

Arts in Mind

Mill Valley Welcomes Music Teacher Phoebe Dong

Part Two of Two

By Angela Barnett and Suz Lipman

In our January column we featured new Mill Valley School District music teacher Phoebe Dong, and learned about her teaching background as well as the way she uses music as a bridge to other school disciplines. This month, we delve further into Phoebe's personal background and passion for music education.

Q: Last column, we talked about your work with underserved students. What drives you in that area?

A: I am passionate about music education because as a child, I felt the injustice of seeing wealthier schools receive adequate funding for good music programs, while poorer schools like mine suffered. I was raised in a close-knit working class family in Sacramento, where my parents, who were from China, ran a mom-and-pop store. Money was tight, but in spite of our financial limitations, my parents always made it a priority to give me music lessons.

When my mother was a little girl in her village in China, she was taken out of school in 5th grade to help with the cooking and cleaning. Even though she begged for music lessons, she couldn't have them, and she vowed to give them to her children. My two older brothers never had the opportunity to play music, so when I came along, it seemed that I was the one who was supposed to get lessons.

When I was 5 or 6, I got a toy piano, which I would sit and play for hours. One night, my family went to see the movie, "My Fair Lady". The next day, I came home from school and started playing "On the Street Where You Live" by ear. My mom asked where I'd learned it, and I said, "I just figured it out."

When I was 9, my older brother worked the entire summer to buy me a piano. He had intended to use his earnings to defray college expenses because he had just been accepted to Stanford. Instead, he sacrificed the money for the piano. If it weren't for my family making sacrifices, I would have never attained my dream of becoming a musician and teacher.

I am impressed by the loyal support Mill Valley parents and the community have for arts education. Kiddo!, in particular, makes impossible things a reality. Within the first month of teaching here, I met a little boy and his mother. The mother wanted to enroll her son in my violin class, but had no money to rent or purchase an instrument. I offered to loan a school-district instrument to the boy, but found he was too small for any of the instruments in our inventory. The boy had such a hungry look when I let him hold one of

the violins. You would think I had just given him a bicycle for Christmas. Fortunately I knew that Kiddo! funds were available to correct the situation. I went to a local music store and purchased a new violin of the correct size for him and delivered it to his class the next day. It was a crowning moment. He sat proudly next to all the other kids who came to school with their rental instruments. Regardless of whether that little boy is going to grow up to be a concert violinist or a software engineer, he's going to have the chance. Maybe he will have the chance to do both!

Q: How do you choose the music you teach?

A: I try to give kids music they wouldn't normally listen to on their own. I choose classical music because it provides a historical framework for how western music developed in our culture. Kids are exposed to a lot of pop, rock and jazz, but seldom understand that all these forms had some origins in classical music, which in turn, borrowed ideas from many world cultures. I also try to choose pieces which have "staying power" to the ear. Is it something I'd want to listen to 20 years from now? I want the kids to hear and perform classical music filled with vitality, emotion and profound beauty. You can't develop a kid's musical sensitivity unless you expose him or her to the possibilities.

Students often ask to play music they have heard from a recent movie or T.V. show, but I learned a great lesson many years ago when I allowed this to happen. The students begged me to teach them the theme to "Jurassic Park". I felt there was no harm in doing this since the music might motivate my students, so we played it each day in class for a week alongside some selections from Tchaikovsky's ballet, "Swan Lake". Within a week, the kids were begging me *not* to play "Jurassic" because they wanted to play Tchaikovsky. I said nothing to sway their opinion, but the kids concluded that it was more fun to perform Tchaikovsky. When I asked the kids why they rejected "Jurassic", they responded that it was the same melody played again and again! I realized then that "staying power" music is recognizable at any age. The sad part is that we think that we have to give the kids "popular" music to motivate them. Given the heavy responsibility of educating future music consumers, we need to resist this temptation and to keep our eye on the prize—developing open-minded kids with a curiosity to explore and appreciate *subtlety* in music.

My ethnicity shows, but I also love Chinese folk music. I use some of this to teach my middle school orchestra students about human rights and the meaning of artistic freedom. We seldom think about how music might reveal the social values of a society. I recently brought in an ancient stringed instrument popular in China called the erhu (2-stringed violin) and demonstrated this for the class. This led to a discussion of how Chinese melodies are constructed and inspired by symbols in Chinese culture. Next, the kids watched a landmark documentary film made in 1980 called "From Mao to Mozart" which details the goodwill visit of American violinist Isaac Stern to China. Watching the movie, students learned about the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution, which wiped out a whole generation of musicians. The movie gave the students a greater appreciation for

artistic freedom in our own country. The message was a strong one: It could happen to anyone when human rights are not protected.

“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.