

*In Honor of Karen Tuttle as She Retires*  
*By Carol Rodland*

I will never forget the day I met Karen Tuttle. It was the beginning of my sophomore year at Juilliard and her very first day of teaching there. Exhausted and discouraged by nagging neck, back, and arm injuries, I considered my meeting with her to be a last-ditch attempt to save my viola-playing self. While I could not fathom my life without the viola at its center, I also could no longer tolerate such intense pain and frustration. If she couldn't help me, I was going to transfer to Yale and major in English.

On that bright September day, she invited me into her newly assigned studio and with minimal preliminary conversation I unpacked my viola and began to play for her the first movement of the f-minor Brahms sonata. She listened and watched with that complete attention and focus that I have always likened to x-ray vision to the soul, and when I reached the recapitulation, she stopped me, pried my thumb from the neck of the viola, poked my left wrist inward, and dropped my fingers from the knuckle line to the fingerboard with a soft plop. "Sweetheart, if you fix this, this, and this, you will be just fine." I stared back at her, and recognized immediately that she knew exactly what she was talking about. She radiated love and confidence and I trusted her instantly. She was offering me an escape route from my prison of physical tension. It was no longer a puzzle without a solution. I remember practically dancing out of Juilliard that day.

That was, of course, only the beginning of a long and arduous journey toward complete recovery. Throughout the entire process of revamping my technique, Karen Tuttle provided me with essential knowledge, imparted with astonishing patience and unwavering love and support. My personal odyssey with Tut ( as so many of us

affectionately call her) consisted of seven years of intense work as her student at Juilliard, three years of which were spent with the privilege of being her teaching assistant.

Without wanting to be overly dramatic here, I have to say that this woman literally saved my life!

As I pondered how best to honor my beloved mentor and now treasured friend in written format, on this, the occasion of her retirement from Juilliard, I decided to keep my own reminiscences to a minimum and provide instead some background information on her extraordinary life, for those of you who are not as well-versed in “Tuttle-lore” as are we her students, as well as providing a collage of fond memories collected from some of her former students.

While Karen Tuttle openly discusses with her students the details of her life’s history and the people and philosophies that contributed to her development as an artist, I would like to express my gratitude here to Matthew Dane, whose doctoral dissertation, entitled “Coordinated Effort: A Study of Karen Tuttle’s Influence on Modern Viola Teaching” (Rice University, May 2002), provided an excellent source for checking the accuracy of the facts as I remembered them. Matthew, who is Assistant Professor of Viola at the University of Oklahoma, never studied with Karen Tuttle, but in this excellent document, he chronicles her life and also interviews nine of her former students, this writer included, who are active in the teaching field.

Karen Tuttle was born on March 28, 1920 in Lewiston, Idaho, to Eunice, a choir director, and Ray, a country fiddler. Upon completion of the eighth grade, when she decided she had had enough of traditional schooling, she turned her energies fully to the study of the violin. This decision to quit school was the first in a lifelong series of pivotal

decisions she made based on instinct and “gut feeling” about what was good and “right” for her. Karen Tuttle has always been marvelously free-spirited. If something rings true for her, she responds with a resounding “Oh yes!” and pursues it wholeheartedly. (Those of us who know her can picture her joy and hand gestures as she says this!) If it is physically painful or somehow unnatural, it is “wrong”.

So, school felt wrong and music felt right. I can picture her telling the next part of her story; she assumes a horrifically tense violin-playing posture, by twisting her neck sharply to the left, raising her shoulders, grotesquely poking out her wrists, and severely contorting her face. “This is how I used to play.” Quite successfully, by all accounts; she had a manager, toured the West Coast, and did some high-level free-lancing in Hollywood, all of which were somewhat uncommon for women at that time. She claims vehemently, however, that with all of this physical discomfort, she was not fully enjoying her life as a violinist. She claims she would have eventually quit, had the next moment of “Truth”, her fated meeting with the legendary violist William Primrose, not come when it had.

