

# STUDIO HANDBOOK

## Erika Blanco violin

Bachelor of Music, violin – Vanderbilt University, Blair School of Music

Master of Music, violin – University of Minnesota

Suzuki registered, volumes 1-10

Lux String Quartet, first violinist and founding member

Quad City Symphony, violin I section

Charanga Tropical, first violinist

**[erika@erikablancoviolin.com](mailto:erika@erikablancoviolin.com)**

## **Introduction:**

Welcome to my studio! One of the utmost privileges of my being a musician is interacting with students and their families. As you will see outlined in this handbook, I am most concerned in our growth together, music's being the common thread and medium for that growth. Regardless of professional vs. recreational musical ambitions, becoming a well-rounded musician entails patience, vision, goal setting, problem solving, collaboration, listening, and respect, qualities that are useful in all areas of life. I primarily present these aspects by example and thereby presume likewise with my students and their families. Private instruction is most effective for a musician's advancement because of the trust, respect, and routine established in the student-teacher-parent relationship. Particularly with the Suzuki philosophy to which I adhere, I believe that every student, regardless of age or background, can achieve a high level of musical aptitude given the right stimulus (instruction) and right environment (creating a fuller musical experience outside lessons by listening to music daily; having family engaged in the musical experience; attending live concerts, etc.). Each year I look forward to furthering these relationships and seeing the musical and personal development in my students.

## **Objectives:**

1. To cultivate an appreciation for beauty and discipline in the whole person
2. To formulate a rudimentary and ever-growing appreciation of music
3. To progress through a thorough, personal, and level-appropriate repertoire
4. To develop the musical ear through listening, repetition, experimenting, reviewing and other techniques
5. To nurture and instill leadership and musicianship qualities

## **Student Expectations:**

1. Practicing a regular routine along with the practicing parent(s)
2. Listening *daily* to the level-appropriate Suzuki recording; listening assignments outside the Suzuki repertoire
3. Balancing a healthy teacher-student-parent relationship in which all three persons are of importance
4. Willing to try new and sometimes seemingly difficult techniques or practicing routines during a lesson and/or during personal practice time
5. Demonstrating appropriate respect and willingness to adhere to parent's involvement during *home* practice and to the teacher's involvement during lesson time
6. Desiring improvement and progress through practice

## **Teacher Expectations:**

1. Fostering tone, technique, and musical interpretation
2. Conducting lessons in an exciting, stimulating environment
3. Maintaining a truly Suzuki-based ideology in lesson tactics (Read *Nurtured By Love* by Suzuki for ideology)
4. Striving my very hardest to be punctual and valuing the parent-student's commitment and time
5. Delivering a promise made to students in a timely fashion, either about repertoire, rewards, etc.
6. Understanding each student's personal level and ambition for the violin
7. Recording all activity during any lesson for reference, evaluation, and growth
- 8.** Being able to give varied solutions or techniques about a certain problem or difficulty
- 9.** Being readily available in person or via telephone or e-mail for any kind of discussion about any aspect of the lessons, myself, and/or the student-parent unit

## Parent Expectations:

1. Adequate *note-taking* and listening during lessons so that parent can be home-teacher during the week! The parent who practices with the student is required to attend all lessons and to oversee each at-home practice session
2. Alerting the teacher sufficiently and immediately concerning any chronic health concerns and/or learning disabilities
3. Respecting lessons as the special time for the student and teacher to interact
  - a) If any questions arise about something that has occurred during the lesson, record them in the notes and address them at the ending 5 minutes
  - b) Being careful not to embarrass the child (e.g., being overly involved during lessons, being negative...)
  - c) Parents may certainly interject if 1) something of question which recurred during home practice occurs at the lesson or 2) if a disciplinary issue arises
4. Encouraging at every possible opportunity while being attentive to both the child's strengths and weaknesses during home practice
5. Arriving about 5 minutes *before* lesson time begins so that the child can be unpacked and ready to begin at the close of the previous student's lesson
6. Making the child's Suzuki recording available at various opportunities (e.g., carpool, other commutes, during house chores, before bedtime, bath-time, breakfast, etc.)
7. Communicating with teacher via e-mail or telephone about problems or confusions that may arise during the week's practicing
8. Overseeing child's hygiene (e.g., washed hands before handling violin, clipped nails, etc.)
9. Renting/purchasing an instrument, *with prior teacher approval*, that is appropriate for the child's needs and child's size. Any instrument acquired without teacher approval may be deemed unfit to play and will not be permitted for use.

