



Episode 69: Music as Self-Care with cellist Bianca d'Avila Do Prado

Christine Goodner:

Alright, everyone, thank you for being here. I'm excited today to be talking to Bianca and hopefully I'm saying your name. All right there, Bianca. I was trying my best, but thank you so much for being here. I've loved connecting with you in the different ways that we have a little bit in the Suzuki world in the online world, but it's a pleasure to speak with you today. So thanks for being here.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Thank you so much for the invitation. So lovely speaking with you.

Christine Goodner:

Likewise. So I'd like to start by asking people to just introduce yourself a little bit if you want to share about what you do in the world of music so listeners can get to know you.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Wonderful. So I'm, I'm a Brazilian cellist cello teacher and composer. I live in the Chicago area. I teach at the Music Institute of Chicago where I coordinate the Third Coast Suzuki Strings cello program and I teach both Suzuki and traditional students. I also have an online studio that I teach some private students and some students through the University of Idaho Prep Division. And I'm also involved in multiple projects that I try to combine my Latin American background and my knowledge of teaching to create materials and compose music to help diversify the repertoire that string students in the United States have access to.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I love that. We'll talk more about that in our conversation today, I hope, because what a wonderful project. First, I'd love to zoom back in time and just see if you could share a little bit about when did you first start playing the cello, if it was your first instrument or maybe something else was your first instrument, but how old were you and what do you remember about learning when you first started?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yeah, so I grew up, my dad plays guitar and sings. So I grew up hearing my dad play Brazilian Bassano songs, Beatles songs and all this kind of popular music. And so I always wanted to play. I loved singing since I was little, so I used to sing with my dad and I really wanted to learn to play an instrument, but my parents thought it was too early to start because in Brazil we didn't have teachers who could teach little kids. And then my dad thought, oh, guitar is a big instrument. They don't want her to start until she can't do because she's not strong enough little hands anyways. So after asking a lot about that, I remember the Christmas before I turned nine years old, I got my first guitar and then I started lessons and it was super fun. I loved doing that.

And then I was fortunate to go to a Lutheran school when I was growing up and the principal's daughter was a recorder player and she decided to start a little group music group at this school. And so mostly recorders and a few guitars. And I joined that group and that was my best experience throughout my school years was being part of this group. She was a wonderful loving teacher. She's my biggest inspiration as a teacher to this day. And I played guitar there for a few years and then I saw the recorders playing so many interesting things and I thought, I think I want to learn recorder. And also because I loved her, so I wanted to be her student. And then my mom said, well, you need to finish the school year and then next year we're going to switch to recorder if you would like.

And then that summer I went to a dollar store in Brazil and I bought a recorder. And so I started learning by myself and I played that summer a lot, four of my grandmas at my grandma's house. And probably that didn't sound very good, but that was really fun. And so when I got to my first recorder lesson, she already told me, okay, you can join the group because you already know what to play. So I kept taking recorder lessons and she was just an amazing teacher. And with this group, we used to go to a big encounter of all the Lutheran school music groups in my state would get together once a year. We have like 500 kids playing all sorts of instruments, like brass guitar, strings, recorders, every kind of instrument was welcome. And we would spend three days, we would have our little presentation group by group, and then in the end we'll play out together. And that was always amazing. And usually we had to travel, so that was fun too as a child going somewhere else, staying in a family's house. So it was super fun.

And then in one of these encounters I saw cello and I was like, oh my goodness, that sounds so pretty. That's what I want to play. I want to play cello. And then my mom, oh my goodness, one more thing. She keeps wanting to play. Then we couldn't find a teacher close to my house. It was expensive to get a cello. My mom even looked a little bit at that, but she thought it would be too hard at that point for us. So I didn't start until I was 15 years old when finally after insisting about that, and actually I remember I sat in a conversation, said, mom, that's what I want you to do. I want to be a cellist and I want that to be my job. I want to play the cello. And she was like, but you never touched the cello.

