



Episode 26: An Interview with Angel Falu Garcia

Christine Goodner:

Thanks everybody for joining us today, today, I'm excited to be talking to Angel Falu and I was hoping you could start by introducing yourself to us a bit telling us about who you are and what you do in the music world.

Angel Falu:

Sure. I am Angel Falu. I am a viola and violin, Suzuki teacher, currently living in Rochester, Minnesota. I have my studio here and I have about 35 or so students - wonderful students that I get to work with on a weekly basis. So it's great.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I'm looking forward to talking about your own practice experience and what you share with your students about practice. I'm excited to get into that today, but I wondered if we could start with you sharing a bit about how old you were when you started music or what you remember about the beginning of your musical life.

Angel Falu:

Sure. I started at around, I think it was nine or ten. My music journey has been quite interesting. There was a music camp around the area and the community where I lived, where there were...It was government funded and I took the opportunity and joined the music camp. And one of the many offerings that they have was they were offering music classes and I think they had us in like a guitar group. So everybody was taking guitar. The teacher saw that I was really interested and I was really getting it. And after the month or so of music lessons, he approached me and he said, I want you to play. I want you to continue the music and I want you to because I see potential in you. And so I kept for a semester, I kept taking guitar lessons.

He saw that he needed a bass guitar player for his adult ensemble band. And then he said, well, I'll continue teaching guitar. That's what you want to do, but I need a bass guitarist. So would you be interested? And so I took a little bit of guitar lessons for a few months here and there. And then I switched to bass guitar and I did that for about two years. But then in the process I heard- I kept hearing about this program that was literally across the street from where I was taking my bass guitar lessons

and doing the band ensemble rehearsals. And it was an orchestra program based or modeled after EL Sistema, the Venezuela orchestra program. And so I got interested and I wanted to keep exploring.

So I went across the street literally one day and I said, "I want to play clarinet." And they're like, "no, sorry, clarinet is full, but we do have space for Viola." And I'm like, "what's a viola??" They explained to me what it was. And I'm like, "okay, I'm down." And three months later I just joined the orchestra. I was super motivated to learn and it was great. It was a really good experience. And from that on opportunities just kept appearing and there were teachers willing to help me take advantage of all of those opportunities. So I think that's when it started about like nine or ten, and then it kind of morphed from guitar all the way through viola which is my main instrument.

Christine Goodner:

There's so many interesting things about that. Did you hear the orchestra play or how did you know, "this is something I want to check out?"

Angel Falu:

I think it was my friends. My friends joined and they kept joining the orchestra. I had friends who played clarinet or trumpet, and I had friends who played violin and they were all talking about it and it sort of piqued my interest and literally I just went across the street and I'm like, "what's this all about?" Like, I really, I want to play clarinet because it was an instrument that I kept wanting to explore, but my teacher was like, "no, stay on bass guitar." And I'm like, "but I want to play the clarinet." They're like, "no, stay on bass guitar." But it was definitely- watching my friends and listening to them, talk about how great the orchestra program was. And it took off from that.

Christine Goodner:

Do you remember having music in your life before that age [of] nine or 10? What was your background in music before that? Obviously not in a like structured, official way, but do you remember hearing music around you or anything that made you interested?

Angel Falu:

Oh yeah. I think the funny thing around Latinos and people of color in general is that there's lots of noise. And, when I say noise, I mean like loud music going around. And so I do remember since I was a baby listening to my mom and my dad sometimes singing duets together, like popular songs. And my grandma would wake up on like Saturdays. Those were like the days of cleaning the house and it sounds like such a cliché, but it really was like, they would just wake up on the weekends and then blast music very loudly. And we grew up around that sort of culture and where like, I literally listen to music all the time and I can listen to everything and I'm cooking and I'm listening to music, I'm showering and I'm listening to music. And even like when I do administrative work for my own studio, like I have to do it while listening to music that sort of gets me into like that focus, focus state and where I can accomplish things without that. I just feel very uneasy. So music has always been a part of my life, but in like many different genres of music have been part of my life.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's really interesting. I just interviewed Barbie Wong. She's done a bunch of research with famous musicians, not just classical, but like Elton John and Alicia Keys and all different people. And one of the big commonalities between them was just, they grew up in a family or a culture surrounded by

music. It didn't have to be classical music or, you know, anything structured in this particular way, but that, that really has an influence on that. So I think it's so interesting.

