



Episode 28: An Interview with Kristina Turner

Kristina Turner:

So I'm Kris or Kristina Turner. I am a violin slash viola teacher in Salt Lake City. I had been a teacher in Washington state for about 16 or 17 years.

Christine Goodner:

Thanks for being here and talking with us today about practice. And I know we're going to get into your perspective as a student growing up and as a teacher, and then you're a parent as well. So I would love to talk about all of those topics today and whatever comes up with that. Do you remember how old you were when you started playing music and what sparked your interest in getting going with that?

Kristina Turner:

I remember we had one of those old Baldwin, fun machine things in the family room, and I had free reign over that, and there was lots and lots of buttons to go in and push and I could turn it on and sit down and make all kinds of noise and came up with my own little songs. And of course, my parents thought that was just the most fantastic thing ever. And we also had an antique pump organ in the living room. So there were objects of music around, and my parents did listen to music, although I couldn't tell you exactly what it was that we listened to. And I do remember going to church every weekend and there was the choir and I was part of the bell choir. Actually when I was a part of the bell choir, I was told I would never be a musician because I did not have a sense of rhythm.

Christine Goodner:

<laugh> oh, no. I also played in bell choir, both at my church, growing up, my dad conducted ours, and then I played in high school, I had varsity bell choir, but it's really challenging to count when you're playing in a bell choir. You just have your one note that has to come in. And I feel like that's extra challenging counting practice than let's say playing an instrument where you play all the notes.

Kristina Turner:

You have to wait for all of the others and they have to get theirs at the right time, it couldn't have possibly been me.

Christine Goodner:

Well it's not easy. We'll just say that. <laugh> Did you start on the violin or viola as your first instrument with lessons?

Kristina Turner:

Started in the fifth grade strings program in our school. I remember having a couple of the teachers coming around to our fourth grade classroom recruiting, and that was, Roger Alexander and Mark Slipping. And they came and they made quite an impression. We just had to go and do that. I just had to start playing violin the next year and I was super excited about it. So I was 10 and started on a full size and I did not have private lessons to start with. I did not have private lessons until I was in high school. I was 16 and somehow I had managed to get into chamber orchestra. I was in Strolling Strings, we played lots of pop tunes and they were memorized and I loved it. We'd go and do gigs and play at the retirement facilities and et cetera. And somehow I managed to pass the audition to get into chamber orchestra. And that's when I was told, "everybody else here has private lessons." And I went, "Oh! That's why it's easy for everybody else." Here I was trying to figure out third position and all the key signatures and Pachelbel's Canon on my own. <laugh>.

Christine Goodner:

Wow.

Kristina Turner:

So I managed to get some private lessons then with another very patient human being. Oh, bless her. Because in order to learn something first, you have to accept that you do not already know it.

Christine Goodner:

Not your strong point at that age?

Kristina Turner:

No, it was not, it was not. We still speak so it couldn't have been too bad, but I think she still tells the story of me coming into a lesson and having to pause the lesson to feed my Tamagotchi <laugh>.

Christine Goodner:

It sounds like you figured out a lot on your own. Do you remember enjoying practice or the problem solving aspect of that?

Kristina Turner:

A lot of my practice was on my own because my mother's way of helping me practice was [saying] "Is that the right key?" which would usually mean that when she was home I would just put my instrument away, but to be able to succeed at something and then share it. So when I got something right, then sharing that with my parents or with my friends was a motivator and being able to do well when I got to class the next time. So I did somehow managed to get myself to practice. My practice was probably a lot of run throughs at the most efficient thing. Just a lot of it.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. Yeah. And it sounds like the social aspect was a big motivator for you, whether that was family or school or friends.

Kristina Turner:

Social aspect has always been huge. I personally think that going off into a practice room by myself to play is like being grounded and I still hate it.

Christine Goodner:

<laugh> I would always like to ask, "what do you remember being challenging about practice", but maybe it was the isolating nature of it?

Kristina Turner:

Oh, it was definitely isolation. It was better in college since there was going to be somebody else isolated in the next room, also practicing.

