



## Episode 59: Time in Music Lessons is Never Wasted with Eloise Hellyer (Part 1)

Today we're speaking with Eloise Hellyer - Eloise is a violin teacher who lives and teaches in Italy, is author of the *Book 1 Teaches, 2 Learn* and [violinteachersblog.com](http://violinteachersblog.com)

In this conversation we talk about Eloise's experience practicing with and teaching her own children, the importance of music teachers, and what she has learned from decades of teaching as well as numerous interviews she has conducted with performing violinists and I especially love her message that time in music lessons, is never time wasted.

We had such an interesting discussion and it was a bit longer than usual, and rather than cut any of it, I'll be bringing it to you in a two part series - half this week, half next week.

I hope you enjoy our conversation as much as I did!

Christine Goodner:

All right. Well, welcome everyone. I'm excited today to be talking to Eloise Hellyer and Eloise. I was hoping you could start by introducing yourself a little bit and telling everyone what you do in the world of music.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, I teach, I've been teaching the violin for a long, long time because I started out by teaching my daughters. At one point, we moved to the Middle East and literally, and I'm talking about 1980, and there was literally no teacher around for, well, thousands of kilometers anyway, and there was no way to contact anybody. We had maybe one phone line and you couldn't call anyone. Anyway, it was very expensive and there was no internet. So it was either I teach them or they didn't get lessons. And so what happened was is that I started teaching them, and of course I did research and I bought books and I got advice. And anytime I traveled, I took my kids wherever I could. But at a certain point, people saw my daughters who, I will tell you, they happen to be talented, thank heavens. It would've been hard to ruin them. And they thought, well, I must be doing a pretty good job teaching. So they asked me to teach their kids. And so one thing led to another, and here I am a long time later and I'm still working, and not as much as I used to, but I still do a lot.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I love that. And we'll talk more about that, what it's like to practice with your own children, which if you're teaching your own children, you're doing that as well, I imagine. Yeah. What was that like, that process of supporting your kids through their practice especially?

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, it was terrifying because as I said, I was alone completely alone. And I have to tell you, I was teaching in the piano and the violin. Okay. And it was terrifying because I had no one I could talk to. That was hard. So I was just bumbling along and hoping I didn't mess them up too much. And luckily I didn't. I would gladly have given the responsibility to another teacher, but the choice was teach them myself, or they didn't get music lessons. And the thing I liked about it so much was that I was really motivated by the desire to share something that was extremely important to me.

It was important to my whole being, because as you know, music encompasses everything. Your physical, your intellectual, and the spiritual aspects, everything together. And that had been very important to me in my development. And so I really wanted my daughters to have that. Not I didn't want professionals, but I thought they could become proficient at it. And that's why I did that. How I supported them. Well, I wonder what they would say. One of them, both of them got master's degrees in violent performance. One of them is a professional, and she's playing all over the place. She's going to South America for a month to play. But they were quite different as children. So if you want to know something about that, I can tell you that practicing with them pointed out to something really, really important. That is that every child is different.

And what one child thinks is absolutely wonderful and fantastic, and we're not talking, let's say we've got children of equal ability. The starting point is the same, but their personalities are so different. And what one child finds fascinating, the other one finds boring. And ego can be really strong in small children, and that can be hard to deal with. So you can't always make it fun.

Christine Goodner:

Yes,

Eloise Hellyer:

I tried. I couldn't. Sometimes you have to do it, you got to do it. So they both grew up to be highly self-disciplined, but they were very different as children. And I needed to take that into account. I can give you an example. My younger daughter, when she was born, I decided I would teach her math and reading with the Glenn Doman method. I dunno if you've ever heard of that, but it was a big thing back in the late seventies, early eighties. And it was by the time she was two, she could read 52 words and she could do addition and multiplication two, exactly. Two, she would not do subtraction and division. When I say she wouldn't, can you imagine a 2-year-old absolutely categorically refusing this, according to method was not possible. Yet it happened. And I read the books. There was nobody I could talk to or call. I read the book. I did everything exactly as he said. And what I learned from this was sometimes you have to change tactics, sometimes you have to wait. Sometimes you have to circle around and come back. And I've noticed in particular, no one dies if you break the rules a little bit because not everyone fits into the same mold. As I said, what one child loves the other finds jury. So that was my big takeaway from all of this.

Christine Goodner:

And I think many people who parent or have parented a 2-year-old, can imagine them refusing to do many things, actually.

Eloise Hellyer:

And the way it was presented, it shouldn't have been a problem. But to this day, she depends on her cell phone calculator.

