



Photos by Mark Schueler and Michael Zirkle

Uptown Girl. Downtown World.

by Jeannie Mellinger

Karen Strittmatter Galvin joined the North Carolina Symphony as Assistant Concertmaster in the 2007/08 season. Devoted to music and fiercely talented, she is deeply committed to her orchestra, her community and to fomenting vibrant, artistic activity in downtown Raleigh. Karen, classically trained through years with Suzuki, two youth orchestras, conservatory at Carnegie Mellon and a master's degree from the University of Maryland, also has a passionate interest in contemporary music. Along with her husband, percussionist Shawn Galvin, she plans to share that interest with the world.

Our take? **Watch out – she's going to set the world on fire.**

The Beautiful Brown Violin

One morning in Latrobe, PA – home of Rolling Rock beer, Arnold Palmer and Fred Rogers – four-year-old Karen Strittmatter had an epiphany. Right there, on the television screen in front of her, was the beloved and cardiganed Mr. Rogers with a little boy and his father playing violins. Karen was riveted. She had never seen such a thing before. And she just knew.

“Please mom,” she begged. “I want a beautiful brown violin.” It took a year of serious pleading to convince her parents this was not a passing preschool fancy. “Mom’s response was ‘that’s sweet, dear,’” Karen remembers. But persistence paid off, and finally, on her fifth birthday, her uncle brought her a half-size violin that had belonged to her great-grandfather.

Karen started lessons at the local Suzuki institute. “They had to get me another, smaller violin to start with,” she says, “but I did finally grow into and play my great-grandfather’s violin when I was around eight. I played it for about a year before I needed to move on to the next size.”

We Do Weddings

Karen’s two older sisters soon starting taking music lessons too. “Michelle played flute and my oldest sister Jeanne played cello. She saw cellos at my Suzuki school and was immediately attracted to them. They were classy and understated, which very much suited her personality.”

Karen loved the violin as much as she knew she would when that first one seductively winked at her from *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. “I was so lucky to have an amazing teacher who became both a mentor and a friend. She was wonderful. She encouraged me and was very creative in her approach. I loved the class lessons too. They tapped into my competitive side!”

Soon after the girls started their lessons, they formed the Strittmatter Trio, and in no time they were playing weddings. Karen, at age seven, still hadn’t grown into the half-size violin when they played their first gig for \$15. That was the start of a significant, money-making business that lasted until Karen moved away from Pittsburgh when she was 23.

“We played at least two weddings a weekend,” says Karen. “We bought our instruments, we paid for lessons and we paid for school. That was our job. We were

serious. Our baby sister Lisa started playing the piano when she was five, but she wanted nothing to do with us. She went off on her own, which was good since she could keep it up when we went off to college. And it also turns out that she can sing, so that became part of her business, too. We’re not sure she’s actually our sister since the other three of us can’t sing a note!”

Whether they had lovely voices or not, the Strittmatter Trio did not want for business. It’s easy to imagine how completely appealing these little girls must have been in their matching dresses and Mary Janes. “Let’s face it,” Karen smiles, “the quality of the music early on may have been unpolished, but the cute factor made up for it.”

They weren’t merely adorable, they were dedicated. They literally never said no to any request. Their repertoire was huge and constantly growing. There was Mendelssohn, of course, and many arrangements of Handel’s *Water Music*. If the bride wanted rock songs, they would arrange the music for violin, cello and flute. “We’d always warn them that it wouldn’t sound the same, but they didn’t care. We played a lot of things from *Fiddler on the Roof*, including, for some reason, ‘If I Were a Rich Man.’ No idea was too crazy for us.”

They were indefatigable as well, playing not only for the wedding but for the receptions. “We would read through hours and hours of trio music,” says Karen. “We were little workhorses. We’d play for three hours and never take a break – we didn’t know we could!”

With a schedule like this, there was no time for typical afterschool and weekend activities. The Strittmatter Trio was **working**, thank you. But the obligation was never an issue. “Practicing and performing was part of our day, like showering,” says Karen. “Our parents weren’t pushing us at all, but they were serious about making us aware of our commitments. We were making sacrifices, they were making sacrifices. They didn’t take that lightly and they made sure we didn’t either. So we were up at five a.m. to get in an hour of practice before school. We took school seriously too and got good grades because that was part of the deal.”

