

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The many ways we practice listening together allow us to co-create experiences of **empathy, connection, and belonging**. Cello lessons provide the setting for collaborative listening and response, so that we can grow our capacity for excellent artistic communication. We stay aware of the window of discomfort, knowing that engaging directly with difficulty is the only way to grow, but doing so when overwhelmed is unsustainable and leads to burnout.

Listening is the primary tool for practicing empathy, and it is at the heart of cello practice. My job as a listener is to give my full attention to the sounds of the musician in front of me, to the physical movements they make while playing, and to the words they use to describe their experience of the music. I want to notice everything so that you can be seen and cared for, and so that we can create paths for your personal healing and musical growth.

Every lesson I teach begins with some form of **warmup**, often taking the form of a scale, etude, or rote exercise. Without the technical demands often found in repertoire, warmup provides a setting for instilling practices of empathy by guiding a student into awareness of their body and the cello, breathing, and listening deeply to the sounds of the instrument. It is here that compassion and critique can interface. The chosen warmup should be easily mastered by the student. And it is my job to ensure they do play it masterfully by demonstrating flawless execution of the foundations of cello playing, such as accurate hand shapes, smooth and resonant bow changes, dynamic contrast, and excellent intonation, to name a few. By setting high standards for easy music, we can trust that ease and excellence will transfer into the more challenging repertoire and set the stage for sustainable growth.

Growing a cello practice will look different for every person and every body. I collaborate with my students to develop techniques and goals that work well for them. But growth does not come without challenges. When we engage in **functional discomfort** - taking on a difficult task without becoming overwhelmed - we can begin to grow. In cello lessons, we work together to identify the particular challenges of a piece or skill, and we invent solutions and practices that work well for each cellist. When a student is struggling, it is my job to be curious about what is causing trouble. I take what I hear and together we generate possible solutions. Growth is not always an easy experience, and it will involve messing up, trial and error, self-reflection, receiving and incorporating criticism, and lots of mindful repetition.

To witness **excellent cello playing** is a remarkable thing. Watching someone truly own a piece they are playing is to see the shadow of a huge amount of time, energy, and work that is not quantifiable just from watching their performance. That is to say, the most substantial work begins only after we have learned the notes and rhythms. The journey from good playing to total ownership of a piece involves engaging with functional discomfort, daily attention to the piece, self-reflection about your playing, incorporating critique from your cello lessons, performing the piece many times under pressure, and getting really clear about the story the music is telling.

I work together with students to mitigate stress and cultivate a supportive learning environment for lessons and at-home practice. In contrast with functional discomfort, **dysfunctional discomfort** is the feeling of physical or emotional collapse when the nervous system is overwhelmed. When we experience an excess of anxiety or stress, those feelings make it difficult to show up fully for cello practice and impossible to learn anything new. A dysregulated nervous system cannot take in new information. Although it is not my job to protect my students from their own discomfort, together we can face the growing pains in ways that are safer and more sustainable.

Broadly speaking, cello lessons are for collaborating on experiences of empathy, healing, and growth. My goal in lessons is to cultivate a safer and supportive space for my students and colleagues to care for and listen to the cello and attune to the wisdom of their bodies. To pursue growth without listening to the body's stress responses leads to dysfunction in cello lessons. When we feel safe and regulated in the pursuit of growth, we can begin to experiment, imagine, and transform.