



Episode 23: An interview with Jessica Peresta

Christine Goodner:

Today, I'm excited to be talking to Jessica Peresta. Jessica, thank you so much for being here and chatting with us today. I'd love to start by having you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Jessica Peresta:

I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me. I am a music education specialist. So what that means is I mentor and coach music teachers I provide done-for-you lesson plans, a curriculum in my membership site, I have a podcast blog, all the things. And so I started as an elementary music teacher and worked in the schools. And while I was there, found my passion for helping teachers. And that's just kind of how it pivoted into what I'm doing today. That's basically a long story short <laugh>

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I'm really a big fan of your work and what you do. I felt really supported by a lot of things you put out as a teacher. So we're gonna talk a bit about, you know, support for teachers this time of year, especially, and especially in the year 2021, where I know a lot of people are feeling just tired or burnt out a bit. So we'll talk about some of that, but you know, this podcast lot about practice. And so I really love to hear people's journey with music. Like what instrument did you start on? How old were you when you first started learning an instrument or maybe you were a vocalist? I don't know. I'd love to hear your story.

Jessica Peresta:

No, I am an instrumentalist. So I am a classically trained pianist, and I've also played clarinet. Well, I guess I could still consider myself [a clarinet player]...through college I would say. So my journey starts at actually the age of six years old. And I was kind of thinking about that today because it's funny since my experience, I don't know if I've ever heard of another - well let me just tell you my story and then I'll tell you why I'm thinking this. So my first grade teacher, not my music teacher, my first grade teacher had a piano in her classroom. And that's what I'm saying. I think that's very rare where a classroom teacher has a piano in the room and I don't know why she did to this day. I just know she did. And so my dad had gotten a piano that was being given away.

Jessica Peresta:

He's just that way still to this day, he just collects things. And so he just got a piano. It just kind of sat there. And I remember walking by it all the time and wasn't even in my head thinking, "I'm gonna learn to play that." I just, I just knew it was there. Well, this particular day in first grade, it had to have been around Christmas time- winter break- because she played the song, Jolly Old St. Nicholas. And it's so funny to me, I have a really bad memory, but for me to remember that specific song? It just stuck with me. So I was sitting behind, it was an upright piano, so behind it, so I could not see her fingers. I remember just sitting there listening to her play. And I went home that day after school.

And I went immediately immediately to that piano. We had gotten and picked out the melody. Not right away, but I did. I like took my time and picked it out. And I remember my mom going, "did somebody teach you that today?" And I said, "no, I just listened." And so from that day on, I basically, I think like the next week they got me in piano lessons. And so that's where my piano journey started. And then in clarinet, I decided I wanted to be in band, in middle school. And so I started clarinet as well. So I literally did both. It was crazy and a lot, but I'm grateful. I did both. I started college actually as a piano performance, major thinking, that's what I was gonna do. And then I realized how much I love teaching kids. And so I thought, "well, I can still play piano without having the performance degree," you know? And so that's kind of how my journey started with music. And I just knew instantly I loved it. And I didn't know it was gonna be my career at that moment at six years old. But I knew that's where the spark just happened. One teacher taking the time to play and I heard her and I went home and then that's where the interest started right there.

Christine Goodner:

Wow. Yeah, the power of just having music in kids lives, even just indirectly that's that's really cool story. Yeah. Do you remember anything specifically about practice when you were young? I know all of us have various experiences with how practice went for us at young ages. Do you remember anything in particular about that?

Jessica Peresta:

Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, mm-hmm, <affirmative>

Jessica Peresta:

When I was thinking about this question today, I remember a specific point where I actually quit. I know that doesn't have a lot to do with practicing, but it does. Here's what happened. So I was so gungho and excited about piano. And then I remember it got to the point, maybe a few years in, where my mom was like, "you need to practice, you need to practice." And I would be one of those kids that would show up to lessons and be fine, and they would move me right along. And then I learned songs really quickly, but I just got bored easily. And I remember I started kind of losing my passion and I just got a little bit bored. And so I took a year off, which is crazy to me to think about now, because she just got to the point where she's like, I'm done.

