



## PERFORMER CORNER

### Mark Gitch

by Annette Caruthers

I first met Mark Gitch in Milwaukee, at a weekend workshop for string teachers, lead by Mimi Zweig, about 15 or 16 years ago. At the time he had already made a respected name for himself as an orchestra director and concertmaster in Owatonna. Since then, as I have focused more and more on teaching and he has moved to a position in the Wayzata High School, I have had students from his orchestras and have visited the orchestras he conducts. Watching him work with students has been inspiring for me, as he teaches technique and musicianship simultaneously, while keeping all the students involved even as he works with a particular section—all while keeping an amazingly upbeat attitude! The students love him and his orchestras. How he does all this and where his inner resources to accomplish all this come from are an interesting subject!!

The following is quoted from Mark, in response to questions I asked:

Doug Overland (Mounds View Schools) was my first violin teacher. I started in fourth grade, inspired by an instrument demonstration at our elementary school. I'm quite certain that *Bile 'Dem Cabbage Down* was the tune that sealed the deal. My mother had a minor in music and directed our church's children's choir and her father was an active musician as well, but my parents took a pretty hands-off approach to my study. On one hand this was empowering, on the other I certainly didn't practice as much as I should have! When Doug recommended private lessons, my parents took me to Mary Horozaniecki, who at the time was teaching at MacPhail.

"Mrs. H" deserves a great deal of credit for influencing my approach to students. In addition to putting up with my quitting lessons twice and the above-mentioned lack of practice, it was evident that she meant to teach me how to play the violin. The story some may have heard of Mary sending me to a third floor broom closet to practice my scales is true, and is only the tip of the

iceberg! Around my freshman year of high school, Mary suggested we play something or other for a recital and I announced, "I'm not doing any studio recitals." After a pause she replied, "Okay, no studio recitals, but you have to give a senior recital." I quickly agreed and smugly progressed through the next three years recital-free, thinking this agreement would soon be forgotten. At the first lesson of my senior year, I was greeted with, "So, what are you going to play on your senior recital?" She saw something in me that I was only vaguely aware of at the time: a real love for music and for the mysteries and challenges of the instrument.

Mary's carefully sequenced instruction was mirrored at John Madura's program at Mounds View High School. His "proficiency units" included opportunities to learn all of the string instruments and to conduct. I was part of a quartet in high school whose members would play a phrase, stand up, take the neighboring player's instrument, play the next part, and then rotate again. There was a lot of joy in the music made with my friends, and with John, at Mounds View, but it was the careful pedagogy that helped concepts stick and inspired me to reach for more.

Other events that played significant roles in my decision to be a music educator included GTCYS under Bill Jones, Summer Project at the U of M, All-State Orchestra with Dick Massman and J. Robert Hanson and a single lesson with Mary West. Mrs. H. arranged for the lesson and for a spot in Mary West's studio if I wanted it. In addition to correcting a flaw in my bow

hold (Mrs. H., always striving to be a better teacher, commented "She said the same thing I've been telling you for years. Tell me why it made sense to you this time."), this was a turning point for me as I was in a position to decide if I was going to be a violinist with the added practice and competition and such that went with that path, or

if I was going to stay on my path with Mrs. Horozaniecki. I chose the latter. As a teacher, I think this story in my life helps me to relate to students who have trouble seeing themselves as more than they are at a given point in time. We make choices and they come with consequences, but some of those consequences can be positive, too. Mrs. H. maximized the practice time I was

willing to commit and I used my "unspent practice time" in ways that I think were beneficial.

I didn't enter college as a music major, but I had a notion that teaching was in my future. I switched to music education at the end of first semester, and finished my B.A. in Music Education at St. Olaf in 1988. Among the many, many positive takeaways from my time at St. Olaf was coming to know music in a passionate, visceral way. Steve Amundson was (and is) an inspirational presence on the podium, and professors such as Charles Gray and Alice Hanson (among others), picked up where John and Mary left off, challenging me to be more than I perceived myself to be. After a long-term sub position in St. Peter in the spring of 1989, I accepted a .8 elementary string position in Owatonna, where I had done my student teaching. In doing so, I



turned down a full-time high school/middle school position in Wisconsin because I felt that I could best prepare myself professionally by extending my time with trusted mentors in a string program with a long history of success in a community with a long history of supporting the arts. I didn't expect at the time that I would spend the next 16 years there. I also conducted for the Southeastern Minnesota Youth Orchestra for a couple of seasons. The following year the position became full time and included some middle school. In the third year, my predecessor at Owatonna High School, Bruce Wood, left to teach at St. Cloud State and I was offered the high school position. In addition to Bruce, I was blessed to work with John Anderson and Arnold Krueger in my earliest years in Owatonna. John has since passed away, but I still visit with Arnold, who is now in his eighties. Many of the band and choral staff were also influential in my early development. Outstanding educators Jen Arco Bellefeuille and Lisa Revier were my string colleagues at the time I left Owatonna. My time in Owatonna had a profound influence on my teaching philosophy in countless ways.