## What is "Suzuki"?

Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) was a Japanese pedagogue who realized one day that "all Japanese children speak Japanese!" His insight was that Japanese is a difficult, intricate language to learn, yet all Japanese children achieve fluency after only a few years from being born. Most parents aren't formal educators or language experts, so how does this fluency happen? Dr. Suzuki named his approach the "Mother Tongue" method. Parents, from the time their children are born, speak to them, even though they know an infant cannot comprehend. Children are constantly hearing their native tongue: on the radio, in the grocery store, in the waiting room, from siblings in the household; language is all around them! Once children are toddler-aged, parents start putting letters on refrigerators and in the bathtub. The expectation clearly isn't so that the 18-month-old will read. It's exposure and familiarity.

Speaking happens long before reading. It's awkward, sometimes hard to understand, but eventually all children "practice" enough so that forming words becomes natural, automatic, and comprehensible. Reading occurs once a vocabulary bank is established.

Imagine the process of learning to walk: it's awkward, tumbly, and ungraceful. After perseverance, walking happens, and before long, running occurs! The first steps in violin are learning to hold the violin and learning to hold the bow. Much like learning to walk, it's awkward and unnatural. But persevering with the process is absolutely necessary before any "running" (or playing) can occur.

### **[What is “Suzuki”? continued...]**

With the Suzuki philosophy, the student listens daily and frequently via CD to the repertoire he or she will be learning. It becomes (sometimes obnoxiously) engrained so that, when the time comes to learn it, it's only a matter of aligning the physical requirements because the mind already knows what the piece sounds like.

Note reading begins very informally, much like the refrigerator magnets or the foam bathtub letters. Formal notereading is delayed until the instrument and bow are comfortably and consistently set in the correct posture.

That being said, Dr. Suzuki insisted early on that he was the only one who really “taught Suzuki,” his point being that he wanted teachers to use his philosophies with the important tenets and align them with their own style and teaching personality.

### **Why private lessons?**

As already mentioned, private instruction's effectiveness hinges on the consistent relationship between the student, teacher, and parent. Musical development relies on regular nurturing, not taking a lesson occasionally to prepare for an upcoming performance. Much like athletic training, playing the violin is physical and mental and involves training muscles, reflexes, and concentration; inconsistent attention to proper training will yield inconsistent results and ultimately be frustrating to the student and their family.

### **Practice:**

Because playing an instrument is physically and mentally demanding, ease of playing and progress correlate with the quality and then quantity of practice. That being said, quality and consistency of and thoughtfulness during practice will produce much better results than one or two weekly cram sessions of practicing. Should a student show a distinct disinterest in further study and demonstrates this through a deliberate lapse of progress during a period of lessons and/or a negative attitude (especially not complying with the student expectations listed), the teacher and parent should have a serious discussion concerning the further purpose of lessons and of possible termination. I want music to be a positive, productive experience for all my students, which could be significantly impeded if the student is showing indifference and apathy.

A good analogy to violin playing to keep in mind is like planting a seed: it requires specific care in its feeding and light exposure, but it's a slow, sometimes unnoticeable growth. It can't be forced or expedited, and if its care is inconsistent or overdone or neglected, the plant's health will suffer. If it's too neglected, the growing process will have to be restarted all over again.

### **Tuition:**

Families have two options for tuition payment: semesterly in advance or in 4 installments throughout the semester due at the beginning of each installment period notated in the studio calendar. Failure to keep payment up-to-date relinquishes lessons until payment is settled and can jeopardize a family's right to be in my studio. Out of consideration for my time commitment to each student, tuition is **nonrefundable**, and each student is committed financially to a semester at a time, regardless of attendance.