Christine Goodner:

Fair enough. I think that's what I learned from working with my own kids to share with you, my experience was I was doing teacher training and then I was trying to practice with my 4-year-old daughter at the same time. And I was like, I can't get my own daughter to do the thing I'm being told to have other parents do with their child. I'm like, what's wrong with us? And I did have to learn, well, I'm throwing out the rules because how do I work with this child in front of me? And I think we just learned how to do that out of necessity.

Eloise Hellyer:

Yes, absolutely. Yes. So many people say, you shouldn't teach your own kids. And I even wrote a blog post about that because I very firmly believe that if you want to teach your own kids, why not? If you want to, why not? It's a great gift you can give them. And yeah, maybe you're going to be a little irritated sometimes, but then tell me when. I mean, I dunno about you, but I would get irritated with them for other things. So I mean, it's just part of raising children. So I am kind of tired of people who tell you, you should never teach your own kids, and you should absolutely find a teacher if you can. And I think if you want to, you should.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. And for us too, I didn't have resources to pay for another teacher, so it was a different reason than you, but it was also like, if we're going to do this, this is what it's going to look like and I've got to figure it out.

Eloise Hellyer:

And well, I think it probably made you a lot more compassionate as a teacher as well.

Christine Goodner:

I did learn a lot.

Eloise Hellyer:

Think it was a very good experience. Yes, I did learn. That's not to say that all teachers should have children and teach them in order to learn compassion for

Christine Goodner:

Six. Of course not.

Eloise Hellyer:

No. But in my case, it was a very big help.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. And if you're somebody who feels like I'm a musician, I'm trained as a teacher, should I teach my own child? Or is it bad to do? So you can figure out, you just have to be flexible and creative and maybe curious about how your child learns and what will support them. And you can support them. You just might have to change your tactics along the way as you learn more about them.

Eloise Hellyer:

I think a lot of people forget that a lot of very great musicians were taught by their fathers and mothers. Lots of them. We'll start with Mozart. So I think there's a lot of people say, well, it didn't work for me, so therefore, well, it doesn't always work. And if you can find another teacher, it's helpful to have somebody to talk to. Okay.

Christine Goodner:

Of course.

Eloise Hellyer:

But I don't have any, I would encourage any person who wants to teach their own kid to go ahead and do so. I mean, look how many homeschool and nobody says they're doing a bad thing.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. So circling back to those days, practicing with your daughters, what do you feel like you had to learn that did work? Or were there any other challenges you wanted to share? I'd love to hear more about what that was like.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, I mean, it's kind of the same because as I said, I had two extremely different personalities, both of them, very strong personalities, which is not surprising I guess. But I think in general, sometimes practicing can be emotionally difficult. That's why you need somebody to help you and sitting with your child, even if you have an older child, I would do this. I would be listening. They knew I was listening even after I took them to other teachers, because when they got to be 11, 12 years old, at that point, we were living back in Italy. And I could take them to other teachers and I did, but I would still listen to them practice. And I think it's a big help just to be present. Even going to the lessons,

I would always do that as much as I could too. I must admit I was selfish. I not only went to learn to help them, I went to learn myself. Because watching other teachers is very helpful. And it's something I did. Anytime I got a chance in three continents, four anywhere I could, I did. And it didn't matter what they were teaching either what instruments, anything. It was extremely helpful. So in that kind of support is helpful. Secondly, I think the way I viewed it, I see music education just like they used to a hundred and some years ago, that it is the part of anyone's integral part of anyone's education, mathematics, reading, writing, all of that. And if you see it that way, it makes everything a lot easier. I didn't have a doubt in my mind that I was doing the right thing because when you start having doubts, I think you as a mother know what happens as they hone in on them. And so you have to be really convinced. And I was very convinced. Okay, so if you treat it practicing like homework, chores, saying please, and thank you washing your hands, that kind of thing, I think it'll make practicing easier for everybody.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Yeah. I agree. And when I do sessions with families and workshops, I do get a question a lot, is it bad to have my child continue with music lessons, even if they see it as a chore? I see nothing except a benefit of having children involved in music. Maybe the tactics need to change. There's certainly damaging tactics that we want to be cautious of, but just insisting that your child is going to take a lesson or practice an instrument through high school, for example, I can only see good from that. I think they will only thank you later. I meet so many adults who tell me if only my parents hadn't let me quit, but it's hard to keep 'em going sometimes.

