



## Episode 29: An Interview with Raymond Mallari

### Christine Goodner:

Welcome everyone today. I'm excited to be talking to Raymond Mallari or "Mr. Ray", as he is known. And Raymond, we're just really glad to have you here with us. I wondered if you could just start by introducing yourself and telling us a bit about who you are and what you do?

### Raymond Mallari:

Surely. Absolutely. Thank you so much, Christine, for having me. I am known in the education world as Mr. Ray and I am right outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for many, many, many years. I have taught in many, many different music institutes, but nowadays I am just affiliated with Immaculata university as an adjunct faculty and at Westchester Music Academy. I have the wonderful honor of being the president of the greater Philadelphia Suzuki Association here, and I teach violin and viola.

### Christine Goodner:

Great. Thank you so much. And I wondered if we could start by going back in time a bit to when you first started learning music. I don't know which was your first instrument, but how old were you when you started and what do you remember about those beginning music lessons?

### Raymond Mallari:

Absolutely, a big rewind to my life in fourth grade. So I grew up in Virginia. That's where I did elementary school, middle school, high school, and such and I started playing violin in the fourth grade through my school's music program. It was not a big program at all. And it was one of those pull-out-of-class programs. So the music teacher there in fourth grade gave us these permission slips and my parents had to sign it, "yes, I'm allowed to be taken out of my regular fourth grade classroom and go to the cafeteria - that's where it was - go to the cafeteria and have a music class."

If I remember correctly oh, so long ago, there were only three other kids that signed up for it. So again, it's a very small program. And so I returned with my permission slip and in that permission slip, we were supposed to also check what instrument we wanted and it was violin, viola, cello.

And I picked Viola actually the other three, they picked violin. I was like, Hey, I'm going to do the other one. I'll pick Viola. I didn't really know what it was. And so when I gave it back to the teacher, he came back and said, "Ooh, Ooh, you know what? We actually don't have any violas for you," because again, such a small program, we didn't have any rental affiliations with the music store or anything like that. I think it was just whatever the school had or what that particular music teacher had. So then my

initial choice of viola went out the window and I just checked the violin box. And so that's when it started and individual lessons though, didn't start for me until way, way, way, way later. I was in maybe seventh grade at this point? Eighth grade at this point? I started private lessons and it was when music was becoming more, much more serious for me in my life. And then of course the music school director there, very wonderful, very inspiring. The music was more serious, more complex, and I loved it and I wanted to get really good with it. So I finally started taking private lessons in middle school. And at that point that gentleman was my second music teacher ever, ever, ever. Into high school continued my individual private lessons into high school. Things were shaping up even more seriously for me. And I ended up for a little bit with two private teachers actually.

There was this legendary teacher that moved into the area. And again, this is in, Northern Virginia and everybody was raving about her. And I was like, "I want to try, I want to see what that is all about." So for a little while, I ended up with double private lessons. And so it was my little way of saying, "oh, I've got to get caught up" because I didn't start private lessons until seventh grade. And I know that's really, really late for our world here. So that's my rewind story. Fourth grade onward to high school.

**Christine Goodner:**

Wow. There's a lot of people I've talked to on the podcast who started in the school program. I think it just highlights how important those programs are. Do you remember seeing like obviously not everyone in your class signed up for music lessons or music class. So do you remember why you signed up? Did your parents want you to play? Did you see someone play violin and that sparked your interest? What got you interested in like filling out that form that first time?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yeah, I don't have many musical backgrounds with my family. I'm really the only one that went into it professionally. Of course I have an uncle or cousin that goes, oh, I played the guitar and sing and dabble on the keyboard a little bit, but I was the only one that really went into it into the deep end.

I didn't grow up in a strong musical household. I don't know where it came from. I just knew I wanted to play. And actually even a year after I started in the fifth grade, I remember of course being in that grade, we talk a lot in our classes about what do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to be when you grow up? I want to be a firefighter, I want to be a doctor, an astronaut, whatever. And I always said, I want to be a violinist. I didn't say violist. <laugh> I just, I remember always saying in those little silly school pro conversations, telling teachers, yeah, I want to be, I want to be a violinist. Oh yeah. I want to be a violinist. So yeah, I really don't know. I didn't grow up as a Suzuki kid actually. That's worth noting the cafeteria classroom thing that I had, we weren't a Suzuki structure, although that teacher did use the Suzuki book. So I learned them back then. So yeah. I just loved it ever since I was little.