### **Attendance:**

Due to the intensive nature of my performance and teaching commitments, student-initiated absences are not excused for any reason (e.g., illness, prearranged vacation, etc.) and will not be made up. I have included in our

### **[Attendance continued...]**

calendar specific lessons when I will be gone for performances. In the event that I miss a lesson, we will reschedule at a mutually-convenient time; please note that I **will not reschedule a make up lesson** if it is student-initiated. E-mail is the best way to inform me of a prearranged absence; if it's within the day of the lesson, calling or texting is appreciated.

*Please see the appendix article 'Make Up Lessons from an Economist's Point of View' at the end of the handbook for a clearer understanding of my policy's rationale.*

### **Illness:**

In order to protect myself and be considerate of any other students I see that day, students who are contagious with a fever, who have had a fever within 24 hours, who have a cold, are sneezing or blowing their noses frequently, may not attend lessons. I reserve the right not to teach if a student exhibits symptoms of the flu, a cold, etc.

### **Inclement weather:**

In the event of a blizzard or other weather-related events for which meteorologists are advising against being out, I will offer 1 make up lesson during 1 designated weekend at the end of the semester. If a student cannot attend that make up weekend, that student forfeits that lesson; no other make up times will be provided, and tuition is nonrefundable. I will notify families immediately via call or text the day-of if weather dictates canceling lessons.

### **Lesson scheduling:**

Lesson scheduling can be reset before every semester. The teacher will honor semester-to-semester day/time specific slots. However, day, time, or day/time changes, pending the teacher's schedule, are on a first-come basis. If the student is late for his or her lesson, the teacher will conduct the lesson until the scheduled ending time; however, if the student arrives with only 15 minutes of lesson remaining, the teacher will not proceed with the lesson. Need of a permanent change should be addressed ASAP, although any canceled lesson must still be counted toward semester tuition.

### **Instrument rental:**

Because violin and bow making are delicate, complex arts, taking years of training for all the handiwork, I require families to consult me before renting or purchasing. Cheap instruments are cheap because they are inexpertly crafted, usually in factories by machines and not handmade; not only will they not train the ear for a fine sound and good tone, they break easily and do not stay in tune. If you already have an instrument or rent/purchase one that is subpar, I will require a replacement of my approval.

Recommended shops for rental: 1) **Quinn Violins**, 1081 21st Avenue SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414; 612.378.5470 or [sales@quinnviolins.com](mailto:sales@quinnviolins.com). 2) **House of Note**, 7202 Minnetonka Blvd, St. Louis Park, MN 55426; (952) 929-0026.

Definitely call and schedule an appointment if going to rent or purchase so that the shop can make necessary preparations for your visit.

**Instrument care:**

Violins and bows are extremely sensitive to climate and handling. I expect students, regardless of age, to learn to take ownership of carrying and caring for their instruments. Special attention must be paid during transitional seasons as instruments respond to temperature and humidity. Particularly in the winter, instruments will need an in-case humidifier. Try to keep instruments within 65-80 degrees Fahrenheit. **Under no circumstances** should an instrument be left in an un-air conditioned (in summer temperatures) or un-heated vehicle (in winter temperatures). The teacher will observe the care of the instrument and will notify the parent when due action is required for any maintenance or repairs. Any repair work should be done promptly, as not to injure further the instrument, and the repair shop **must be pre-approved** by the teacher.

**Studio behavior:**

Since the lesson is a concentrated but small amount of time spent between teacher and student, parent(s) and any observers (friends, siblings, etc.) who attend lessons should respect this time for the sake of the student by sitting quietly and not interrupting. Anyone attending the lesson should defer any cell phone conversations or texting until after the lesson. The practicing parent(s) must be present at all times and taking notes during lessons.

Arrive early so that going to the bathroom and/or hand washing can occur comfortably before the lesson time. Hand washing is especially imperative due to the hands-on nature of violin playing.

