live in one place.

DH: What are the strengths, and if there are any, possible drawbacks for a cello teacher living in Rochester.
CM: Rochester is a friendly, family-oriented community that values education and a strong work ethic. It's a great place to raise children. SEMSA (the Southeastern Minnesota Suzuki Association) is a strong professional network for the private studio teacher in this area of the state. I have great colleagues!

DH: Where did you grow up?
CM: Cheyenne, Wyoming.

DH: How did you get into cello playing?
CM: I started playing cello after 3rd grade in the Cheyenne Public Schools. My mother told me that I decided to play cello after hearing Leonard Rose perform at a community concert in Cheyenne. I don't remember the concert at all. A group of high school orchestra students came to my grade school for a recruitment demonstration and I liked the cellist's tone. At my first cello lesson, I nearly quit when I found out I couldn't play left-handed. After crying for a week or so, I decided to continue playing, reluctantly resigned to a right-handed approach.

DH: What path led you to Suzuki cello teaching?
CM: At Oberlin College, I observed Kazuko Numinami, a student of Dr. Suzuki and an outstanding teacher and musician. I remember watching her teach young children and was amazed at the ease of playing and beautiful tone that they all demonstrated. I didn't sound that good when I practiced!

Later, I heard Bill Starr (one of the American pioneers of the Suzuki movement) give a presentation for public school teachers in Cheyenne about the Suzuki method. The following year I went to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville during my January independent study term to study with Mr. Starr. He gave me my first look at a successful Suzuki program. It was a great month, which included violin lessons with Mr. Starr and daily observations of private violin and group lessons taught by the two Japanese teachers and Mr. Starr. I also watched videotapes of Starr's work with Dr. Suzuki during his extended stay in Japan.

Mr. Starr encouraged me to attend Stevens Point, so I went to the American Suzuki Institute three times and enrolled in Marge Aber's Suzuki Method survey courses, the closest thing to teacher training at the time. After graduation, I taught music in the public schools (middle school and high school orchestra, and elementary string classes) in Nebraska and Wyoming. Then I moved to southern California to teach in a public school Suzuki program. There were lots of little violinists and few cellists again. Eventually, I went to grad school where I completed long-term Suzuki training with Tanya Carey at Western Illinois University. After graduation, I decided to pursue full-time studio teaching, resulting in my move to Rochester.

DH: Who are some other mentors and inspirational figures you've had in music teaching? What do you feel you garnered from these influential people?
CM: Florence Marsh was my piano teacher in Cheyenne who taught me to listen with ear training, harmony, improvisation, and accompanying skills in every lesson. She was a master teacher, always looking for something new to keep her teaching vital. John Kendall (another pioneer of the American Suzuki movement) had great energy and humor and an ability to engage students. He also had an amazing ability to diagnose problems and break down skills into manageable steps. What a mind! Yvonne Tait had high standards and was a one-of-a kind teacher. Tanya Carey taught me to expand my horizons and that anything was possible if you can adjust your thinking! All of these are master teachers who worked directly with Dr. Suzuki and had successful programs.

DH: What do you do to keep your cello teaching fresh and to avoid burnout?
CM: By the end of a school year, I'm ready for a break and need an infusion of energy and inspiration. I try to attend at least one workshop or institute each summer. I enroll in teacher training classes, enrichment courses, or just go to an institute as an observer, depending on what I feel I need. I'm always looking for fresh ideas or a new way to explain a point. Living in the Midwest close to Chicago, Stevens Point, and Minneapolis is a big plus. There are lots of opportunities to see outstanding teaching. There's always something to learn and plenty of resources nearby. I also keep an eye out for workshops and courses in related music and education fields – Dalcroze, Kodaly, ASTA, MNSOTA, etc. Anything that sounds interesting is a possibility.

I reserve August for a vacation, and go where there is no phone, no computer, and no cello. Rafting down the Colorado River, for example! Total escape.

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DH: You must be inspired by observing other teachers. Tell me more about that aspect of your professional development.
CM: I thoroughly enjoy watching teachers teach. I even like to observe violin, viola, and piano teachers. They all have lots of great ideas and each has a perspective on teaching and on Suzuki that is slightly different from cellists. Since teaching is an art form, I'm always interested in seeing great teaching in any subject. There are so many things to learn from other teachers: style, pacing, priorities, diagnostic skill, decision making. I can look for ideas for technique classes and group lessons or I can practice my own diagnostic skills while watching the institute teacher work out a problem or develop a point. I will watch almost anyone teach. There's always something to learn.

DH: I know you have studied the Suzuki books in many short-term teacher-training courses. Please elaborate a bit on what that has done for your cello teaching.
CM: When I started teaching, there were no teacher training courses. My early experiences were mostly with violinists, since I lived in small towns with very few Suzuki teachers to talk to or to observe. Cellists were scarce, so I went wherever the Suzuki action was: to Stevens Point in the summer to see cellists, to local or regional weekend workshops, and to concerts during the school year.

