



Time to Practice podcast Episode 15: An Interview with Dr. Quinton Morris

Christine Goodner:

Welcome everyone! I'm excited today to be talking to Dr. Quinton Morris. I wonder if you could start by introducing listeners a bit to who you are and some of what you do.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Sure. I'm Dr. Quinton Morris and I do a number of different things in the music world. My day job is as a University professor. I teach at Seattle University; I teach violin. I also run a nonprofit organization called Key to Change, which provides violin and viola lessons to middle and high school students in an underserved area of our county. And then finally, I am the artist scholar in residence at classical KING FM radio station. I have a show there called Unmute the Voices, which is both a radio show, as well as a video series that highlights and celebrates the music of people of color who are both composers as well as performers.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, I've been enjoying that video series, especially - I've been watching that. That's been great. So we'll make sure people know how to find that after our conversation today.. Well, one thing I've been asking people - we're recording this in the summer of 2021 - is just what has music looked like in your life the last year and a half or so? We've all been going through unusual times and I just wondered how that's impacted your music making and all the things that you do.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

I think one thing that COVID has definitely taught - at least I won't speak for everyone, but I'll speak for myself - is a high level of patience and also diligence and appreciation for living in the moment. With that being said, I have been very, very busy since the pandemic started in March of 2020. There's been a number of activities from teaching online, as well as of course now the radio show and the video series and a number of different workshops and lectures that I have been doing virtually. So I've stayed pretty busy. I really cannot complain, to be honest with you. At times, I feel like I've probably had way too much going on! I think we've also had to learn the space of respecting each other's boundaries because now that we're online, it's like, oh, can you talk, can you jump online? And so I think learning how to just create those healthy boundaries so that you can enjoy both your work as well as your home time while being at home, I think is really essential, not just for musicians, but I think for all people.

Christine Goodner:

Right, yeah, I can relate to that. I think at first I overdid things because it seemed like this was going to be shortlived. So I was doing all these things, trying to be helpful where I could, and then I've had to learn those boundaries, for sure.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Right, Right.

Christine Goodner:

Well, I would love to zoom back if we could, to when you started learning music. I heard in an interview - you can correct me if I'm wrong - that you learned in a school program at first, maybe around third grade? I'd love if you could tell a little bit about what that was like for you and your beginning experience.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Sure. You are correct, I did start in a public schools orchestra program in third grade. I was eight years old, from what I remember about that time, because it was so long ago. There was a woman who came around with violins and violas. There was a girl who actually had played the violin and started a year before me. She was really smart. And so I felt like, okay, if she plays violin and she's really smart, I probably should play the violin, too, cause I kind of wanted to be smart like her. I remember going to music camps during the summer at the junior high school, which was a big deal for an elementary school student who was able to be around older students. I had a great time. A lot of students in my neighborhood all played an instrument, and so that was, of course, kind of the thing to do. It was a lot of fun. I don't have any bad memories of that time, except it being fun. And actually - fun fact - I also played French horn. I picked up the French horn in fourth grade and then juggled both instruments. Violin and French horn all through high school.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, that's amazing. Very cool.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

I picked the two hardest instruments.

Christine Goodner:

Love it. It just points out to me what I've seen from my own students is that the social piece of learning music can be so motivating, and so key. I imagine that was a big part of what made it such a fun, fun thing to look back on.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

It was, it was.

Christine Goodner:

We talk a lot on this podcast about practicing and I wonder, do you have any memories about what it was like to practice when you were younger? Did you like it? Was it hard?

Dr. Quinton Morris:

When I was younger, especially when I was first starting out, I loved to practice. I remember practicing...we used to live in this high-rise apartment building, and I remember standing out on the balcony and practicing there, my violin or my French horn, and I would see the other kids swimming. Of course, I enjoyed my childhood and had a great time being outside, but I liked practicing as a kid. I remember having my little practice logs and filling them out, and I'm sure there were some times where my mom had to say, son, you need to practice your instruments, but I don't remember being forced to practice an instrument. So I guess I can't really relate to those students in one sense, who just don't practice. I liked my music teachers, and so I think a lot of times if the student likes the teacher, if they like the environment that they're in, if the learning environment's fun, it's educational, then kids - they're naturally curious beings - they're going to want to learn more. So, yeah, I think when I was a kid, I don't remember not doing it.

