



## Episode 14: An Interview with Chenoa Murphy

**Christine Goodner:**

Well today, I'm excited to welcome Chenoa Alamu Murphy and Chenoa I would love for you to just start by telling listeners a bit about who you are and what you do.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Thanks. First of all, thank you so much for having me Christine, as she said, my name is Chenoa Murphy. I just got married this year in March. I am a teacher, educator, and violin symphony musician. Um, I've been playing the violin since the age of three and started through the Suzuki violin method when the Suzuki method was fairly new to the United States. So I remember when we had to submit cassette tapes and mail them to Japan so that Dr. Suzuki could listen to them, you know, in order to advance through the books and graduate and whatnot. So I am from the old school Suzuki violin method.

**Christine Goodner:**

I love it. Did you ever get a response from Suzuki himself?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

No, not that I'm aware of nor did I ever have the opportunity to meet him or, or see him, but my teachers of course, were able to study under him and meet him in person and whatnot. So I was probably as close to him as I could have gotten at the time.

**Christine Goodner:**

That's really fun. Do you remember when you started playing, was it something you wanted to do? Was it something your family wanted for you? How did that begin?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

It's a great question. The story that I was told about how I got started in my violin journey is that my mother took me to my first classical music concert, which so happened to be the Suzuki Japanese children. So I was two years old at the time and they were here in the United States on tour. I believe this is when he was showing off the methods, so to speak, and wanting to show people, you know, what

the method could do for their children, so to speak. So I remember that concert and my mom said that I was very excited that I was very interested that I showed interest. So I don't know if I stood up in my seat, you know, who knows, you know, being two years old, but she wanted to enroll me in lessons then, but she was told that I was too young. And so a year later at the age of three is when I got started. For a long time, it was, it was a great passion of mine and something that I love to do and really enjoy doing. So I would say that it's something that I wanted to do.

**Christine Goodner:**

Hmm, that's great. I love hearing those stories of what sparks people to begin. And do you remember always loving it? Did you love to practice? Was it a struggle? Some of both?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

I never...no. I don't recall practicing being a positive experience for me. I did love performing. I loved, you know, like I said, playing the instrument itself, but practicing no, even to this day, no.

**Christine Goodner:**

I love talking about that because I think as family supporting young musicians, we might feel like, "What's wrong? They don't love every minute of the practice?" And I think a few of these interviews I've done, people have said they loved practice all along, but it's pretty rare.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Yeah. I mean, because I just wanted to play the pieces, you know? I just wanted to get to it and just play it and, and be perfect right away. And I have to admit, I was pretty impatient with myself. So as long as I was getting it, I was happy with things and my progress and whatnot, but otherwise I do recall my mother practicing with me as, standard in the Suzuki method. However, when I was, on my own, it was just a struggle to get the hours in or, or really even knowing how to practice. So I think that was probably the bigger issue for me is just knowing how to practice.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. That's a theme. I hear a lot too. Do you find that you spent more time when you're working with your own students about how to practice and teaching them those skills?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Yes, absolutely. In fact, if they haven't practiced at home, then I recall saying, okay, well, this is what you would have done had you practiced at home. And so we pretty much practice right there, during their lessons and teaching them how to break down difficult passages and you know, how to isolate passages that are giving them trouble and problems and just how to put it all together. But I don't remember that being something that I was taught as a kid. When I got to college and studied with my professors, there is when I got a better idea of what practicing looks like and how it should be conducted and scheduled and all of that.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. I think it's just a skill that we have to learn if your child is really resistant or it seems like they're wasting time or staring at the music stand and not do anything, they just really may need some skills like- "what do I even do?"

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Absolutely. Right. And I think it's a very important skill to be able to learn because, you know, just telling a kid to, to just do something, it's just, you know, there has to be a how to it.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. They often need some coaching. I talked to a lot of teachers now who had a similar experience and now I feel like we're all really trying to teach those practice skills that we didn't learn until college to the younger kids so they can be successful.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Absolutely. I agree.

**Christine Goodner:**

Important conversation for sure. When did you know that- this is not a question I mentioned, but our conversation is making me think of it- when did you know you wanted to become a professional musician? When did that spark for you?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

During my high school years? Because that's when my mother started asking me, "okay, do you want to do this as a career?" Like, "what do you want to do when you grow up?" And she said, "do you want to be a concert violinist?" You know, I didn't even know what that was. I really didn't know what my options were, but when she started to ask me those questions and it just really started planting seeds in my mind as to the possibilities. And then that's when I decided to major in music. So I have a bachelor's as well as a master's in violin performance. And then I completed, much, much later in my life, like in my early thirties is when I decided to go back to school towards a doctorate, but I was married to my children's father at the time and did the wife thing and cut my studies short cause he got a job and all that. But yeah, she started asking me those questions, like when it was time to start visiting colleges and thinking about my future, my career choices.