Jessica Peresta:

If you are not gonna do this, I'm not wasting my money. But I remember specifically coming back to her, I was probably like 11 or 12. And I said, "I'm ready to get back in. I miss piano. I'm ready to do it again." And I think because I made the decision that I wanted to do it, then from that point through college,

through today, I still am motivated to practice even now. That really helped me even as a private piano teacher with my students, because you know what it's like, you can tell right away way, if you have a student who it's their desire, or if it's mom and dad, I wanna enroll them in piano, which that's not always a bad thing. Sometimes those kids end up loving it, but sometimes you're just like, oh my gosh, another week of you not practicing. And so it really helped me with understanding these kids. Sometimes you're not gonna wanna be there sometimes you're not in the mood to practice. But for me, I think me the motivation of wanting to do the lessons when I decided to go back to it was, was so important to me cause it's what motivated me to keep going.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. And I think sometimes even without that break, students have to go from, somebody's telling me to practice to I actually want to do this for myself. Even if you don't have a break in there or you do...I think that mental switch has to be flipped on. Like at six you probably really wanna play. And it's not really connected like, "oh, I'm gonna have to practice really hard to be able to play." Cause I have students that come in and they saw violin somewhere. Like you, something sparked it for them, and they begged to play, but then there's this period of like, "oh, there's this hard work."

Jessica Peresta:

<laugh> Right. Yeah. It's like when I remember the theory books I would do on the way to lessons and I would get it done, but it was just like, "I'm getting it done, but I didn't really apply it to what I was learning." It was just like to check it off the list. And so yeah, there's a lot that goes into that for sure.

Christine Goodner:

Right? Oh yeah. So, so interesting. And just about our developmental stage and what we can actually understand at various points. Thanks for sharing that. I always love hearing people's stories. I think for the listener, different stories are gonna connect with them and like "that sounds like us." So I think it was really fun to hear. So pivoting a little bit. I had reached out to you originally because it's December, 2021, when this episode's gonna come out. And I like to typically (pre-pandemic) spend my December is like dreaming about the year to come and making grand plans for myself for the coming year. And I think for myself and many teachers I'm talking to, and I imagine many parents are feeling this way too. I know you're a parent, we can weave that in, just how do we think about the new year coming up and you know, either make plans or goals around our music or our teaching or working with our children through music?

Jessica Peresta:

I think it's hard. It is definitely hard pandemic or not to set goals, but I do in my personal life, in my work life. And as a parent, I do make goals for personal growth, work, growth, parenting growth, what growth I wanna see in my children, in my marriage, every area of life, I think it's important to set goals and it's okay. You know, if you get to the end of the year and you haven't reached that particular goal, you've set for yourself in whatever area, it's okay if you didn't reach it. But I think setting goals and having something to aspire to and to strive for is so important. It keeps you going and it keeps you driving towards it.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Not speaking for anybody else, but I'm just always like "I make goals and I always hit them". In these last two years it's like, "oh...the reality of the world is I cannot hit some of these goals." So this is a

good reminder even to me to hear you say that and be like, "okay, it's okay just to set some and realize I can't control everything about it."

Jessica Peresta:

Oh, that's so hard. I am such a type, a personality too. I like all my ducks in a row. And I think I gave this analogy to someone last week. It feels like my ducks are swimming in circles right now. They're not in a row. I can't get them in a row, no matter how hard I try. It's funny because I speak to my audience all the time about balance and how balance doesn't look like the scale in the store where it's weighing the two pieces of fruit balance is not going to always have everything equally aligned in your life. It's not gonna be like a pie chart with 20%- everything around is equally going well, there's gonna be sometimes parts of your life, where you're needing to focus more on that. And you're needing to spend more time on that particular thing. And other things fall underneath that. And it's always kind of shifting. I'm thinking of my own life. Sometimes being a mom, being a mom always comes first, but I mean, sometimes I have to focus more heavily on it. And so there's sometimes maybe projects I've been wanting to work on or whatever it is that I'm like, "that's just gonna have to move. It is what it is." And sometimes, my kids know, there's gonna be sometimes where it's not all the time. Most of the time, I'm trying to get my work done when they're not here, but that doesn't always happen that way. So there's sometimes like if I have a deadline to meet or whatever it is, they know for an hour or two hours, you're gonna be doing this while mom's doing this.

