



Episode 71: Collaboration between studio teachers & Orchestra Directors with Stephanie Hellekson

Christine Goodner:

Alright, well welcome everyone. I'm excited today to be here with Stephanie Hellekson. We're going to tackle the topic today of working collaboratively as private studio teachers or private lesson teachers, and then also an orchestra or ensemble director slash teacher. And I think if you're a parent who's listening to this caregiver, someone who supports a young person in practice, sometimes we can be the one stuck in the middle and we're hearing one thing from one teacher and another from another. And we'll try to weave that in as well. Just how do we navigate maybe hearing two different approaches or two different requirements from two different teachers And we're trying to help our child navigate through in a healthy way. So it's a big topic. We know we're not going to cover every possible way to address it, but we hope we give some good food for thought and share our perspectives. And I'd love to start off, Stephanie, by you just sharing a little bit of who you are and what you do in the world of music.

Stephanie Hellekson:

So I teach currently at a public school in Seattle. I teach fourth through eighth grade orchestra. And it is required that kids take orchestra in fourth and fifth grade in my school. Pretty unique and families seek that out about the school that I go to. So I feel super fortunate and I've been teaching that age level for 18 years. This is my 18th year. I also have taught youth symphonies in Gig Harbor Washington. And then I currently am a director of Youth Symphony in Bellevue, Bellevue Symphony. And I play violin professionally and have taught private studio violin as well. So you kind of have the whole thing.

Christine Goodner:

I'm excited to have you join this conversation from that perspective. And fun fact, Stephanie and I are related, we're cousins and we grew up going on vacations sometimes and bringing our instruments out together and having musical memories together growing up. So that's a special relationship we have too.

Stephanie Hellekson:

And whenever people are like, how did you start the violin? I said, well, my cousin Christine really was so awesome. And I was like, I had to play the violin because of you.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. And we're only a few years apart, I'm sure. I was not playing anything awe inspiring from my perspective now when you saw me play, but I love that

Stephanie Hellekson:

A mean twinkle.

Christine Goodner:

That's right. Probably. Yeah. Alright, well it's such a pleasure to have you here and to shop like this together.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, I'm excited.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, me too. And the prompting for this episode in particular is a question that somebody submitted to me and asked me to address, and I think I'm just going to read it the way it was submitted to me. So a question that was submitted to me as a request to talk about was, could I please talk about the private teacher versus orchestra teacher and the issue of too many cooks in the kitchen. And I think unfortunately sometimes it's this dynamic is set up as us against them. And I think knowing the person who submitted this, probably just very frustrated by some situations in which they felt not heard or acknowledged or listened to. And I think I want to set the tone for our conversation to say we both would like to have it feel like a collaborative relationship and not feel like we're pitted against each other. That's the ideal world. Although sometimes we're all put in conversations or in a situations like that. And also that I think we just want to acknowledge this is a tricky topic and we hopefully want to all come from the place of respecting our colleagues and maybe being curious about where they're coming from rather than feeling we can assume what their intentions are or what their perspective is because I think sometimes that solves a lot of problems or helps. So anyway, I just wanted to say that before we dive in, Stephanie.

Stephanie Hellekson:

No, I think that's when we first started thinking about this, I was like, yeah, because initially, and we've all been in that spot where we're confused or I don't know, feel maybe sideswiped by something that happened with a student or in the classroom. If something happens in a classroom and I have 40 kids, I'm like, oh my god, that can derail so fast. And so we've all had that, but really if we kind of think of it as a triangle of the orchestra teacher, the private teacher, the youth symphony as all kind of just working together, I think that that can solve a lot of, I don't know. Yeah. Like you said, it can help us be curious, the famous Ted lasso quote, if we start there of being curious, that's maybe a really healthy place to be if we can talk ourselves out of the initial rage, what just happened.