She first heard and, more importantly, saw Primrose play in Los Angeles, as violist of the London String Quartet. His ease with the instrument so enthralled her, that she approached him immediately and asked to study with him. He agreed, but only on the condition that she switch to viola, since he was a violist, and move to Philadelphia, since he taught at the Curtis Institute there. She happily did both. After all, “Truth” must always be pursued, according to Tuttle doctrine, even if it means trading the E-string for a C-string.

Primrose was, of course, a phenomenal violist and played with great physical ease and virtuosity. He was truly a “natural”, by all accounts. He taught by example, but if anyone wanted or needed a technical explanation, he very quickly began sending them to Karen Tuttle for help, because it was she who could articulate what it was he actually physically did to achieve his beautiful sound and virtuosity. For this reason, before she even graduated from Curtis, Primrose appointed her to be his assistant, a position which she kept even after graduating and moving to New York City to begin her career as a performing violist. When Primrose left Curtis in 1951, Tuttle took over the viola and chamber music departments, which she headed until 1956.

To summarize briefly some highlights of her career after graduation from Curtis: she moved to New York City and played a great deal of chamber music, including membership in the Gotham, Galimir, and Schneider Quartets. She also became the first woman to join the NBC Orchestra. Her marriage in 1957 to Reichian psychoanalyst Dr. Morton Herskowitz resulted in her moving back to Philadelphia, where she lives to this day. Her teaching positions over the years have included professorships at the University of Albany, the Philadelphia Musical Academy, the Peabody Conservatory, the Mannes College of Music, the Manhattan School of Music, a return to Curtis in 1978, where she still teaches, and from 1987-2003 at Juilliard. During the summers she has taught at the Aspen Music Festival and the Banff Center for the Arts.

Karen Tuttle loves to tell stories about the six people, including the aforementioned William Primrose, who revealed essential “Truths” to her. This diverse list includes the oboist Marcel Tabuteau, the cellist Pablo Casals, the violinist Alexander

Schneider, the violinist/medical doctor Demetrios Constantine Dounis, and the psychoanalyst/doctor Wilhelm Reich.

From Tabuteau, the great French oboist who held the position of principal oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra for over forty years and who also taught at Curtis, Tuttle claims she learned about “grouping”. I can see and hear her imitating his French accent and singing with numbers and hand gestures to show us how notes should be organized in a phrase and why. Through her, those of us who never met Marcel Tabuteau were able to experience this legendary musician’s spirit and musical genius, because not only does she impart to us his wisdom through her stories, but she is a terrific mimic!

Karen Tuttle admits to an at times tumultuous relationship with the renowned Alexander Schneider, with whom she played in the famous Schneider Quartet for a number of years. She revered and respected his musicianship, but claims she was not always enamored of his physical approach to playing the violin. Despite their frequent and spirited arguing, however, she considers him to have been an important influence on her. It is because of their intense professional relationship that we have those spell-binding Haydn quartet recordings! I can hear her imitating his Russian accent as she recounts their fiery quartet bickering. Again, through her stories, she brings us closer to a master some of us did not have the privilege of knowing.

It was through Alexander Schneider that Karen Tuttle met another of her key mentors, the brilliant cellist Pablo Casals. Schneider was the organizer of the famed Prades Festival in France, in which Tuttle also participated, and it was there that she met and eventually even studied with Casals. His ease and comfort with the cello as well as his unique mastery of and passion for the music of J.S. Bach were amongst his many gifts

to her. Tuttle's reverence for Casals inspired me and many others to listen to his recordings and to devour any books we could find about him. Casals' approach to teaching interpretation, which included very specific identifications of a piece of music's inherent characters, is an integral part of the Tuttle teaching method. Again, she provides us with a deeply personal connection to one of the music world's giants.

While in New York City, Tuttle also became acquainted with the violinist-physician, some would even call him "guru", Demetrios Constantine Dounis. From him, Tuttle claims she more deeply understood just what it was, physiologically speaking, about William Primrose's playing that seemed so "right". Dounis was well-known for his scientific study and teaching of proper and healthy use of the body and mind in conjunction with string-playing technique. Some of Tuttle's own fame and unique successes as a teacher are connected to the teaching of healthy physical habits in conjunction with technique and effective and communicative music-making.