Jessica Peresta:

And I think that's okay. I know I used to stress out about that. "Oh my gosh. I'm feeling it being a mom. If I'm doing this, I'm feeling my business. If I'm meeting this area, oh my gosh. I'm not spending enough time with my husband. My friends need me." And it's just that causes overwhelm. When you're trying to meet every area of your life equally, instead of realizing there's gonna be lots of ebbs and flows to your week, your month, whatever it is. And that's okay. And so I don't know who needs to hear that. I need to hear that from myself. And I tell myself that all the time, let the guilt go because that's just normal. It's normal for life to not be equally aligned. Like, you know, when people talk about balance, sometimes I'm like, that's not real life. <laugh>, that's not the way it really goes.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. And I think especially the last year and a half various periods of time, people were trying to work and school and all sorts of things, all mashed together. I feel like the lines between things got a little blurred there. So <laugh>, it really doesn't feel like we can separate them now. So how are you thinking about the new year? Like for yourself as a musician or someone who works with music teachers? I imagine you're hearing like, I am some fatigue and burnout <laugh> this fall and late fall-winter. How do we feel like we're still getting a fresh start at the new year with that in mind?

Jessica Peresta:

It is so tough right now. Teachers have a lot of expectations put on them. A lot of, "oh, the pandemic's over. Let's just move forward." I hate to use the word "normal", but I don't know what else to say, but how it used to be, but the burnout I'm hearing from teachers, it is so real. It's real and I think we need to acknowledge that. So instead of just saying, like I said earlier, it's easy to set goals for yourself, but instead of saying "set some goals and just keep moving forward and show it being peppy and happy", that's not always realistic. And so when it comes to goal setting for teachers, whether you're a private teacher or whether you teach in a school building or whether you're both, first of all, take a break during

break, take some time for yourself to really unwind, to maybe take some time to journal if that's your thing. Or for me, actually, I had a Google doc I opened today and I called it brain dump. I just literally [dumped] all the things in my mind I needed to put down. That's the way I [do it], everybody's different. And what you're doing is you're getting it outta your head and on paper. And when you do that, you're able to really start looking at the things that are spinning in your head that are causing you overwhelm. So during break, take a break, maybe just take a full break because what really will help spur you forward into the new year is really taking time to take care of yourself. And I don't mean self-care in the way of bubble baths and pedicures. Those are amazing, but really taking care of yourself, finding the time to take a break and not think about school, then once it's time to go back, the way to really move forward is to think about what has worked so far this school year. What have I really liked about what I've done? What, what do I need to maybe change a little bit moving forward and then just start slowly making steps towards that, you know? And because what's worked in previous school years, in previous Januarys even, are not gonna work in this January because I've heard from several teachers, you know, like lesson plans that have always worked. The kids aren't listening as well. They're not paying attention. Like they used to, it's just COVID fatigue or whatever you wanna call it. It is very real. So I think a lot of it too is when it comes to setting goals is about being flexible. And knowing that if your plans that you have set for yourself, or even when it comes to lesson planning is not going the way you want it to. Or it just seems like you're just hitting a brick wall.

Jessica Peresta:

It's okay to pivot and no, don't take it so personally, a lot of it is not you. Probably 99% of it is not you, you're fighting against a lot of other things that are out of your control. I think just being flexible in your plans and maybe just jot those down on that Google doc, like "these are the plans that aren't working. Maybe it's not time to just cut that all together, but say, what can I do instead of the way I normally present this lesson?" And just kind of move that way. So I hope that helps answer your question a little bit. I know I went a lot of different places with that answer.

