



Episode 27: An Interview with Lisa Dyvig

Christine Goodner:

Welcome everyone. I'm excited today to be talking to Lisa Dyvig and Lisa, I was hoping you could introduce yourself a bit and tell listeners a bit about what you do and who you are.

Lisa Dyvig:

I'm Lisa Dyvig. I am a violist and I teach private lessons and I am the principal violist of the Olympia symphony in Olympia, Washington. And I also play in symphony Tacoma in the viola section, besides that, I am the mother of a Suzuki violin student and a former Suzuki violin student turned trombonist. And my husband is the orchestra teacher at Olympia high school and is also in symphony Tacoma on double base.

Christine Goodner:

Lots of musical perspectives we can talk about today I'm sure from all of that. So yeah, thanks for being here. And we'll talk some about practice and a really cool resource you have with gift ideas for musicians. And it's always wonderful to talk to violists because we had a lot of violinists and pianists, but I started viola as a secondary instrument in high school and just absolutely love the viola- the sound of it and also just playing viola parts in an ensemble it is one of my favorites. So thanks for being here and sharing that perspective. I'm curious if we could start with you just sharing a bit about how old you were when you started playing music. And I don't know if you started on the Viola, but would love to hear you sort of your origin story with music.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. I actually started on violin and switched when I was in middle school. I started in the fifth grade at the age of 10 in the public schools. I remember there was a day they showed up in our classroom and had all of the different instruments demonstrated. And I went home and I told my parents, "I want to play the violin" and my family isn't what I experienced as very musical. Although later I found out my dad was in a band and he was a young adult. And so I do have some musical background in my family, but at the time I didn't know that. So I think my parents thought I was a little crazy, but were very supportive and they said, "Great, we'll get you a violin and you can do this. It's your thing. We'll never make you practice. You have to do it on your own." And they didn't make me practice. And I will say there's, times I didn't practice so we can talk about more of that later. But I just fell in love with it. And by the time I was in sixth grade a year later, I decided I wanted to try the cello. After a year of the instrument being under my ear, I loved the deeper sounds and I was like, I can't hear myself play in class.

It feels weird. So I switched back to violin and then added the viola in eighth grade. I ended up playing violin through high school. I asked to switch- I was taking private lessons on viola, but I asked to switch in class and my teacher said, "well, we have enough decent Violists and you're a good violinist. So I'll be playing violin in class." And then my senior year, I got to play a solo on Viola with the orchestra, which is great. But I think had sort of a negative feeling about the fact that I was sort of required to play violin at school. And so when I graduated, I said, I'm never playing violin again. And I have never performed on violin since then. I've been just a violist, but I do teach violin, mostly the younger students I'll teach up through like Suzuki book four before I'll pass them on to somebody else. But I really just love being a violist. I love the family feel of being in a viola section, a little less competition than the violinists.

Christine Goodner:

Wow. That's great. And I think at least for me as a teacher, a lot of people come to me knowing about the violin. So that's what they request, but not everybody knows about the viola or what it is and so I think that's why we get a lot of violinists who begin and then switch over to viola.

Lisa Dyvig:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> yeah, it's interesting. I wasn't interested in the Viola- I didn't even notice it so much when they brought them around to the classes in fifth grade, but I really loved the deeper sounds. I had an experience I think that is why I play viola. I was in The Seattle Junior Symphony and I was in the, I think the first violin section and my g-string broke during the concert. And I think I missed like four notes. We were playing Tchaik Four and I was like, why do I even have these lower strings if I don't get to play them? And I really wanted the deeper sounds. So I decided the viola was my thing.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. I really love the deeper sound too. And I think sometimes I get students who are violinists, but they're really drawn to those lower strings. And I always think like, "ooo, you would be great candidate for the viola."

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. And if you have any violin students that you play duets with and they choose the lower part because they like the harmony stuff, they might be destined to be a violist too.

Christine Goodner:

Right. And I think your orchestra experience feels unusual to me at least, because I think typically there's really a need for more violists in an orchestra. So, sometimes maybe that's not true, like in your case, but I think around my area, at least, I know they're always looking for strong violists. We talked a bit about what you loved and I think school programs are always so important and so wonderful to support. And I wondered if there's anything you remember particularly loving about music, it could be any of the instruments that you played, but do you have anything that sticks out to you as you were growing up that made you really feel the love for music?

Lisa Dyvig:

I don't know exactly what made me fall in love with it. I just knew that by the time I'd been playing for a year, it's what I wanted to do with my life. I said, I don't care what I do as a job, as long as I'm playing my instruments, that's all I need to do. And the group aspect of the orchestras has always been wonderful for me. And then, chamber music is also fun. In college I spent a lot of time doing a lot of chamber

music: string quartet, piano quintet... I love all of that too. So it just feels like home when I'm playing. I don't think there's a specific one thing that comes to mind, but it's just always been a part of who I am since I started playing.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. And especially, it sounds like the group feeling of playing is a big piece of that for you. A good reason to make sure kids are in group experiences with their instruments.