Christine Goodner:

And so to set things up today, I thought maybe you could start by sharing just some of your overall thoughts. And then I just thought of, especially with a colleague too, just some ideas of what have we encountered as private music teachers and how some sticky issues, I guess that come up and then maybe we could think of how one might navigate those and we'll jump in there.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Sure, sure. I mean, I would say a third of my students are on private lessons

Maximum. And so I think just knowing that my tendency is to leave the kiddos with private teachers alone in terms of technique, but one of the things I do love doing is if I notice something is a little off vibrato or I'm like, what is happening there? Or bow hold, or why are they playing super slouched down a middle school? They'd love to do that in the orchestra classroom in chairs. And so I always start, what is your, definitely not in the whole group. And I know that that is not always the case for some teachers, but hey, what does your private teacher say about your bow hold? Show me your best bow hold. And then just in lessons, things kind of seem to like, oh, that's the one we should be playing with. And if it doesn't correct itself in a way that I would say I try for 75% happy with, then I'm kind of like, Hmm, what's going on there? And then it's like, do I know this teacher? Have I worked with them before? Do I have other students that, oh, they all have that same bow hold? I'm like, oh, okay, well that's the way they're teaching bow hold. And this is the way I'm teaching bow hold into a class of 40, which is hard. It's really hard to do both things privately and as a group.

Christine Goodner:

Well, and hats off from my perspective on anyone teaching bow holds to 40 students or adjusting bow holds or 40 students at once. So I think trying to think of, that's a good example of maybe a teacher has a certain technique that they're like, this is a hill I would die on. I want the technique to look this way. And then from an orchestra teacher's perspective, oh, there's going to be a test on this and it needs to look this other way. I don't know how you navigate that.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, I mean I guess just try to, it helps me if I have other kids with that private teacher and it's behold if they're getting a decent sound for the group, then it is not a hill that I'm going to die on and it might be for another student. So I just let that one, I let a lot of things be like, does the kids sound okay for this? I mean, this is middle school orchestra, I'm not. And I send my students to Roosevelt High School and they're winning award after award. And so I'm like, I kind of try to keep that perspective of this is what's best for the kid right now. And if it's going to knock off their points on their playing test, I stick to a rubric of bow hold, seems tense, causing a sound that is not ideal. And then if a teacher has an issue with it, they can of course always talk to me, but I try to have it marked down on a rubric so it's really, really clear and written down so that the parent and the teacher, if they need to see what's going on, why they were graded down.

But it can be hard. It can be like, oh,

Christine Goodner:

It's so hard. I was thinking that too. I mean that is hard. And I think I also have had the experience where someone, my student might say, or I've worked with in a summer camp, oh, the teacher says this is the right behold. And then I show the teacher a picture and they're like, what? No, of course I've told them to bend their thumb or whatever.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Well, and that's the thing, it's some preschool teacher was like, I'll believe half of what your kid says about you if you believe half of what they say about me. I think I also kind of have that in the back of my mind too, of a middle schooler. I mean, this happened to me just last summer where, and this is a colleague that I know and I work with and they're like, this kid said this about you. And I was like, oh, interesting. She does have to read her notes. It is actually a requirement. She can't just guess, but that's what she told her private. Oh, Ms. Stephanie never tells me to sit up straight. And I was like, literally every day I tell you to sit up straight. So it's those things where you're like,

Christine Goodner:

And I think this is a point we both agreed beforehand, we want to weave in. It's like communication is so key because it can feel not great to be misrepresented to the orchestra teacher by your student and vice versa. And it gets, I don't know, feelings can be hurt or it can make us feel riled up. And sometimes just having a conversation and reaching out and saying, Hey, can we talk about this? I think that can solve a lot of angst.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, totally. And I love when teachers will reach out. Even in this situation, I was like, I can't believe. But then I'm like, oh, but this kid I kind of can. And the orchestra teacher just from that perspective really does try to get to know kids pretty well because if you're thinking, okay, I have 12 first violins who can sit with who and who's a good role model and who's going to spur each other on and who absolutely can't sit next to each other, there's a lot of that going on. So we do really know the kids fairly well, but I love when a teacher will reach out and be like, Hey, this is something that I am working on with this student, will you help me with that? I've done that with teachers or parents are like, oh my gosh, their wrist is so flat and lessons and their teacher just keeps saying, oh. And I was like, oh, well on the test I can just write a little note. I'd be happy to help with that because I think it benefits everybody.