However, dear reader, please don’t imagine a chamber music sweatshop. The weddings were fun, and although the trio always maintained professional decorum when performing, Karen admits there was

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plenty of giggling when, for example, the bride's dress is so tight that her father and new husband-to-be have to lift her up the five steps to the altar. And certainly the traditional western Pennsylvania cookie table was another major attraction for hard-working young musicians.

There was plenty of time for fun at home, too. "We lived out in the country and so we'd spend a lot of time outside playing and just being kids. We didn't have to log a certain number of hours practicing. We just understood that practice was about improving and if we improved, we were doing our job. Both of our parents came from huge families (14 and 11) and so they weren't micromanagers. They understood that it's OK to be independent as a child."

Orchestra opportunities don't come up just every day of the week, but soon one did, in Raleigh.

Up Another Set of Stairs

In addition to her wedding business, Karen joined the Westmoreland Youth Orchestra when she was seven and by age ten, she was playing in the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony, the youngest musician at the time (ed. note: other PYS alums include NCS Associate Concertmaster Dovid Friedlander, violist Sandra Schwarcz and Resident Conductor William Henry Curry).

New teachers were needed and so, when Karen was just 11-years-old, she and her sisters began studying with members of the Pittsburgh Symphony.

"My poor dad is a heavy equipment operator," Karen says, "and so three times a week he was behind the wheel again, driving one of us to Pittsburgh and back, an hour each way, in addition to ferrying us all over western Pennsylvania to weddings on the weekend. He was so exhausted he would often sleep during our lessons, or so we thought, but he was actually paying attention. He definitely became an educated consumer of music!"

Karen's teacher, Debbie Holland, was like a mother to her. "I still have this beautiful relationship with her," she says. "I credit

her with not just helping me become the violinist I chose to become, but she had a great influence on my personality and my development as a human being."

She also studied with Hong-Guang Jia and Hwei Sheng Kao, both from China. Mr. Jia had lived through the Cultural Revolution, learning to play the violin by listening to Heifetz records in secret. Mr. Kao came alone to the Curtis Institute as a 16-year-old with no English. Together, they instilled in her a very specific work ethic. "You could make a mistake once," says Karen, "but not twice. Their thinking was, why would you repeat a mistake?"

"I was so lucky to grow up near Pittsburgh," Karen says. "It's a very cultural city and the music program was great. The city really loves its orchestra. Pittsburgh just

likes winners in general. If you're good at sports or you're good at music, we like you!"

The Love Factor

Helping her perfect her gift as a violinist is not the only thing the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony offered Karen. Somewhere in the back of the orchestra was a really cute 17-year-old percussionist named Shawn Galvin. Thirteen-year-old Karen had quite the crush. A good friend of Karen's older sister Michelle and Michelle's boyfriend, as well as a frequent third wheel on their dates, Shawn always joked that he was waiting for Karen to get older.

As it turns out, he wasn't kidding. "Two weeks after I graduated from high school, he called me. We went on our first date in June of that year and we've been together ever since." Shawn went to Duquesne University and Karen to Carnegie Mellon, both conveniently located in Pittsburgh. They dated all through Karen's college years, and meanwhile, Shawn won a job with the U.S. Navy Band in Washington, DC.

When Karen graduated from conservatory, the two married. Karen went to the University of Maryland for graduate school.

Of course, her interest in the program had a lot to do with Shawn being in Washington, but there were other great reasons to be there. The Guarneri String Quartet was in residence then, and there would be lessons and coaching with this renowned ensemble. Also at Maryland was a highly regarded violin pedagogue, Elisabeth Adkins. "She's great," says Karen, "and the perfect teacher for me to have, helping me bridge that gap between being a student and beginning a professional career. She was wonderful to me."

After graduate school, Karen won her first job with the Delaware Symphony and had her pick of interesting freelance opportunities with the Washington National Opera, chamber music ensembles at the embassies, and fun gigs like a Jethro Tull tour and the Clay Aiken Christmas tour. Shawn was happy in the Navy Band, which is as steady a job as you could ever hope to find. They bought a house. Everything was falling into place. Boxes were checked on the tick list. No need to change a thing. However...

Siren Song of the South

Orchestra opportunities don't come up just every day of the week, but soon one did, in Raleigh. Happy and settled, Karen wasn't paying that much attention to auditions. But Shawn encouraged her to take a look. The calendar was free. Shawn was free, too, which was unusual. Raleigh was just a short-ish drive. There was nothing to lose and an assistant concertmaster post to win.