Christine Goodner:

<laugh> No, I think that's really important and rest! I think I used to power through, and do a lot of things all at once before these last couple years and I'm realizing, "oh, I can't push myself quite the same way." Because I am more burnt out. But you know, I think we're all operating that way I've heard that from a lot of people. So really taking the rest when we have the opportunity, I think is great. And not to take it personally, if what's always worked suddenly feels way harder or it suddenly not working, I think it's easy to think there's something wrong with what we're doing. I like that idea. Children are showing up with different needs for sure, because of the last couple years. And then we can pivot and be flexible without feeling like it's our fault in some way. I think that emotional work that goes into working with children or we're dealing with our own emotions and then theirs and their needs, it can be tiring.

Jessica Peresta:

Oh, for sure! When you're working with anyone. So let me give you a personal example. I started experiencing some serious burnout. I would say a few months ago, maybe around summertime. And I didn't really know why cause I love what I do. I love my work. I love working with teachers. I love working with kids. I still love kids. And so it is hard. It was hard for me to identify "why am I feeling overwhelmed?" And I realized, not just since COVID started, but more when COVID started, I was pouring into everything and everyone giving, giving, giving, giving, giving, giving, and I had a good friend of mine...It's like those people that come across your path that are there to speak to you. And she said, but when's the last time you poured into yourself? And I went, what do you mean? And it was almost

like I was feeling selfish for taking care of me because I just wanted to keep giving I'm just have such a giver personality. And I realized that's what it was. I was like not making space on my calendar to just take a break, to take a breath, to not be mom, business owner, wife, friend, all the things. But when, when is Jessica taking care of Jessica? And so I think that's hard for teachers to say I'm pouring into the lives of students, my parents, my colleagues and then you have your families, your own personal family as well. And you're always giving, giving, giving, giving. And I know I get the comeback of like, "but I don't have a lot of time to do that." You're right. And it's very hard, but it's not for me because of the busyness of my life. So it's not always about setting aside like two hours here or there. Sometimes I have some days where I can do that, but there's some days where it might be, I know I'm gonna be in the car 15 minutes. I'm gonna intentionally, this is gonna sound creepy, but I'm gonna sit in silence for those 15 minutes just to let my thoughts process. Like if that's the only quiet time I can find then. And I feel so much better after doing that, so I think it is about finding those, those pockets of moments. Even it doesn't need to be these huge amounts of time where you can, whatever that looks like for you, take care of yourself, whether it is in the morning, if you're a night person, if it's at lunchtime, if you're at school and you need to eat in your car to get away from everyone for a minute, that's I think what's gonna help you too is maybe you're like me and you're finding yourself burnt out. And maybe there's a lot that goes into that. But maybe one of the things like I said, is because you are pouring into others all the time and you need to also make sure you're not leaving yourself behind as well.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I think, and that is hard to do. I know when I was on the computer 24/7, I started taking long walks to sort of get through that time. And as things have gotten, like you said, "normal", if we can call it that, I realize I feel guilty sometimes for doing that. And I've felt like "oh, I should answer these emails. I should prep these lessons or make photocopies" or whatever it is. But I really realize that's my way of giving back to myself. Like I feel better, but I also focus better when I'm teaching and it can get my best self to my students. But I have to really fight myself to do it. I think the listener could just think about what is that for you? It could be something totally different than what we've mentioned for ourselves, not having the guilt that we're putting in that time for ourselves is really, really important.

Christine Goodner:

It's a good reminder for me as well as I'm talking to you about it, like, oh yeah, I better do that when we're done with this conversation. What I'd love to talk about next is just thinking about, you know, we've all gone through sort of a stressful, not sort of a very stressful time these past couple years and all at once. So we can sort of support each other through that. But I think colleagues said something to the effect of, well, we always have at least, you know, somebody is going through a hard time, you know, one at a time, not everybody collectively and you know, thinking about how can we take what we've been through or what we're learning about ourselves into the future. I wondered if you had any thoughts about that or maybe just what if you wanna share anything you're taking from this time that you hope to take into the future for yourself?