Christine Goodner:

No, that's great. I'm sure there's lots of people who can relate. I hear guests come on and say, oh, I really didn't like it till grad school. And then others will say, oh, I loved it from the start. And they're all valid, you know?

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, when I got older, that's a different story. When I was older, then it was practicing certain things and changing your technique, and a lot of that stuff was not fun. When I was growing up, also, technique wasn't really emphasized in my orchestra program, it was more about having fun, and so when I got older, of course, and started taking private lessons, then I had to undo a lot of bad habits. So then that wasn't fun, but I believe that as a teacher, you have to be able to strike a balance between teaching good technique and also making it fun, because when kids make a beautiful sound on their instrument, they're going to want to do it over and over again. As I'm reflecting on this, there were a lot of kids who actually dropped out of orchestra as we got older. Now of course they probably had other interests, too, but while it was fun, our school orchestra wasn't very good. So when I reflect back on that, now I'm sure a lot of kids dropped out because they didn't like the way we sounded because kids need to see progress. They want to hear progress. They want to feel it. So as teachers, I think it's really important to strike a healthy balance between emphasizing good technique and also emphasizing fun and enjoying it.

Christine Goodner:

Right. If it's all technique as a really young child, it's hard to find that fun at all. And I think as teens get older, being a part of a group that sounds amazing, and being a part of that bigger sound and bigger experience is really what's fun about it. At least I remember feeling that way.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

And creating a space in a community where that is celebrated.

Christine Goodner:

Right.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

That's important, I think.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Do you remember a moment when you decided that you wanted to become a professional musician? Is there something that sparked that for you?

Dr. Quinton Morris:

I always wanted to become an attorney when I was a child; that was my desire, my dream. When I got to college, I had a violin teacher who was just phenomenal. I was still just playing violin for fun. She used to say, you know, if you just practiced a little bit more, you could be really good. So through those lessons with her, I began to just kind of...my thinking and my thought process of how I looked at music and how I enjoyed and explored music began to change. I started envisioning myself more as a musician than as an attorney. So in my junior year, I wound up...actually at the end of my junior year I transferred, because I just felt like that was the right time for me. I had to do it.

I prepared all of my junior year for auditions and transferred at the end of the year to the North Carolina School of the Arts. A lot of people thought I was insane because I only had one year left of school, and so, it's like, we'll just graduate and then go to a music school. But I didn't want to take that chance because I knew that I wasn't ready for a graduate music program. I needed strong, fundamental music skills at the undergraduate level. So I took this huge gamble and this huge chance and left and I do not regret it. It was probably one of the biggest bets I have ever made on myself and it paid off.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's amazing. That sounds like that teacher really saw something in you, that she really helped you envision yourself in a different way. That's really amazing.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

She did. It's interesting because I was just telling someone this yesterday, that I'm at a point in my life where I am living the manifestation of what I've always wanted and I have more than I could have ever imagined when I was 24, just getting ready to graduate with my music degree after transferring and basically doing three years over. I am bigger and better than I could've ever imagined I would have been at 23. So there was a lot of sacrifice, a lot of setbacks and a lot of major blows and disappointments that I encountered, but it all brought me to where I am right now, and I'm so thankful.

Christine Goodner:

Sometimes I think if I could go back and tell my younger self... give them a snapshot of life now maybe, and just say, keep going. It's going to be okay. Save me a lot of stress and angst!

