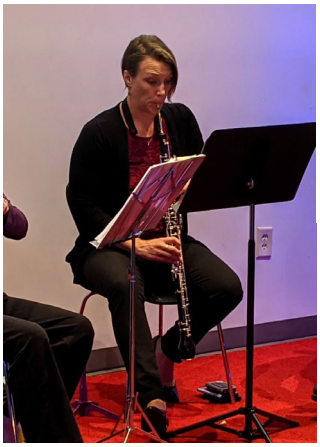
*Liberating Arts*: News from the SLA

# Music Faculty's Care for Their Instruments:
## *A Labor of Love Few See but All Hear*

### *Whitney Holley on Care of the Oboe and English Horn*



Whitney Holley's parents gave her a choice in the fifth grade: take Spanish or play an instrument in the band. Holley chose the latter option, but then had a second choice: select instruments to try. "I picked oboe, flute, and clarinet," she explained. "I couldn't make a sound on the flute and only squeaked on the clarinet, so oboe it was." Like many people, her parents were not familiar with oboes. "They had to look it up in the dictionary because they had never heard of it before."

Holley later learned the English horn, which she points out, "Is neither English nor a horn." She has grown to love both instruments but primarily teaches the oboe unless someone needs an English horn specialization.

Along with playing an instrument comes the inevitable necessity of caring for one. When asked what work she does to maintain her instrument, she gave a list:
1) Play reeds made for your instrument, as it can influence how it vibrates over time. 2) Maintain a relatively consistent temperature, especially when playing. It's made of wood, so extremes cause all sorts of issues. Blowing hot, moist air through a cold instrument is likely to cause it to crack, which is a HUGE problem. 3) Swab out the condensation every time the instrument is played. *Story Continued page 3*

### *Todd Mueller Remains in Tune With His Instruments: On Their Care*

Todd Mueller started musical training on piano in elementary school, but his lack of practice quickly ended a keyboard career. In middle school, he joined a rock-n-roll band. "They told me to play drums, and so I became a drummer," he recollected. His father worked for MCA Records and DJ'd events. "My love for music was kindled by his spinning Top 40 records." By high school band, Mueller became earnest about studying Music.

Mueller has the same humility about his abilities that many musicians exhibit. When asked how long it took to achieve a "basic" mastery of his instruments, he noted that it was after his masters degree. It was also accompanied by incredible burnout. "I decided to only play what I wanted, and I started using all of the tools that I had worked to develop in a more meaningful way," he said.

Since Mueller is a percussionist, he plays numerous instruments. Each requires unique care. Drums are instructive of the complexities. The heads need changed regularly. Different heads have varied characteristics. For example, plastic heads need changed more frequently than calf skin. Although calfskin drum heads are more desired, they pose more problems. "Because calfskin has pores, it is affected by humidity," he explained. Pair that with the fact that the tension determines the pitch of the instrument that has to be in tune, and you get many
*Story Continued page 3*

## *Marc Gilley on the Serious Sustaining of Saxophones*

Like the other music faculty at GGC, Marc Gilley started playing his instrument early and often. Also, like the others, he loved it so much that he pursued a doctorate DMA in music performance. He selected the saxophone. "Once I picked it up I never put it down," he commented.

Gilley demurred when asked about "mastering" his instrument. "That's a tough question because in music there is no final end point," he said. "The cellist Pablo Casals was once asked at 80 years old why he still practiced, and he said it was because he thought he was making progress." Lest one think Gilley were engaged in false modesty, he further noted, "Even now in my daily practice I always have something to refine or develop and I'm constantly working on my conception of how to approach music, performance, and the instrument."

Like all instruments in constant use, the saxophone requires consistent care. Among items that Gilley oversees are oiling and changing the oil in the key work, maintaining the cork and felt, maintaining the cork on neck to accept the mouthpiece, cleaning mouthpieces and keeping the pads dry when stored because the act of playing the instrument introduces a lot of humidity. "I also adjust reeds when needed, which is all the time," he said.

Gilley uses his saxophone to perform not only on campus but also with other groups; right (in center) with *TaxiCab Verses*. *Story Continued, p. 4*

## *Rachael Fischer's Vigilance for Violins and String Instruments*

Rachael Fischer leads the GGC String Ensemble, which has violins, violas, and cellos. She also teaches violin in private lesson settings. As if that were not enough, she can play violin, viola, and used to play flute in band.