I earned an M.A. in Music Education at the University of St. Thomas in 2002. I had been accepted at Ohio State, but my superintendent at the time would not grant a sabbatical to attend a full-time program. I felt so strongly that I had found my teaching home in Owatonna that I researched area options. The ability to complete a degree on weekends and summers at St. Thomas and the university's focus on pedagogy was of great interest. I valued the opportunity to deepen my ties to Owatonna through my thesis, *The History of Music in Owatonna, 1854-1891*. My first teacher, Doug Overland, was the adjunct instructor for string pedagogy!

At this point, as may be obvious, I planned to stay in Owatonna for my entire career. Of course, plans are not guarantees and I accepted a position at Wayzata High School in 2005 and have been there since. The program at Wayzata has nearly doubled in size over the last nine years. My colleagues Tom Pieper and Aimee Paar-Olson work hard to keep up. We do not start students until sixth grade. A fair number of our students begin privately before then, some through a partnership with MacPhail and others in private studios. The high school has four orchestras and about 140 students, up from 90 a few years ago, and we expect it to grow more before stabilizing. I also teach

two sections of Honors Music Theory and one section of Music History.

On Saturday mornings, I direct the MacPhail Suzuki program's Sinfonia Orchestra. My daughter, Maya, is in the group and I really value the opportunity to be making music with her.

I've also played in the Bloomington Symphony for most of the past 25 years, most of those as assistant principal second violin (currently acting principal). I've conducted the BSO a few times as well. I used to play a fair number of weddings and receptions with the Owatonna Quartet and have occasionally played in a group with Aimee Paar-Olson, Sarah Duffy and Angelique Rowell up here as well, although that work has tapered off in recent years. I still play in the Owatonna Community Orchestra, which plays only one concert a year, also a group I have conducted in the past. An occasional gig will crop up (viola with a '90s review band this last fall!), but I don't seek out gigs like I used to.

All of my important teachers and mentors have conveyed their love of music and a belief in their students. If my students and colleagues can say the same about me, then I've done my job well.

### Professional Reflections:

How does teaching influence my playing?

I approach my playing as if I were coaching a student through the piece. Solving technical problems, good practice strategies, making a line interesting, etc. I try to practice in the same way I would want a student to practice. The day after a good practice session, I'm often teaching through the filter of what I discovered or solved while practicing. Conducting also has a significant effect on my playing. Even with a single staff in front of me, I'm always trying to hear what is going on elsewhere (sometimes to the detriment of the notes on the staff in front of me!).

How do I perceive the role of the studio teacher in relation to my orchestra?

Private teachers should be working on the things I can't—solo repertoire and refining core technique. While I greatly appreciate the work they do with students on music I program, lessons should not be used to "keep up" in my orchestras. I also appreciate when teachers communicate with me about student successes or challenges, and about the music I have students playing. Interesting to me right now:

- How to bridge the gap between haves and have-nots (students who have had early lessons vs. sixth grade start?)
- How to teach enough technique to late-blooming students in a large group setting.
- Individual accountability in a large group setting (is orchestra the answer or the problem?)
- Ability grouping — how far is too far?
- How do you know if you're moving too fast or too slow? Maximizing student potential, finding the sweet spot where the students feel ownership even as you lead them to a place they can't get to without your guidance.
- The finest student performances I've heard are led by educators who drive their students harder than I do. I think these same students are also most likely to have negative experiences with the art—it's a chore, they have problems with success and failure, etc. But they will win more competitions. When am I not pushing enough? Am I even capable of pushing more? If I am, should I?

Advice for new teachers:

For me, learning to play all of the instruments well (better than any of my students not studying privately) was very useful. In Owatonna I taught private lesson on all of the instruments and needed to really play cello and bass, so I took lessons on each. It is a huge advantage to be fully confident in your ability to demonstrate on all of the instruments. This created "street cred" with the students, not only because I could play these instruments, but also because I took the time to do it.

- It's OK to not have the answers. We ask students to show their work, and it's okay to show ours. Don't "fake it 'til you make it;" sit down and figure it out. Ask colleagues for help; ask parents for help; ask students for help. If you make a mistake, own it, laugh about it, then correct it. Let students see your process so that they can see that process and practice is how things get done.
- Find your strengths and play to them.
- Find your student's strengths and tap them.
- Life is not really measured by the choice between high or low 2 or how close your bow is to the bridge, but you have to convince your students, at

least for a moment, that it is. In the best moments of teaching, you believe it, too. You're willing to bleed until they get it (really get it!) and ready to raise a "Hallelujah!" when it happens.

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*now teaches full-time from her home studio in St. Louis Park. Her students often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. †*