Christine Goodner:

And yeah, I think if we can support each other's work with let's help this student along

Stephanie Hellekson:

To

Christine Goodner:

Work on this thing that they're working on, I think it's really nice to have backup for that and not just feel like we're the only one saying it to the student. So that's where the relationship between us can be really beneficial. One person when they heard I was talking about this, asked how to reach out, how to stay in contact with the orchestra teacher, what's the best way to do that? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Stephanie Hellekson:

I do. One, please don't get mad if we forget or don't respond because I have a hundred and I teach at a small school. I have 120 kids and then youth symphony another 60. And so sometimes stuff that's like, Hey, so-and-so's teacher can get a little bit lost in the fray of you didn't do your five oh fours and your IEPs and you have this meeting. So it's definitely like it's not a fire to put out, Hey, I have these students.

I always love to know the private teachers in the area if I don't, because I have a lot of parents that want their kids in lessons and they don't know how to go about it or they need two or three names and if I have two or three names in that neighborhood, so that's the other thing. Yeah, email is good. Or sending a note with the student sometimes is really nice of, Hey, we're working on this. We have a recital coming up. If there's time, maybe they could play their song. I love when kids can play their songs in my class. It really inspires the other students. That's a good way to reach out. Probably not through the parent. I don't usually want to hear from parents about a private teacher. I'd rather hear from the private teacher directly.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. Yeah. It becomes kind of a game of telephone too, I think in a way. Yeah.

Stephanie Hellekson:

But no, in the violin case is probably the most effective for little kiddos. I had that with a harp student actually, I don't know how to buy harp strings and I need them. And it was like, I've tried your email. I don't know if this is right here, call me please. And that's in my backpack right now to do actually before we go back on Monday.

Christine Goodner:

Okay. That's a really good tip. Actually. I wouldn't have thought of that. So yeah, thanks. Because I think if we keep saying that communication is key, it's like, okay, and then how do we

Stephanie Hellekson:

Go

Christine Goodner:

About that? So I hear what you're saying is you might read that email about, hey, so-and-so's teacher, but responding might be the low on the fire to put out list.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Totally. Well, and the other thing that, because a violinist by nature, but I've played the cello since college, so about, I don't know, 20 years, that's a long time. So I'm a mediocre high school cellist and I can get my way around fingering this for some harder stuff up to fourth, fifth position. I can position all of that, but I really love it when a cello teacher will put in fingerings for their student, then I can share them. And I have on hard songs, I have a file of this person's fingerings, this person's fingerings, this person's fingerings. And that's another spot to be like, hey, the kid can be like, Hey, my teacher wrote in these fingerings, can I use these? Should I use these? And generally I'm like, whatever fingerings you want to use. If it's in tune and it works and I don't hear the shift is great. That's a tricky one. So we can talk about that in another question, but that's another spot that communication with the teacher is sometimes fun. Oh, who's your teacher? Do you like them? What do you lesson? That kind of stuff.

Christine Goodner:

Okay. Yeah, I think there's a lot of things, some of the things we were thinking about that come up and you can maybe just decide if there's any of these you want to talk about or not, but having fingertape are not and that you realize for those of you listening who are not string players, some of this very string

as a private teacher we'll be trying to work on a certain skill or we might be holding off on a certain skill because we're like, I want to see this other thing solidify a little bit, but then it's coming up in orchestra and it gets a little sticky. Maybe I'll to stop there. I think you might have something to say. Yeah,

Stephanie Hellekson:

