

An Interview with Karen Tuttle

Karen Ritscher



This interview took place on July 26, 1993, at Karen Tuttle's home in Philadelphia, where she lives with her husband and two cats. As a former student of Tuttle's, I have always been extremely grateful for her artistry, warmth, and guidance. She is a most loved teacher, honest and generous with her wisdom and kindness. It was a joy to have the opportunity to hear about her ideas and career. K.R.

Karen Ritscher: How did you come to the viola? What were your early influences?

Karen Tuttle: I started the viola, actually the violin, because I didn't want to go to school. I graduated from the eighth grade, and I hated school! When I told my mother I didn't want to back to school, she said, "Well, okay, but you have to do something." My father was a country fiddler, so I pointed to his fiddle and said, "I'll play that." My mother agreed, with the stipulation that I spend the same amount of time practicing as I would have in school. And if I ever "goofed off," she'd pick up the phone and give me a look to warn me.

I grew up in Walla Walla, Washington. My first teacher was Jean Heers, a young lady whom I liked. She was a tight player, but her personality was raucous and funny, and by Walla Walla standards, she was free—she smoked, a "sin" in our town. Her approach to the violin was extremely rigid, however, since she had been taught that way.

After a couple of years, my parents took me to Karl Havlicek, a Czech who studied with Leopold Auer. He was the first teacher who really influenced me

because he had tremendous energy and enthusiasm. He was a difficult man, but I managed to learn to play quite well. In fact, when I was 16, I toured in a duo with him (and his wife and his cat). We played four or five schools a day, and I was making good money, \$100 a week. Unfortunately, he found my diary and when he read what I had written about him, our tour was over!

Ritscher: What was your repertoire?

Tuttle: Show pieces, Wienawski, Kreisler; and I had to talk, which was then extremely traumatic for me. Eventually I did, however, learn to love talking. When I was 17, I studied with Henri Temianka—he was an excellent violinist with good physical habits and natural fluidity, but he couldn't verbalize how to be comfortable. When I asked him what to do because I hurt when I played, he said, "Don't worry, honey, you'll get used to it."

After a brief marriage (my husband thought I was a terrible wife since I never cleaned or cooked), I went down to L.A. That's when I met [William] Primrose. He was playing in the London String Quartet, and I thought he was the most beautiful image of anyone playing any instrument. I immediately walked up to him and asked to study with him. He looked at me and said, "Well, I teach at the Curtis" (I had never heard of the Curtis Institute of Music) "and you'd have to switch to viola." I said, "Great."

Ritscher: How did you feel about

becoming a violist?

Tuttle: I was happy because I was in such agony. Meanwhile, I married Phillip Goldberg, who was a beautiful violist. He entertained so much with his spaghetti parties, however, that I had to rent an extra room in which to practice. When we moved to Brooklyn, New York, we had nine rooms for \$75. I had taken a contract with Columbia Pictures to make money for living expenses at Curtis. But then, Primrose called me back to become his teaching assistant in viola and chamber music. I was terrified, but it was a wonderful time because the calibre of the students was so high: Michael Tree, John Dalley, Jules Eskin, and Joey Silverstein.

Ritscher: So you were thrown right into teaching?

Tuttle: Yes, and Arnold Steinhardt still reminds me of the time I threw them out for not rehearsing!

Ritscher: Besides Primrose, did anyone else have a strong effect on your development?

Tuttle: Marcel Tabureau provided one of the huge musical lights for me. He was first oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and he conducted our string orchestra. He put *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* on our stands, and we played (Tuttle demonstrates the theme with accents on every beat). And he said, "No, it's 1, 12, 122, 345," with a gesture of an underslung circle, a wave motion. He grouped notes that belonged together, went to the pivot

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of the phrase and energized the notes. He used the example of racing a car in neutral. "Your foot is on the gas and you're going nowhere!"

Ritscher: By "grouping of notes," do you mean not being dictated to by the bar-line?

Tuttle: Yes, exactly. Tabuteau said, "The bar-line is the enemy of music." Casals also had the same point of view, even though the two men had different musical vocabularies. The idea of pacing seems to be an intuitive talent, but I have been able to teach it.

Ritscher: Is it a question of being able to feel the direction of energy?

Tuttle: Exactly, you must be able to feel your own energy moving to be able to pace well.

Ritscher: You mentioned Pablo Casals. How did you meet him?

Tuttle: In 1950 at the Prades Festival. I had moved to New York and was on staff at NBC. They had asked me to stay in Philadelphia and to play principal viola in the Philadelphia Orchestra, but I said no, because I disliked Philadelphia and I didn't want to play in an orchestra. I auditioned for Prades with Sasha Schneider at the Levintrits' house. And Sasha accepted me, he said, because he liked my sound. After Prades, I stayed with Casals for six more months to study.