**Christine Goodner:**

Wow. It's always interesting to hear what sparks it for people. It sounds like you really knew right away that that was for you. I love that. What do you remember about practicing? Did you always love to practice? Did you find it challenging?

**Raymond Mallari:**

So I know many of our colleagues, the initial answers like no, no, no, no. And then when I had these conversations with parents of my students, of course the answer is always, no, my kid doesn't like to practice my kid doesn't like to practice, nobody likes to practice. And I said that answer as well for a long

time, but I started to dig a little bit deeper in the third, left quadrant of my brain and thought, wait a minute, hold on. I think I like practicing. I remember liking this, doing this a lot hours and hours and hours. And I share with people all the time, my famous Schradieck story when I was probably in ninth grade, 10th grade or so and Schradieck, whoever's listening, if you don't know, you might know, it's a very, very, popular etude book for string players and it's the guy's name, Schradieck. So I remember ninth grade, 10th grade. I'm not sure I was practicing Schradieck for a really, really long time after school, right before dinner. That was one of my standard timeframes for practicing. And that was going on and on and on about this Schradieck Etude. This was on the violin.

And I finally, think my mom had had it <laugh> cause she came up to me and she was covering her ears and was like, can you just stop that one now? Can you just play something else now? Or just take a break now? And I was like, oh, and I realized I have been doing this for quite some time. It's like an hour and a half now I'm on this silly little **Aude**. And so that's silly little story I share with people all the time as my way of saying I'm attached to practicing.

Absolutely, absolutely. There's many days. Of course. I don't like it <laugh> so no, and many days, yes, I absolutely do like it because practicing now many decades later for me has become not just a source of like, I've got to work. Right? I've got to work. I've got to practice. I've got to learn this thing if I have a concert or a gig, but it's also become my alone time, individual time. And most of the time fingers crossed. If I'm doing it really, really committed. I don't have my iPhone and my computer iPad within my peripheral vision where I go, oh, who's texting me. Oh, who just sent me another email? What do I have to do with this makeup lesson, rescheduled lesson somebody's asking for another gig or something like that instead, all of that goes away. And I'm really just throwing my brain cells to the wonderful instrument that I have. So those are moments where it's just me, individual time. And I go, yeah, I am really loving this every once in a while I say, it's kind of like, it's sort of like, it's meditating maybe? If that's an equivalent, even though I don't have a whole lot of history with stereotypical meditating session to me, it kind of is when I have my fiddle under me my fingers.

**Christine Goodner:**

No, I like that complex answer.

**Raymond Mallari:**

<laugh> It's yes and no.

**Christine Goodner:**

Right. <laugh> and it sounds like the like really deep focus or I think they call it flow and we're just really time goes away and we're just really in what we're doing. Like that's very satisfying and we can get to that place.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yeah. And that's really what my silly Schradieck story is really one of my earliest memories thinking, wow, all this time just went by, how did this happen? Like woo! <sighs> <laugh>

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. What a great story about practice.

**Raymond Mallari:**

My poor mom. <laugh>

**Christine Goodner:**

<laugh> Well, it sounds like you wanted to be a violinist forever. What drew you into teaching or what maybe sparked your interest in teaching?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yeah, sure. So my history with starting to teach goes into high school as well. So at this point, the music program much, much, much more developed compared to my initial story as a fourth grader, three other students into this cafeteria. Right? So now it's really rocking. It's really awesome. And the high school music program had a deal with a middle school that was nearby. It was like a mentorship program, a quote, "big brother, big sister" kind of program where some of us high schoolers went and tutored the middle schoolers. And by high school I was really into music and I really was wanting to make this be part of my identity even more. And it was really the only activity that I was into. So I was like, yes, I'll do it. Absolutely. Sign me up. I'll do it. <affirmative>.

So that's when it started. And it was really small. I might have tutored like two, two or so middle schoolers at that point. But by the end, by my senior year, the end of my high school career, I was probably with like seven to 10 middle schoolers because of course a of years have gone by and it's became a bit more solidified that, oh, Ray is over there, sure, he'll help you out with how to first start shifting or something like that. So that's how it started. I'll add a little bit more when I was a senior and again, the program really was rocking and it was amazing and the wonderful opportunities that were there. I, I was very blessed to have, because my school had music theory and three level orchestras. So by the time I was a senior in high school, I was of course in by that point, which was level three theory? I can't remember. It might have been three. And I was in the top orchestra as a violinist. I was in their middle orchestra as a violas and I was in the freshman orchestra as a student conductor. And I was just like really, really going to town with adding these things to my life adding music to my life.