Angel Falu:

Yeah, it really did. And yeah, it was something that I was always like, "wait, why are they singing so loud?" And then it got me to do the same thing. And so I don't know. I feel like I have somewhat of a good ear for like catching melodies and singing songs and memorizing lyrics of random songs that I get to listen and learn on a daily basis because that was a consistent thing in my life. Not a only for me, and like you said, on a structured basis, it was just my mom listened to music. My grandma listened to music and my family on a daily basis, we would blast music for everything we did in our house. And my neighbors would also blast music. It was like a cultural thing sometimes. I mean, looking back it's like it was too loud probably, but still the element of music what's very present.

Christine Goodner:

Hmm. I love that. And I think we can think if a parent is listening to this or a practice partner, just how are we listening to various types of music around our children? And it doesn't have to be one type or one genre. I think that's actually really important to branch out with that. What do you remember about practicing when you started? It could be when you started guitar or when you joined the orchestra, but do you remember enjoying practice, understanding practice? I'd love to hear anything you remember about that.

Angel Falu:

So thinking back, I think to me when I was younger practice was more of a social event. I don't think I remember like locking myself up and being like, "I'm going to practice this because I have to get good for my own part of the orchestra. No, that wasn't it. And in reality, both in the band setup and in the orchestra setup, it was more like we had rehearsals almost every day or we were I would practice in either sectionals or when we had that free time for us to do our own individual practice, I would gather up my friends and be like, "let's just get together and practice." So we would sit in a corner here or there and literally just play our instruments as much as we could. We were allowed to take our instruments home so we could practice. But that wasn't a reality in my household. So I didn't get to practice at home. I did practice Monday to Friday, but it was more in the social setting of the school and with my friends.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. An argument for not just having music class once a week or something. And I think one of the hard parts of about growing up practicing is the lonely one-on-one aspect. So it sounds like a great environment for practicing with people.

Angel Falu:

Yeah. And because it was somewhat of the traditional way, there wasn't that culture of having my mom be present and supervising my practice routine, it was more of like, you're old enough, you can handle it yourself. And I think my, even my teachers were like, "well, you get to practice from here to here and you get to practice this and this" but you get to practice it on your own. Right? And some of those teachers were really diligent in if they saw me being too social and too chatty with my friends, then they would isolate me. But they would sit with me and be like, "okay, I need you to practice this section and learn this really well. So you're going to sit with me while I practice and you practice." So I remember those. And eventually as I got older, one of my favorite teachers or the ones that I remember with love

was one grumpy old man. I love him so much. He passed away, but he would be like, "Hey! I see you socializing too much. You need to go into this room right now!" And then he would like, sit me and watch me practice.

Christine Goodner:

No one can see us, but you're shaking your finger at the screen.

Angel Falu:

Exactly, exactly. Shaking their finger like, "you need to practice this right now because you have a solo ensemble that you have to do." And I'm like, "but I don't want to practice." It's like, "no, I want you to audition to this orchestra. So you need to sit down." His name was Jaime Medina. He was my orchestra teacher, but he was also my individual like Viola teacher at the conservatory. It was funny. And I always laugh a lot when I remember all of my interactions with that man.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Sounds like, like you needed the structure maybe?

Angel Falu:

Oh yeah, definitely. Yes, yes, yes.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. And this was in Puerto Rico?