Lisa Dyvig:

Absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

Do you remember anything being hard about music growing up? It could be practice or technique wise?

Lisa Dyvig:

I struggled with practicing. First of all, my parents were not the type to say, "did you practice today?" Like we do with our children and encourage daily practice. And so I did struggle. I would do a lot of like cram practicing between my lessons a day or two before I would be like, "okay, I can just fit this all in today." And that never worked. And my teachers were always too nice to me. And I would fake it well enough that I'm like, "They don't know that I didn't practice." And I'm sure they did but they didn't say anything. And had they called me out on it. I might have changed my habits a little earlier, but yeah, just the act of practicing was challenging for me. I don't like being alone, I guess, with my instrument. And I remember, in college, especially where you have to go wait for a practice room, I would wait in the hallway talking to people and then I'd get in my practice room and I'm like, "I'm all alone now. And I need people." So I'm not one of those people that ever spent, the four to five hours a day practicing. So I would find the most efficient ways to practice, which I think was a really good thing, but I didn't get the time on the instrument that is necessary for ultimate success, at least as a younger performer.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I think that solo practice piece can be a big challenge for young students, especially really social young students. Cause it's like, "oh, I have to be in here all alone with anyone to talk to and this is really hard." Do you think those experiences have shaped how you teach and how you work with your own kids with their practice?

Lisa Dyvig:

Yes, absolutely. Especially for my teaching, because I know what it's like to not want to practice, but also to know that you need to in order to improve. And so I teach the efficiencies of practice, how you take the small section, you know, if you play through something with a metronome and you go to a place that you can't play with a metronome, that spot you should stop and work on. Things like that, where I know it's always fun to play through things, but that's not effective. And so really figuring out the places that need attention and focusing on those rather than just being in there, spending the time on your instrument, but focusing on actual practice spots.

Christine Goodner:

Hmm. And just from all lot of the interviews we've done with this podcast and guests that have come on, really, they said when, when they figured out how to do that, that's when they started to really love practice. So it's such a gift to our students to help them figure that out.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. But you don't need hours and hours of practicing, you just need focus, practice to improve.

Christine Goodner:

Right. And once you figure out like, "oh, this is actually helping!" I think it's so much more motivating.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. And finding ways to make practicing a little bit more fun when you are doing those small sections over and over again. My favorite thing to do is to make them harder. So if you're playing something that's hard, find a way to make it even harder, whether that be playing it really loudly or changing the rhythm if it's 16th note passage doing all the rhythm to make it even harder so that when you go back and play it, normally it feels easy all of a sudden. It's the quickest way for me to feel like I've accomplished something.

Christine Goodner:

Hmm. I love that. That's a great tip. I wonder too, just along those same lines with your own children, that sounds like you were more proactive about helping make sure practice was happening on a daily basis. I wonder if you could say anything about that?

Lisa Dyvig:

Yes. My husband has taken over much of the practicing duties. My kids are older now, they're 13 and 16, but my daughter started asking to play the violin when she was two, I would be teaching lessons and she would be hanging out with the parents of whatever student I was teaching. And at two she's like, "Mom, take me to the violin store. I want to play the violin." And so we did. We got her a foam-a-lin to start with, and she played with that for a while. And at four she was still asking to play. And so we found a Suzuki teacher and, the best teacher in our area was an hour away. So at four we were driving her to Tacoma for lessons. And that was a little bit much. So she lasted for a while and then we had to take a break. So at six in kindergarten, she's still asking to play. So we started back up and she's been playing ever since. So it's been 10 years. The practicing has always been sort of a battle. She didn't take lessons from either of her parents because, there's a bit of a power struggle that tends to happen with a parent-child relationship in that way, even though we are highly qualified to teach her, we felt it was best that she learned from somebody else. So practice sessions sort of feel like, least when she was younger, felt like lessons. And I guess I didn't know what it would be like to be a non-musical parent, helping a person play the violin. And so I was always just wanting to make corrections. And so I think I learned a lot as a parent, how to be a better teacher for young students, by just letting the mistakes happen, cuz we always wanna stop them and be like, "no, that's out of tune." And you can't.