**Christine Goodner:**

Really cool. Yeah. What a great culture of music at your school too?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yes, I was very lucky. Very blessed, I think.

**Christine Goodner:**

Is there anything about it in particular that you still like about the connection with students or what do you hope students either then that you noticed or now gain from working with you? <affirmative> I think sometimes the human side of teaching is interesting to hear about.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Oh, yes. When you're saying that phrase, the human side of teaching, you're making me think about all of these things that I've noticed as a pattern teaching for many, many years, many individual lessons, group classes, and so forth. I noticed this pattern where, of course we learn from them. We see them grow up. If we are fortunate enough to have them for a few years or so, and mixed with that, the idea that it's a ratio of one to one, one teacher to one student, my attention is not divided between 20, 25

others or however many in the class. So a wonderful relationship really could develop with this. And so the human side I learned could be something as simple and silly and maybe as "inappropriate" as students, whatever age they are- passing gas. Yes, of course, absolutely, that happens. To something more serious over the years that I've noticed where they would share things with me about their parents when parents are no longer in the lesson room with me to things about their siblings, that I would be told something and I'd be taken a little bit aback. I'm like what? This person just said that? Yeah, so potty humor, to some more serious things. And some of these serious things also go into mental health issues, which is very, very big these days, very important. It's always been important and I'm very glad that it's much more at the front part of our lives now. And so I realize that these are wonderful human side, as you said, part of lessons that that has nothing to do with C sharp, playing staccato correctly, or anything like that. And it was over time, I realized, wow, this is beautiful. This is really beautiful, I think even though there might be some, quote, "negative topics" that come up and it's delicate, it's sensitive, but it's that wonderful relationship, which is part of the Suzuki philosophy that makes what we do so cool. So different, from general music maybe, or a different subject, like bio or math and all that silly stuff. So yeah, I've noticed over the years being totally more into and attached to the human side of things.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. Well, I think there's not that many teachers in our lives that we spend years and years seeing every single week. It really is like a mentorship relationship that's over a really long time for some students.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yes, yes. Oh, absolutely. Yeah, man oh man.

**Christine Goodner:**

And like you're saying, I'm glad there's more attention on the mental health side of things and just having trusted adults there for us as teenagers is huge.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Oh, absolutely. I don't want to, of course, give any specifics away. But, I feel very, actually honored and special when a student comes up regardless of age, when a student comes up to me and brings up something in their lesson time that doesn't have anything to do with music, per se, because it tells me, oh, this person trusts me. Oh, wow. This person is seeking special guidance with something else. And for me personally, as a musician, I'll go in the performing side. Now for me personally, as a musician, I've realized with the many recitals and concerts and so forth and so forth, many that I do, it's actually very important to have that human experience, to bring to the notes, to bring to the stage or whatever little recording project I'm doing. That's what makes it truly spectacular. I think.

**Christine Goodner:**

And I think performers who bring themselves into a performance, I mean, you can really tell that when you're in the audience too, if we just have all the right notes and no humanity and a performance, we don't want that either.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

Speaking of that, do you have any memories from of teachers you worked with growing up that had an impact on you? We didn't talk about that question before today, but do you remember, as we're talking about this human side, any teachers that had that sort of impact on you?

Raymond Mallari:

Yes, absolutely. I have had many wonderful, wonderful teachers both individual private lessons and of course orchestra teachers. What really comes to mind or who comes to mind immediately right now is the second teacher that I had in college. And this is at Westchester University. And this is the legendary Miss Sylvia (unclear). And I went to her partly because she was very accomplished in both violin and viola. And I was studying both, dual. So there was so many lessons that we had where we actually didn't up playing. I was on unpacked. I was ready to play. The music stand was full of my music, sheet music, Etude books whatever. And we ended up talking, talking, talking about everything and anything. And I realized, oh man, there is a humanity, human emotion, life experiences that she's building in here with me. So I'm thinking well beyond my ability to play F sharp. And I remember this was getting heavy duty when I was doing competitions and very consistent solo recitals.

And the other side of my brain, I was thinking, why are we just talking? I should be playing for her. Oh my gosh. But we're talking about all this other stuff, all this other life stuff. And it took me not until much later when I was actually done with my studies with her that I realized, oh, she doesn't need to teach me how to think about F sharp. She needs me to think about how to put life into this F sharp. It's the personality behind the notes is what matters. And that translated onward to my own teaching, regardless of age and level, I have this tiny little lecture-like segment with students about adding some personality, adding some mood, whatever, behind the notes.