Ritscher: Were other people there also?

Tuttle: Madeline Foley, Gilbert Reese, and Eugene Istomin, who we called "Hoibie" so we could practice our Brooklyn accents. Herbie (Istomin) loved to cook; he would come over and cook for us—it was great fun.

Ritscher: And you were playing for Casals?

Tuttle: I played for him, and he played.

Ritscher: What kind of influence did he have on you? Did you study the Bach Suites?

Tuttle: He was one of the largest influences for me. He gave me one of my big truths. I had asked him if he analyzed what he did on the instrument. He told me that he had gone to a teacher when he was 10 years old who told him to put a book under his arm. Casals said, "But it didn't feel good!" ignored this advice, and revolutionized bow technique. This reinforced my feeling that if it doesn't feel good, it is wrong! Also, Casals was the first artist to play Bach as if he were a human being with an emotional life. Casals made me acutely aware of the importance of getting the emotional response, the character, before one does anything else. He spoke of this, using



Karen Tuttle is chairman of the viola department at the Juilliard School of Music and on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music. She also teaches at summer and winter seminars held at the Banff Centre. She has taught master classes in viola and chamber music and has performed in concerts at the Yale Summer School, Eastman School of Music, University of Utah, Banff Centre, and elsewhere. She is a member of New York Philomusica, a chamber music group.

Tuttle made her first tour of the United States as a violin virtuoso when she was 16 years old. Thereafter, she began to study the viola with William Primrose and at the age of 25, succeeded him as head of the departments of viola and chamber music at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. In 1955, Pablo Casals invited Tuttle to perform chamber music works with him at the Prades Festival. She stayed to study for six months with the great cellist and later returned to perform in seven Casals festivals. She has also participated in six Marlboro festivals under the direction of Rudolf Serkin. In 1958, she had the unique privilege of introducing the viola to native audiences in the villages of Samoa, and Tahiti, and in 1959 toured cross-country as a viola soloist with the Camera Concerti. Her Carnegie Recital Hall debut in 1960 received outstanding critical acclaim. She has been a member of the Schneider, the Galinier, and the Gotham string quartets and has recorded for Columbia, MCA, and Haydn records.

such words as "love, melancholy, frank," but even more, he showed the character in his face. He was saying, in essence, that Bach must be played expressively. I think he was a huge influence on many people's lives because he verbalized what a lot of people felt but were afraid to say.

Ritscher: What about your own edition of the Bach Suites—did it come from Casals?

Tuttle: Yes. I changed only a few

bowings to suit the viola. Casals was a wonderful teacher—he worked out the characters and really taught the music. He wasn't a help physically, however, because he was such a natural player.

Ritscher: So it seems that Primrose, Tabuteau, and Casals were the largest influences on your musical life. Was there anyone else?

Tuttle: Yes, Alexander Schneider and Sasha. I recorded all the Haydn quartets

in the Schneider Quartet. It was Sasha, Isidor Cohen, me, and then different cellists—Frank Miller, Madeline Foley, Saidenberg, and Hermann Bush.

Ritscher: What was it about Sasha?

Tuttle: I learned so much from Sasha; the sense of spacing was fantastic—he was a miracle to play with. And you know I've listened to those recordings, and I still love them. I dearly loved Sasha, well, perhaps more like "love/hate" because sometimes he could be so rude. He was valuable in my life.

Ritscher: Did you ever study the violin Bach Sonatas or Partitas with

Casals? Do you like them on the viola?

Tuttle: No, not really. My European students seem to enjoy them, but I don't think they sound good on the viola. I do teach the Cesar Franck Sonata and Kreisler, however.

Ritscher: Do you advocate starting a talented child immediately on viola or on violin?

Tuttle: I hate to admit this, but usually violinists who were violinists first are better equipped technically. By college, however, they need to switch to viola in order to really sound like a violist—they have to learn to really get in the string.

And also, they have to think about work after they graduate, to learn the repertoire on viola. Some people transfer easily, but many others never lose their violin sound.

Ritscher: What do you emphasize to get them to sound like a violist?

Tuttle: There's one major difference: you cannot play on the side of the hair. You must focus the sound on the viola *through* the hair and pull the string.

Ritscher: Do you advocate flat hair all the time in all parts of the bow?

Tuttle: Most of the time, unless you want a special sound.

Ritscher: What about sound production? You have a gorgeous, deep sound, and many of your students are known for their sounds. How do you teach that quality?