Lisa Dyvig:

So you can fix things, but mostly it's just the repetition of learning the skills and the time on the instruments. And so just getting the instrument out was always challenging starting the practice session, but once she was playing, it was great and fun and the lessons were fun, group classes, fun. We've always had those moments mom's telling me to practice, don't want to, but I know I should. So it's been

an interesting parenting as a music teacher, to a student. And then my son, he started playing when I think he was six also, he would always accompany us to the lessons and the teacher would be like, "Hey, why don't you violin for him next week too?" And so he played through book four in fifth grade and then switched to trombone in fifth grade when he could choose between band and strings at school. And we could just tell violin was no longer for him. So we now have a trombonist but practicing with him, it was the same feeling of them wanting to play, but not wanting to be told what to do by mom and dad. And so I know that in the Suzuki method, there's a point in the age range and skill level that the parents take a little bit less responsibility for practicing. And I know that with my children that started a lot earlier than it would in other families, just because we did have a power struggle with the practicing and the feeling of wanting independence for them.

Christine Goodner:

I can relate to that a lot. I think sometimes parents will come and say, "oh, I want to help my child with practice, but I'm not a musician I think is going to be hard." And I always think sometimes maybe it's a little easier because exactly you can just kind of relax and enjoy the process without knowing all the things.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. I would love to just look at a list and be like, "your teacher said, you should do this" and now you do it. "Okay. Do it again." Instead of, "I know that you should have played your third finger higher there" or whatever and not taking over the teacher role in the practicing versus just guiding them in practicing it. I think it would be a little nicer as a non-musical parent.

Christine Goodner:

I always feel like that too. I'm sure there's pluses and minuses to both, but it could be very hard not to say all the things. And then it gets in the way of our children's motivation and discovery for themselves, what works for them.

Lisa Dyvig:

Now that they're older, we are still working on the self-directed practice. So we're hoping there comes a day that we don't have to ask them to practice, but we're not there yet.

Christine Goodner:

I know my parents had to tell me all through high school, they didn't have to be there, but they had to tell me to start. You know, even professional musicians tell me they have little tricks to get themselves started cuz it's still hard as an adult. I think just starting anything disciplined is just hard for humans.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. The best, most effective way that we found to get our kids to practice was to ask them to put their instruments away. If you leave the instrument out and then you ask them to put it away, they pick it up and then they're like, "oh, maybe I'll play." And they do. So I think leaving the instrument out is the easiest way to get started if it's in a safe place and there aren't risks for animals or small children damaging them in any way.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Sometimes up high out of reach, but visible too, just because I do think with string instruments too, they're away in a case it's different than a piano that might be out in the living room and your child might walk by and see it and be like, oh, maybe I'll play something, you know? If we can't see it and it's in a box back away somewhere it's harder.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. You just get it in their hands and then all of a sudden they start playing and it's wonderful.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, exactly. I think when we were talking about, in this conversation today, you mentioned working with teachers and how you have had a role in helping teachers in their teaching. And I wondered if you could talk a bit about that.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah, of course. I started teaching private lessons when I was a freshman in high school. I remember there was some fifth grader that like missed the starting of class and wanted to try to catch up. And so I started working with him and I ended up teaching lessons all through high school and I realized that I had no idea what I was doing. And I went to college, I have a degree in viola performance and I still feel like I never was taught how to teach, even though I've been taking my own private lessons for years and I've been watching other teachers and I've taken some technique classes and it still felt like there was something missing. And it's been a few years now, but I finally- once my daughter was well into the Suzuki program, I decided to do the Suzuki teacher training program so I'm currently registered through book three. And that was my first real teacher training that I took and I felt so much more secure in what I was doing. There was a lot of things I was doing that were going well. And I found a few things that I could improve upon. And then I realized there were so many other people out there that start teaching and don't know what they're doing, or don't feel confident about it, specially the younger students. In my area, there are a lot of teachers, but it feels like not enough for all students, especially those that don't have the funds to pay professional teachers. And so I know that there are high school students out there teaching and, so I decided to teach a class to some local students that were recommended by their teachers to get them started feeling confident about how to teach lessons, because I know they're going to anyways. And I would like for them to feel successful and support our local music teachers. And so I did a class for, I think it was about, about 15 students. We had, I think it was two and a half hours of just teacher training for the basics. So not starting students from scratch, but taking students who are learning in their school programs already and giving them the foundation to feel like they are effective private teachers and supporting the students and the teachers in the schools.

Christine Goodner:

That's great. Yeah, like a mentoring program for young beginning teachers. I love it.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. And I required that they come and watch me teach lessons for a couple of times. If I do this again, I don't think I will have the capacity to have that much. So maybe watching other teachers teach is something that is useful for young students who want to teach lessons as well. <affirmative> But I know there are a lot of different styles of teaching. I think that it's something that's really necessary for anybody who wants to teach lessons to get some sort of background on the environment of a private

lesson and what you should do. So that's something that I'm hoping to turn into either an e-book or an online course of some kind, so more students can get that information.