And I say to them all the time, or what I will say to them now is there is no new 2022 F sharp. It's the same F sharp was last year, two years ago, 20 years ago. So what you put behind it is truly what's going to be what we find rewarding. Right? So that kind of stuff is what really stuck to me when I was with my teacher over at the university. Talking about all kinds of stuff, really all kinds of stuff. I mean, really, it could be the silliest of things, recipe of this, driving out to that, and it just...I realized way later, oh man, there was life things that she was building in my thinking, which was such a cool way to teach <laugh>.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I love that. So if you had a student that you felt like, you know, I have students sometimes that are more reserved or they're trying to play correctly, but I want to have them give more of themselves through their music. What approach would you take to a student that was hesitant to do that or shy about doing that? Do you have any example of what you might? I loved what you just said. I wondered how you would take that a step further and like help a student bring that out if they didn't know what you meant or were hesitant.

Raymond Mallari:

Hesitant. Oh, surely. Absolutely. So I've developed a set of standard things, um, that I do in lessons. If I have someone who is a little bit reserved, as you say, right? Again, this is regardless of age. I have this nifty, it's an app I used to do like, little post-it note cards back in the day. And back in the day I wrote on each, index card, an emotion, a mood: angry, happy, sad, frustrated, nervous, anxious, sleepy, lazy, all that stuff. And I would say, cool, pick a card, any card and that kid would pick a card and oh, now you have to play, Come Little Children in the style of angry and they have to find a way to do it. And then we

do that again. And again, maybe this time with a scale onward, onward to perhaps a middle schooler or a high schooler where I say, cool, pick three cards.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Now you have cards. Now you have to find a way to play Humoresque with these three cards. Now I know Humoresque, Dvorak He wants it this way, supposed to evoke this certain mood or whatever, but you are the artist Dvořák is long gone. You are the artist you make this come to life. And then of course it turns into a full, long story. And many colleagues of ours have the same approach where it's like, all right, tell me a story using your violin or your Viola with the notes that are found in the Vivaldi A Minor. And it's pretty nifty what people come up with. So that tends to help people out if they're on the reserved side to come out and explore other things. And it's so cool. So, so, so cool to see what happens if you do this, which I do.

If you do this activity and you repeat it again and you repeat it again, three months later, you repeat it again a year and a half later. And it's just so awesome. When it comes to the scale, earlier I mentioned I've had people do this as well when it comes to the scale, it makes their practicing much more interesting because instead of the basic, all right, turn on a metronome, put it on 60. Here's your Galamian, or Carl Flesch, whatever scale book you have up and down, up and down. Oh God horrific sounds right. Instead they're thinking, oh, my D scale today is going to sound sleepy. Whatever that means. When I do this with not a lot of input or I don't give that much instruction, I think it's so cool to try this out. So I've had students where they end up doing things technique wise that I'm like whoa, do you know what you just did? That was so cool. What we call that, what I call that in the technique world is this thing. And this thing is like something they've maybe never done before. And they're like, what really? I'm like. Yeah, absolutely. So whenever you see this in book seven level material, you already know how to play that thing that you just did because you were playing whatever mood or emotion they picked. So it's so nifty, it's so cool.

**Christine Goodner:**

Thanks for sharing all that. I think that's great. Sometimes it just starts as simple as an assignment and assigning here's the emotion we're trying today rather than you have to feel it somewhere deeply to begin with.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yeah, absolutely I had one mentioned bit in a high-ish level specific thing. This was years ago. I cannot even remember who this was. This was, a Pinchas Zucherman masterclass. And he was giving a master class on gosh, so long ago. I can't remember. Maybe he was giving a masterclass on a Mozart violin concerto. And he was talking to the student about making Mozart sound like Mozart and his direction to get to that was to tell the student, okay, what if Brahms wrote this? How would you write it? Okay. Now what if Bach wrote it? How would you play it? Now, if Tarkovsky wrote it, how would you play it? And then he finally went to now if Mozart wrote it, which obviously he did, how would you play it? And I thought that was so cool. I was like, wow, this particular, student was having a hard time, defining her version of Mozart and he went about it this other way. And I was like, wow, I never, ever would've thought to do that because I only play Mozart like Mozart, you know? <laugh>

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. That's a great example. Wonderful. Well, I feel like we could just talk and talk and talk about different practice things.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yes, I can go on and on like you. Man oh man!