**Performing:**

The musical arts is not an self-insulated, isolated experience but one of collaboration and sharing. I encourage my students to play for their families, friends, and neighbors informally or formally. My studio will give 1 recital each semester (approximately October and March). It's an opportunity for family and friends to see their loved ones, but it's also a good motivator and goal for the student.

**Concert opportunities:**

We have the distinct privilege of living in a community that embraces a whole scope of the arts and has a host of options in which the public can participate. Seeing live music supports your local musicians, but it also catalyzes curiosity and inspiration in students in a way that can't be manufactured any other way.

My own quartet Lux strives to make concerts and performances approachable and realistic for families, especially with young children. Respecting a performance space is, of course, the polite thing to do, but I hope one day for more venues where children can feel less stuffy and inhibited.

The Minnesota Orchestra ([minnesotaorchestra.org](http://minnesotaorchestra.org)) and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra ([thespco.org](http://thespco.org)) both offer several family-oriented concerts a year in addition to their full regular season series.

Other organizations like the Schubert Club ([schubert.org](http://schubert.org)) and Minnesota Sinfonia ([mnsinfonia.org](http://mnsinfonia.org)) also offer family concerts throughout their seasons.

**Media:**

In this digital era, watching and listening to high-quality performers and performances is easier than before and much more economical. Purchasing mp3's on Amazon or iTunes is convenient and cheaper if you want to cherry-pick tracks from an album. YouTube is also an invaluable source for not only listening to but watching

### **[Media continued...]**

high-caliber performers. Obviously a high-degree of discretion must be used for YouTube as it's an open source. Some particular orchestras and performers as a good searching springboard: Minnesota Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Australian Chamber Orchestra, NY Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic, London Symphony, Wiener Philharmonic, Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Vienna Philharmonic; Hilary Hahn, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Gil Shaham, James Ehnes Sarah Chang, Itzhak Perlman, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Rachel Barton Pine, Leila Josefowicz, Julia Fischer, Lisa Batiashvilli, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Midori, Jascha Heifetz Janine Jansen, Joshua Bell; Guarneri String Quartet, Alban Berg String Quartet, Juillard String Quartet, Emerson String Quartet.

### **Classical Music and Music:**

I believe that music is a powerful, beautiful art form - music of all genres, cultures, and time periods. Classical music, or technically "Western art music," is valuable because of the technique it requires of its musicians. Classical music in and of itself isn't more important or beneficial. It is beautiful, not because it's old and European but because it's beautiful. Some musicians are fighting a prevailing attitude of "Classical music is dead." On the one hand, we need to revisit how we perpetuate, present, and perform this music. However, I strongly believe that Classical music and other types are compatible and related and rely on each other. I do not subscribe that Classical music is inherently more worthy or culturally relevant than other music. I encourage students to gain technical facility and collaborative skills in their Classical studies but to be daring to try other types: joining a Celtic, Jazz, or Latino ensemble, improvising, composing. Music has all kinds of gateways for exploration, Classical music's being an important one but only one.

### **Other teachers:**

A huge part of my job as a teacher is to present and exhaust my knowledge in the field of violin and music to the student. That being said, when a teacher and student have been together for a number of years, the teacher may deem it appropriate and necessary to graduate the student on to another teacher of his or her approval - for a change of pace, a different approach or emphasis, or a vaster wealth of experience and knowledge. This is far from a punitive course of action. The dialogue should be open long before this transition, and both current teacher and the student's family should be comfortable with the change. In the event that a family decides to transfer independently of the teacher's recommendation, it's polite to inform the current teacher as soon as possible. Educators invest so much into each individual student and want the relationship to be as transparent as possible. Between teachers, we want to respect our colleagues, and baiting students from one another without collegial consultation is unethical.

## APPENDENDIX

### Make-up Lessons From An Economist's Point of View

Article Copyright © 2001 Vicky Barham

I'm a parent of children enrolled in Suzuki music lessons. I'd like to explain to other parents why I feel – quite strongly, actually – that it is unreasonable of we parents to expect our teachers to make up lessons we miss, even if I know as well as they do just how expensive lessons are, and, equally importantly, how important that weekly contact is with the teacher to keeping practicing ticking along smoothly. I think that it is natural for we parents to share the point of view that students should have their missed lessons rescheduled, but if we were to 'walk a mile' in our teachers' shoes, we might change our minds about what it is reasonable for us to expect of our teachers.