No, I think that that's a good, I mean Finger tapes or no finger tapes. If the kid, I mean I start finger tapes with my, because I'm teaching 34th graders, so I start with Finger tapes and this year I started doing color coded finger tapes. This particular class is a little bit of a hurricane, and so I was like, I need a color. First finger is red. Once they've seventh grade, eighth grade, we start considering taking them off or earlier, depending on the kiddo and how in tune they play. But teacher, if a private teacher took off the kid's tape, say they're in fifth grade, they've been playing for four years, and I'm never going to be like, where are your tapes? It's just like the kid's playing in tune. I just kind of trust that the teacher or vice versa, A kid might come in and be like, my tape fell off and my lesson is tomorrow and I don't know, then I'll put it on. But I'm like, does your teacher want me to put them on? I kind of try to ask a lot of questions.

Christine Goodner:

Sure, sure. No, I think you have a very balanced approach. It sounds like that. I heard of a kind of extreme case where the family had to have two violins, one with tapes, one without, because each teacher was so at odds with their thought process about that. And that's a stressful place to be as a parent. I will say if you're a parent listening and you get caught in the middle on something like that,

Stephanie Hellekson:

That sounds really hard. I

Christine Goodner:

Agree.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, don't a tricky, I don't know what to say about that. That's a lot of questions, right?

Christine Goodner:

And I think well, hats off to a parent who's willing to do that to just kind of help their child through. I think just in thinking this over and talking to other colleagues about it too, just how do we help our child, especially if maybe rigidity is one way. I'll put that between

Stephanie Hellekson:

Different

Christine Goodner:

Ideas. How do we help child? We might have to think about how do I help my child make the best of a situation where,

Stephanie Hellekson:

And to really not try to take on that pitting one teacher against the other. I think that that kind of puts that kid in that spot. I did have a violin teacher who, I mean this kid played great, great technique, loved everything about this kid and the teacher, but tuned to 4 42 and we tuned to four 40 in orchestra. And so it was just a lot of tuning for that kiddo. But it was fine. And that was one thing that I'm like, I can't tune my whole orchestra out of 4 42 for one kid.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. And I guess that brings me to one of the points that I've thought of as a private teacher myself and working with children who are in an orchestra situation is sometimes it's also okay to be like, this is the orchestra bow holds. And maybe not you personally, Stephanie, but some teachers who are like, your finger has to be at this angle Exactly kind of a thing. Versus the private teacher who might disagree. It might be like, I think we can adapt a little bit and be like, okay, an orchestra, you might have to adjust this bow hold a little bit

Stephanie Hellekson:

And

Christine Goodner:

How do we compromise that way too?

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, and that's definitely something that I've talked about with private students that have come and they're like, well, this teacher really wants this. I was like, well, then that's what they want. And you're learning a new skill and you're learning how to change skills in that moment. And that's okay. That's an okay skill to have to be, my teacher says, play this more on the string and in orchestra, the orchestra's playing it more off the string. And that's reality. You do have to be able to do it all. But what you were talking about, about if holding off on a skill and then it comes up in orchestra, I think that that is probably one of the most common

Things of like, oh no, now I have to talk about third position because the class working on shifting or the first have a spot and they're the only kids that have that shift. And then it's like, well, I wasn't planning on doing that yet because their wrist was still like this, but I've just seen it work out year after year after year after year of kiddos that are like, oh, that's why my wrist has to be straight. And it's a little safer to practice shifting with everybody who's practicing shifting and sounding bad. You have everybody that's trying to get somewhere where they don't know where they're going and everybody's making the same mistakes and it maybe safety and numbers. And so I think it all kind of works out, but it is a little bit jarring sometimes to get that new skill of like, oh no, I wasn't ready to, but now I have to.

But I guess maybe just if that's a place that anybody has been in, just know that the orchestra teacher knows that they know it's a push or they know that it's a new skill or I know Suzuki doesn't start adding flats for a long time and that's just not reality for middle school. If they're going to start playing with the band, if they have to play lift every voice and sing for the Martin Luther King assembly, that is three flats and it's in six eight and there's a key change and that's the easiest version, and so that's what they're going to play. But we know it's a stretch, but at some point, training wheels have to come off.