**Christine Goodner:**

I think it's great to talk about because I think sometimes we don't dive in deep enough to help people kind of get themselves get help that they need if we're not specific enough. So I love all these conversations, but what advice would you give or what would you do if you have a family that comes to you and says that there challenges with practice. Getting started practicing, for example, do you have anything that comes to mind that has really helped families that you work with?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Surely! One of my standard answers to that I get that quite a bit is to find I can tie this to Suzuki too. Parents as partners has been a thing for quite some time. And I have been encouraging many of my students to have a practice- this can stem from what I've been doing over the past year and a half with practice challenges with the pandemic. So pandemic happened and I realized, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, the world changing. How can I continue music education going and practicing is going become much more of a challenge. And even before pandemic, the hashtag "practice challenge" has been very popular. And so I decided to host zoom practice challenges, and I have had four or five rounds of this very successful. And so we would practice together.

Having a buddy is so, so, so helpful. The last one I did, I had the great, great pleasure and honor of having a guest Ms. Rachel Barton pine, those of you who are listening don't know Ms. Rachel Barton Pine. Oh my gosh, go on iHeartRadio in the Instagram, all of that stuff, Spotify, iTunes and get your Rachel Barton Pine, listening, going. Fantastic person and a fantastic musician. So this connection, this buddy is what helps people out. And of course that's not always easy to do actually have a new family, a new student. They don't have a musical buddy yet. And so I crank up the at home concerts performances, no matter how silly or casual it is. Perform for this sibling, perform for aunt whoever on FaceTime that lives over in Ohio, right?

The smallest tiniest thing, three second concert, woo! It's so cool to do. And every once in a while that has evolved into students sending me a video. It's like, okay, this is now a concert for Mr. Ray. And they hit record and play one line of Lightly Row, or I'll have my more developed, more advanced ones play a page of sites or something like that and they'll just send it to me in a quote "concert style". So that's helped quite a bit with practicing. Of course, the absolute best I think is when they have something to practice for such as a performance, a concert, a competition, an audition, or even nowadays, if it's something as silly as a TikTok video, Insta, Twitter-gram, whatever it is. Oh, well you want to share your Song of the Wind? You better practice your Song of the Wind before you let your big sister put it on her TikTok. <laugh> Good old practicing. Whew. It's tough. Because it's a lonely activity.

**Christine Goodner:**

Right? Yeah. And I do think practicing for something is so key as adults and professional musicians as well. When we have something to practice for, it's just so much easier to get started because there's this urgency of time. So I think we can manufacture that as families. Like you're saying, I love your ideas because sometimes I've heard, "well, our teacher doesn't have a concert scheduled till this far out in the future", but there's no reason you have to wait for the teacher to schedule it. You can, like you're saying send videos to family. You can play for the dog or the neighbor on the porch for people walking by, whatever it is it can be informal and you can schedule it even if its something small.



**Raymond Mallari:**

Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

**Christine Goodner:**

Great. Where can people connect with you if they're interested in finding you on social media or if you have a website you want to share that we would love to hear about that?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Sure, absolutely. I'm easily found on Facebook and as my name, Raymond Mallari and I can also be found as Mr. Ray on Instagram or Raymond Mallari. Got two accounts over there. Old school style, I am on LinkedIn. <laugh> I have an account profile somewhere. I don't do too much with it, but yeah. Good old social media. And then of course being the current board president for the greater Philadelphia Suzuki Association, I am also easily found on that website.

**Christine Goodner:**

Thank you. Great. I want people to make sure they can connect with you after this conversation. So I always like to wrap up and just ask if we have one final tip?

**Raymond Mallari:**

Yeah. That's a tough one to answer because yeah, one thing! What is the one thing? And I was thinking about this and I think what I would like to lead with is the best practice tip is listening. Listen, listen, listen, anybody who's ever taken the lesson with Mr. Ray knows that the first thing on our practice chart is listen. It something that I will never, ever I've never told the student "you listened enough, you never have to listen ever again to Minuet 3. No, never. No. Of course I want people to continuously listen, this stems back from when I was heavily doing, quartet music and the coach that we had then just kept saying, "listen harder, listen, listen more, listen more!" And of course we were very busy students, playing this thing, trying to play our best. And I didn't have that pierce through my core so deep that I was like, "oh, if all, if I just listened to this thing, I'll play my part fine." So yeah. Listening, listening, listening either actively or passively listening for entertainment, for enjoyment, or for education.

**Christine Goodner:**

Great advice. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us today.

**Raymond Mallari:**

Thank you. Absolutely.