**Christine Goodner:**

I think about what, what sparks that for us. And it sounds like you had a really supportive, supportive mother there helping you decide.

To switch gears a little bit. And you know, we got to know each other through some other work that you're doing over the last, you know, 18 months or so you've been running some wonderful online classes about black classical composers and musicians and you know, a lot of people that were left out of my own music education, for sure. And I think for many of us, we're sort of realizing there's many people who are not included in what we learned about classical music. So I'd love to hear what prompted you to teach those classes and what you've enjoyed about teaching those classes.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

First of all, I want to say you're not alone in feeling left out in terms of what you were taught, the who's and the, and the, you know, the what's in classical music. That's my own story. It wasn't until I was in undergraduate school where I began to even ask, you know, I wonder if there were people who looked

like me, who were in this field as musicians, you know, who were concert artists as well as composers. And to my recollection is when I remembered coming across William Grant Still and I actually performed his suite for violin and piano for one of my recitals, and then fast forward to 2019 homeschooling my children at the time. And there was like a co-op for homeschoolers. And so they, this particular homeschool mom was asking him and recruiting parents who wanted to teach certain subjects for this online co-op this is what she was developing.

And so that's when I decided to teach on black classical composers and musicians, we only had four students at the time, including my two. So then fast forward to 2020, there was some things going on here in the country, the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. So there were protests happening both in this country and around the world. And I remember thinking, Christine, "what can I do differently time?" Because, you know, at that point we had been at that point before just with other people. And so I said, "well, how can I respond in a way that is healthy, in a way that was positive and most importantly, in a way that brought a solution as opposed to continuing to regurgitate, to take the problems and the issues and the anger and what not." And so I remember the classes that I taught in 2019, I said, "well, let me refresh this information."

### Chenoa Murphy:

And I do remember there were some deep discussions happening even among the Suzuki organization itself on the international level, in terms of where they stood with black lives matter and whatnot. And so I just began to tell people, Hey, this is what I'm offering introduction to black classical composers and musicians. And boy, I tell you, it was almost what's about 60 adults and about 23 to 26 families because I taught two classes, one for families and one for adults. And let's just say, it just really took off from there. I went from teaching the courses to also conducting diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops, which does incorporate the black composers as well as their repertoire and teaching teachers, how to diversify their studios, diversify the repertoire, and really learn how to introduce this music to their students in a way that isn't overwhelming, because I know if this is something that you haven't been taught or learned.

And there's a, particularly if I may say for white string teachers, there's this pressure to get it right. There's this pressure to not make a mistake. And so I do hope, and so far the feedback that I have been getting is that my workshops and my classes in general, just really help people to come to terms with some things, as well as have a safe, nurturing space, to be able to say, Hey, I just didn't know. You know, and, and this is what I was taught about classical music, or this is what I believe to have been the right way to hear or know of classical music. So I'm really grateful for that because I feel like we're all human beings really trying to do our best with life and with the issues that, you know, have fallen into our laps and the legacies that we have been left with that might not be so just might not be so comfortable to own up to, and, and really do something about not just for where we are currently, but also for our children and grandchildren.

And great-grandchildren, so the main thing I love about teaching these courses is that I get to bring these people to life. For example, Florence price is one of the people I talk about and I live in Springfield, Illinois, and I had no idea that three hours away in Chicago is where she debuted or where the Chicago symphony rather debuted one of her symphony orchestras. And she is the first black woman to have that achievement, you know, and it's, it's just really amazing what these people have gone through the,

the ups, as well as the downs and the obstacles in which, you know, they had to overcome in order to achieve such awesome achievements.

