

Arts in Mind

Mill Valley Welcomes Music Teacher Phoebe Dong

Part One of Two

By Angela Barnett and Suz Lipman

When word got out that the Mill Valley Schools were in need of a new music teacher to teach stringed instruments, it was Kiddo! founder Trisha Garlock who thought to call the New Century Chamber Orchestra in San Francisco. From that orchestra organization came Phoebe Dong, who, in a short time here, has proved a passionate, talented, and popular new string teacher in the district. We recently caught up with Phoebe between classes, private lessons, community projects, and her own ongoing music studies, to ask her a few questions about her background and philosophy.

What were you doing before teaching here?

I taught strings full-time in the Dixie School District for 17 years. In tandem, I directed string ensembles for 14 years in the Marin Symphony Youth Programs. About five years ago, I had an epiphany that I wasn't nurturing my own musical soul enough, so I took a break from public school teaching to study piano full-time. While on leave, I became an artist faculty member at San Domenico Music Conservatory, teaching private piano students and directing chamber ensembles. I still enjoy the balance of performing and teaching. I continue taking weekly piano lessons -- the violin is on the back burner -- and I'm learning a lot and even playing in juried competitions for the experience.

In the last year, I've served as Education Coordinator for the New Century Chamber Orchestra in San Francisco. I enjoy the NCCO job because it helps me reach underserved students in Marin who might otherwise be denied an opportunity to study music. My job is to support and mentor gifted violinists interested in teaching who also have a strong desire to work with underserved students.

I also serve on the Board of Directors for the Music Teachers Association of California, Marin branch, which decides policies for a professional network of private music teachers in Marin and raises scholarship money for disadvantaged students. There are always kids who are left out of music. Music study can be expensive and parents can overlook it while they're trying to survive. It is my hope to bring those kids to music.

What are you teaching currently?

I teach two string orchestras at Mill Valley Middle School, as well as two chamber ensembles, each a string quartet playing music by composers such as Haydn and Mozart. I also teach all the violin, viola, and cello students in 4th and 5th grades at the five Mill Valley School District elementary schools. And I have private violin and piano students.

What do you like most about teaching music?

There is an endless amount of creativity in a music classroom. I love teaching music and teaching so many other things with it. When school districts ignore music, they miss the potential of bringing different disciplines together and teaching other subjects in a creative and wonderful way.

At MVMS, I started to align the 6th grade music curriculum with social studies by doing a unit on Chinese music. I taught the students the Chinese pentatonic scale and the way you can combine different notes in that scale to create melodies, much the way you would do with a blues scale. They each went home and wrote a piece of Chinese music. I told them to come up with a poetic title for their piece that reflected an aspect of nature, because nature is a very symbolic aspect of Chinese music and art. It was very successful, and I'd like to try this with 7th and 8th graders too, when I find the open time.

I'm also really interested in doing more collaborative work with other ensemble groups at MVMS, where Cayce Carnahan currently teaches many band ensembles. It would be exciting to be able to explore more symphonic music with Cayce utilizing strings, winds and percussion. This fall, we combined strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, and chorus for a piece called "Zombie Jamboree". It was really fun to work with the large ensemble.

The real creativity breaks loose when you start collaborating outside your department, such as when the MVMS chorus and drama departments come together to create the musicals. A lot of different disciplines can be put together.

What else keeps you going?

I have faith in the system and kids. I'm also very proud to be working with an extremely talented and caring music staff that inspires me daily. As long as there are hungry kids who are curious and excited about music, I'll have the energy to feed that hunger.

A showcase featuring soloists and small ensembles from the Mill Valley School District's music program will take place Monday, February 11, at 7:30 p.m., at the 142 Throckmorton Theatre.

"Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Angela Barnett and Suz Lipman are writers and parents in the Mill Valley School District.