Angel Falu:

Yeah. I grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Yeah. That was all my interactions- my music interactions in my youth were all in San Juan, Puerto Rico, part of the program was called, the acronym was PASU and I grew up there and then eventually I got a scholarship to study, there was a specialized music school where they taught half of the day was dedicated to, or is dedicated because that school still exists, dedicated for academic studies. And then the other half of the day is for music. Eventually I got a scholarship to study at the pre-college program at the conservatory. So I was 16 by then. And that's when I met Jaime Medina I studied with them and then I graduated and got into the college program at the conservatory.

Christine Goodner:

Wow. Do you remember a moment when you decided this is what I want to do as my career?

Angel Falu:

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting in my high school, which was a regular vocational high school. I didn't know. Like I already took the college prep test and what would be the equivalent of the SATs down in Puerto Rico. And they called the college boards or something like that too. I remember sending my test results to like three or four universities, like different public or private universities. But I think I paid a little extra to send it to the conservatory as well. And it was all up in the air. And then I was just like, "well, music has been present in my life since I was a kid, I think it's the only thing that makes sense. I think all my friends were disappointed. They're like, "I thought you were going to become a doctor" and I'm like, "no." I think I was just sitting in the yard, like on one of those benches and I was

literally like, "I think I'm going to go for music. I mean, I already pretty much do it every day. Why wouldn't I just keep going?"

Christine Goodner:

Do you feel, because we always talk about practice on this podcast. Do you feel like you're practicing really changed from that as a group with your peers in that beginning orchestra into those college years? What do you remember changing about practice?

Angel Falu:

It was a struggle, I think in the beginning because again, going into that professional career, whereas competition track and you know, everything has to be very structured and also you're figuring your adulthood. There was a lot going on, but practicing wise, I struggled a lot. I think throughout my whole undergrad, it wasn't until grad school where I was finally made to understand how to structure my practice in a more efficient way. Also as I got older and banged my head, against the wall many, many times then I started recognizing what helped me practice or I'm more of a visual person. I also need to understand what the mechanicals are rather than just, you need to practice this section from this, to this. And then, you have to do dynamics or you have to do phrasing better.

And I think most of the time in college, my experience with some of the teachers, not everybody, but some of the teachers, they would just tell me to do things without the proper explanation of how to get there. And so I struggled a lot with understanding how to do that. But in my graduate school studies, my teacher was like, "you have this and this and this and this that are great. And you have so much potential. But the problem is that you don't understand how to structure your practice or you don't understand the mechanics of how to get there." So for example, "I need you to really sink your be into the string, but you can't do that if you don't feel the weight of your elbow." Right? And "if you don't let the elbow or the arm, get your, be sink into the string and then pull in a downward motion. And then when you get to the tip, lift the tip off. And as I'm a visual learner, then I would see him do it and then understand. I'm like, "oh!" And then I would feel it myself and do it. And then he was like, "yes!" I remember his quote. The professor was Alan Bodman. I love him a lot as well. He's retired since, but I think one of his quotes was favorite quotes was- "you are the most frustrating, yet exciting student I've ever get to teach." And he explained it to me because it was just like, "I don't understand how your brain works because I tell you something. And when I tell it to you, you don't get it. But as soon as I show you and I explain to you how to do it, it's amazing. You just do it."

Angel Falu:

And I'm like, "well, I think that's how I work." So yeah, and it was a process of me not understanding and struggling and struggling and struggling and yet plowing through because that's what you do when you're in school. Until you find that someone, that teacher that really inspires you and explains to you, right? And makes you understand or helps you understand what you need to do to help accomplish things. And I think for me, from then on that's just even how I teach. Like I need to make sure that all of my students understand what to practice, but not what to practice specifically, [but] how to practice and how to accomplish all of those things.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's what I was thinking. When you were talking, I wanted to ask you next was, do you think that influences how you teach your students and how you explain practice?

Angel Falu:

Definitely, definitely. And fairly more recent teachers that I get to draw things from, but I do have a lot of things from when I was growing up. When I was growing up, when I was a teenager, I have influences from when I was in my undergrad. I had fantastic teachers that I draw things from all the time that I get to be like, "oh, this works or, "oh, I can see how explaining it this way might help the student or this certain student learned a little bit better," which is great.