How do you know you want to do that for Plus in Brazil so hard making a living as a musician. She was like, you were so smart. You have good grades in school, you should go and do something. Anyways, I insisted. And then finally we found the teacher and then I was 15 years old, I was old enough to hop on the bus and travel for an hour to get to my first shell teacher. And then I finally started it and it was wonderful. It was a lot. I already wanted to go to college, so I was like, I need to practice. And that's when practice came to my life because up to there I played the recorder a lot because I really loved doing that. I never had this organization, oh, you've got to practice. I played all the time because I loved it. And then the cello, it was okay if I want to make it to my college audition in two and a half years, I need to really work hard.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, a different kind of practice. Yes, for sure. Yeah. What a journey to get to the cello.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

I know

Christine Goodner:

I love everything about that and the finding the dollar store recorder. And I know sometimes parents cringe. I see posts online that it's like, oh no, there's a recorder class at school right now and my child's bringing home a recorder. And there's all the jokes that come with that, but it can be a very practical way though to get music in a kid's hands and get them excited about making music in some way that it doesn't have to be recorder forever. And there's also beautiful classical recorders.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

It's wonderful

Christine Goodner:

That I didn't even realize existed.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, it is. It's wonderful. And I had so much joy playing recorder. I have wonder sometimes I think I should get my recorder again and go back playing because it was just so fun playing. And I had this wonderful teacher, so we were good recorded players. It was a very nice group. We were super, we sounded beautiful playing recorders of course in the beginning. And I learning as in every instrument, you don't sound that great, but with time she did a good job. And then actually my first job as a music teacher was as a recorder player before I played cello because this wonderful teacher graduated from law school and decided she was not going to teach anymore, and I was her more advanced student. So when I was in high school, she invited me to teach the younger students if I could teach some of them. So I started teaching music before I started playing cello, which is kind of interesting.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, interesting. Yeah, I love that. I'm destined to be a teacher, it sounds like.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

I know. Yes.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I can relate to that. So when you got to the cello and you had just a couple years to get ready for a college audition, that's an ambitious goal. What do you remember about practice at that time? It sounds like it had to become more serious. Of course. What do you remember being hard about that? And also was there anything that you remember liking about that?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes. I mean, every time I could get my cell and make a sound was just like a gift because when you wait for so long to do something, every time you do it, you just really treasure it. Actually. It's so good talking about that. I think with time you tend to forget about that, but it was so just special. I remember putting

my cello on my back and walking with that big cello and thinking, super proud thinking, oh my goodness, that's so cool that I finally got to play the cello. I think the memories I have, I was just thinking about that before our conversation. There's many things I don't really remember about that time, but I remember coming from school and okay, I got to practice and being really serious about that, about that, and I had a good consistency about practicing, but I also used to work hard, and so I developed a lot of tension in the beginning because I had that kind of pressure on myself that I needed to make to the audition. And that was not a very healthy way to start, I think. But well, it was necessary at that time, at some point. I mean, then later I learned a lot and trying to do better to my students so they don't develop this kind of anxiety and also tension.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, that's a lot of pressure to put on yourself in a way.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. When we were thinking about what to talk about today, one thing you wanted to mention was what motivated you when you were a young musician? I wondered if you could say more about that. We've touched on it a little bit.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, definitely. My teacher, Patricia, she was just so loving. And also she was my second grade teacher, but I remember that as a second grade teacher, she was like, we would sing songs and make everything about music, and she was just so loving and we all felt like she really wanted us to be there. And that community we had as recorder players and we would do get together to practice on the weekends and all the traveling and those things. Really, I wanted to be with those people, and I really felt like that was my game. And so she's so wonderful. She never forgets my birthday. She sends me to this day a message on my WhatsApp every year on my birthday. And I remembered hers this year. Sometimes we forget, I don't remember every year, but I think mostly having a teacher that was very much loving and that I felt like no matter what, she knew how to read. The students of course, we're not doing wonderfully every day, but she knew how to get you from the point where you are and you were, and do the best you could do that day in that lesson, in that rehearse.

Christine Goodner:

Well, that's very special. Yeah. And a good reminder how important the relationship with our teacher is. Yeah.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes,

Christine Goodner:

Definitely. And how we feel, and just the social, I've read a lot about the social component and how motivating it is to be in an environment where it matters that you're there and people

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Are

Christine Goodner:

Caring about you and not just about what you produce, but as a person, I think that's so special.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Except it really,

Christine Goodner:

I'm glad you talked about that. Thanks. Well, I think why don't we pivot a little bit to our current day and thinking about, I want to make sure we talk about your project working with students and diversifying music. We were both at the Asta American String Teachers Association conference last year, and I know I believe one of your pieces was premiered there. If I'm remembering correctly, maybe you can just tell us a little bit about your passion for that project and anything you want to share about it.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

I know that's very interesting too. So like you said before about how my teaching path was, I went to college for performance and I came here to study a master's in performance, and I never really studied composition, but it happened. So I think it's very important to be open for all the, there's so many ways you can express yourself as a musician and you really, sometimes some surprises happen. So I came here to study my master's in performance at Illinois State. It was a wonderful experience. And then there was this call for scores for the Mosaic collection. And then one of my professors, Dr. Kate Lewis, tagged me on a Facebook post and I was, oh, let me send that to my friends who are composers. And then the next day I was like, well, I should look that up. Okay, this is okay. They need a beginner's piece.