Eloise Hellyer:

Exactly. If my mother had just made me practice, yes, it is hard, but it's the doubt that gets you. I tell the same thing to parents all the time. I said, are you asking them if they want to speak their mother tongue? Well, no. In Italy, everybody goes to catechism. They all go to doctrine as they call it here, whether they want to or not. It makes absolutely no, it's something you do. So they go eight years, they do this. So they may never become religious, but they do this training and nobody has a second thought about it. But when it comes to music, oh, everybody's supposed to want to practice all the time. And I frequently use the example of love. Now we all love our mates, right?

Christine Goodner:

Right.

Eloise Hellyer:

Sometimes we love them a lot, sometimes a little less, right? I mean, it happens, right? There are times you have ups and downs. Now we adults know that, and we know the love is there. And through the harder times, we work at it and we keep going. Okay. But in more difficult times for children, they don't know that. They don't know. They're too young to have that kind of experience. And so we have to help them through that.

Christine Goodner:

So you have a wonderful book out called One Teaches Two Learn, and you've written many articles and conducted interviews with musicians. There's so many things we could talk about today about practice and since that's what this podcast is centered on. But I would love to start by asking you what you think it's important for families of young musicians to know about music practice, maybe beyond what you were just saying.

Eloise Hellyer:

Okay. Yeah. I've got lots of things. First of all, don't confuse not wanting to practice with not wanting to play. That's a big one. And kids will do this, and so will their parents. I get this a lot. Oh, he doesn't want to practice. That means he doesn't want to play. I said, wait a minute. And I asked the kids, I said, does your mom and your mom and dad, do they like a clean house? They said, yeah. I said, do they like to clean it? And some of them say, oh yeah. And the parents go, ah.

And most of them say, well, no, not really. I said, does your mother, when she has to your father, when they have to wash the dishes, do they throw themselves on the floor kicking and screaming? No. I said, well, are they so happy to do housework? They say, please track in all those muddy shoes and everything so I can wash the floor. I just can't wait. I said, well, that's not, I said, so they like a clean house. They got to clean it. And if you like to play, you got to practice. They'll all tell you, I don't think I want to play anymore because I don't like to practice. And you say, no, wait a minute. You like to play,

don't you? Oh, well, yeah, I guess so. So it's a practicing that's a problem. So they need help with this. And so does, I said the parents, because parents are often not convinced that you have to have a very, be very convinced when you're raising your kids of things. And if you're not, that's what they hone in on.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. And it's sometimes emotionally exhausting to get our kids to practice if they're throwing themselves on the floor. So lots of empathy for that. But I think one of the things we talk about here all the time is just what is it really like to practice? And like you're saying, it's just hard work. Sometimes we might want the end result and love to play, but the hard work is just the hard work sometimes, and that doesn't mean we don't love it.

Eloise Hellyer:

Yeah. Well, there is one other thing I would say, and that is sometimes I tell parents all the time, I say, who does a little will play Sooner or later they'll play, okay, but who never, practices will never play. So don't feel guilty if your kids can't practice as much as you like to, or you can't get them to play as much as you like to. I've had kids who didn't practice for years. I mean, they did the minimal amounts. But this is the beauty of being old and having lots of experience, is that I have seen kids who seem stalled for years and then all of a sudden go through three books in one year, bang. Which if their parents had given up, they wouldn't have done. And if they hadn't had their violin hands off, if they'd started at that older age, they wouldn't have been able to do that. So it's very useful. Whatever you can do is fine. Okay. That's my attitude anyway. Not all teachers feel that way, but I like to keep people playing because I think it's important for reasons we'll go into later on.

Christine Goodner:

No, I agree with you there. And I've seen that too. I've seen that some spark and suddenly reading had a student say, why didn't I practice more? It's like, well, so many reasons, but I'm glad you're doing it now.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, it happened in my own family. I won't say which one, but someone took a very long time to get through book one, and then all of a sudden, by the time she was 10, from the two to eight, she was in book one. By the time she was 10, she was playing the B minor. She burned up. It was unbelievable how fast she went. She never would've done it if I hadn't. She was playing the piano really well, but the violin she didn't like all of a sudden one day.