Jessica Peresta:

<affirmative> oh my goodness. That has a lot of different directions. I mean, part of it is for me working with teachers, I'm not currently in the classroom. And so when I decided to start my business, I like anyone didn't know a pandemic was coming. So I had to completely pivot the way I was helping teachers, the lesson plans I created for them, all the different things. But I think it's helped make me more resilient in moving forward into this coming new year because the fact that I'm gonna continue pivoting to help them the best way in listening and hearing them as a mom. My whole family got COVID

in January. It was very frustrating cause we were one of those families that were very, very careful and wore masks everywhere. And I didn't let my kids go to Indian or things. They were still in school buildings, but they, they did everything in their power to keep the kids safe with social distancing, masks, all the things. My oldest son got sick first and then we all dropped like flies. That experience though really helped, not like I would wanted to get sick, but what I mean by that is it really put in perspective. I was forced to take three weeks off of everything and really put in perspective my family matters a lot to me. They always have, but I've carried with me almost a year later where if they're home sick a day, things on my calendar can wait. It used to be just like, well I'm gonna off the da, da da, no, it really made me realize I want to prioritize better things in my life that matter. And what does that look like for me will look different for someone else. I just think as I move forward, I want to just keep listening to my audience and listening to what I need and listening to what my family needs and really finding ways to prioritize things a little bit better. So I'm not so stretched thin and burnt out. If that makes sense.

Christine Goodner:

I think through different sets of circumstances, I kind of come away with the same thing. It is okay to take some time. I think I used to push through before this, if I had bronchitis or whatever it was, and I would just power through and keep teaching. And now I think it's really been put in perspective. Like it's okay to take care of our physical selves.

Jessica Peresta:

<affirmative>, mm-hmm, <affirmative> so important and mental health, like, let's be honest, like this has <laugh> been hard. Like we have all been in one aspect or another dealing with different mental parts of living through these last two years. It's been just so hard. And so teachers as well as you're listening where maybe it's burnout, but maybe you were at that point where you're just like, I mentally cannot go on. I wanna give permission because I recently talked to a counselor that it's okay. There's no stigma behind that. It's okay to speak to someone who does not know you. That is a third party, second party, whatever it might be to talk to about it. And I'm gonna be better with that moving forward as well. Like not being embarrassed of like saying things like that. It's okay. Because I think- this is a different conversation for another day, but social media, you just see the highlight reels. People are smiling, happy. This is what's going great in my life. But behind the scenes, it's not like you want people to struggle, but things are hard. Life is hard. Life is busy and you're navigating a lot of different things and mentally we're trying to figure out- that's what happened to me. It was like mentally trying to prioritize all the things in my life. And that's why I talked to someone about it. I'm like, help me! I don't know, help me. I just think moving forward, I think going into 2022, I wanna be more authentic and real and the best I can to let people know, it's okay. If you're going through something you don't need to show up perfectly, you don't need to show up as this perfect teacher who has no struggles, who, whatever it might be, that it's okay to have some hard times but you are gonna get through it too.

Christine Goodner:

Definitely. And I think parents too, I think teachers and parents alike, there's so much almost decision fatigue, cause everything we're doing, we're like analyzing the safety risk and just, I think a lot of people are just feeling very exhausted with all of that. So I really like that. Thanks for sharing that too. I see a therapist as well and just like we have preventative care and care when we need to for our physical health, I think it's equally important. Some of us have friends that kind of, we can bounce things off of or vent as teachers or parents, but also there's a lot of professionals out there that can help as well. And I think just creating a space to acknowledge it's been a tough time, hopefully things are moving forward,

but it's okay just to feel the feelings of what's going on and process. I think giving myself space to do that is what's helped me feeling like I'm atleast coming to the surface of the water instead of underwater, burnout wise. It's just acknowledging we've had a hard time. Let's just like kind of feel that. So then we can move through it.