Christine Goodner:

Interesting.

Kristina Turner:

So I think that there's a term for that called body-doubling.

Christine Goodner:

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Kristina Turner:

In which I've actually kind of returned to that now a little bit, I found a friend that I can, that will practice kind of alongside me.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, that's cool.

Kristina Turner:

Or they'll work while I practice. And it's really hard to skip ahead to the next section when you notice somebody else is aware that you really should go back and redo that spot even if they're not going to say anything about it.

Christine Goodner:

Right. Yeah. And there's something just about someone else being there and not feeling isolated too, I think.

Kristina Turner:

Yes. And it's really nice when every so often somebody pipes up and says, "Hey, that sounded really good." Then other times, it does happen that we hear that. "Um, where'd you met your metronome go?"

Christine Goodner:

Oh my gosh. I love it. What was it that sparked you wanting to be a teacher? I'm curious about if we left forward a bit, what inspired you to work with young people learning music?

Kristina Turner:

Originally? This is an interesting story. I didn't plan on being a teacher. I was first asked during kind of a dark period by my nephew and a neighbor. And they asked me for violin lessons and I told them, "find a real teacher, I don't know how to teach." And they were persistent. So then the next thing I knew I had six students. Then I figured I'd probably better join one of the local symphonies so that I was playing with someone over the age of 13. And through that I met the local teachers; I joined in with their teacher breakfasts and that's how I met Betsy Stuen-Walker. And then there was my ECC and I got my book training. And now I have, I think all of the book training or pretty close to it, but it was going through- ECC was a huge one and seeing the philosophy of it.

Christine Goodner:

For those who are listening, who may not be as familiar with the Suzuki method, that is like an introductory course- every child can. It sort of sets us up to begin teacher training, whatever instrument is. So do you remember what connected with you about that course?

Kristina Turner:

Probably the thought that every child can, like, they really can, that it's the nurturing of each student as they are, where they are and meeting them and helping them along their journey to their next steps.

Christine Goodner:

That's what keeps me in this as well. I also was asked as a favor, like, "oh, you'll teach my a child." And I'm like, "I'm not actually a teacher." I was in college thinking I would do something else. And I think that's the thing that struck me as I was working with that family friend as a favor is just like the impact I could make on that one student. It was really exciting to me. What do you remember about those first students you taught before you did your training? Like what hooked you?

Kristina Turner:

That I should probably apologize to them. <laughs>

Christine Goodner:

Well... <Laugh> Because you went from one person who asked you to many students it sounds like rather quickly, did you love it right away?

Kristina Turner:

I did. One, it was super social and these kids thought that I knew things and they liked to learn stuff and I liked to teach things. And I was surprised with how I had a knack for sequential and breaking things down and problem solving and prioritizing. And that is a wonderfully fun puzzle and really satisfying. And then on top of it to make somebody happy and then for them to see that they could do something, they didn't think that they could do.

Christine Goodner:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Kristina Turner:

That's incredibly rewarding.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I agree with every bit of that. Absolutely. And I love just helping students who thought like, "I can't do this." And then helping them kind of unlock what it is that lets them actually be successful. One of the follow up questions I like to ask after we talk about just like, how do we become teachers is just, why do you teach? What do you hope your students take away from working with you? Besides skills on their instrument of course.

Kristina Turner:

I suppose it is that they are capable of a lot more than they know. And one of my big ones is that it's all about the music, but it's not about the music. It's about the people.

Christine Goodner:

So true people do ask me, don't you get tired of listening to *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. And I think like I'm not really listening to *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, I'm working with a brand new human being in front of me. I have never worked with before. It doesn't really register with me that I've heard *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* a thousand times.

Kristina Turner:

Yeah. It's no longer the sounds.

Christine Goodner:

I'd love to talk a bit about the parent side of things. So we can come back to teaching if we want to. But you have a son that you have practiced with and who plays a couple instruments, I believe. So, I wonder if you could share anything you wanted to about your, your journey with him or what you learned about practice and being a practice support adult from working with him?