I was at that time living in Idaho, and I was teaching beginner's orchestra, so I was like, I did my best to learn some bass so I could help, because I never went to music ads, so I didn't really learn all the other methods, just so, but I was the closest to a bass teacher in town, so I picked up the bass and learned a little bit so I could help the children better. And I was, well, this is a beginner piece. It's like black or Latino composers. And I was, well, I grew up in Brazil, so I know Brazilian music, and I have these students in front of me that are the people they want me to write a piece for, I'll try. I'll give it a try. And then I composed my first piece, Brazilian habanero. So one minute 0.5 grades, piece four strengths.

And it was wonderful. It worked out. It was published in then Jose Collection, and it's a super fun piece. I mean, it was like, I really didn't know I would be able to compose music at that point. And that was my first try. And one thing that was very special about that, we would play that in Yorkton, Idaho, and it was so much fun to connect with the kids and to see how much joy they could have playing my music. It was something I never expected to experience, and it's been so great experience to be connected to those were playing my music. And so that was how it all started. And then after that, they asked me to, they commissioned me to compose a piece for the cello Repertoire consortium, and then they wrote my first cello suite that has five movements all inspired in Latin American music.

And it's more like a grade book, three, four level, so a little bit more advanced. And again, each movement is a Latin American rhythm or style. And I just put their, well, for the first piece, I'd say that composers, sometimes they have a hard time knowing what kids can do, especially what they can't at that level. So I had them in front of me. I knew, okay, it needs to be very simple so they can play and have fun with it. And then in this other piece, since it was for intermediate students, I try to incorporate

things that, again, I have that kind of students, I see them every week, so it's not very hard for me doing that part of being level appropriate. I try to put some things that I taught that are not in the Suzuki books at that level, but they can use for orchestra transition from PIKA to Oracle, those kinds of things.

And sometimes I see they need a little reinforcement and also some little prep exercise that can help them playing through book four pieces. And this is wonderful experience too. I ended up writing a second cello part, and then they play at the Intermountain Nstitute of Sex. I was so thrilled that I could, again, connect on Zoom with the students and talk about the piece and hear them play and see the difference that when you just talk a little bit about your ideas as a composer, how it changes the way they play the piece. It was just super magical. And they were super excited to see the composer and to know the composer. And this is something that's very important for me too, because I didn't grow up playing music from female composers. I didn't know a female composer, so maybe that's why I never thought I could do it, because I just, so I'm representing that maybe some Latino girls see me and they'll say, oh, I might be a composer too. See that it's something that is possible and that real people like me can write music.

Christine Goodner:

I think it's so important for us to see someone who we identify with that's doing something we never thought we could do before. It just really opens up possibilities for anyone, but especially I think for young kids. So it doesn't just feel like, I feel like when I grew up, I only heard about male composers that I remember, so I just felt like, oh, that's something that men do, not me much less from different cultures. I don't have that same experience as you and many others where even my cultural music, I'm not seeing. So what an important thing

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

I know, and I love doing that. And then I entered this new canon project, which was very great. That's why I premiered at the conference. And with that, it was really nice. They connected me with a mentor. So it was the first time I had a chance to work with someone, because before I was just doing from my own experience, but I never had a professional composer that was guiding me. So I connected with Nicholas Reto, wonderful Argentinian board, American composer, Argentinian born American composer, and he is just wonderful, so patient. And he came to the Midwest Conference and we met in person. He lives in la, we're doing an ultra Zoom, and he is been such a good, helping me with other things, not just writing music. Then how do you manage that? How do you work with signing contracts and all this? It's a different world from the teaching world.

So it's been a very wonderful experience working with him. And actually now he invited me to be part of a new project that's coming up next year. I can talk much about that, but it's in that same idea of diversifying the repertoire for strings. So I'm very excited to be part of this new project with him. And then also, I was connected because of the composition part with the resonance team, which is something I'm also very excited about. That is our now new Cello method, multicultural cello method. So we did a really good research to find pieces from many different cultures and sequence them in a pedagogical way. This book hopefully is coming this fall. We've been working hard on that. Hillary Land is coordinating everything, and Laura uses King, wonderful challenges, recorder all the pieces of the book, and so hopefully soon it'll be out. So I'm very excited about that too.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. Oh, I hope I'll keep an eye out for that. I would love to share that with listeners when that comes out. Do you have ways that people could find your music? Say there's a teacher listening or a program or a festival or institute, how can people find your music if they would like to play it?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yeah, I have on my website, some of the pieces are on music direct, or you don't even know.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. We can connect and share links after our interview,

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes. Okay.