Tuttle: Providing a person has a natural posture with balancing the bow in the hand (that's the first thing!), then I go through the back, the shoulder socket, upper arm, forearm, wrist—all must be in alignment to get the full focus of what you have naturally. To play really in the string, you seldom need to press, except slightly towards the point. To keep the weight in all the way to the point, lift the elbow slightly and *then* you're in the correct position to initiate the stroke from the elbow, allowing the back and upper arm to go in.

Ritscher: What do you mean by alignment?

Tuttle: Alignment means that the wrist and elbow are on the same plane with the shoulder down. And you are rolling around in the socket, the shoulder free like a Thai dancer's.

Besides the bow balance, to get a throbby, centered sound, I think you have to have a love affair with the fingerboard. By that I mean you have to feel tactilely into the string with your left-hand pads. The vibrato is a delicious sensation—getting the fat focused just right. Each finger has its own weight and balance. You must let your wrist give in and *enjoy* the contact with the fingerboard. That is paramount for sound.

Ritscher: So sound is the synthesis of both hands?

Tuttle: Of course. I feel the two middle knuckles of both hands—it's a wonderful connection. If you feel the pull in the bow and if you coordinate with a repull, then your vibrato responds as well.

Ritscher: What's a repull?

Tuttle: Starting at the frog on the down bow, as you approach the tip, the balance shifts through the hand. When you feel the first finger taking paramount

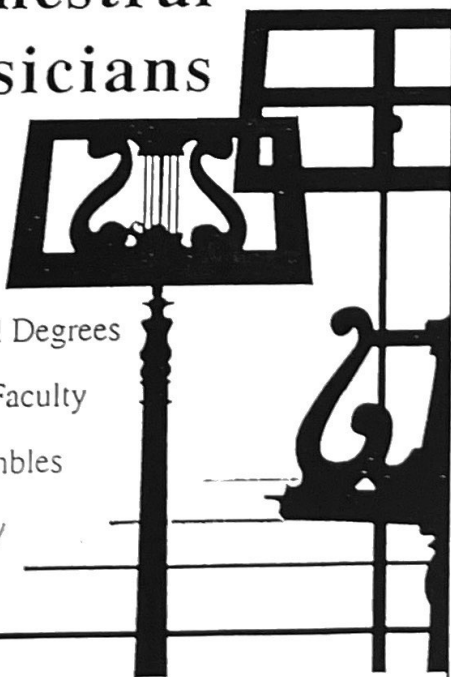
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pressure, you feel the pull across the knuckles towards the fourth finger and then the fingers straighten out towards the tip.

Ritscher: So in effect, you give yourself extra length for the phrase?

Tuttle: Yes, the repull gives an extra energy pull at the tip. And the frog and the tip are the parts of the bow where the notes are the most emotionally significant.

Ritscher: What about your development of the idea of coordination?

Tuttle: Coordination is defined in the dictionary as a state or relation of harmonious adjustment or functioning. For string players, it's the relationship between the horizontal movement of the bow and the movement of the neck, shoulders, chest, and pelvis. This physical coordination affects the musical phrase, the spacing of notes, and the dynamics. Dr. Robert Dew has written an article about my ideas on coordination that will be published soon in *The Strad*.

Ritscher: How do you teach your system of coordination?

Tuttle: By demonstrating. The repull I do on the student's viola, standing behind the student. Then I show them what notes belong together and how to group, relating the phrase to the physical gesture.

Ritscher: Often this is difficult to learn if the student has a neck that is muscularly tight. What do you do in that case?

Tuttle: The first thing I do is cup my hand around their chin and make them lean on my hand. Usually they superimpose weight, the same as they do on their chinrests. I point out that it is not necessary to tighten the muscles of the neck to balance the viola. Then I teach them the four places on the bow to release the neck: 1) before you start a down bow; to meet the down bow, 2) the balance point; you release the neck as the shoulders go down, say "un-huh," 3) over the tip; say "hi" as the head releases back; and 4) for string crossings, spiccato; head-neck "wobbles." I have them do circles without the viola. Their right arm circles in the air with no stiffness in the spine or neck. The movement of the neck is a reflex action, but many people have trouble feeling it as such because they are not used to a free action in the neck.

Ritscher: What about the rest of the spine?