It was a bit scary to think of leaving a solid life in Washington behind and heading for an unknown part of the country. But just like the violin on Mr. Rogers, the North Carolina Symphony winked, seductively. And so Karen said yes.

Karen was one of three string players to join the orchestra that fall. David Kilbride, Assistant Principal Violin II, and Christopher Fischer, Assistant Principal Viola, were also new to the Symphony. "We had our own little support group," says Karen. "But joining the orchestra was so easy. Everyone was so nice and accommodating and friendly. It's interesting to talk to people in other orchestras because you see how functional our group is compared to others. My theory is that we get along because we have to spend so much time together on the bus!"

Dream a Little Dream (or Two)

Three years after their southbound leap of faith, Karen and Shawn know they made the right decision. "We love the city, we love the people we've met, and we love the fact that there's a strong arts community here. We musicians are a creative bunch and an incredibly social bunch and one of the cool things about moving to Raleigh is being able to live downtown. We've found that there really is something to Southern hospitality. People want to talk to you and get to know you."

Karen and Shawn's embrace of Raleigh is evidenced in their own ensemble, New Music Raleigh, a brainchild of theirs since they were dating. "Our dream was that we would collaborate with artists of all types and styles, in a less formal atmosphere, playing the music of contemporary composers in unconventional spaces. Such a dream. But now it's time to do it. We're so excited about it - me and Shawn and [fellow NCS violinist] Maria Evola. We're just small potatoes now, but we plan to become a non-profit, develop an education program and be a force for modern music in the city.

"We want our concerts to be about having the audience close to the music and playing music that fits with the time we live in right now. When I think about what we do at work, which I love, I think of it in the context of playing these beautiful masterworks, pieces of art. I'm performing a Leonardo DaVinci or a Renoir. We play in a formal space and we wear formal clothes to revere this music, to honor it. It's the best of what we are as human beings. With NMR we want to lose a little of that reverence.

"I think the institution of the orchestra is at a crossroads," she continues. "I see what Shawn and I want to do as an outgrowth, a way of way of welcoming in new audiences who might be intimidated by a bunch of people on stage wearing tails and formal black, to simply come and experience music in a bar. There is this idea is that it's elitist to come to hear a symphony orchestra, but once people get to know us they enjoy the experience more because they are watching a friend on stage. I want to know them too. I'm more excited about the experience knowing there are people in the audience that are excited to be there. That makes me play better."

Alongside this dream is the dream of building a home in downtown Raleigh,

with a detached, soundproof percussion studio for Shawn, and perhaps a rooftop deck where they can look out over the lights of the city on a warm, summer night.

They have their eye on a little property that fills the bill. "We'd love to be able to entertain and have concerts, so we want a big, open living space and maybe an outdoor living space as well," Karen says. "We're depositing as much money as we possibly can before going to the bank, but we've been talking to an architect we adore. I found him online and emailed, saying, 'we're musicians, we have no money, but would you be interested in working with us?' He wrote this beautiful response telling us that his dad was a musicologist and he grew up in a house where the piano blocked the TV. He got us immediately. Being a musician and fitting into a regular house is hard to do - especially with all of Shawn's percussion equipment. So if we can start from the ground up and build something that suits our needs from the beginning that would be great. It's so exciting that we can do this in Raleigh."

Giving Back

Along with the commitment to music is commitment to other aspects of the community. Karen has been involved with Community Hope, a literacy mentoring program sponsored by the YMCA that pairs adults with young children, one on one. Although she isn't able to continue as a mentor this year, she plans to stay involved by fundraising for the program. She would also like to work with the organization to help them find more nutritious sources for the snacks they provide.

She and Shawn have enjoyed working for their favorite political candidates and Karen plans to become involved with the bike and pedestrian lobby in Raleigh. "I want to start researching and lobbying for better bike paths and safer pedestrian crossings," she says. "Anything to make Raleigh a more bikeable, walkable, safer city. It is such an awesome community with all these great neighborhoods close to downtown and so many wonderful places to go. It just makes sense to hop on your bike instead of getting in your car to go four blocks. And we have so many beautiful days here. But it needs to be safer."

