



Episode 33: An Interview with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner: Welcome, everyone. I'm excited today to be talking to Barbie Wong and Barbie, I was hoping you could start by telling us a bit about who you are and what you do.

Barbie Wong : So I am a music educator and I teach parents how to raise joyful musical kids. So I'm both a music teacher and a parent, and I have found that when these two worlds collided, there was a lot of difficulty with raising my own kids to be musical, but then with my insights as a teacher, and with the extensive research I started doing, once I saw my kids, weren't naturally wanting to make music I grew into this job that I have created for myself. And I found that I had so many answers that parents are looking for because that was me five, ten years ago. And now that I found these answers, I want to share it with the rest of the world.

Christine Goodner: Great. I can't wait to talk about this together because this is a topic I'm passionate about as well. I always think about what do I wish I had known when I started or what would I go back and tell myself when I started? And I think it's a real gift to share those answers with other people who are in that position. So I can't wait to hear more about that. I wonder if we could start by just when you yourself got involved in music. How old were you? What instrument did you start with and anything you want to share about that story?

Barbie Wong : So I was four or five when I started and my family came to the United States when I was four and I don't know why we started music, but my parents told me later, they realized, "oh, music is really good for kids." So we decided to put you in music lessons. And I started with piano lessons in the

Yamaha music system. And a lot of that was playing by ear and developing that. And of course I had an older sister, so I was hearing her play piano before that.

Christine Goodner: Yeah. A lot of families come to it from like realizing, "oh, this is good for our child, for their brain" or just for intellectual development or to have music in their lives. And it's a great place to start. Do you have any early memories about practice? Do you remember liking it? What do you remember about those early years if anything?

Barbie Wong : Just struggling? You know, my mom was very authoritarian and she had a lot going on with her own life, but basically the way she would make us practice was to threaten us with punishments and, you know, like bless her heart. I'm actually so grateful that she persists and it must not have been easy on her end. My parents actually, they were running a 24 hour motel business. And so they'd have to get up in the middle of the night when there was a customer. So they had all of this pressure and yet they still managed to get us to practice our instruments. And it wasn't until I was 13 that I actually fell in love with playing the instrument and then no longer needed the prodding from my parents.

Christine Goodner: Hmm. Yeah. So interesting. And of course, many of us parent, the way we were parented and we're like you're saying, we do the best we can and appreciating what that gave us, I think it's really neat to hear you talk about, even if we would do it different ourselves or if we do it different ourselves now that we know more.

Barbie Wong : Yeah. And I think, you know, getting kids to practice, it's not a black and white issue. There's so many nuances and it depends on so many different things. And I think all so a lot of times parents and I had this idea too that "oh, I really want practicing to just be fun. I want everything to go smoothly." And the reality is that sometimes practicing is hard. Some days I know even adults, I have musician friends who say, "yeah, I don't want to practice," but this that's just part of the whole package. And if you can see the big picture and most kids can't, you know, we adults have to help them either see it for them and then guide them along or eventually help them see the big picture.

Christine Goodner: Absolutely. In my experience, people will compare music lessons to- "well, we took an art class or we took swim lessons and my child just instantly liked it and they always want to do it. Why isn't music feeling the same?"

Or maybe "they don't like music," because it isn't the same. I think talking about that's very important.

Barbie Wong : Yeah, exactly. And, and helping parents realize too it's okay that your child doesn't like music or practicing in that moment and you haven't failed as a parent, if that happens.

Christine Goodner: Yes. And you are not doing something wrong or it doesn't mean they're not cut out for music. It's just hard work. Sometimes it's hard to understand as a kid.

Barbie Wong : Yeah. Exactly.

Christine Goodner: You know, coming from a Suzuki method background, we talk a lot about building character and parents and families will tell me, well I want my child to learn perseverance or hard work or all these things because of music. And I think it's easy to forget. We learn those things because we have to struggle through and figure out how to keep going when we don't want to do it. Like that's where perseverance comes from. And that's the less fun part, I guess, to think about. It's not like we magically get perseverance it's that we are like, "I really don't want do this. How am I going to make it happen?" And then we build that muscle.