Kristina Turner:

I originally tried to start with him when he was four. Betsy had offered to teach him lessons. Now I should say that my son has autism and he was mostly nonverbal at the time. He was pretty much nonverbal until he was nine to ten years old and he still doesn't use a lot of words. And he asks me if I would stop using mine frequently. <laugh> it was when he was four, we tried to start and he didn't know exactly what it was that we were asking him to do, and he would offer other behaviors. And I was embarrassed by the fact that my son wasn't doing all the things that he was supposed to be doing exactly the way they were supposed to be doing it. And so I am ashamed to say that I stopped way too soon...stopped way too soon.

We could have worked through things. So there was a period of time where we waited and it was finally, when he was nine years old. He was getting close to starting fifth grade strings. And I realized this is something that is very important to me, not just because of the music, but because of all the other aspects of it. And I wanted it for my own son. And so I figured that if I was going to start him, I better do it. I did, I got him going by this time. I'd some more teacher training. I've been teaching longer. I had more experience myself, and I had a whole line up of teachers saying *when* it no longer works for you to be his teacher, let us know. <laugh> Definitely the *when*, not the *if*. And so I got him started and his dad had also thought that the reason why I was starting wasn't because of him, but because of me, like it was "oh, you're the music teacher, you want your kid to play music."

Kristina Turner:

And maybe that's not going to be his thing, don't push it on him. And I'm stubborn. So I turned to this kiddo, I turned to Zane and I said, "okay, Zane, do you want to play violin or viola? Pick one." He said, "viola." His dad thought the piano would be a better choice for him since it would have been laying out in black and white in front of him. So I said, "Zane, viola or piano? Pick one." And his response was "Pick two." So I got him a keyboard and put that in his room and said, "There you go, have fun with that. I don't know what to do with that thing, but have at it." That way he had something that I wasn't picking on. And then I started him on viola myself. And there was one evening when I had him getting ready to practice. And I said, "Zane's toes to mom's toes." And he did! He put his toes to my toes. That was very clear communication that he could understand. And then I had a couple of things written down on a list and I told him exactly how many of each thing we were going to do. And then we were going to be done. So I think we did 10 bow holds or 10 tone builders or 10 of this other exercise. And then we were done and his father was watching this and said, "Wow! The connection and the communication that you two just had, that was fantastic! I'll swap my schedule so that I'll be the morning parent so that you can practice with him in the evenings." Excellent. The next morning I elbowed him when the alarm went off and he got the kid walked onto the bus and I got to sleep in. Yes, it was fantastic. Practice at first, was not always solid and steady, but then once we got him going where there was a reward for practicing every day at the end of the week, I think we were going to Menchie's for practicing seven days. And then one week we missed a day and we didn't get to go. We have not missed since.

Christine Goodner:

And now many years ago was that?

Kristina Turner:

I think it has been about-oh, I think we've had pizza now every weekend for like three years.

Christine Goodner:

Highly motivated.

Kristina Turner:

Yes. And that's of course now for practicing two instruments, but he has another thing that he does at exactly eight o'clock every night. And so right after that, he practices his instrument. And does it without being asked.

Christine Goodner:

That's a big moment when that starts to happen. Well, it sounds like structure and very clear communication really helped you get going.

Kristina Turner:

Yes, definitely. Because if there was any discussion, whether or not it was going to happen that day or not, it became a battle. But when it was a, given that at this particular time, this is what we do, there was just no argument. It just got done.

Christine Goodner:

I hear that so often, like we feel like we're doing a favor sometimes to give our kids a quote "day off" and then really it backfires cuz then they just kind of try to push and see "maybe today is the day off if I beg enough." Then that's just really exhausting.

Kristina Turner:

Exactly. The every day is easier than some days.

Christine Goodner:

I think so too, even a little bit. For those listening, you can just do something that day. At least you've built a habit, even if you haven't gotten to all the things on the list.