Karen, along with some of her colleagues, has performed at the Women's Shelter ("I



Top to bottom: Karen with a student; Karen performing; husband Shawn at New Music Raleigh concert; Karen, Shawn and Sadie



The best seat in the house is the seat I sit in – there’s so much energy that happens on stage

also want to be an advocate for the homeless in Raleigh”) and raised money for UNICEF after the earthquake in Haiti (“We need to do something now for Pakistan”). “There are so many opportunities to be involved,” she says. “The community feels very active here.”

She also maintains an active teaching studio and coaches the Young All-Stars, an exclusive chamber orchestra for advanced high school musicians led by Music Director Grant Llewellyn. “Just giving them those skills, telling them, ‘Yes you can move your chairs so you can see a little better, the inside player turns the page, try using this part of your bow – little things like that and you see them start to figure out the rhythm of what works in an orchestra, what makes a good stand partner.’ I loved doing that. I’ve been working with Triangle Youth Philharmonic a little bit, as well – doing some coaching and listening to their auditions.”

Whew. But who would expect less from the girl who had a wedding business at age seven?

On Being a Musician

“I’ve never thought of this as just a job,” says Karen. “When musicians go out, when we hang out together, the conversations are constantly about honing our craft. It never leaves our minds. So much of how we feel about ourselves as human beings is reflected in how we feel about ourselves as

musicians, which can be really hard when you’re in a slump. We’re taught to be very self-critical – that’s part of our training and how we improve.”

One of the brilliant advantages, though, of being a musician in an orchestra, is that you have colleagues to support you, particularly in the string sections. “We are very much a team,” Karen says. “We depend on each other and on our stand partners. I’m so lucky to sit with Bekah [ed note: Rebekah Binford, Assistant Concertmaster]. She’s such a strong and beautiful player and a beautiful person. I just adore her and sitting with her gives me an extra sense of security.”

Other than sometimes having to miss a friend’s wedding or being unable to travel at Thanksgiving or New Year’s, Karen can’t think of a real downside to being a musician. “Every once in a while,” she says, “I’ll have that moment when I’m caught up in the beauty of what’s happening and think – wow, this is my job, I can’t believe that!”

“You know, when we sit down to play, we are focused on expressing art. We have our own special kind of religion. After a concert, to have experienced that transformation...maybe you’ve just played a Mahler Symphony and it was incredibly beautiful and you overcame obstacles and difficulties to create this transformative piece of music...it’s more than adrenaline.” She stops,

shaking her head. “There aren’t words. It’s a religious experience. The audience applauds and that means so much to us to know that we’ve shared this not with just the people on stage, but the audience was part of that experience as well. It puts you in touch with your humanity. It is so uplifting.”

“For me, as a musician, I sometimes look out at the audience and I feel so bad that they are sitting way out there. The best seat in the house is the seat I sit in – there’s so much energy that happens on stage.”

2035

What does the future hold for this dynamic and talented young force of nature? Karen definitely expects to always love playing. “And I’ll still be teaching,” she says, “because I love teaching. I’ll be enjoying as much free time as I possibly can. I’ll have a big garden with lots of big trees. And I will travel in all of my off time. And outside of work, I will still be involved in individual projects – that’s gotten to a big part of what I do.”

What else does she see in her crystal ball? “In twenty-five years, New Music Raleigh will still be going strong and is now an institution. My vision is for it to be a vehicle for young composers, young musicians – commissioning work and really being at the forefront of what’s happening in new music

and doing new ideas and creative things. Shawn and I would like to find a way to fund commissions and have competitions and find ways to inspire composers to be creative about how they write for groups and offer showcases for young musicians.

“The other thing I see for myself in twenty-five years is still being very active in my community where I live. That’s very important to me and something I’ve enjoyed since I moved to Raleigh.”

Most of all, though, Karen wants to see music thriving and reaching new audiences, and of course, she and Shawn will be a part of that. “I want to introduce as many people as possible to the experience of hearing the orchestra live. It’s this massive organism made up of all these very different people, all working for the same goal together. And not just that – the audience is very integral to the performance as well. You know when they love it, and when they’re not too sure. It makes you play better when you know the performance is being received well. You never know what’s going to happen – that’s part of the excitement. Maybe this sounds cheesy, but it restores your faith in humanity to see that people can come together to create something that beautiful. I think it’s a miracle when that happens.”



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