Barbie Wong : That's right. And I think a lot of times too, children build that muscle by seeing parents build that muscle. As parents, we have to build the perseverance muscle of constant reminders, and saying it daily, and being okay with feeling like, "I don't want to remind them again, but I know this will help." And then persevering through that.

Christine Goodner: Yes. Well, we'll talk more about maybe ways we can help think about doing that as families as our discussion goes on. I'd love to go back to that moment when you feel like, "oh, I fell in love with playing music at 13." Do you remember that moment or what it was that sparked that for you?

Barbie Wong : I do. It was music camp. It was the first time where I went to a sleepaway camp and it was just for music. And it was my piano teacher at the time who ran this camp. She was really woman and not only a fantastic musician, but she really understood how to make music come alive and really fun. And so at music camp, you're just there in the woods with a whole bunch of-we were, most

of us were pianists, but there were, I think there were woodwinds and there were string instruments and we all had assigned practice times. And in that moment that was totally fine to practices because all of my friends were also practicing. And so there was this magic of music camp that afterwards I realized, "oh yeah, music is fun." And it's because I got to do master classes, and make music, and hang out in the cabins, and play volleyball and all of these wonderful things. So that I have to say is the turning point for me. And I am so grateful for my teacher for basically saying "come to music camp!"

Christine Goodner: And I think of myself as a teenager, it was really the social aspects of music that hooked me in because I didn't always want to practice, but I wanted to be there with my friends, making the music. So I was willing to put in the time for the community feel, or making music together or just hanging out in between practice sessions and all of that. So important for just that ownership or like, "oh this is for me, not just because my parents are telling me to practice."

Barbie Wong : Yes, exactly. Yeah. This is it's the positive peer pressure when it comes to music camp.

Christine Goodner: And I think even as adults, what I love about music is making music with other musicians and that social time in between rehearsal or at either end of rehearsal, I think that's just what makes music magical is being a part of that. Practicing in our rooms alone is like necessary, but not for everyone the thing that sparks love of music.

Barbie Wong : Yes, exactly. Yeah. I totally agree. And then I took up another instrument as an adult. The ukulele and I still remember, I basically, I just joined a ukulele club or you know, a class and I actually really didn't practice outside, but I went every week and it was so fun because I love the people. And lo behold, after a few years I got pretty good at the ukulele, but it was mainly because I just went consistently. And just that the social time as you were talking about is so important.

Christine Goodner: So I always think if parents or family is listening, thinking about if my child's unmotivated, or that spark hasn't been lit for them yet, what social environments can we help foster in their lives for music to take place with other people? Because I think for many people, that's what sparks like, "oh, I love this. How do I do more of this?"

Barbie Wong : Yes, exactly. And I think that's why art class and sports are so appealing because a lot of those are done in groups and a lot of the practicing is happening in the group setting. So there's not as many kids that have soccer and then go home and practice soccer. They're just practicing at the soccer practice.

Christine Goodner: And there's a feeling of "we're in this together" and "we're working towards a common goal", which I think you get when you're working towards a performance with other musicians and that feeling of teamwork and also so important. Well, I always like to ask people, is there anything you felt like you learned the hard way about practice or anything you think you learned in those older teen and beyond years about practice that you can see really helped you enjoy music or enjoy the process?

Barbie Wong : What's interesting is I feel like the person who influenced my practice the most is actually my ninth grade English teacher, Ms. Arday. And she actually was fantastic because she taught us study skills and one of her study skills was to take notes, you know, pay attention in class when you take notes, but then to go home and review those notes. And the reviewing the notes can take as little as two minutes, but she stressed the importance of reviewing the notes every night. So the first night review it, then do it the next night, and then keep doing it until your next class. And that idea really stuck with me because when I started doing that with music, with music practicing and it didn't have to be long practice sessions, but I would do little chunks every day. I just made huge improvements when I did that. And to this day when I stick to that regimen and I need to learn a piece- almost anything this can apply to learning any skill. If I can do it consistently every day, then it really has helped. And I have actually, there are many times when I don't do that and I've tried, when I was younger I'm like, "oh, I'm just gonna cram." And then I realized, oh, cramming doesn't work. I need to do it every day.

