Joys of Teaching

Elizabeth Beilman with her teacher, Fritz Magg, at Indiana University

MANY NORTH CAROLINA Symphony musicians teach. With a passion equaling that of their onstage performance, members of our orchestra give their time, talent, and profound enthusiasm for music to Generation Next.

Elizabeth Beilman

Associate Principal Cello

This is a typically full day at the Gilmore-Beilman home. The morning holds a brisk walk and a delicious couple of hours of practice. The evening will bring us to a Holiday Pops performance in Southern Pines. And the afternoon is for teaching. It is something I've done since coming to North Carolina – even before – and when I was asked to write about why I teach, it was very difficult to fix upon a single answer. Difficult because, like playing the cello or breathing the air, it has become a natural and necessary act.

So as I greet each of the two students who enter our sunny music room this typical Thursday, I find myself remembering all the other students who came before them.

My first student in North Carolina who, after graduation, earned performance degrees at prestigious music schools and then established her own music career, teaching in Tennessee. And another student, a tiny Chinese-American girl who went on to become the lone female engineering major in her class at Princeton. She also played in the student orchestra there. Then there was the disadvantaged student who was able to attend UNC-G because of a music scholarship. Students who went on to pursue their musical dreams all over the world.

The two students I work with today are not so different from their predecessors, in that they are unique in every way. The first child is a boy of thirteen years. He has studied the cello for only two of those years, a late start by musical standards. However, he has taken private instruction in both piano and composition and, as he places his music on the stand, he tells me that he would like to share his latest work, a sonata for cello and piano. The piece proves to be inventive, lyrical and lovely to play. This is my first student to demonstrate such talent for composition; his imagination and focus are a delight. After I make a few suggestions, we proceed into the body of the lesson.

Scales, etudes, solos. Except during contest and recital periods, lessons invariably follow this plan. This is the format all of my teachers followed with me and it works very well. I find it very satisfying to know that I am following in my teachers' footsteps, and as the boy begins to play an arrangement of Brahms's Lullaby, my thoughts go back to a particular lesson with my teacher, Fritz Magg, at Indiana University. We were working on the Brahms Sonata in E minor. It took several repetitions before Mr. Magg, an exacting and sometimes intimidating professor, was satisfied.

At this point he leaned back in his wooden chair, his long legs stretched before him, and began to muse about his past. "You know," he began in his charming Viennese accent, "I studied this piece with Diran Alexanian at the Paris Conservatory and-and-and (there were always several extra "ands" in every sentence) as a teenager, he played it for Brahms himself. So, in a way, you are Brahms's great grandchild."

This bombshell was met with total shock on my part. I felt humbled and empowered at the same time. Now, as I relate the story to my budding little composer, he proudly proclaims, "Well, then, that makes me Brahms's great-great-grandchild!" Somehow, his next rendering of the Lullaby seems especially warm and convincing, imbued with his newfound sense of ownership.

This intimate connection with our musical past is a truly thrilling aspect of the teacher-student relationship. But the ability to reach into the future is equally exciting.

(l-r) Elizabeth Beilman, Paul Randall, Mike Cyzewski, Jacqueline Saed Wolborsky

My next student, though only twelve years old, has already studied the cello for seven years. Her skills are a felicitous blend of intelligence, athleticism and musicianship. The repertoire she plays now has been chosen to challenge and inspire. This student is a joy to teach; she responds eagerly to every suggestion with a natural beauty of tone and phrasing. One hour becomes two without our noticing.

The one-on-one, long-term relationship of private teaching is a rare thing in our mass-produced world. It is a precious trust to be able to pass along my teachers' knowledge, as well as what I've learned on my own. And every single one of my students has contributed to my own enrichment, satisfying a deep need for continued growth. If I am able to further their own growth, it is only a minimal repayment for their gift to me. Teaching is its own reward.

Paul Randall

Principal Trumpet

Over the years I have taught many young trumpet students in my spare time (which is not much!), working around my Symphony schedule. It has certainly been a rewarding experience, particularly when one of my students has gone on to a university music school. However, one of my most interesting teaching experiences began at a concert in Meymandi Concert Hall several years ago.

At the end of a concert, I was walking offstage and a man called down to me from the choir seats behind the stage. He asked me what fingering I use for E natural when playing the C trumpet. Obviously this fellow was a trumpet player, so I told him to wait and I would come to him to chat. It turned out that he was indeed a trumpet player, and asked me if I gave lessons. He told me that he lived in New York, but traveled to Raleigh to visit a friend and do some work fairly often. We set up a date to have a lesson shortly afterward.