Christine Goodner:

Thanks for sharing that. I think that's a good reminder that we just never know. Yeah,

Eloise Hellyer:

No, you don't. You never know. I had one other little girl, I shared this with you briefly. It was so hard to get her to practice. I had her for seven years I think. Okay. Then getting her to practice was absolute torture. And her mother is a fine musician, by the way, but we just hobbled along. But she was pretty far ahead because after all that time, I still managed to get her to do something. But she wasn't hot on practicing. She moves, her mother becomes a singer in a very famous opera house, and they moved to a very big, large Italian city, and she gets into the conservatory, which is hard to get into if you don't know anybody in that city in particular. And she did. And she found herself so far ahead of everybody else that she had to keep practicing to stay ahead. Well, guess what she's doing now? She won two different

positions in prestigious orchestras, two different ones. She's a chamber music player and she's a teacher in a prestigious school of chamber music. And guess what she got as a student? Another one of my students. So you don't know. You just don't know.

Christine Goodner:

In a related topic, I think sometimes when we are musicians who are adults, teachers ourselves, performers ourselves, we sometimes forget what it was like to practice as children. So I just wondered what you would say that it's important for teachers to know about how students practice that might be different from the way they do. If you have any thoughts on that?

Eloise Hellyer:

I think it's very important to remember that most of the young teachers that you see in teacher training are fresh out of conservatory. Okay. They're conditioning. They've been conditioned, they've been practicing longer than most doctors study to become doctors. They're highly motivated. They have been in conservatories, which are highly competitive. They've done all kinds of things. They graduate and guess what they got to teach. And so their tendency is to think that everyone does something for the same reason they do. In other words, why do you play music? Well, why would anyone want to play music if you don't want to be really good at it? And everybody has got a different reason for playing. And I think you're nodding. I think you agree with me on that one.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, of course.

Eloise Hellyer:

That we have to recognize that there are some really, really, I'll say it, talented kids who just really don't want to go that far with it. And that's okay. And some teachers get frustrated because they, oh, he's not the best he can be. Well, if they're good at music, they're usually good at something else too.

And we have to allow them to explore that. And so insisting that, yes, you're talented. Yes, you can do this. And I think we have to relax a little bit and let people come to us because I have found in my experience, the ones who want to take it seriously will let you know. They'll tell you. And it isn't their parents. You can tell. And they may not practice lots and lots and lots, but you can tell what there's something there that they want to do. And it might come out when they're three, might come out when they're four, as one of my students did. It might come out when they're 15.

Christine Goodner:

And you do talk about that in your book, which I love. But what would you share with people about some of the other reasons that you've experienced or heard that people might be interested? Not, I'm in lessons to become a professional violinist necessarily, or whichever instrument. But what are some of the other things that you would share people get into this for or get into music for?

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, first of all, they might just want contact with you if you stop and think about it. What kind of attention does a student get from an adult? Parents are interested. They don't count, but when they go to school, they're in a class of how many, they go to sports. They're in a team of how many they go to ballet class. They're how many kids in the class. They come to music lesson and they've got you, and

you're focused on them and you're interested in them. That is enough for some kids. They want that attention. And we'll say, well, they should be practicing. Well, fine. Sometimes they need that contact. Sometimes that's enough to keep them going. Not like we're trying to make them love us. It's not that. It's just, it's very interesting to a child to be interesting. Most people don't find kids interesting. They find them cute and they like them. I love kids, but I see all my students as people,

And it doesn't matter if they're three or they're 85, they just come in different packages. There's still people who need something from you. And so the best thing is, for me anyway, is to be available for that and to take them where they want to go and to help them realize what they want. Sometimes they have no idea what they want. They come, the parents don't know what they want. And you're coming there. And it is surprising because as a musician, you know what you want. Again, you assume everybody does. Lots of people they may know in other aspects, but not in the musical aspect. I think there's one story in the book, in one of the interviews that if you haven't seen it yet, (unclear), who was a famous quartet player in his day, said that he was a soloist in front of an orchestra, and he finished playing. And nonetheless, than the concert master, the orchestra said to him, oh, Manny, you're so lucky. You know what you want. And he said, what a peculiar thing to say. Doesn't everybody? And then he said, I started teaching and found out that they don't. So a lot of it is to help them discover what they want, but you help them. It's like giving birth. It's like being a, what's the word? Midwife. You help them give birth to something that's theirs.

At least that's how I see it.

Here are a couple of my takeaways from the first half of my conversation with Eloise Hellyer:

First: I was struck by what Eloise had to say about why she wanted her own children to learn the violin - that she was motivated to share with them something that was so important to her and wanted to have that, not to be professionals but to be proficient at it at least - I loved that.

I encourage you to think about what motivates you to support music in the lives of young musicians in your life. Is it similar?

2nd : Don't confuse not wanting to practice with not wanting to play. Practice is hard work sometimes, or just neutral work. I loved the comparison to wanting a clean house but not always wanting to do the cleaning up.

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