Christine Goodner: Just how our brains work.<laughs> I love that you could take that from English and apply it to music and make that connection and the consistency. A colleague and I did a research project with a survey of teens and we asked "what was the hardest part about practice when you were younger? What do you remember?" And they said "just doing it every day." It was the hardest part. So I do think that's where we would need the parent support and sometimes practice challenges or anything that can entice us to just get that consistency in until it clicks for us intellectually, maybe how helpful it is.

Barbie Wong : Yes, exactly. Yeah. I advise parents. I said, "if you've ever watched Batman at the end of the Batman TV show, they say, well tune in next time, same bat time, same bat channel." And they say do that with music practicing. And eventually it will get easier.

Christine Goodner: And on like so many things we do in our modern times, it's really a long term project. You get to that point. And I think that can be part of the challenge too. It's like, well, nothing else in our life takes this much consistency perhaps with our children. So it's a unique opportunity to practice.

Barbie Wong : It is. It is. And, and I've seen actually wonderful benefits now because I have two kids and I still remember I was going to teach a parent class at some point. And then my younger kid, who's 14 now. She said, "oh, you're going to teach a parent class. Great. Well I'm going go practice." And then this light bulb went off and I thought "wait, I didn't have to tell you to practice" we're at this stage where, because you know, we've done this so much. And I asked my kid, I said, "well, why did you just say you're going practice?" And they said, "I don't know. It's just part of the routine. This is just what I do." So it's become just part of their daily life, what they do every day. And I no longer, now that my kids are older, have to struggle in the same way.

Christine Goodner: A nice hopeful message for the parents who ask like "when will I have to stop reminding?" And I always share my own parents had to remind me, I think all through high school, just because I was bad at planning my time or like starting new tasks. So your child may come to that at different times. But yeah, that's wonderful that moment when that happens, it's like, "oh, I'm going to do it."

Barbie Wong : And I have to say too, even once they get to that, it's still important for parents to still check in and still, you know, I still ask, "how is practicing going? What are you working on?" So I think I want to- I think a lot of parents think, "oh, at some point you can just wash your hands and then you're done." And it's like, "well, no, it's nice to actually still be engaged, but in a different way, when your kids are teens.

Christine Goodner: Right. We don't have to be coaching them through fingerings or every note anymore for sure. Which is nice. But maybe we could talk more

about that. What do you see as the parent or practice partner role in those teenage years? What are some examples of what could help?

Barbie Wong : I think it's important to really understand still what's going on in the lessons and not necessarily having to sit in, like if you did that when your kids were younger, but also, if you're not in the lessons, checking in with the teacher periodically. And I'll do that with my older daughter, once in a while, I don't know what's going on, because she takes her lessons without me, but I'll text the teacher say, "Hey, how is it going?" Or I'll say, "Hey, do you have time for a five minute chat? I'd love to know how my daughter's doing." And if she needs any support from me, the teacher that is, and also my daughter, so it's really nice. And then also here, cuz my daughter plays the cello. So she's not practicing out in the living room where the piano is in the public place. So I will just check in I'll say, "wow, I'm really hearing that your tone has really developed," or I'll say things like, "oh, can you tell me more about what pieces you're playing?" So just asking her about that. And then also I know it's hard now, but findng opportunities to go and see live music so that she can see other cellists and be inspired by other cellists.

Christine Goodner: Yeah. Thank you for sharing those, you know, part of our job is encourager. I like that what you mentioned involved, "Oh, I see here's a good thing I see happening." And also just that question of tell me about... fill in the blank and then it opens conversation. I think if we ask yes or no questions of teens, that's what we're going to get or even just "how's your practice going?" "Fine." [Using monotone voice] So I like the "tell me about..." Or I could imagine just "what thing you could play for me in the next week?" Or inviting them to share music if they're open to it. But I love the positivity and the invitation to have a conversation.

Barbie Wong : And I also love to hear about my kids' music. What are they listening to? You know, my kids are playing classical music on their instruments, but they love Taylor Swift and they love all sorts of different kinds of music. And I think it's so important for us as parents to really listen to them, "what are you listening to? Oh, okay. All right. Can you put it on? I want to know what interests you." And that can really be wonderful way to have a connection with your teen.