Christine Goodner:

Right. Well, yeah, no, I think that's a helpful perspective. And I think as a teacher, if it's a little bit of a stretch, we were going to do this in six months anyway, then I can sort of roll up my sleeves and be like, this is exciting. You get to do this ahead of when we're going to, but you'll be ready when I'm going to introduce this piece where I was going to teach you. And I think I've heard maybe there's some states that have very competitive high school

Orchestra situations where maybe a student only learn first position, but suddenly it's like you're going to be playing in fifth position for this piece. And it's not a little stress. I feel like they need years of skills. This is not me now, but just stories I hear from colleagues and feeling like, wow, this is so ahead of what my student I would like them to be working on because I feel like maybe they're going to injure themselves working so hard. So I realize this is not your day-to-day situation either. But I guess I just want to acknowledge too, from that conversation we're just having is like, oh, it's a little bit of a stretch. I think we can see that, oh, okay, we're all stretching together if it feels like overwhelming or I'm going to hurt myself. I can see how that stresses out teachers.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Oh, 100%.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah.

Stephanie Hellekson:

And I think that for a long time there's been that push for orchestra teachers, Washington state and Oregon State are not like this in terms, but I have heard this too. Or there are some teachers that I will sit in a competition and I'll hear orchestra after orchestra, and I'm like, who? That one was a stretch. And I just, I'm not in the mentality of that much of a stretch is appropriate and that's a whole nother conversation. But I think if we can kind of sight read through something, it might be ready in six weeks. I try not to be pulling stuff out of the hat that it's just not going to work for the group. But sometimes that happens.

Christine Goodner:

And I think I just want to acknowledge for those of you listening who might be in that kind of a situation that's a little beyond what we're talking about here and even our own studios and programs for us to even address, but we know it's an issue

Stephanie Hellekson:

And it's hard. And it can be one of those things where you're like, yeah, this is hard and take breaks, and that's how we can address how to practice or what not to do. Or is it possible to play that down in octave? What does your teacher think? Or we turn those 16th notes into notes for think that oftentimes I'm giving simplification for some stuff for kiddos that maybe they're an eighth grade orchestra, but they started a year ago. I don't expect them to play a page of 16th ounce. So giving them simplification and options is always good.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, no, I think it's, again, such a big topic and everybody's situation is going to be so different. One thing I wanted to address for sure is we're talking a lot about collaboration and I think in a way maybe

people where they are being careful to stretch students but not beyond what they're capable of and all of this. And I think some people are going to be in a situation we're just alluding to where maybe they want to reach out to the orchestra teacher, but it's not reciprocal that we're going to collaborate now or vice versa. Maybe the orchestra teacher wants to reach out to a private teacher and get on the same page or support each other and they're just not getting a response. So do you have any advice for that situation? I know many people face that.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, I think one, and I try not to put the kiddo in the middle of this, but I think I always would recommend starting with questions. Okay, so what are you working on in your lesson right now? What was your last recital piece? Or do you have a recording of your last resettle piece? Or could you play it for me? That gives, if we're talking about if we're using what's the level, appropriate level that gives a good, oh yeah, they just aren't ready for, they aren't ready for that. And that can give me a different perspective. Asking the kiddo questions without trying to be pointed is a really good way. And then you can be like, oh yeah, we're not going to see eye to eye and then just let it go. And I think the hardest thing is to just be like, or with seating, we talked a little bit about I don't seat based on ability.