Karen Tuttle's remaining great conduit of "Truth", Dr. Wilhelm Reich, was not a musician. Without going into detail here on Reich's theories, I will borrow Matthew Dane's succinct description of Wilhelm Reich's influence on her: "She views Reich as the 'ultimate' in connecting the physical to the emotional in musical performance." (Dane, page 16) Tuttle's insistence that her students acquire healthy physical habits with the instrument is not intended solely for reasons of physical comfort and its hopefully resulting injury-free professional longevity. Rather, she feels that connecting emotionally with the music's inherent characters and conveying to the listener these emotions from a deeply-felt well of personal experience are of paramount importance. She maintains that accessing and communicating these emotions are only made possible by the

understanding of one's own emotional life and by the dismantling of the physical barriers which inhibit one's full expression of them. Thus inspired by Reich, she encourages students to journey inward, to "work on" themselves, in order to live fuller, richer lives, and to thereby enhance the power of their artistic expression. Her nearly fifty years of marriage to her beloved husband, Morty, himself a Reichian psychoanalyst, have continually deepened these beliefs in Reich's philosophies.

Karen Tuttle's extraordinary pedagogy consists of many ingredients, including her deep and inspiring love of music, her unique physical approach to the instrument, and her warm, loving, and generous personality. She tirelessly helps us to become the best performers and teachers we can be. She also insists we learn to become good colleagues. Cut-throat competition and its resulting alienation were not tolerated in her studio. Instead we were encouraged to engage in lively discourse with each other, constructively criticizing when necessary, and always being supportive of each other. The magnificent result of this is that we her students have become a family of sorts. I count some of my Tuttle "siblings" amongst my closest friends and most cherished colleagues.

While it was not possible to contact the many hundreds of Tuttle "siblings" individually as I prepared this article, I was able to collect reminiscences from some of my "immediate family" to share with you here.

***Sheila Browne***, Assistant Professor of Viola at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, writes: "For four years I walked into Karen Tuttle's studio on the fifth floor at Juilliard, and was enveloped in her special radiance. Hers is a radiance like no one else's—so sunny and wise and empathetic and loving, and very much attached to the earth. She did more than inspire me—she empowered me, teaching me the tools I needed to

become more myself than I ever could have done on my own. I endeavor to share that energy and knowledge with every student I teach, for it is one of the most needed and important gifts anyone could possibly receive.”

***Caroline Coade***, violist of the Detroit Symphony writes:

“I remember first playing for her in her home in Philadelphia and immediately feeling so comfortable with her...she’s not only a beautiful woman, but often smiled at me while working with me during my lessons...One thing that really stands out about Karen is her dedication. She is tireless in her dedication to teaching and to making each student the best he or she can be...I appreciated her interest in my life AND my music...What I’ve learned from all of this is to be generous with my students. I am generous with them in both time and in sharing my ideas of music. I get to know each of them individually and encourage them to become the best they can be.”

***Susan Dubois***, Associate Professor of Viola at University of North Texas, writes:

“Tut taught us to question everything and everyone---even her!—during lessons...She also taught us how to teach; not only did she want us to verbalize everything in order to make sure we really got it, but she required us to make comments in studio class about our fellow students’ performances, and she entrusted some of us to test the waters as her teaching assistants...Tut treated each student with a fresh perspective---even if I was the fourth Brahms sonata of the day, she approached me and our work together with great enthusiasm and energy. No matter what we were working on, it was ALL important and there was something to be learned, whether it was a performance of the Bartok Concerto or the act of “filling up the space” between two notes.”

***Jeffrey Irvine***, Professor of Viola at the Cleveland Institute of Music, writes:

“I was fortunate to study with many wonderful teachers, and Karen Tuttle was the last. Karen had (and continues to have) a profound influence on my life- on my playing, on my teaching, and on the way I live my life. Her zest for music, the viola , and life is infectious! She opened my eyes and set me off in a new direction, on a new journey. It was scary, but it was exciting, and I’m still traveling! Thanks for everything, Karen!”