Jessica Peresta:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> Yeah. And maybe you've just never taken the time to stop and think about like, let's say there's nothing major that you can pinpoint that's causing burnout, but you're just, maybe you just haven't processed through the emotions of just what's happened in our world. <laugh> I know that brought me down a lot too. It's just like, ugh, I wanna help. I wanna know what to do, every time you turn on the news, it's something else and it's so hard. And so maybe it's even setting limits of how much you check your phone or how much you turn on the news. Not like you're going to stay in a bubble and not be aware, but that can't start bringing you down as well. When you're just constantly seeing negative, negative, negative. I think that's okay to just set limits on. I've even set limits on after a certain time of night, I don't check my text messages. I don't like to talk on the phone past a certain time. I have stopped scrolling, social media past a certain time. All those little things that seem like they're just little things they do add up to really help you more than you think. Like even when it comes to TV, I've been setting aside maybe two nights a week where I don't watch TV. I'm just reading instead. And even that helps me shut my mind off better too. And so when we're talking about goals for the new year, I think just little things like that when it, maybe it's not like some big teaching thing you wanna think about or something in your parenting life, but it's something little like what do I like about my nighttime routine? What do I wanna change? What do I like about me looking at social media? There's nothing wrong with doing that, but maybe your mind is having a hard time shutting off because you're rethinking whatever you just saw or whatever it might be. So I just think in your own life, think about just little things like that, that you can adjust and that's helped me tremendously. And I'm gonna continue thinking of different ways as well, you know?

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Well thank you for, for talking about all of this. I hope this conversation gonna sparked some thoughts for people, even if you can't relate to our exact examples or experiences, hopefully it pops in your, in your mind as you're listening - this is how I feel that's different and it can help us start to process. How do we kind of move through the feelings and emotions of this year and think about the new one coming up? I'd love to hear where we can connect with you, Jessica and about your website or social media, anything you wanna share for the listener to find you?

Jessica Peresta:

Yeah. So my website is thedomesticmusician.com and I have a podcast called The Elementary Music Teacher Podcast. And you can find my podcast, blog, and resources on my website. I just mentioned. And I also have a look there, Make a Note What You Really Need to Know About Teaching Elementary Music and the main place I like to hang out on social media is Instagram just @jessicaperesta. So I would love to connect with you there.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. I love following your account. I get lots of good inspiration and support there I find so yes, definitely go find Jessica there on Instagram. Well, wonderful. I think I didn't warn you about this question, but I love asking people if you just have a tip about music practice that comes to mind that we could leave

listeners with, is there anything that's like a favorite tip to share maybe if you think about your own kids or yourself growing up or?

Jessica Peresta:

Oh man. Okay. So I actually am teaching one of my kiddos piano. He is actually six as well, ironically. So, favorite tips for him is I notice that if he's not in the mood, <laugh>, I'm just not gonna force it. So it's finding time throughout the week that would work for your calendar for practice. And then also knowing, the personality of your child because he is a very sensitive kid. And so if he gets frustrated easily and if he does not get it, he will cry easily. So I know I've learned to use the phrase, "let's come back to this later and try again" Usually when we do that, he's fine. So I would say when it comes to practicing, don't get frustrated easily, whether it's for you or your child that you're listening for don't get frustrated easily. And if your child is getting frustrated, know that it's okay for them to come back to their instrument later and try again and that it's also okay if they're not understanding a piece, rely on their teacher for support. Ask them questions, you do not as the parent have to figure it all out on your own because I know that that can feel a little frustrating sometimes as well. With practice, just follow the instructions from your teacher from warming up to scales and to pieces and whatever that might be and just don't give up, just keep going cause you'll get it.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. Yes. I think learning to practice, one of the biggest things is learning how to deal with our own frustration as we work through the things that are hard, you know, especially as children. So thanks. I love that tip. All right. Well thank you so much for your time today, Jessica. Good to chat with you.

Jessica Peresta:

Thank you so much for having me.