Christine Goodner:

Yes.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

But connecting to my Instagram. You can see I'm always posting things about all the materials and linking things there to learn more. And also on my website. And yeah, I'm always trying to share all the things that I've been doing. Okay.

Christine Goodner:

We'll make sure people have a way to connect with you with that, because I think, yeah, all, well, most people I know are want to diversify the repertoire they are teaching and exposing students to and giving them experience with. And wonderful that there's a living composer that I think that's exciting for students too. I know that maybe there's a way to connect like that. So yeah,

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

I know. And I love connecting. That's something, it's just such a great joy when I get the chance to speak with the students and hear them play my music. And here at the MIC Academy, they're going to play my, I'm going to a rehearsal next week, so I'm super excited to see what they think about the, and so yeah, I love all those opportunities. When I can't go and speak with students, that's so such a magical thing. Seeing my music come to life through different students, and it sounds different depending on who's playing and what's their background, what's their glo. And so it's just so magical to see so many ways your music can, so many people are music and rich in so many ways it can sound, and then you keep learning more about your own music through them.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. It sounds like you get as much out of that as they do probably.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, I do.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's wonderful. It's a good reminder if we're a parent listening, a family listening, a teacher listening of just thinking about how do we help get kids excited about music? And I know you've probably seen it. There's a video going around right now about an astronaut playing the violin in space that I share that in group classes and just everybody was so excited. I think sometimes we get into our little box of here's what I always do, or here's what I always teach to my students. And I think opening that box up a bit and just showing students what's possible and who's alive now doing exciting things in music, that gets me excited. And I see the students really respond to that.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, that's true.

Christine Goodner:

You're also, I know working to provide bilingual cello lessons and programming to students, and I'd love to hear about your project that you're working on with that as well.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yeah, this project's a real, I'm so honored to be part of it. So after I graduated my master's, I went to Idaho. I lived there for a year, and it was a wonderful experience. Built a very beautiful big cell studio there in Sandpoint, a whole wonderful community there. But Illinois was home for me because I studied here, had so many friends, and I connected with Telecare about training when I did my book five online with her. And then she offered me, if you ever need a letter or something for a visa, and I was applying for a visa at that point, and she gave me the letter, and when Visa came, I wrote her, thank you so much for a letter. It worked out. And she was like, would you like to go back to Chicago like that? There's an opportunity to start a program.

They need a Suzuki teacher who is bilingual, who can speak Spanish, English, and they speak Portuguese, of course, to work with this wonderful project. And I was like, oh, wow. Yeah, I would love to learn more about that. And then in less than a month, I was back here in Chicago to start the program. I mean, they already had it going, so they already had the families recruited, they had the instruments. So I just got here to really get the lessons started. It's a wonderful program. We started with 15 students. We have about 30 now, and we want to keep expanding that. All the students get tuition free lessons. They get to be part of the music of Chicago Suzuki program, so they have access to everything. Any Suzuki student in our school has, they all got Catholic private lessons and group classes, and they're just forming such a beautiful community of cello players.

Most of the children have, their English is better than mine. They were born here. They're great, but some families really need that help. I have family from Chile. The mom doesn't speak much English, so I teach the child in English, so she knows how to work with him at home. So it's been a really lovely experience working with these families. They get instruments, supplies, everything. William Harrison Lee, wonderful. Get low instruments, really good instruments for everyone. And so yeah, it's been super nice and they have built a beautiful community. We had a picnic this summer. It was super fun. The parents organized it, so we went to a park, we played for a few minutes, and then they went to the playground. We had amazing Mexican food and all the food that the parents brought, and it was just so special to see those kids. And I had no idea before I moved to the United States, because in Brazil, Suzuki education is not as big.

It's growing a little bit, but it's not as big. But I had no idea before I moved here how expensive it can be to be part of a program like that. And so giving these kids that would not have the means to afford doing this kind of work and seeing them playing and joining the school as part of the music instead of Chicago

is just a very beautiful experience. I'm so honored to witness that, to work, coordinating that and trying to grow our program the best as we can, but keeping everyone engaged and happy about playing the cello the most important thing.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, what a gift. I think it's so important that more students have the opportunity to play any instrument. It doesn't have to be violin like me or cello like you, but it can just add so much to our lives. Yeah,

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Just making music.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah,

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

If somebody's near you and wants to get involved, do you know how is it possible to support that program?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