Kristina Turner:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>,

Christine Goodner:

That's huge. Yeah. And I think sometimes there's a debate about external rewards or incentives or whatever you want to call them. And I just, I think it's really important to think about as an adult, I give myself an incentive for practice or for other discipline things. So I like that you're giving that example and it hasn't sabotaged the motivation long term it doesn't sound like. So it's a great example of that.

Kristina Turner:

No, he's 16 now and he's still playing and it's still every day. Sometimes he wants my help in practice. Sometimes he does not want my help in practice.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. That's at 16, yeah. It's good that they want our help sometimes I think at that age. You wonder if he'll be 30 and still having pizza every week from practicing.

Kristina Turner:

<laugh> Him? Probably! <Laugh>

Christine Goodner:

Oh, I love it. I love the routine. I think there's a story you told me once. I wonder if you remember, if you could tell me now? Where you offered him to play so many twinkles in a row to get a reward and then...Do you remember that story?

Kristina Turner:

Oh yes. Yes. I remember we were first starting to work on this idea of what actual repetitions were like. And I told him that if we did 10 twinkles in a row, or if we did 10 twinkles, we just had to do 10 twinkles. Whenever those 10 were done, we would go to the corner store and get a candy bar, figuring we'd do one or two. And then the next day we'd do one or two. I really did not expect for him to stand there and play all 10 of them. Right then and there so that we could go to store and that's when I really started to figure out what it was that he was capable of doing under proper motivation. And I gave him opportunities to duck out. I'm like, are you sure you want to do all of these right now? And he did. He did them all. Another one was having the mini M&Ms on the piano, after he had started doing piano

lessons. We needed to work on something and for every time he did it, he got an M&M- the little teeny tiny ones. And when he started to get kind of tired or frustrated and I could see it, I told him he could be done, I just got the rest of the M&Ms <laugh>. And there was no way I was getting those M&Ms. It was not going to happen. And then I had complete buy-in with him again, he just jumped back in again and I didn't make him do it. It was his choice. I also told him that mom got all the Ws <laugh> that only worked for a little while.

Christine Goodner:

Great stories. Yeah. I think sometimes we underestimate and also some kids, if we say, "here's your goal" we have to be careful how big of a goal we get. If they insist, like "I'm going stand right here until I meet this and get my candy bar..." We've got to know our kids!

Kristina Turner:

There was another lesson where I was teaching. I said, "how many taka taka stop stops can you do in a row? I've since learned to put a time limit on that, because I lost count after 300 something. And the poor mom was freaking out thinking that her son was wasting my time. And I had to tell her, "no, he's doing exactly what I asked him to do. We're going to sit here and find out for science."

Christine Goodner:

I was thinking of you when you were the parent of that four year old sort of embarrassed by non-typical behavior, we're seeing, or maybe just like "non-perfect" behavior. I just wonder what you would say to yourself back then, or what you would say to a parent listening who sees their child, maybe acting a different way than other kids in group class, or at lessons, or just a different way than they expected lessons would go. What would you go back and say to yourself that might help someone else to hear?

Kristina Turner:

That it was more normal than I thought, and that everything is a skill and we need to acknowledge the growth and development of every skill. That could be whether or not the child is able to stand still, or if they can focus, if they have developed the ability to self-regulate or to wait or to take turns or to accept that maybe they made a mistake and that not knowing something is okay. And that all we have to do is just keep showing up and keep trying and it'll work its way out.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. So important. So important. And it's easy to think of some of those things as behavior issues. Like my child's misbehaving. I know I was self conscious about that as a parent of young kids. And like you're saying, some of those things are skills and things they have to practice and we can really let them practice it through music.

Kristina Turner:

Exactly. Music is such a wonderful venue for learning how to work on all of these different skills.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, definitely. What surprised you about being a parent of a musician? I imagine some things we've already talked about, but I wonder if anything else comes to mind?

Kristina Turner:

The first thing that comes to my mind is, it's hard! But also incredibly rewarding. Last winter we recorded the duet for Humoresque with my son, for his recital. And it was just such a happy parent moment that I got to do that and watching my lead a group class in Aunt Rhody and have all of the other students accept it. The fact that my son who was mostly nonverbal, could sit in the back of an orchestra and play along. So a lot of these proud parent moments are appreciating the opportunities that music has provided and maybe how much it has developed the relationship and provided a venue for communication.