Christine Goodner:

I think sometimes certain tactics for practice were great for certain students. And then those of us who don't fit in that box have to struggle through. So it's great to have lots of ideas.

Angel Falu:

Yes, yes, yes. The more ideas we get, the better it is, the more we can pull from that bag and cater to many different students,

Christine Goodner:

The practice partners listening, if you're students seems like they're struggling with, "how do I practice?" As a teacher I would want to know that because I have a lot of ideas, we don't get to see the practice at home to know, but just knowing that okay, there's ways I believe every student can learn and can practice, but we just may have to be really creative depending on who our child is.

Angel Falu:

Yeah. Yeah. That's it reading books about learning styles also help me. You know I'm a fan of that Life Lens book and everything that has to do with finding ways to understand how people learn. I eat all of that up. Like, I'm not much of a self-help book kind of person, but when it comes to like finding learning styles and how people or what makes people tick in motivating to do things. Yeah. I buy them in boxes.

Christine Goodner:

I agree. I love anything that gives strategies. I always say, I don't need to put a label on any student. You know, a lot of books will say like, oh see what color your student is, see what category they fall in. But I don't even care about that so much as I want all the strategies, because I feel like no two students have the exact mix of here's what you do that works.

Angel Falu:

That's right. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Well, anything else that comes to mind for you about practice?

Angel Falu:

I think, and I think this has been said enough, but I couldn't agree more. It's just find ways to make things easy. Breaking things down into goals you can accomplish. And I like what the book Grit have to say about all of those like small goals, medium goals, and then big time goals. And I even shrink it down to like a piece, right? You might have that big goal of like, I want to learn and memorize this piece by X amount or X date. Right? And so then start small, really small goals, break things down and find those

spots where you know that this box is gonna be a little more challenging, break it down. And even if you have to go like one bow or one note at a time, start slow and build that confidence and build that consistency going little by little.

Angel Falu:

And then I think as it evolves, the advice that I got from Patricia McCarty, when I went to one of those prestigious like music camps, again, opportunities, she told me, yes, practicing slow is efficient, but also separating, drilling and practicing as fast as you can also helps your brain know what to do. And I think I find it also very validating to follow, like Hillary Hahn. Social media is wonderful in a way that most people are willing to open up their practice times and expose themselves and be vulnerable that way. But what I like about is that my way of viewing of how to practice in that way, like fast and stop and separate and drill gets validated by seeing her, watching her practice. because that's what she does. She knows all of these concertos and she probably hasn't played, I don't know, multi concerto in like 10 years. But when she brings it up, when you see her practice, she's practicing really fast, but she's stopping. And she gets that really small section. And she does said as fast as she can, tempo. But then she breaks it down and okay, she does this chunk 10 times and then she does the next chunk 10 times. So yeah, the beginning start really slow. And then as soon as you understand what to do and how to do it, practice as fast as you can, but then stop separate drill.

Christine Goodner:

No, I love that. Yeah. Yeah. I agree. I think she's great to follow because she'll and just she'll share, oh, today I just like "everything went wrong or my fingers weren't cooperating", all these things that happened to all of us, children, amateurs professionals alike. And it's just so validating to see this world class violin is sharing the human side or just the reality instead of, "oh, everything's perfect for me."

Angel Falu:

She's really honest. Yeah. I think that two days ago, she, she said, well, practice didn't get done today. "I tried my best, but you know, between being a mom and doing all this stuff and taking a little bit of a break the day went by and it was 2:00 AM and I needed to go to bed." It makes all of them seem human, which is great. And I appreciate it as well.

Christine Goodner:

Before we go on to our final tip, I just wondered if we could go back to the planning goals. I loved what you were saying about that because I do that often with students as well. And I think sometimes we're good at like, "I want to graduate from this book or I want to play this piece in a recital," but then not everybody knows how to work backwards from that and give themselves a reasonable timeline. What kind of things would you say or do with a student that have bigger goal to help them break it down?