So the music suit of Chicago is a nonprofit, and we have, for this program, we get some grants every year, and we have our board of trustees making donations, but we're always counting on donations from anyone in the community can just go to the music institute of Chicago websites.org, I think it is, and find more ways to donate. We have a big gala every year where we get lots of our funding, not just for my program, but there's a violin program in Southern Chicago that is also third calls, the same idea. It's a little smaller, but still there. It's been there for a few years. We also provide lots of scholarships for students who can pay just 50% of their tuition or something like that.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, yeah. Thanks. I think it's important to talk about, and also if we feel like called and led to support something like that, to look in your own community and see where is this happening and can I help it grow in some way, whether it's time or encouragement or finances if we can. I think supporting that in our community is so important.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yeah, that is very important.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Well, I wonder if we think about the current day, I am sure you're doing your own practice in addition to your composing. What would you say you're thinking about in your own practice these days? What's something that keeps you motivated currently?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

So you asked me about that, and I kept thinking this week, and I think that's really what came very strong to me because it's part of my life right now at this moment, is just, especially for teachers, have practice as part of your self-care routine. It is so important to be in touch with your instrument. And it's so easy to, you never miss a lesson. You need to teach. You never miss an appointment you have, but it's so easy to miss your own practice. So my parents were here for three weeks, which was wonderful, but I was totally devoted to be with them. And then when they left, I was now, okay, now it's new year. I need to start doing better for myself. I saw my mom as a very good example. She works out an exercise that I was not doing anything. I'm turning 40 next year, so I need to start taking care of myself.

And so I started, okay, I'll wake up really early in the morning. I'll take a walk. I saw your walking pictures this morning. They're so pretty. Yes, it's delightful. The weather right now to go for walks. So I've been going for walks and then I'll come home and practice. So I put that on my schedule as part of, so the same as teaching it's practice. Is there my best to honor that time because it's super easy to honor everything else, everything else in your schedule, but not your practice time. And that's really the opportunity where you can check in with your body, nurture your beautiful tone, and get ready to be a good teacher, to be a good role model for students. And so I think that's what, it's been very strongly with me in this new school year, and it's easy. Another thing I did this year that I'm really proud of is that I scheduled some breaks on my teaching because last year I didn't have a full studio, so they kept giving more students, and then I kept filling the times, and by the end, they didn't have time, any breaks on my teaching.

And so I also put on my schedule, little breaks in between lessons. And so I think that's going to be a much smoother school year, even with a lot of students. I have a very full studio, but really trying to take care of myself and to keeping up with my own playing as well. Not just practice, but really getting to play my cello every day.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I like that you called it, because I think sometimes we can think of it as work, and it sits there on our schedule, but we're like, oh, here's this big thing that is going to be hard or frustrating or work. And I think if we think of it as like, oh, I'm taking care of myself through my practice, that gives it a different feel to me. I like that.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Of course. And in the beginning, of course, it feels like, okay, I have to go. But I think as we encourage our students every week when we teach them, if we keep doing and stick with it, it's going to be more and more pleasant with time, just part of what it is. You play your cello every day. So yeah, just trying to do yourself what you tell your students. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

And I think our mental attitude about it makes a big difference. There was a interview I did with Amy Beth Horman, who's a fabulous cello teacher, or excuse me, violin teacher. And she was talking about how every time she puts the violin on her shoulders, she thinks of having gratitude for the time with her violin and how she tells her students, if you don't feel like you can do that, then put it down and do something else related to your music, but only put your instrument into the playing position with a feeling of like, oh, I'm grateful to be doing this.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. I love that. I think that switch is so helpful because sometimes like you as a teenager with, okay, I'm going to audition in a few years for the cello scholarship or entrance into college, we can be very tense and very forcing. And I think the long-term, long, big picture of practicing is how do we feel grateful to have the time with our instrument?

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Yes, absolutely.

Christine Goodner:

And how do we foster that? Yeah. If we're parents, how do we foster that for our kids? Yeah. Well, thank you so much for coming on and speaking with me. I am looking forward to hearing your music out in the world and for people to check out your music. And we'll be sure to share a link to your website and your Instagram account so that listeners can connect with you. But I so appreciate your time. I so appreciate hearing your perspective and your journey as a musician. What a beautiful journey to where you are now.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Thank you so much. Thank you. Oh my goodness. I'm a big fan, so I am so honored to be speaking with you. It's so great, and I love everything you do and following your social media and everything. It's such a great inspiration for all of us, teachers and parents, and I'm sure students. So thank you for doing that.

Christine Goodner:

Well, thank you. Yeah, pleasure is mine to speak with you today. Thank you so much.

Bianca d'Avila Do Prado :

Thank you.

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