**Christine Goodner:**

And I think for many of us, we're looking around thinking, well, how come this, I have never been taught this, or here's, here's our, you know, literature that we all follow as teachers, and this is not included. And how do we incorporate that? So those who didn't attend those sessions that you did live when you first started doing this, now you have prerecorded sessions that people can sign up for through Thinkific online. And wonder if you could talk about that and how people could sign up and learn more.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

You can go to Thinkific and look for the courses. I have two classes now, introduction to black classical composers and musicians and black classical composers and musicians, the journey onward, which serves as a part two. And so one way that I started telling teachers from the very beginning, especially when I began to sense a lot of anxiety around wanting to be an ally, wanting to be an ally the right way, because there are those that are performative and just wanting to look good without really allowing issues and things to reach their hearts and their being. I tend to attract those who I feel are really sincere and wanting to learn and humble themselves, you know, to learn. And so I just tell them, "Introduce this music the same way that you would introduce Beethoven." There really doesn't need to be this big deal, you know, roll out the red carpet.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Okay. Now we're going to learn about, you know, black composers. I mean, you can do that, but then there's also, like I mentioned, just introducing it. For example, there's adoration, which I think is very good for, I would say maybe mature beginners to intermediate playing levels adoration, and just, you know, say, for example, this is a piece you want to teach your, your private students, as well as a group class in a group setting. Just say, "Hey, we're going to learn this piece. This is Florence Price. She was the first black woman to have her composition played by the Chicago symphony." And here we go, you know? There really doesn't have to be this whole, huge introduction, I hope that makes sense. I do realize that people do feel the need to have a special month, or a special time or a specialty...

But if we really want to just start integrating this material and this history as a way of normal life, you know, then we can just talk about it, like in that manner. Does that make sense?

**Christine Goodner:**

Absolutely.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

I mean, is it special? Is it awesome? Is it, do I wish every classroom, every concert stage, every home even knew about these people? Sure. You know, and again, I just feel like if we just start to talk about it, just like we do anything else and normalize it, then I feel like that would also help to take a lot of being anxiety and angst out of introducing, not just the people, but also their music in their studios.

**Christine Goodner:**

All right. And I can, you know, for me, the hope is that none of my students have to grow up thinking, is there anyone like me that could be a professional musician or a composer? Like I want all my students to see themselves represented.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Exactly! Absolutely. And I still recall when I was living in the DC area, the freelance musician, where I heard the butterfly lovers violin concerto, and it was of course written by a Chinese composer. And I remember thinking, I had no idea, that Chinese people composed Western style, classical music. Every culture has their own version of classical music, but the Western style of classical music! There's this piece that was written by a Chinese composer and it was beautiful, you know, and I'm thinking this is something I should have learned about.

**Christine Goodner:**

And it may feel really different to us to incorporate this music. Cause we weren't trained that way, but hopefully we can present it in a way that it does feel like, oh, this is just a variety of people have composed music and I'm learning about them and we don't have to make it, you know, other in some way by making too big of a deal. Right.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

I like to say too, understand the training aspect of things, but, you know, we're, we're still more than our training. We're still more than, you know, what we've been taught is the right way to do XYZ or what's been accepted as the default way. And so just, you know, if we begin to think just from a human perspective, you know, just as a human, how would I want to be introduced if no one had heard of me or knew of me, how would I want to be introduced? And I'm, I would think that whether you're a woman or whether you're a person of color or different sexual orientation or whatnot, that you would just want it to be of ease and peaceful, if that makes sense, you know, a lot of visceral emotions that have been surrounding these issues, which brings on the anxiety and whatnot. And anyway, I feel like I'm going on and on, because there's so much I can say about this, but yeah. Just be, just be normal about it.

**Christine Goodner:**

Mmm, and I've realized for me, I probably need to say more about all composers. And if I just introduced any piece, like to my group class, for example, here's a picture of this composer, here's three facts about this composer. It would make it feel a little easier to just make that a normal part of this is how we do our music.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Exactly, exactly. And another thing that my workshop addresses, which really starts to get to the heart of things is perhaps the reason why there is so much anxiety around introducing the repertoire, even talking about the composers themselves is what were you taught? You know, what has been your experience about people of color period. So based on what you've seen in the news, or different entertainment outlets, or even in your own personal lives, whether that's something that you have been accustomed to, or not also depends on how you introduce this music. So say for example, if your diet has mostly been while I just see people of color through a particular lens and what the news shows me, then there is going to be some uncomfortable feelings, introducing Florence price, you know, and rightly so. I mean, and, and this goes into a whole other area of the brain and how our minds work and

conscious and subconscious beliefs and thinking there's a lot that goes into teaching this that I feel people have to overcome, but it's, it's doable. It just takes a lot of inner work. And if people, and when people are willing to do the inner work and look within themselves, then yeah, they become more comfortable and more successful. Then it's totally doable because we all have to do it.