Tuttle: Well, everything correlates. A free body is important. But many times, you see people doing releases in their bodies like knee bends, for instance, in-

stead of the release of their neck. First, the feet should be slightly separated—if the person is left-handed, the right foot back; if right-handed, the left foot back. Stand loosely like a jazz player (not heavy metal), with a relaxed belly. I find the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method extremely beneficial. So the work really begins away from the instrument. Then you must balance the instrument. I look out for raised shoulders, jaw clamping, biting. If the student has a long neck, I fill up the space with sponges and usually a high chin and shoulder rest. Sometime later, when the student understands the feel of bal-

ance, I can often remove some of the sponges. Sometimes, too much mechanical support does get in the way mobility—you adjust students according to their physique.

Ritscher: How does coordination affect the left side?

Tuttle: First, you must really feel the pull of the bow, because without pulling, the string coordination is meaningless. But with the pull and repull, feel a counter-reaction in the left-hand intensity.

Ritscher: How about different characters? Do you feel the emotional quality in the left hand?

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Tuttle: Well, you can manipulate the pad to get different types of sound.

Ritscher: Do you analyze vibrato for students?

Tuttle: Usually I just vibrate on their arm what kind of pressure and intensity.

Ritscher: With a new student who is overwhelmed by so many things to think about, how do you recommend practicing?

Tuttle: You must focus on one thing at a time. It depends on what the overall picture is. If the neck is really tight, it gets in the way of everything else; that must be addressed first. Then whatever the specific problem is—left wrist, finger action, shifting, and so on.

Ritscher: I remember learning bowing with the six bowings.

Tuttle: Yes, there are two families of bowing: the *détaché* family—*détaché*, *martelé*, and *balanced spiccato* (arm moves initiated from the elbow socket; and the *tremolo* family—*tremolo* (in string, towards tip, not necessarily at the tip; “wave bye-bye” for correct action), *spiccato tremolo* (wrist-initiated) and impulse of down-up (straighten fingers out and let them spring back).

Ritscher: What about the balanced bow hold?

Tuttle: I spell out the fingers, the thumb opposite the middle finger. The thumb must be malleable—it evolves just like the fingers, from bent to straight. If the bow rolls to the side, then press the ring finger. The pinky does not have to stay on the tip if the arm is not long enough; it is nonfunctional.

Ritscher: Shifting?

Tuttle: There are two kinds of shifts. 1) Expressive: this is a release of the left wrist, and the bass knuckles come up to meet the fingerboard before the shift; that allows you to shift before you shift. Then the fingers assume a normal curve before the arrival note. The longer the shift, the more the movement becomes like an inch-worm. So you're always in touch with wood. You don't feel positions, but just tactile touching. 2) Scale shifting is just displacement of fingers. For downshifts, you come back into the palm of the hand.

Ritscher: How does this finger action and “snaky” shifting affect intonation?

Tuttle: When I first change people over, they have more trouble playing in tune because they rely on a rigid frame and a stiff wrist for security. But ultimately the sound is much more focused and therefore in tune.

Ritscher: What about people who have fear about long shifting?

Tuttle: Fear gets in the way of the little impulses. Attitude can be crippling. You so often hear, “I don't know what happened...” it went so well in the practice room.” Some students naturally have a confident attitude that I call “killer instinct”: that ability to let nothing get in the way of projecting their true personality with confidence and know-how. Think of the tennis players Steffi Graff, Monica Seles, Stefan Edberg, or Jimmy Connor.

Ritscher: If a student doesn't have the “killer instinct,” can it be developed?

Tuttle: I don't think so. But sometimes therapy helps a person with confidence problems. I sometimes recommend play-acting, pretending you're someone else. I used to pretend that I was Primrose, and it worked. Or I tell my students to “think jazz” because that helps let go of all the little muscles. Everyone eventually finds his own way—only you can do it for yourself because it's your own psyche!

Ritscher: What is amazing to me is how you are able to cultivate each student's unique musical personality. Is that conscious?

Tuttle: No, I just see a problem and try to fix it. My only “method” is helping the student feel healthy with the instrument. My goal is to feel mentally and muscularly happy and in balance with the self. Now that's a mouthful! But what a great privilege to study oneself for a whole life time. I think that attitude helps: “How lucky I am for the opportunity to explore myself!”

Ritscher: Also, then practicing becomes more enjoyable.

Tuttle: Yes. The desire to project is an instinct, but I do think that the discipline of mind can be taught. Sometimes the most difficult task in teaching is to get people to trust the new and give up what is familiar. But it helps to have my former students teaching now also: Kim Kashkashian, Jeff Irvine, Michelle La Course, and you. You all have different vocabularies, but the direction is the same.

Ritscher: Well, I've always admired your courage in teaching, to persist to the bottom of an issue.

Tuttle: No, it's not courage, because it's my own point of view. ✓

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