Like many parents, I pay in advance for lessons each term. In my mind, what this means is that I have reserved a regular spot in the busy schedules of my sons' teachers. I understand – fully – that if I can't make it to the lesson one week (perhaps my son is sick, or we are away on holiday, or there is some other major event at school) then we will pay for the lesson, but that my teacher is under no obligation to find another spot for me that week, or to refund me for the untaught lesson. And this is the way it should be.

In my 'other life' I am an economist and teach at our local university. Students pay good money to attend classes at the university; but if they don't come to my lecture on a Monday morning, then I am not going to turn around and deliver them a private tutorial on Tuesday afternoon. When I go to the store and buy groceries, I may purchase something that doesn't get used. Days or months later, I end up throwing it out. I don't get a refund from the grocery store for the unused merchandise. If I sign my child up for swimming lessons at the local pool, and s/he refuses to return after the first lesson, I can't get my money back. So there are lots of situations in our everyday lives where we regularly pay in advance for goods or some service, and if we end up not using what we have purchased, we have to just 'swallow our losses'. On the other hand, if I purchase an item of clothing, and get home and change my mind, I can take it back and expect either a refund or a store credit.

So why do I believe that music lessons fall into the first category of 'non-returnable merchandise', rather than into the second case of 'exchange privileges unlimited' (which I think is one of the advertising slogans of an established women's clothing store!)? Speaking now as an economist, I would claim that the reason is that items like clothing are "durable goods" – meaning, they can be returned and then resold at the original price – whereas music lessons are non-durable goods – meaning, once my Monday slot at 3:30 is gone, my son's teacher can't turn around and sell it again. The only way she would be able to give him a lesson later in the week would be if she were to give up time that she had scheduled for her own private life; and that seems pretty unreasonable – I can't think of many employees who would be thrilled if their bosses were to announce that they couldn't work from 3:30 to 4:30 this afternoon, but would they please stay until 6:30 on Thursday, because there will be work for them then!

Many teachers hesitate to refuse our request to shift lesson times (because our busy schedules do change), because unless they keep us parents happy, we will decide to take our child somewhere else for lessons (or to drop musical study), and they will lose part of their income. This is particularly true in areas with lower average income, where it can be particularly difficult to find students. So rather than telling us that 'well, actually, the

**[Make-up Lessons From An Economist's Point of View continued...]**

only time when I'm not teaching and that you can bring your son for lesson is during the time I set aside each week to go for a long soul-cleansing walk, and I can't do that on Monday at 3:30 when you should have turned up', they agree to teach us at a time that really doesn't suit their schedule. Teachers who are 'nice' in this way often, in the long run, end up exhausted, and feeling exploited; they try to draw a line in the sand. However, too few parents ask to switch only when absolutely necessary, and too many parents want lesson times when it suits them this week, which is not the same time that suited last week. If the conflict arises because my child is in the School play, and they have their dress-rehearsal during his lesson time, then I feel that I must choose between the two activities, and if he attends the dress rehearsal my private lesson teacher doesn't owe me anything.

During May, my eldest son will be missing three lessons because he is going to accompany me on a trip to New Zealand to visit his great-grandparents. I do not expect my son's teacher to refund me for those missed lessons, or to reschedule them by 'doubling up' lessons in the weeks before or after our departure. Since there will be lots of advanced notice, I might ask her to consider preparing a special 'practice tape' for that period, or to answer my questions via e-mail, but if she doesn't have the time (the second half of April is going to be really busy for her, and she wouldn't be able to do the tape until more or less the week we left) and so has to refuse, then that's fine. I certainly don't expect her to credit me with three make-up lessons; there is no way for her to find a student to fill a three-week hole in her schedule during our absence. Instead, I hope that she will enjoy the extra hour of rest during those three weeks, and that we will all feel renewed enthusiasm when we return to lessons at the end of the trip.