I see it based on principal seating. So ability and leadership, they have to apply, they have to audition for their tests, they're playing tests or they have to say, then I'm auditioning for principal seating. And then from there, I don't see it for second, third, fourth, fifth chair. I see it based on a variety of factors. And I think that a teacher, they see their kids sitting all the way in the back. That can be some feelings coming up about what, what's happening. And so, Hey, how does your teacher see? Or how did your last test go? And just asking the teacher I think is okay, but if the teacher and you have different ideas on how things should be like, there really needs to be an eighth chair. Those are two different perspectives and both are okay, and it's not life or death. This is orchestra. And the kid ultimately is in it for fun and for being a well-rounded child. And to really kind of maybe think about that perspective is maybe a good idea.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. I think just thinking about health overall, mental health, physical health, we want to overdo things and injure ourselves. For example, we don't want to create a toxic feelings or environment around any of this. Ideally,

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, it's just not worth it. These are kids, they have a lot going on, and I think these middle schoolers, they have a lot going on. They have a lot of social pressures at school. They have a lot going on in their families. And so music should be a place where they can come and be heard, both them themselves, and then they have this other thing in their life. And if we can try to support them in that by just being like, well, we don't see, I die, and that's okay. It doesn't mean your teacher is wrong. That's what I try to say sometimes is it doesn't mean that your teacher's wrong. It just means that I have a different philosophy and your teacher has a different philosophy. They have 40 students in their studio and I have a hundred, but I don't see as often or as in depth, and that's okay. We all have had to play, do different things for different teachers.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, no, I think that's a very healthy way to go about it. And I think, again, if you're the parent family member listening to this, just

Stephanie Hellekson:

Bless your heart.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. I love that. And I think just thinking about what helps my child, how do I help my child sort of grapple with what's going on and keep things healthy and like you said, enjoyable for them so they have this positive thing of music in their life that doesn't get soured by being in the middle of differences of opinions and everything.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I feel really fortunate that the teachers that I work with here are all really supportive, and if we have different of opinions, it's not a make or break situation that I know of, but yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I mean that's what we hope for is that collaboration. And I think also just like, okay, then if I'm not getting a response and I'm trying to reach out and collaborate and how do we make the best of this is what it is, and we might wish it was different, but let's just support the child from our side then.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah, absolutely. Or are there concerts that you can attend? Do you want to go that far? Is that something that can, I mean, I have people coming in and coach if I need like, Hey, I'd be happy to come in and coach. I'm always like, oh, my violence needs some work. That's good. Those are all things, but ultimately I would hope that a teacher, if somebody wrote me an email that's like, I really need to talk about this particular kid, this particular situation, that then I'm a little bit more like, okay, let's talk about it.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Well, thank you. I know big topic, and we're looking at it again, for those of you listening from our perspectives in our musical worlds and trying to include other perspectives as well. But we might not have addressed your specific situation, and we know that that is probably the case as every so individual. But thinking about that, how do we collaborate, how do we support the child that we're working with and keep their music a positive experience in their lives, I guess is the big takeaways we want to leave with you and any other thoughts you want to share before we go, Stephanie?

Stephanie Hellekson:

No, I think that that's really what it's about, and just knowing that I think everybody's intentions are probably for the best. We just don't always understand where they're coming from, of just kind of assuming the positive is always a good strategy to start with.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. If we assume there's a positive intent, we can likely have a more productive conversation.

Stephanie Hellekson:

For sure. For sure.

Christine Goodner:

Alright, well thank you for your time today. Look forward to next time we get to chat about all this.

Stephanie Hellekson:

Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, thanks for being here.

Before we go today I want to recap some of our discussion points from this conversation:

- Be curious
- Assume positive intent
- Try to collaborate, but if there is no way to do that, DO help the student navigate the situation and adapt as much as possible

We know that conversation doesn't cover every scenario or situation that may come up and if you have a perspective or experience share, please reach out and do so. I'd love to hear your thoughts and perspective and I will be sure to keep talking about this topic because I know its a big one. I want to thank my colleagues who helped me brainstorm some ideas for this episode - I appreciate you!

Alright everyone - happy practicing this week. Do what you can with the time you have and leaning into curiosity. Take good care!

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