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Keep going, keep going. I think that that's something in our business that we don't talk enough about is how to define your own success, whether you're a music teacher or a performer, or working for a radio station or a newspaper or playing in an orchestra. There's always been kind of this hierarchical level in classical music of, you're only successful if you're here or you're only successful if you make this much money or you're only successful if you play in a major symphony orchestra, and that's just not true. There are so many different facets and things in our career that are so beautiful, that one can explore. You get to define your own success on your own terms, and that's thinking and a model that I wish that we as a field embraced more of.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I do too. I hope that's starting to change, but yeah, I definitely growing up felt like success as a musician looked like one or two things, maybe being a soloist or playing in an orchestra...I feel like those were the two things. And if you couldn't see yourself doing that...I love what you're doing with your radio program and the video series, too, because I do think you address that, as well. You're talking about women and people of color. If you don't see yourself in the people that are doing those things growing up, it's very hard to even think that's a possibility for you.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Yeah. I remember when I started my music undergraduate program, I remember being in the orchestra, hating it. We had nine hours of orchestra a week and I was miserable Monday, Wednesday, Friday, three to six. It's like, I'm not doing this for the rest of my life. Are you kidding? This sucks. And it was a good orchestra! I could not wrap my head around the fact that one person gets to make all the artistic decisions about how the ensemble is supposed to sound. I just didn't feel like it was a democracy. I never understood that. So smaller chamber orchestras, where there's more say, and more of a democratic process, where everyone is making music together rather than this kind of top-down model, is something that I subscribe more to. I think it's more fun, and you're able to explore versus being dictated to by one maestro who, in my case, when I was in school, I didn't respect. So it's like, that's not something I want to do for the rest of my life. So I found other avenues of chamber music and eventually in solo playing, where it was much more fun and much more engaging, and I felt like I could learn from other people.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, and I just wonder, thinking about the work you do with students in the Seattle area now, how that ties in with just what you hope to give them through their music education in your program.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

I love it. My program Key to Change - we're in our fourth year now. We have about 150 students in our studio that play violin and viola; so many students of color from all different backgrounds. Our concert is tomorrow; I can't wait! It's in-person and we're going to be socially distanced and everyone's going to be masked. And it's so much fun! It really is because I just love seeing the diversity of our kids. I love seeing the varied personalities in our studio, and I love the community that we've created. You know, I grew up...in my orchestra programs, I was generally the only boy or the only black or person of color, generally. I never really felt part of a community. I mean, people were nice to me, but I never felt really engaged or welcomed. I felt more tolerated. So through my program, people who are from very opposite ends of the neighborhood or demographics are coming together and they're becoming friends and their parents are becoming friends. I think that that is really in essence the beauty of what makes a successful studio is when you can bring people from all different walks of life together to learn and celebrate something that they're so passionate about. In this case, it's music

Christine Goodner:

That gives me some hope for the classical music world. I hope we see more of that.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Well, I think that we will only if it's intentional; it has to be intentional. You can't expect that you're going to get a bunch of people of color that are going to just say, ooh, I want to sign up for your studio. It has to be reflected, and people have to see themselves in your studio. So if you say that you want more students of color, then you've got to reflect that; you've got to go to the people and show them the value of why it's important, and then eventually they'll come. There is not one dominant race in the Key to Change program because there's

literally so many different types of ethnicities and backgrounds. It's reflected in our board. It's reflected in our staff and reflected in our repertoires. So it's not just a student thing. It's not just, oh, let's try to get more students of color. It's...let's be reflective from the people who donate to our program all the way to the students who sign up for our program, all the way to the people who even like us on social media; let's make this very diverse. So we're intentional about that, and I think that if teachers want to do that, then they have to be intentional through their actions, not through their words.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely, and like you're saying, look beyond just what students are coming to this program, but who am I hiring and who am I working with and who am I bringing in as guest clinicians? And what music are we playing and all of these things. Yeah, I'm glad I see more of those conversations happening, and I hope, myself and others, we can actually start seeing more of that in action.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

You know, I'm going to be honest, and maybe I'm in the minority in this, but talk is cheap. I mean, if you want to know what a teacher's strategy is, don't watch what they say, watch what they do.

Christine Goodner:

Absolutely.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

So there's lots of conversations that are happening, but while all those conversations are happening, there's also time that's being wasted on actually doing something about it. I don't want to sound cynical when I say this, but at some point we got to stop just talking and get to work. I feel like there's a lot of talk and not a lot of action. I think it's good for us to talk. I think it's good for us to talk through the issues and that sort of thing, but at some point we've just got to execute our words into action and make it happen.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I know. I agree with you. We had Calida Jones on the podcast and she was just encouraging everyone to just take a look around every so often and really think, am I still thinking about this? What am I actually doing? And making sure we're holding ourselves accountable to take action and not just nod our heads or agree in the conversation, but actually taking action.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Also ask yourself, why is this important to you? Why is it important to diversify your studio or your orchestra program or your learning environment or community? Why do you really want to do it? Is it because you don't want to be labeled as a racist? Or is it because you really care about the community and you really care about the lives of all people? Well, if that's the case, then that also means that you care about social issues, because the various social issues that have happened with the black community, or most recently, with the Asian community, that means you care about those issues because those people come from those areas. I think that

educators need to be very intentional about why it is that they want to be diverse in their programs. Why is it that they want to program the music of black composers? For some of the reasons I stated earlier.

