

Rachael Keplin Gladen, DMA

678.641.1638
keplin.rachael@gmail.com

“The universe is only as large as our perception of it. When we cultivate our awareness, we are expanding the universe.” - Rick Rubin

Music is a discipline full of connections, and awareness is the thread that binds these connections together—linking our learning to our performance, our audience to our music, and our music to our lives. In performance, I strive for precision while also creating a shared moment with the environment around me. In the practice room, I observe how the patience, curiosity, and attention required by the viola mirror the skills we cultivate in every day life.

However, it is within the moments of viola teaching where I find connections between music and life flourish most. Studio instruction is where students begin, nurture, and shape the foundations of a lifelong musical journey. Creating an environment where these relationships can flourish is at the center of my work as an educator.

My teaching mindset is grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy that listens deeply, is intentional, and responds thoughtfully to the many backgrounds and experiences students bring to the studio. Because lessons are an intimate space requiring vulnerability from both teacher and student, listening becomes my first and most essential goal for learning. Following Pauline Oliveros’ philosophy of deep listening, I begin by introducing awareness—of breath, body, environment, and sound—and utilize these four points often for tools for assessing as the teacher and later handing them as a tool to the student.

I also find that developing listening fundamentals make space for student and teacher engage in the lesson with openness. As a mentor, I interpret deep listening with my students further through weekly check-ins, attention to non-verbal communication, observing physical posture and balance, and the emotional cues students reveal through language, body language, and musical choices.

As a Suzuki teacher, I carry the “every child can” philosophy wholeheartedly into both individual and group settings. My pedagogical priorities include developing healthy technical foundations, emphasizing resonant tone, building a flexible and organized bow arm through a balanced set up, sequencing new techniques to support ease, and understanding music through listening, performance, and score study. My goal is to meet each student where they learn best and make all musical material accessible and joyful.

As an active composer and improviser, I incorporate non-canonical repertoire and free improvisation into lessons and group classes. Improvisation provides an immediate entry point into personal expression, regardless of technical level. It allows students to explore their musical voice, combat practice fatigue, and approach technical challenges from new angles. A beginning improvisation exercise I use with students are to abandon the rhythm and written elements of a passage and experiment with only a few of the pitches. I guide them to use their intuition and ear as they gradually play with rhythm or other adjacent pitches. Over time, the student generally realizes a more personal connection to what was once a cold technical passage. As a bonus, the student’s focused is turned to musical gesture instead of purely technique.

Playing the viola is no easy task! While traditional practice strategies—slow practice, etudes, rhythmic variations—remain essential, I encourage students to invent solutions of their own. Improvising around difficult passages, re-composing bowings and fingerings, or creating “practice games” helps students identify the deeper obstacle and builds independence.

I believe building a studio community is rooted in belonging, trust-building, and fostering genuine relationships. When students feel seen, supported, challenged, and inspired, they stay—and they thrive. I believe it is my job to support the growth of my students personally as well as professionally.