Angel Falu:

I'm a fan of "preview spots", and that is just my small accomplished goals. And so I would prepare the piece in a way that the first thing we do is section one, section two, section three, identify the sections of the piece and then as identify the challenging spots on each section. And then we start drilling on that. And that takes us about a month. Let's say that we have two months as a goal. And then after that first month of putting all of those previous together, um, three or four lessons have gone by then it's time to put chunks- section one and two together. So then we start working on big chunks and that it's

what I call the mid-level goals, right? So we need to be able to play sections one and two in a way that's more seamless, right?

Angel Falu:

And you need to start memorizing those two sections and ask. And at the same time, we're still practicing sections three and four we're separating and drilling all of those sections. But what, what it does is that at the end, it creates the seamlessness of, I already know what to do and there's no scary things because I've practiced it either in a random order, cause I don't necessarily start the first preview of section one. I would start maybe section three or section four or section a whatever. And then by the end in the recital, the result is amazing. And like I said, it's just a small, it's like one piece, but it could be a graduation recital or it could be an ensemble recital starting small. And then all goals accomplish small goals like previews. And then mid-level goals. It's tackling big sections and make sure that the transition between each section is seamless.

Angel Falu:

And then at the end, when you have everything put together, I see it kind of like a puzzle. Then you just play everything through. And then we work on little details. I call it, I tell my students like ironing a shirt, right. You have to whole shirt put together, but then we still have wrinkles that we need to tackle to make sure that everything is like really nice. And then you wear it and you look really good. Right? You look good. You sound good. And it's great. But it starts by working hard from the beginning. It's working hard, but working smart as well.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Thank you for of breaking that down. I think that could be really helpful to people. And I think sometimes as musicians, when we do that work still, when we play it straight through our brain is thinking of it in those sections. And it's like little mini songs where we've pieced together. And that I think that can really help take the stress off of like, will I remember it all? Or will I get lost or anything like that?

Angel Falu:

Exactly. Exactly.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's really helpful. Thanks for talking about that. I, I would love to, you know, keep talking. I think we have so many great ideas to share. I think for today I would love to move on and just see if we could leave the listener with a final practice tip. It could be a recap of something you've said or something new, but what's the practice tip we could leave listeners with today.

Angel Falu:

I think again, things that are said that I just want to reiterate and I want to reinforce, which is, I think listening is very important in practicing. I think it's the most magical thing that can happen in practice. And I think you've mentioned it and Ed Sprunger has mentioned it as well and in music there's no such thing as magic, but the closest thing to that is listening. If you listen consistently, then your brain will magically make it seem like, "oh, I remember this." And then your fingers will move appropriately. Your bow arm would move appropriately. I say bow arm, because I'm violinist. But you know, your hands will do, your body will do what it needs in order for you to accomplish things. So yeah, I think listening would

be my tip, like, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen. I think most of the times when I see my students struggling, it's like, have you listened to your piece?

Angel Falu:

No, I didn't have time. Like, oh, no wonder. Right? But, but then the next week, we make the goal of like how many times do you get to listen to make it easier? Okay. Five times every day. And then they listen and I can see the progress. It's as immediate as the next lesson, I can see the progress because they're listening. Things are easier. They're more confident. They accomplished whether if it's the small goal or the mid level goal, it's much more seamless or I can hear it, I can see it. And then I mention it like, "wow, you see what listening does?" And they're like, "fine." And then I celebrate. Definitely listening.

Christine Goodner:

Right. And there's just so many things we don't have to teach like bit by bit or symbol by symbol on the page. If we've just heard it, just like learning a language by immersing yourself in it, it just comes natural. And thank you so much for your time. And it's been really fun to talk about practice with you and hear more about your story as a musician.

Angel Falu:

Well thank you for inviting me. This it's been such a pleasure. I enjoyed it a lot.