Christine Goodner:

Is there anything that stuck out that they felt like they really took away from that? Or could you tell what was clicking for them or helpful to them?

Lisa Dyvig:

First half of it was teaching like basic teaching skills, not really instrument related, but you know, interacting with students. And that part was fine. They got a lot out of it, but once we got instruments out and I would demonstrate things incorrectly and have somebody try to fix me, it was interesting seeing them try to find the words, to explain what they wanted to say and how to make corrections. So when you actually have to put into words, what you want fixed, it's a process, but it's fun to watch.

Christine Goodner:

Right. And we all learn those teachers along the way, the hard way. I think mm-hmm <affirmative> how am I gonna say this in a way that means what I mean and gets the message across. So yeah, that's a great thing to help young students or young beginning mentors or teachers to figure out. Valuable practice. I love it. I also wanna make sure we talk about your shop Alto Clef Gifts. And I was hoping you could tell us a bit about that, how it got started and, and what you do with that.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. So about three years, I was listening to a podcast that was talking about side hustles and they had a Facebook group and somebody in the group said, I have an Etsy shop where I put designs on t-shirts and coffee mugs and other things and this company prints them for me and sends them to my customers. And something clicked to me and said, I could put an alto clef on something because I was teaching in a music store at the time and breaks between students I would walk out and just look at the merchandise and see all these fun violin things and treble clef things. And there was never anything with an alto clef on it or anything for Viola. And as a violist, I felt a little sad. So I decided to try it. I found a design program and found this company that does print on demand. And I put alto clefs on random things and almost three years ago, exactly. I sold my first item and it was really fun and going well and I was enjoying the creative process. And then I had my first Christmas season where there was a little bit of, out of control feelings from me with this other company making stuff for me. And so I decided I would like a little more control and I learned how to press my own t-shirts, and how to make my own coffee mugs, and I have been having a lot of fun with it ever since. I have now purchased a laser cutter where I make my own Christmas ornaments and other earrings and fun little things. And I'm just trying to spread the viola love with our community so that we can all feel like we have a part in the family of music as well as all of the other classics.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's really fun products. We had some in our silent auction at the Oregon Suzuki Institute, we have a lot of violists that come to that Institute and take training and participate as students. And yeah, everything was a big hit. Everybody loved seeing that. So I love that you're doing that because I think violas often get left out of like musical items or even mentions sometimes.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. And we always, we tend to feel a little bit like the black sheep of the orchestra, where we get made fun of a lot. The viola jokes- I am not a fan of Viola jokes. I think they make us feel less than, and all of the jokes are about how we can't play our instruments well, and that makes us feel unloved and so my mission is to make Viola players feel loved through products without alto clefs on them. <laughs>

Christine Goodner:

<laugh> yes. Every violist I know is awesome. So we need to spread the viola love.

Lisa Dyvig:

It's really fun through this Christmas season of selling this year. I have been getting little notes in the orders that say, thank you so much for creating this shop or thank you for seeing a need for products like these. And it's so nice to know that what I'm doing is making difference out there for people.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And it's really great high quality things. And you also do have some items that are not just Alto clef I think so people can connect with you about that too.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yes. I've, I've noticed that a lot of people who order something you're like, could you do this in treble clef too? And so I've started considering that music teachers are some of my main customers and they would like all the clefs. So I do have ornaments and t-shirts that are available in all the clefs. And I do take requests. So if there's something you see that you like, that you would prefer in a different clef, I'm happy to do that.

Christine Goodner:

I love it. Well, we will share links for people to find that this episode should be coming out. I think January of 2022 But there's gift giving opportunities, I think throughout the year teacher appreciation, birthdays and the end of school year, all those fun things.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yep. I think for people who are auditioning for things, little gifts for that are nice. Graduation is another time people often purchase gifts and of course birthdays.

Christine Goodner:

All good opportunities and really fun to have something that's personal for violists and other musicians in our lives.

Lisa Dyvig:

And the alto clef is just so pretty too. And it replaces the letter B in words, which is extra fun.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. We'll share some fun images of some of your products when I share this on Instagram, because I think it be fun for people to see those are thanks for all this. I feel like we could keep talking about a lot of things, but I always like to wrap up and ask to share one tip about practice. We could leave the

listener with and it could be something we've already talked about that you want to recap or something brand new that's a favorite practice tip.

Lisa Dyvig:

Yeah. My favorite practice tip, I would say is do the very short sections and make them harder and then go back and do them as written so they're easier.

Christine Goodner:

Wonderful tip we can all put to use this week in our practice. Thank you so much, Lisa, for being here and taking time to talk with me today.

Lisa Dyvig:

Thank you for having me! This has been great.