



PERFORMER CORNER

Korey Konkol

by Annette Caruthers

Korey Konkol is Professor of Viola at the University of Minnesota, a popular chamber music and orchestra player, as well as an internationally known soloist. Korey was honored as the 2006 William Primrose Artist of the Year after presenting a recital and master class at Brigham Young University, Utah. You can read a brief bio. at the U of MN faculty page here: <https://music.umn.edu/people/faculty-staff/profile?UID=konko002>. I asked him how he had established his career. The following is mostly in his own words:

“The route to establishing my career has certainly been a circuitous one! A little background—I grew up in Wisconsin in two little towns outside Stevens Point (Rudolph and Custer). I had the choice of going to a public school nearby or getting up very early to catch a 6 A.M. bus into Stevens Point which had a very large high school. If I hadn’t opted to go to the city for junior high and high school, I would probably not be in music today. At Stevens Point there was a huge orchestra (something like 13 violas I recall). The conductor was a violist and I distinctly remember her beautiful tone. It was a very inspiring time for me; we played symphonies by Brahms and Sibelius and I recall a very fine Grieg *Holberg Suite*.

“But wait, music was not my first love. Being a kind of nerd and loner, I really was interested in mathematics. I also took a great deal of interest in theater, participating in almost every musical production the school offered. In fact, that is what I really was going to go to college for, a degree in musical theater, but during winter/early spring of my senior year of high school, my mother died suddenly of a massive heart attack. I was studying with Roland Vamos at the Stevens Point Suzuki camp. He thought I needed a lot of work, but also that I had a flair for the instrument and some potential. He encouraged me to start my undergraduate work with him at Western Illinois University (Macomb). After a bit of

soul-searching and talks with my father, I decided to attend WIU that fall (1980) on a full scholarship (tuition was \$300 a semester back then!) While I was still a bit depressed over the death of my mother, I really put all my energy into practicing (something I really hadn’t done as a pre-college student), and found that my technique, musicianship and confidence improved quickly with Dr. Vamos as my mentor.

“I lived with the Vami (as we affection-



ately call Dr. and Mrs. Almita Vamos), and often had *three* lessons a week. Before I knew it, the Vami had been offered to teach in Chicago on the weekends. As their Chicago studio grew, I went up with them acting as their assistant. I supplemented my modest income by serving as principal violist of the Peoria and Knox-Galesburg Symphonies.

“When I decided to go to graduate school, I chose the New England Conservatory. I studied with both Burton Fine (principal violist of the Boston Symphony at the time) as well as the great Walter Trampler, but I do have to say that I got the most out of my chamber music coaches, Eugene Lehner and Louis

Krasner. Having been placed in the NEC honors quartet, I was given incredible opportunities to play terrific repertoire including all the Bartok and Schoenberg Quartets. (It is important to note that Lehner was the violist of Kolisch Quartet which premiered Bartok’s 6th Quartet, and Schoenberg wrote his violin concerto for Krasner.) Through my contact with Burton Fine, I was able to sub with the Boston Symphony on occasion, but really landed more of a permanent position when I got a year-long gig of playing in the pit orchestra of *Les Miserables* at the Schubert Theater. This “gig” saved me from truly being a pauper at the time—and it fulfilled my one-time dream of being involved with music theater.

“I have felt that all my teachers (Vamos, Fine, Trampler) were a little disappointed in me, because they envisioned me as principal violist of some big orchestra or violist in a fine string quartet—but I always wanted to teach and to that end, I had always studied the repertoire I learned from the perspective of the teacher. When I got my MM from NEC, I applied for the only two college teaching jobs that were open at the time, Bowling Green State University in Ohio and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. I did well at both interviews, but ultimately chose the job at BGSU as I would be geographically closer to my father. I truly enjoyed my first job—played in the faculty string quartet, taught applied lessons and even a music appreciation course. I lived in Toledo (about half-way between Ann Arbor, MI and Bowling Green, OH); also auditioned for Ann Arbor Symphony and was principal with that group during my tenure at BGSU. The combination gave me some nice solo opportunities including Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante*, with Stephen Shipps, and Bruch’s *Romanza* and allowed me to hone my teaching skills. By this time the “Vami” had moved to the Twin Cities, and I was invited on several occasions to present a master class

and recital at the U of MN. Based on my relationship with Dr. Vamos and his students' familiarity with me, I was the candidate of choice to replace Dr. Vamos for a one year appointment, when he and his wife were offered positions at Oberlin College in 1992. I auditioned for the string trio Ensemble Capriccio as the prior violist Cynthia Phelps had just left the MN Orchestra to become principal with the New York Philharmonic. I was also chosen by Maestro Edo deWaart as first-call substitute viola with the MN Orchestra. I have been most fortunate to go on many of the national and European tours with the Minnesota Orchestra as well as take part in many of their recording projects.

"I felt I had really established my career when I could count on more than two hands my students' successes. I'm very proud of my many students who have gotten jobs, especially in a shrinking job market in these difficult economic times. A few notable former students are: Clayton Leung, Principal Viola, Newfoundland Symphony; Dr. Setareh Beheshti, Professor of Viola, University of Tehran, Iran; Jessica Thompson, violist, Deadalus Quartet; Renée Moore-Skerik, Viola Faculty, Interlochen Arts Academy, MI, September 2012, formerly Associate Professor of Viola and Botticelli String Quartet, Texas-Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

"A milestone in my establishment on a more international scale was when I was given the opportunity to host and chair the 2004 International Viola Congress, which was held on the campus of the University of Minnesota. What an event that was, and it turned out to be one of the most successful congresses both financially and artistically in the history of the AVS/IVS. This afforded me greater recognition and pretty much guaranteed a performance or master class spot at subsequent congresses. During the fall preceding the Congress, I was fortunate to be one of the founding members of the Minnesota Viola Society, an organization that unites amateur, student, professionals and viola enthusiasts across the state.

"Additionally, within the past decade, I have been active in publishing my editions of specific repertoire as well as works that have been written for me by the celebrated Brazilian composer, João Guilherme Ripper, including a concertino that I premiered at the South African Viola Congress a few years back. This has provided me a wonderful opportunity to put my pedagogical "stamp" on published music as well as offering me further distinction as editor. This is the first time in my career that I am able to offer both recorded and published editions of works written for me."

Konkol is also noted in another career: that of dog-breeder. His car license plate reads CORGEEZ, which pretty much says it all. While a student at the New England Conservatory he was playing with a quartet during a residency in the English countryside near Wales when he fell in love with Pembroke Welsh corgis. He raises and shows them with considerable success, having three champions so far. According to Korey, the movie *Best in Show* is quite accurate in its portrayal of dog show culture: "It's another whole world." His dream weekend would be to give a master class in the same city as a dog show.

"Having another love in your life enriches your music, enriches your life," was the last thing Korey Konkol said in our interview.

Annette Caruthers is a violist and teacher of violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra for many years, she is now teaching full-time from her home studio in St. Louis Park, close to the borders with Edina and southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. To contact Annette email Annettemusician@gmail.com, or call 952-924-0663. †