Christine Goodner:

Absolutely, and there's more and more resources, if people aren't sure how to do this well, or partner up with somebody, hire guest clinicians to come in or to talk with you...

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Yeah, and not even just guest clinicians who teach instruments, because I think that's important, but also understanding that there's a whole racist lens that classical music has been a part of for centuries. I mean, it was founded on racist principles and it's well-documented that there were composers who invested in the African slave trade and who detrimentally discriminated against people of color, black peoples more specifically. So, I think just understanding why you want to do this and why it's important is the way to go. So bringing in people who can talk to the class about anti-racist practices or can talk to you individually about abandoning your own unconscious bias, I think those things are really important. They're scary, obviously, and uncomfortable, but I think it's also a beautiful opportunity for people to really invest in deepening the level of understanding experience as well as education. Key to Change...all last year we did anti-racist work within our studio. We did it for middle school students. We did it for high school students. We didn't just do one session, because you can't undo anything in just one session. We're a program that's incredibly diverse, and we've talked about that. We established policies and practices on how students are supposed to talk about social issues, and we involved parents, and then we had our staff and our board also engaged in this. Within our program we made sure that at every level we were engaged in this work; that's what it takes.

Christine Goodner:

. That's a great example. I think classical music can be so entrenched in tradition and like, this is how it's always done, that, as you're saying, we have to acknowledge how some of the traditions started in order to move forward to maybe how it's always done, maybe include some practices that were good, include some practices that were racist or leaving people out. So we have to re-look at those traditions with that in mind.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Yeah, and understand that some of the traditions are also a large part of privilege because this is how we have always done it. I have the privilege of being able to say, this is what we're doing and we're not going to try anything else differently. So I think that this is deep work that has to be explored and has to be examined and reexamined often.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Thanks, thanks so much for talking about all that. I appreciate it...ongoing deep work, like you say, for all of us going forward. Well, I wonder if there was anything...if we pivot a second, you wanted to share about your radio program and just what your vision is for that or what you're hoping to do with those sessions.

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Sure. Unmute the Voices is a program that spotlights and highlights the music of people of color, who are both composers as well as performers. It's a program that's sponsored by Classical KING FM 98.1, and it's two parts. There's a radio show that I host every third Saturday of the month at three o'clock Pacific, and we have a beautiful video series where we interview different performers and composers on our show that talk about a number of different issues, from their careers to different social issues within the classical music area or

community, or just kind of anything that is percolating within their own minds. That is released every first Friday of the month on YouTube. So we just launched this project this past Juneteenth, and it's been really fantastic and allowed me the opportunity to spotlight performers and composers who have written really fantastic music and work. A lot of people still don't know that there are other composers of color who have written such great works, so this is a way to also educate even the classical music audience on all of these great composers and performers who have all this great music.

Christine Goodner:

That's a great resource because I know growing up, I certainly heard about all the dead white guys who compose music and that was kind of it!

Dr. Quinton Morris:

That was it. That was it, yeah.

Christine Goodner:

So I really appreciate what I've seen so far of the series. I hope people will connect with that, for sure. Well, how can people find out more about your work if they are interested in the Key to Change program or your radio series, where do they best connect with you?

Dr. Quinton Morris:

For Key to Change you can just find me at keytochangestudio.org; you can find me there for all educational material related. Then of course you can find me on king.org for my show Unmute the Voices.

Christine Goodner:

Great! Well, I just always like to finish things up by asking guests, if they could share one tip with young musicians or parents of young musicians who are listening, what's one thing you could leave people with today?

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Be patient and keep going. Progress is like a valley. You have your good days and you have your bad days, but you gotta keep going and you can't give up. You just gotta power through. Also be patient with yourself. Some days you might be in a cranky mood, but that doesn't mean you should quit. You should just be cranky for that moment, and then keep going. Some days you'll feel like you're on the moon and just so happy and excited. Keep going; understand that success is a progress. You gotta go with the flow of life and you've got to go with the flow of what is best for you.

Christine Goodner:

Thank you. Well, Dr. Quinton Morris, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for your time!

Dr. Quinton Morris:

Thank you so much for having me!