***Kim Kashkashian***, Professor of Viola at the New England Conservatory, writes: “Serendipity led Karen Tuttle’s path to cross mine when I was a sophomore at Peabody, and she was just beginning to define and codify her system of ‘coordination’. Her (for me) revolutionary proposition that musical health is defined equally through body mechanics and spirit, and that both elements are reflected in sonority—was an immediate call for action—a challenge gratefully acknowledged which has accompanied my work to the present. Karen Tuttle’s initial attempts to sensitize her students to “body resonance” were extreme: we removed our chinrests and cut holes in the left shoulder of our shirts in order to better feel the vibration of the instrument! We spent many lesson hours searching for a way to release between two notes while Karen, with an extraordinary combination of empathy and objectivity nourished our desire to keep trying. She taught us the essential—that to perform is to tell the news, and to tell it well requires aesthetic transparency, a generous spirit and the courage to remain vulnerable.”

***Michelle LaCourse***, Professor of Viola at Boston University, writes: “I am extremely fortunate to have been able to study with Karen Tuttle for an extended period of time—pretty much the entire 1980’s. I arrived at her studio a bundle of knots and tensions and injuries waiting to happen, and am certain that I would not be playing today had I not worked with this remarkable woman. I continue to learn from the

concepts she has taught me, as I teach my own students and pursue my own playing career. In addition to being an amazing and inspiring musical coach, Karen challenged all of us to find the highest level of technical accuracy with ease. She was a pioneer in injury-prevention technique, and through her physical approach to playing, one achieves a more intimate, natural contact with the instrument and with the music and a healthier energy flow. This then opens the door to infinite possibilities of color, emotion, intensity, and projection---the ability to share all of this with an audience...Her example as a passionate, compassionate, principled, committed human being in all that she does is equally inspiring...”

***Karen Ritscher***, Professor of Viola at Rice University, writes:

“I first met Karen Tuttle after my freshman year at Eastman. I’ll never forget that first lesson, because I was shocked by her vitality, beauty, and honesty. Within the first ten minutes of meeting her, I asked whether I could move to Philadelphia to study with her. And thus began one of the most influential and inspiring relationships of my life! I learned about drawing and projecting a viola sound that was MY voice, I learned about acquiring a natural technique and good practice habits. I learned about committing wholeheartedly to the music and about pacing and timing. I also learned important life lessons about honesty, accepting myself, healthy work habits and seeing the overview. I am so grateful that I have Karen in my life. What made her an exceptional teacher was that I always felt that my life and playing were all-important to her. Because she so fully supported me, I could strive for my dreams. Of course, I now realize that every one of her students feels the same way—that is her gift and her magic! As I teach, I often feel her force and love in the studio when one of my students turns a particularly gorgeous

phrase. I am appreciative to be able to pass on some of the wisdom I learned from my beloved teacher.”

Karen Tuttle’s students hold positions of prominence throughout the field of music. A testament to the diversity and depth of her teaching is that these positions include principal and section players in major orchestras, soloists, quartet players, and professors in conservatories and universities the world over. Colleagues who do not even play the viola, but who studied chamber music with her, also count her amongst their “major teachers”, so profound was her influence on them!

While Tuttle will no longer be teaching at Juilliard, she will continue to participate along with some of her “offspring” in the annual “Karen Tuttle Coordination Workshop”, initially founded by Jeffrey Irvine at the Cleveland Institute of Music, and to be hosted next in June 2004 by Susan Dubois at the University of North Texas. She also will continue to teach master classes at various music schools around the country.

There is, of course, so much more to say, but I will stop here and finish with a resounding and heartfelt ***THANK YOU*** to our beloved Tut-- for all that you have done and continue to do for countless people around the world, and for all that you are. You have enriched more lives in more profound ways than you will ever know. We all feel so privileged and deeply grateful to have you in our lives.

***Carol Rodland is Professor of Viola at New England Conservatory and also teaches as guest faculty at the Juilliard School. She performs frequently in the United States and Europe as a recitalist and chamber musician, has recently recorded an album of American viola works for the Crystal Records Label, and is on the Executive Board of the American Viola Society.***