



PERFORMER CORNER

Whatever Happened to Sally Browne?

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Sally Browne was *that student* every teacher knows: bright, talented, at home and eager to be part of the orchestra community, but didn't really practice much—just enough to get by. Whatever happens to these students once they move on into their post-academic lives? I believe meeting Sally today and hearing about her post-high school music life might help to remind us that the lessons we bring to our classrooms and studios can have a powerful, life-long resonance, even for those many students who do not become professional musicians.

Today Sally Browne continues to be bright, talented, at home and eager to be part of her orchestra community. Today, many years after she left her high school orchestra class in South Bend, Indiana, she also owns a business, Trussbilt, with her husband, has raised two children (one of whom played viola through high school), is well-traveled, and sits principal viola with the community orchestra I direct, the East Metro Symphony Orchestra. Her commitment to her community orchestra is additionally demonstrated by the fact that she is also currently the orchestra's president.

Like so many of us, Sally began her life in music as a student in her public elementary school. She recalls being tested to see if she was suited to participate in the school music programs, and was invited to participate. Band was available in fourth grade—Sally played clarinet—and in fifth grade orchestra was offered. Orchestra appealed to her more than band, so she traded in her clarinet for a stringed instrument. Gerald Lewis, her Juilliard-trained orchestra teacher needed somebody to play viola, so Sally was given a viola. She remembers a rich combination of private and group lessons as well as orchestra, all taught by the orchestra teacher. In a couple of years her orchestra teacher turned her private studies over to Rocco Germano, a violist, who guided her work through high school.

Viola was a good fit for Sally, she presumes because she has always enjoyed playing in the middle of the sound, harmoniz-

ing rather than playing the melody, sitting amidst of the group rather than standing out front. She was given the opportunity to play in her first string quartet in seventh grade and chamber music remains one of her greatest musical joys today.

It was early in her high school days that Rocco broached the possibility of Sally becoming a music major in college. He

again. Asking around she learned that a number of people traveled to another town to play in a respected college orchestra. So she just showed up to a rehearsal for the first time after her 17-year absence, to find the Stravinsky *Firebird Suite* on the music stand. It was clearly a daunting task to jump back in again, but Sally had kept much of her printed music from high school viola



Sally Browne in rehearsal with the East Metro Symphony Orchestra

explained that in order to do that she would have to devote more time and attention to her studies, traveling into Chicago to work with a more advanced viola teacher, and practice a couple of hours each day. She couldn't see doing this, so never considered making music her profession. So once she finished high school she simply put her viola away.

Sally attended Indiana University, studying literature as an undergraduate and journalism as a graduate student. But she never considered trying to become involved in all the many musical activities. Her life simply revolved in other directions, with other interests and jobs that took her to Washington, D.C., Chicago, Florida and Nebraska. She recalls that life seemed to settle down in Nebraska, and she found herself thinking about the viola

lessons, and she simply started to play again. She believes that it was her rich learning experiences with viola lessons, chamber music and orchestra early in her life that gave her tools she could rely on to find her way back, even after a long absence. Sally has continued to make music from that point on, always finding a community orchestra to join in each place she has lived.

So what does Sally think playing the viola and belonging to a community orchestra bring to her life? It continues to be the community of music making with a group of people she feels comfortable with, and feeling a sense that she has something to contribute that motivates her.

There is something about orchestral music that offers a very interesting way to think. It's non-verbal, very

abstract—I think I’ve heard it said that music is the most abstract of the arts, and I think that’s true—it gives you such different perspectives, different ways to think about the *big topics* of life...It is just a complete break. It always takes me a little bit of time to get into it, but almost always sometime during the course of our weekly rehearsals I find myself forgetting everything else, letting go, and following the music into this other place.

Sally also continues to cherish opportunities to play in chamber ensembles and encourages teachers to create opportunities for their students to have these more intimate group experiences.

When asked what she might say to teachers that are working with the young “Sally Brownes” of this world she lovingly described the most effective string teacher she had ever seen, in a small town in South Dakota.

Hans Peterson was a very gentle person, easy with his students, lots of fun. He was able to draw them out, each in their own unique way. There wasn’t any harshness at all in his work. He would let his students emerge in the way each of them was going to, and his job was to be there to support and encourage them. I think gentle encouragement is the way to go with kids.

Sally has also been stimulated by her work as president of her community orchestra. She finds it fascinating to see all there is involved in the business of sustaining even a small arts organization, and all the elements involved in simply creating a performance. She encourages those who can to find something they do well and contribute that along with their music, to sustain their own orchestral community.

When asked if she thinks she will continue to play her viola for the rest of her life Sally immediately answers, “Yep!”

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an innovative orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in the realms of outreach and arts-in-education. As music director/conductor of the East Metro Symphony Orchestra (formerly the 3M Orchestra) she has brought original and enlightening community partnerships to the center of its work. (Visit www.emsorch.org for more information.) Through the development of Vox Corda (voice of the string), she has led the way in exploring all genres of acoustic string music through the lens of the orchestra and offers an additional perspective for string music advocacy. (Visit www.voxcorda.org for more information.) Elizabeth has performed and taught extensively on both coasts, conducting orchestra, opera, musical theater and choral ensembles, working with all ranges of musicians, including students from beginners to graduate students, amateur and professional adults. Her academic degrees are from Northwestern University (B.M.), Catholic University (M.M.) and the University of Minnesota (D.M.A.) †