Christine Goodner: I think thinking about my own upbringing and my own parenting, just making sure that we have an open enough conversation there

where they know it's going to be met with some open-mindedness and [not] "oh, that's not real music." I don't think anybody said that to me, but I've heard that in classical music spaces, "well, such and such, doesn't qualify as great music to listen to." And I think real, like you're saying, being really open to this is catching their attention for some reason. And any interest in music I think can trickle into our classical music playing and gives us an opportunity for creativity as well. You see lots of artists sort of merging different styles together and it makes it for wonderful music. So I like the openness there. I think that's important if it's going to be met with negativity at all, we're not gonna hear much sharing.

Barbie Wong : That's true. That is very true. You have to go in with an open mind and being willing to listen to this other kind of music. And you're right. Yeah. It's having these different genres. They can really help inform each other and inspire creativity. I think Elton John talks about when he was young he took classical piano lessons and he says, "yes, I draw from that." And if you listen to his music, his chord structures are much more complex than your average one, four, five chords that most pop music is based on. And so it's important I think having a variety of genres that you listen to, and also, I think it shows your child that you're being open, because then they will listen to my music. They want to know, "oh, what are you listening to?" And it's a really wonderful exchange.

Christine Goodner: Great things to think about as we're thinking about how do we connect with teens, because it can be very unclear when we're have like preschool students or great school students is very clear. Like I'm going to tell them to practice and how many times, and then it becomes less clear what is my role here? So I like to talk about that a lot. I think logistics, as you were mentioning that some too, just how can we get them to where they need to go for concerts and rehearsals and lessons or what materials do they need, checking in with the teacher there is really great too.

Barbie Wong : And also I think it's also important. I was talking to this Suzuki teacher and she said that when she was a teen, her parents basically just said, all right, you you've got this, you're fine. And I said, "well, do you think that at any point you felt like you wanted them to pay a little bit more attention?" And she said, "actually now I think about it. Yeah. That would've been nice if they paid a little bit more attention and checked in a little bit more," I think it's important to figure out, like to what extent does your teen want your involvement? You know, my daughter now can drive, she's 16. I thought our last cello lesson [was the last]

where I would drive her to cello lesson. And she actually said, "you know, I actually like our times together when we go to cello lessons, I can drive now, but I actually would like you to come with me." And I thought, "wow, that's wonderful!" Because it is a wonderful bonding time that, and it's kind of like when you're hanging out with musicians and it's the time outside of the playing, it's like the time outside of the lesson can be a wonderful connecting point, driving to lessons or looking for whatever things that they might need for their lessons.

Christine Goodner: And during that time, on the way home, having someone to process with how it went, if our teen is interested in doing that, it could be really helpful. Or just someone who's going to talk to me about something else. I just think that there's a lot of hard work that happens in a lesson that it's nice to process something with somebody afterwards.

Barbie Wong: Oh, I like that. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Christine Goodner: I hear a lot of questions about those independent practices or how do we develop ownership or what's our role as a parent. So I love, I love that you're talking about that. And you talk a lot about parent engagement overall and the importance of parent engagement in their child's musical studies. I wonder if there's anything else you'd like to share about that?

Barbie Wong: In terms of parent engagement, I have to say the hard thing is knowing how much to engage and when, because not only is each child different, but then they grow and change and then the situation changes. So I think first of all, giving ourselves a little break, realizing that we are not going to get it right every time that's one of the hardest things about parenting is you think you got it because you've developed the skills for this particular thing. And then they grow and it's like, oh, that doesn't work anymore. I need to try something else. So just, you know, being kind to yourself and then going and saying, "okay, well what is the situation now? And how can I be engaged fully?" Hopefully your child's teacher is helping guide but it's okay if they don't, there's so many resources out there to figure out, okay, how can I engage at what age, in what situations?