Christine Goodner:

Just from the stories you've told, I imagine how much you've gotten to know your son and what motivates him and helps him learn and all of those things through all these practice sessions

Kristina Turner:

And just how cheeky he can be. He's a jokester. He had figured out at one time, a piece starting on, I don't know, starting it on F that's where he figured it out from some movie soundtrack. Don't ask me which key it was. I just know the starting note because the joke was then he had to learn it on A and then he went into his lesson and he laughed at his teacher and started it on G because he could, and we were like, "oh no, no, it starts on A" and of course, giggle giggle giggle. If this is the rebellion that my son has. I'll take it. "Oh, no, the humanity!" <Laugh>

Christine Goodner:

Transposing as rebellion. <laugh> Yeah, it's amazing just to see what music gives our kids and how much it develops them. And just thinking of the teachers they get to work with and the support of adults they get in their lives, through music.

Kristina Turner:

A wonderful village. And that's really what it is. They say that it takes a village and through our music between their private teachers, the parent, their friends, the friends of parents, their classmates, teachers at institutes and workshops and all of these different adults that are rooting for and supporting that child. It's huge. And just the number of people that my son has come in contact with that are just genuine gems of human beings. If we hadn't been doing music, he wouldn't have had that.

Christine Goodner:

Hmm. And you and I have talked before about students with different learning challenges and differences and how, how important music can be for those students and even though it might feel like sometimes more work at home and in the practice room as we're learning how to work with them I hope listeners feel encouraged to hear your story [with your son] from age four now to 16 and just how worth it it is. Even if it looks different than what we were expecting.

Kristina Turner:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> and I think a lot of it too, is that we go into things with a lot of expectation. And I think it, one of the best things we can do is just kind of kick the expectations to the door and maybe go in with the thought of, "well, what happens if?" and then trust.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I think as teachers, especially Suzuki teachers, you and I trained to just figure out when the student walks in the door, like, okay, what version of this student do I have today? Like the focused version, the distracted version, the tired version. And it's so much easier to do that as a teacher with our students than, as a parent with our own children, just because it's a 24/7 project. But I think the more we can embrace that with our kids, the less we can pull our hair out in practice.

Kristina Turner:

I think isn't it a metaphor that we often use? The plant. If you give it the sunshine, you give it the water, you give it, the food, it will grow. You can't pull on the leaves and make it grow faster. But if you give it everything that it needs and then step back and just tend to it when it needs, it'll grow and it'll grow into what it's supposed to be.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Trusting the process. If only we could control all the things and all the outcomes, but <laugh> at least I've learned as a parent of two adult kids, it's not so much how it goes.

Kristina Turner:

No bonsai on our students. <Laugh>

Christine Goodner:

Or our children. Yeah.

Kristina Turner:

Yes. <laugh>.

Christine Goodner:

I love it. I guess I just want to open it up before I ask our last question, because I want to respect your time, but is there anything else you would want to share with teachers or parents who are listening about your journey as a teacher or working with your son, or maybe the combination of the two?

Kristina Turner:

Maybe that it is okay to not already know everything and be comfortable learning from everybody.

Christine Goodner:

Definitely puts us in the mindset to learn from everyone around us. I'd love to hear where people can connect with you.

Kristina Turner:

I can be found on Facebook. I can be found at kturnerviolin.com. I can also be found at The Gifted Music School in Salt Lake City.

Christine Goodner:

Always like to wrap up by asking, do you have a favorite practice tip that you could share? And it could be something we've already talked about that you want to recap with or a brand new tip?

Kristina Turner:

I would probably say that since starting is the hardest thing, just getting that case open, tagging it on to something else that you are already doing every single day. And just get the case open. So that every day is easier than the last day.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much. I feel like our time flew by quickly, it was a pleasure to speak with you. I hope we get to do this again.

Kristina Turner:

Oh it was so great to talk to you again too!