

In Memoriam... 3/28/20 - 12/16/10

# Celebrating Karen Tuttle at 80

by Carol Rodland

On March 28, 2000, Karen Tuttle will celebrate her 80th birthday. She is one of this century's greatest viola and chamber music pedagogues, and her influence has spread to all corners of the world. Her deep passion and love for music, along with her unwavering belief that playing the viola (or any other instrument) should be physically comfortable in order to best facilitate the expression of the music, have profoundly impacted all of us who have ever had the privilege of working with her.

For months I have been mulling over what I should give her for her birthday. Objects seem so trivial when celebrating the life of someone who has so deeply influenced not only how I play, teach, and think about music, but also how I live my life aside from my art. I have concluded that perhaps sharing part of my own story might be an appropriate way to honor her and this milestone in her life.

I will never forget our first meeting in September of 1987, the beginning of my sophomore year at Julliard. Exhausted and discouraged by a nagging back and arm injury, which had been making playing the viola more torturous than pleasurable, I considered my meeting with her to be a last-ditch attempt to save my viola-playing self. If she couldn't help me, then I was going to pack up my instrument and go to Yale to study English, medicine, law, or anything else that would be less physically painful and perhaps ultimately more financially rewarding! I could not fathom my life without music at its center, but I could also no longer tolerate such intense frustration and pain with no hope for reprieve.

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 intensity that awes and inspires me to this day—and when I reached the recapitulation she stopped me, pried my left thumb from the neck of the viola, poked my wrist in, and moved my fingers from the base knuckle line, dropping them on the string with a plop. "Sweetheart," she said, "that is all you have to do and then you will be just fine."

I stared back at her, absorbing the compassion and love that radiated from her and observing the no-nonsense gleam in her eyes. She wasn't kidding. I believed her and trusted her immediately. Someone was finally telling me that there was a way out of my prison and that making music did not have to be synonymous with experiencing pain. I wasn't going to have to quit after all! I remember practically dancing out of Julliard that day.

That was, of course, the euphoria at the beginning of a long (and at times arduous) journey toward complete recovery. Throughout the process, Karen Tuttle's razor-sharp eyes, ears, and intuition, as well as her bottomless reservoir of patience, love, positive energy, and encouragement, sustained me. She never lost faith in me, even when I lost faith in myself. She even called my parents to reassure them that, despite the difficulties, I would eventually be okay!

I recall being so frustrated at times by having to focus so completely on retraining my body when there was music inside of me, screaming to be expressed with its full velocity and force. When I reached such plateaus, "Tut" as many of us affectionately call her—patiently made it clear to me that,



PHOTO BY PETER SCHAUER

The author (left) and her teacher backstage after a concert in which Rodland was soloist.

although I was being forced by my injuries to do an unusually painstaking sort of work, I would be grateful for it in the end. My sound would ultimately be warmer, more honest, open, and flexible, thus allowing the music to flow in a more direct and organic way. She also told me I would be a better teacher as a result of my troubles, and encouraged me to start analyzing the movements, sounds, and mannerisms of my fellow students.

She encouraged us all to speak up and critique each other in our weekly studio classes—something that not only laid the groundwork for each of us to learn to teach, but also discouraged any unhealthy and destructive competition amongst us. She demanded a supportive atmosphere in the class, helping us to see that we could be important resources for each other because we were all in the same boat, battling different forms of the same demons. In short, she instilled in us the inherent value of being good colleagues, showing us that, in the end, this is far more effective and healthy than the petty back-stabbing that can so often poison one's encounters with each other in the musical profession. Some of my closest friends today are colleagues from Tut's class!

Eventually, through her teaching, I learned to channel my passion and energy into my playing in a way that no longer injured me physically. After completing my bachelor's degree, she decided it was time for me to move on. She sent me to study in Freiburg, Germany, with one of her most famous "descendants," Kim Kashkashian. The richness of that experience is, of course, material for yet another story, which I will not tell here! To summarize, however, Kim—with the magnificence of her playing, her extraordinary teaching abilities, and the keenness of her intuition—helped me to

further internalize Tut's methods, enabling me to understand them and utilize them on increasingly deeper levels.

Upon completion of my studies in Freiburg, I returned to Julliard to pursue a master's degree and to work for three years as Karen Tuttle's assistant. With what borders on saintly patience, Tut tolerated my adjustment period to life back in the USA in general and Julliard in particular, and entrusted many of her students to my care. She gave me free rein to teach them as I saw fit, and she showed me when and how I could do it better and more in accordance with her own work with them when conflicts arose. Her generosity in allowing me to do so still amazes me! It was an invaluable learning experience for me. Having been away for two years, I was able to appreciate and understand her teaching with new eyes; now she was letting me experiment with the application of this knowledge under her expert tutelage. It was a privilege!

Tut's spirit continues to influence my life daily, even though we don't see each other often. My teacher and mentor has become a treasured friend. In her 50 years of teaching, I know she has influenced countless others just as profoundly as she has me. We, as her "descendants," have become a family, sharing our interpretations of her gospel of holistic and joyful music-making with each other and

with our students and colleagues. We live in many different countries and have developed our own vocabularies and ways of explaining her systems, but the underlying principles remain hers.

One of the most beautiful aspects of her teaching is, indeed, her insistence that each person find his or her own true musical voice. She has no clones, but rather, she helps the individual artist to emerge and develop, unhindered by physical tension and pain. There is such richness in the resulting diversity!

Studying the viola in this way becomes a vehicle for the study of our own souls. Despite her unceasing demands for technical excellence and disciplined practice, Karen Tuttle never lets us forget that this soul-study, this journey inward, is "where it's at," and that we are privileged to be able to explore our deepest selves when learning to play. It is, as she constantly reminds us, a lifelong journey. Easy it is not, but how deeply rewarding it is, and how grateful we are to her for her never-ending loving and expert guidance as we travel together! □

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