But realizing that just being present and helping infuse the environment with music, goes a long way. Playing a lot of music around the house, that's what a lot of these musicians whose lives I looked into, that's what they talk about. You know, Elton John had his mom playing the record player or the radio all day long. And he's like, "I just remember it was on all the time" and Yoyo Ma too, he grew up

just infused in music. And so all of these musicians, their love for music comes from their environment and from seeing parents also enjoy music.

Christine Goodner: Yeah. That's a great thing to think about because it's fairly simple to find music and just make sure it's around in our environment, in the car, in the living room background, and helping with that inspiration. We never know until much later when you hear these interviews, like you're talking about how important that can be.

Barbie Wong : Oh, so its so simple to do, right? Everyone has a device. You can just press play. You don't have to be a musician.

Christine Goodner: And there's many resources where you can look up a classical music playlist or doesn't have to be classical even necessarily, but a playlist of music maybe with your child's instruments, somehow involved. And a lot of those are curated for us online now. You could ask your teacher or share with other other families. But yeah, we don't have to come up with knowing where to start either on our own.

Barbie Wong : Exactly, exactly.

Christine Goodner: Right. Well you mentioned some of the research you've been doing about musicians. I wonder if you could tell us more about the work you're doing around that?

Barbie Wong : Yes. So when I was struggling with Kenson (sp?) my older child, with music, I was trying to figure out, and this is back when she was four. I was like, "well, what exactly do I actually want for her when it comes to music and learning music?" And what I realized was, "well, I just really want her to make music for life." I like her to be an adult who is still making music and enjoying it in whatever capacity. I don't need her to be at Carnegie hall or playing at Wembley stadium. It would just be nice if she enjoyed music. And so when I thought about it, I thought, "well, what if I looked into the lives of adult musicians, both professional and amateur to see if there was anything that happened in their childhoods, you know, were there any commonalities, were they doing things?"

Were the parents doing anything or were these people just naturally gifted and naturally drawn to music? And what I found essentially was that these adult musicians grew up in musically rich households and you know, yes, a lot of them

did have musical parents, but a lot of them didn't, like Elton John and you know, Lin Manuel Miranda who created Hamilton, a lot of people love his music. His parents were not musicians, but guess what? They loved music and they loved music so much that they played it all the time. And if you can guess what kind of music they played, then you can then start to realize, "oh, this is the kind of, this is what happens when you inundate a child's environment with a lot of music." So, you know, his parents loved musicals and lo and behold, that's why he became a person who wrote musicals.

Barbie Wong : I would say you were talking about, you know, making sure not to be negative about different musical genres. I call it being a musician <laughs softly>. I think that's the same way with music, for your child learning music. You know, I think it's important, whatever kind of music you love play that. And also, you know, your child might end up playing that kind of music too. I have friends who love bluegrass and their kids are learning bluegrass. And it's fantastic. Seeing the lives of musicians has actually informed a lot of my work. And by the way, a lot of these musicians wrote autobiographies that are really fun to read, like Dolly Parton, Elton John, Carly Simon, Bruce Springsteen, even I highly recommend looking into these and enjoying them.

Christine Goodner: I love that. I think we hear stories about classical musicians for example, Mozart's family had music in it, but it's a little harder to relate our lives to Mozart's for many reasons. So I love that you're looking at musicians from different genres and from more modern times, and then thinking about what can we learn from that for ourselves? I think that's really fun. I haven't heard a lot of people, at least that I've spoken to yet, looking at that in a bigger, global way that will come connect with a lot of people who do love all these musicians and their music.

Barbie Wong : Realistically, even a lot, a lot of adults who want their kids to make music. They do put them in classical music lessons because you know, learning classical music is so foundational and it really can allow you to branch off into all these different genres. But then in reality, I think a lot of adults, a lot of us parents are really just listening to popular music or to country, to all these different genres. So it's nice to be able to, to see that, "Hey, it's okay that even though my child is playing classical music, they can also branch out into these other genres too."

Christine Goodner: I think sometimes classical music world can be a little elitist, I guess I'll say about like, "oh, this is the correct music to listen to." But, I think it's really important and inclusive to talk about all sorts of music applies to people or appeals to people because of their culture because of their family background. And we should be able to have both. And like you're saying classical, music's a great way to learn the foundations. I remember Alicia keys, I've heard a few interviews with her saying she grew up as a Suzuki pianist and it really gave her the technique skills to do what she does now. So remembering it's not a either or, and we include more people in our classical world when we don't decide, it's the only way to go.