I later found out a number of unusual things about my new student. Don Easum was older than I thought, about 80. He had been a pretty dedicated player in his youth, and then put the trumpet away for much of his life because he was too busy with his very distinguished career in the foreign services.

During our lessons, which took place whenever he was in town, I found out more and more about this fascinating man and his life. It turned out that besides the trumpet we had other things in common, notably a passion for tennis. Though Don had stopped playing due to some arthritis problems, he still followed the game closely. At one lesson, I mentioned that I had always meant to go to the US Open in New York but for various reasons had not gone. He invited me to go with him and stay at his place in New York. I attended the 2006 and 2007 US Opens with this great man and had a wonderful time going to the tennis all day and playing duets all night! Don often refers to himself as my oldest student.

Teaching is more than lesson assignments, and making observations about how a person can play better. Teaching is also a personal relationship that has to be cared for and nurtured just like any other. I have actually learned many things from my students over the years, even though they come to learn from me. Teaching was not originally a priority for me, but has become an important part of my life as a musician, and as a person.

Mike Cyzewski

Assistant Principal Clarinet

As I sat nervously waiting for the slow movement of the Stravinsky *Firebird* Suite, my student, Margaret Unger, calmly took a big breath and played the first of the many clarinet solos with ease and exceptional musicianship. Bursting with pride, I wiped the tears from my eyes as she continued to negotiate the musical interplay with her colleagues from the Triangle Youth Philharmonic with a sensitivity usually not displayed by a high school student. I didn't teach her all that, I thought; she is gifted and I am fortunate to have been her clarinet teacher for the last five years.

Every Wednesday, you'll find me immersed in my students' lives both personally and musically for 240 minutes. As each student responds positively to my instruction, I am enriched and energized with a feedback of smiles and thank yous. The instant gratification received by both parties is unique to the private lesson format. When the four hours has ended, rather than feeling exhausted I am filled with endorphins and ready to start practicing myself.

After assessing a student's performance capabilities and learning about their non-musical activities, the committed teacher embraces the challenge of designing both a short- and long-term game plan tailored specifically for each individual. There cannot be one set of inflexible rules for everyone.

Since the private lesson scenario fosters an atmosphere in which the involved teacher's duty is to listen and find fault, I am challenged to couch criticism in a positive fashion. The task of being part cheerleader, part psychologist and part teacher/musician is complicated but invigorating. When managed successfully, I am rewarded with the trust and dedication of the student.

The task of cheerleader is eliminated when the student achieves just a modicum of success and the motivation begins to generate from the pupil. Witnessing this transformation is always an enlightening element of the teaching process. Sharing knowledge also benefits me directly as I re-visit my own early training. This keeps me in touch with the fundamentals of correct playing that even professionals need to continue to practice.

As conductor Hugh Partridge asks the young musicians of the Triangle Youth Philharmonic to stand and accept a standing ovation, these frustrations have long disappeared and I am reminded only of the joys of teaching.

I once read that Coach Dean Smith keeps in touch with all the athletes who played for him. I wish I had the time and energy to do that. The thank yous, smiles and phone calls of successes and friendship leave me filled with pride and make this teacher thankful for still being part of the lives of his students.

Jacqueline Saed Wolborsky

Associate Principal Second Violin

My violin teachers are some of the most significant people in my life. They opened my eyes to the language of music and helped me understand how music transcends time and space. This is a gift.

I teach so I can share this incredible language with my students and make it more accessible to them. At the same time, teaching is a symbiotic relationship. My students constantly present me with new ways of approaching the violin and always encourage me to think outside the box because we all learn so differently.

It is fascinating to me how one concept can be so easy to grasp for one student yet so challenging for another and vice versa. This is when the fun really begins: the process of digging deeper to put together the little pieces of the bigger picture always leads us through enlightening twists and turns.

During this process, I find so many of my own connections being made through my students' learning. Sometimes I suddenly will understand a concept that my teachers were trying to explain to me ten years ago that never quite clicked until that very moment! Aside from my own heightened level of understanding, it is the greatest sense of accomplishment when my students finally get to that next level and really grasp the idea that we have been struggling with. The true reward comes from the journey of discovering music. I hope that the process will make their lives better.