**Christine Goodner:**

I like what you said about coming to it with a humble attitude and just, you know, what do I need to learn and really taking it to heart versus I'm just want to look a certain way. That seems really important. Well, we've talked about how people might incorporate some of the composers just as a part of their curriculum and thinking about how we can do that. But did you have any other thoughts about what teachers might do as they learn more about anyone who might not have been included in their music education themselves that they want their students to know about?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

I love what you just said, because there are also women composers and musicians, Maude Powell is one who comes to mind, you know, who may, or you know, who didn't meet the Canon, so to speak and who was left out. And we, and we don't know much about her or others, but I love what you just said about showing a picture, stating three facts and learning the music. You know, it really is that simple. And I do understand that particularly with African-American composers or black composers, there were some very, I would just for a lack of a better word, awful things, awful circumstances in which they were trying to this awesome music and this creation out of there being. For example, Florence Price, it was born and raised in little rock, Arkansas and life for African-Americans was pretty good, decent.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

She was raised in a middle-class home, but it got to a point where a lynching took place in a nearby middle-class black neighborhood. And so this was part of the great migration where she, her husband and two girls along with other African-American families decided to move north again, this is called the great migration. So places like Chicago and New York and Detroit is where Southern black families fled for safety and for more opportunities. And so this is what she did. And so imagine just having to think about your own wellbeing and your own safety for your, for your family, which is something we all do even now in 2021, you know, with COVID and other things that are taking place, but this is just a part of what she had to go through in order to make history in Chicago, because the move to Chicago turned out to be an excellent move for her career-wise. But that's not something that you necessarily have to teach younger students. You know, you can just focus on the fact that she was the first black woman that the Chicago symphony premiered. And she also won the Wanamaker prize for her symphony as well as for one of her piano sonatas. You know, those are things that you can highlight that would make it more digestible for students. And then as they get older, hopefully this will encourage them and inspire them to look deeper into researching other people who aren't in the Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Canon. So I hope that answers your question.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. And like you're saying like an age appropriate facts, basically, and as students get older, they can handle some more of the conflict around some of what these composers and musicians went through.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Exactly. You know, because they weren't the only ones, you know, Beethoven was known as angry, and I'm pretty sure if he was alive today could have been diagnosed with bipolar depression or just some type of depression disorder, but, kids don't know what that is but you can focus on other things. [Like] how his ninth symphony was when he was deaf, and he couldn't hear when the audience was applauding and so he had to be turned around, so there are a lot of positive aspects of these people's lives that can be highlighted and should be highlight.

**Christine Goodner:**

Absolutely. Thank you. That's really helpful. And I think many people are learning information, but then how do we actually use it and how do we make a difference or our own students grew up in a different mindset about, who we study and everything wonderful. Well, I always like to ask, as we're starting to think about wrapping up our conversation for a practice tip for listeners of our podcast is all about practicing and other aspects of music, of course, but I wondered if you had any ideas, whether it's related to our other topics or not, that you could leave listeners with?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

What stands out to me that I remember my undergraduate professor, Kurt Sassmannhaus [saying]: slow practice leads to the fastest way to learn a piece. And, oh my gosh, in our society of instant meals and instant weddings and instant this and instant that, that is the last thing that a child will probably want to hear, but it really is true that the slower you take a piece and really learn it, note by note, even dynamic by dynamic is the path to learning a piece the fastest. So that's what I would say, because you have to give your brain a chance to catch up with the finger movement. And, you know, there's, there's a whole body thing that's happening when you slow the practice down. So by the time you start to speed it up, muscle memory can kick in.

**Christine Goodner:**

I love that. Yes, nobody really wants to do that, but we miss so many details. I always tell my students to go "thinking speed". I love that. That's a great tip. Well, what is the best way for people to get in contact with you or connect with you if they want to follow up and learn more about what you do or follow what you're up to lately?

**Chenoa Murphy:**

My email addresses, [chenoa@blackclassicalmusicians.com](mailto:chenoa@blackclassicalmusicians.com), [CHENOA@blackclassicalmusicians.com](mailto:CHENOA@blackclassicalmusicians.com).

**Christine Goodner:**

And I assume your website is black classical musicians that come as well.

**Chenoa Murphy:**

Yes, it is, is not as updated as I would like for it to be. However, if there's an organization or even a studio that wants me to teach on black classical composers and musicians, I'm available as well as any organization, Suzuki organization that would love for me to teach the DEI workshop as well, feel free to reach out to me. I am available. And thank you pristine for this. This has been great.