Barbie Wong : <Affirmative> Exactly. I totally agree. And I'm glad you brought up Alicia Keys. She also wrote a beautiful memoir cause though it's not just about, I, I felt like it's it's about her life, but she has so many nuggets of wisdom in there. And one part of her story, which I love is, she fell in love with the piano. She said when she was in the kindergarten, I think when she was five, and you just loved it. And so, you know, eventually she took music lessons and by the time she was 11, guess what she was telling her mom, she's really smart. She's she told her mom, she said, "you know, mom, you know, music lessons are really expensive. And you know, I think I'd rather just go play with my friends. So why don't we just stop music lessons?" And you know, this is a kid who loved the piano, just fell in love with it. And thank goodness for her mom. Her mom said, "okay, let's make a deal. You have to continue with music lessons and practicing during the school year. But during the summertimes, you can have that off." And so Alicia continue, you need to play and practice. And I think that's a great indication of, "Hey, even Alicia keys who loved piano, even she struggled with practicing." And it was the parents' role to come in and just say, "Hey, it's okay you struggle, we're still going to set the structure up so that you continue to practice." And she worked with her. I think Alicia was precocious. I think she graduated high school at 16. So it's kind of like working with a team. So thinking about negotiations, that's really important.

Christine Goodner: How do people connect with you to find out more about your work or on social media? How can people find, find you and connect with you?

Barbie Wong : They can find me on my website, which is my name, Barbiewong.com. I do run a parent group on social media, on Facebook, it's called "musical nest". And so if you look at musical nest, it's a place where people can go and you know, they can pose questions about practicing. I do live videos and, you

know, talk about these issues. I think my next one is on like stress and anxiety during this era. And how do you deal with that? And what do you do when it comes to practicing and kids? So, you know, we talk about things that I feel like are helpful. And then I'm also on Instagram as well, BarbieWongMusic is my handle. But yeah, if people want to reach out, I have classes on my website too.

Christine Goodner: Great. I'd love to move to asking you about a practice tip. I always like to wrap up our conversations. If you could leave listeners with a practice tip. They could think about this week. What would you like to share?

Barbie Wong : I think in terms of practicing, a lot of people focused in on motivation. "Oh, I want my kid to be motivated to practice. Why isn't my kid motivated to practice?" And I created a diagram. I call the motivation circle and it has four components, but the three main components, the top part is the motivation, the word motivation. If you can imagine that, and motivation as we leads to practice and that's the second component. But the thing is, what happens is when you practice regularly, then you improve and you progress. And when kids are improving, they feel so much better. They are excited. They think, "oh my gosh, I can do this. Well, if I can do this, I can do this other thing." And so the third part is progress and progress then leads back to motivation. And so in this circle, a lot of people like to focus on the motivation, but I say, don't focus on motivation, focus on the daily practice, getting your child to the piano or the whatever instrument they're they're at, every day. And even if it's as minuscule as five minutes, and that's the practice- that might be the practice, getting your child to their instrument. Then if you do that for a whole month, just getting your child to the instrument, eventually then the practice will get easier and the momentum will build. And eventually you'll have someone who then practices more easily.

Christine Goodner: Thinking of motivation is something that we can build through what we do and through our environment versus something we have or don't have for no reason we can pin down is so important. So thank you. Thanks for sharing that tip. I hope that helps a lot of people.

Barbie Wong : Oh, and I guess I forgot to mention the one last part. I said, there's four components. There was motivation, practice, and then progress. But the other part is the environment and the environment leads directly to the motivation. So as we talked about earlier, a musically rich environment that will inspire kids to make music. When they see people make music and they're

listening to music and they're making music with others, then practicing comes more easily.

Christine Goodner: Wonderful to talk to you, Barbie, thanks for, for sharing this. It was a fascinating conversation to me. I hope everybody enjoyed it as well. And look forward to us connecting in the future sometime.

Barbie Wong : Thank you so much, Christine. I enjoyed it.