Short-term training courses on the Suzuki repertoire lay out the nuts and bolts of what to teach as one organizes a studio. Taking several courses from the same trainer clarifies that trainer's priorities, goals, and teaching style. This can help lay a strong foundation for a teacher. Another option with short-term teacher training is to work with several different teachers. In this case, one can choose what works best for them from a variety of personalities, musicianship, creativity, strengths and priorities.

Institutes give me perspective on my teaching, studio organization, and how my students are progressing. A week of study and observation listening to students from other studios, as well as talking to teachers about their home programs helps me evaluate the work my students completed, and to focus me on themes for the coming year. It's helpful to see the same issues with students other than mine and see how other teachers handle similar situations.

DH: You have also studied Dalcroze. How has Dalcroze influenced your playing and teaching?
CM: I got interested in Dalcroze after attending a Minnesota ASTA summer workshop at Winona State University with J. Timothy Caldwell. The following year I started looking for Dalcroze summer workshops and ended up at the Marta Sanchez Dalcroze Training Center at Carnegie Mellon University, where I took classes in all 3 areas of Dalcroze—eurhythmics (rhythmic movement), piano improvisation and ear training (singing). The experience was completely energizing. Everything we did was musical.

In eurhythmics classes, music is the teacher, not the teacher's speaking voice. The teacher plays (piano or a recording), the class listens and responds using the body to express what was heard. It requires 100% focus, concentration and quick reactions. There is a heightened sense of awareness and anticipation of change. The result is an instantaneous integration between mind, body and ear. Learning goes in through the senses, i.e. how music sounds and feels, is deep. When the body and the ear understand, learning sticks.

My Dalcroze experience stretched my musicianship and reminded me of the importance of teaching through the senses (sound, feel, look—i.e. gesture). While I can't duplicate movement experiences in the limited space of my studio, I can use ideas from the classes to help my students connect the ear and body (ear to hand connection), and develop concentration, memory, deep listening and musicianship. At this point, I am watching for opportunities in my teaching to include these kinds of experiences in lessons and classes.

DH: How do you deal with the over-programmed child, especially teenagers, these days? Any words of advice...?
CM: I wish I had something great to say, but I don't. There's no easy answer. Overall, here's my approach:

Long perspective

As a teacher, I try to keep a long perspective with my students, so that I can roll along when everything hits the fan. My goals are to help students learn and enjoy music as long as they are with me, and to help them develop excellent playing, thinking, and musicianship skills so that they can perform at a level that they desire as adults. Whether a student is with me for 1 year or 10, I want their cello experience to stick on some level. My hope is that music will be a part of their adult lives. This hope can be accomplished by playing, by supporting a school music program, by sitting on a school board, etc. It's a long shadow that we create. There are lots of ways to be a happy, healthy, well-adjusted musician.

Parent Education

Strong parent education from the beginning emphasizes the benefits of long-term study. There is more research on learning that supports Dr. Suzuki's ideas and the benefits of music (e.g. Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code*; Carol Dweck, *Mindset*; etc.)

Maximize progress

My goal is to teach as thoroughly and effectively as possible from the first lesson, so that there is always some observable forward progress as the students develop skills that stick. It's not one-sided—effort needs to come from parents and students to be successful. Building momentum is important. The more advanced the student is by age 12, the better chance there is that he/she will continue to play, even if their progress slows down.

Get Involved—Stay Involved

Get kids involved in music outside of the studio. Youth symphonies, school orchestras, chamber music, solo performances and summer study can inspire commitment. The more social the experience, the better it will be. There's a payoff for all the lessons, rehearsals and hours of solitary practice.

DH: Do you have any helpful practice hints to give to Suzuki families with children ages 4-12?
CM: 1) Consistency is the key at any age. Establish the practice and listening habit from the beginning. It's not always easy to do, but not impossible either. It's a matter of priorities.

2) Courage! Practicing is messy. Things that look smooth and easy at the lesson can be difficult to replicate at home. Learning takes time and effort. Making mistakes, feeling frustrated, delayed success are a natural part of the process. Parents and student are learning simultaneously. Working out how to organize and direct your child's practice is as big a task as learning to play the cello. Parents who practice with their children have a unique opportunity to watch how their child thinks and learns (and how the parent learns…not necessarily the same!). It is shared learning.

3) Adopt a long perspective. Learning to play the cello is a long-term endeavor.

Plateaus and learning spurts are part of the experience. A lot of learning happens under the surface when is appears that nothing is happening. Playing the cello and making music is a complex process! It takes time for the mind and body to work out problems. As long as practice and listening continue, learning will happen.

DH: Carolyn, thanks so much for sharing your experience and wisdom with us!!

Carolyn Mead has a Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Music Education from the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and a Masters Degree in Cello Performance and String Pedagogy from Western Illinois University, where she received long-term Suzuki cello teacher training from Tanya Carey.

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