She doesn't remember the exact moment when she fell in love with the violin, "but I've always been told that I saw the famous violinist, Itzhak Perlman, on Sesame Street and began asking my parents if I could play the violin." Lessons commenced soon thereafter when she was four years old. By middle school she joined the Chattanooga Youth Symphony Orchestra. She observed the evolution of her musical abilities: "By the time I graduated from high school, I was learning and performing standard violin concertos and solo violin pieces by Bach, which are the usual fare for college music school auditions."

Many musicians develop not just a favorite instrument among many to play but also a preferred model. Fischer's current instrument is a French violin made by Jacques-Pierre Thibout in Paris, ca. 1850 with an English bow by W.E. Hill & Sons. "I have a couple of other instruments that I use for teaching and playing in less-than-ideal circumstances such as outdoor weddings," Fischer said.

One might think that Fischer has achieved a "mastery" of the violin, but she too remains modest and realistic. "Mastery of the violin and any other instrument is a life long process," she observed.

Fischer is grateful that violins do not require the same type of care as wind instruments. "Compared to wind players, whose instruments have tons of tiny screws, rods, and keys, there are very few mechanical parts on a string instrument that have to *Story Continued, p. 4*

## *A Labor of Love Few See but All Hear, continued from page 1*

### *Whitney Holley on Care of the Oboe and English Horn*

4) Don't set it down on the keys. Not only can this bend the keys, but it will cause water to collect in the key holes which causes issues. 5) Oil the wood, inside and out, every few months. 6) Oil the mechanism's keys and attached bits every few months. 7) Until she began apprenticing in repair, she took it for adjustment every year or two. Now Holley does a lot of these things herself.

She advises most musicians to "take an instrument to a technician for general maintenance and adjustment annually because It is a highly specialized and technical discipline." Although she has also studied repair, she observed that musicians tend to adjust their playing to the instrument as they go. Consequently, "that means we don't always notice how hard we are having to work to accommodate a malfunctioning instrument." She said it often comes as a shock to play an instrument after its adjustment because the musician only then realizes how many things were not working right.

Intrigued by instrument repair, Holley began training in 2020 with Ginger Ramsay, who makes Covey Oboes in Blairesville, GA. "Starting in Summer of 2021, I began spending a significant amount of time in the Covey shop doing repairs, getting Ramsay's guidance as I need it and, when needed, using her equipment such as drill presses, belt sanders, and jewelers' drills, which aren't easy to come by on short notice," said Holley. Sometimes she contributes to the creation of new instruments.

Holley is now doing a significant amount of repair on her own. "I am far more confident in my own capabilities both as a musician and as a repair specialist," she observed.

### *Todd Mueller on Percussion Care*

issues, best practices, and trade secrets that have been passed down for centuries."

Although Mueller tries to do most of the maintenance, he suggests that musicians face limitations. "I do not machine metal, so when a timpano is not perfectly round or a rim is bent, I know of two repair shops in America," he observed. One is in Wisconsin and the other is closer in Greenville, S.C. Two repair shops for the entire USA sounds bad, but it gets worse if one wants to buy a new set. "The manufacturer of my timpani was a Father and Son who closed shop after a new industry pushed them out of the once undesirable factory space that they utilized in Denver, Colorado. Now, professional-level instruments are shipped over from Europe. The cost has risen dramatically."

Mueller preserves his timpani with loving care. "I spend time and effort stitching felt for timpani mallets," he said. "I order the felt from Germany and sew it onto bamboo sticks in differing thicknesses and over different cores." This achieves varied articulation and musical feel.

In addition to care for instruments, Mueller cited resources as a need for instructing others in music, especially at Georgia Gwinnett College. "We love what we do and the students seem to value it," he said, "but our biggest challenge is doing what we do in classrooms that were not designed for music." (see photo at right). Almost as an afterthought, he quipped, "please let us know if you have any leads on a benefactor for a music building."

## *Gilley Sustaining Saxophones, Continued from page 2*

Not all aspects of maintenance are easily completed by musicians. Gilley resorts to a repair person when the keys are out of alignment or the keypads do not seal when closed. The spring tension in the keywork may also require adjustment or the springs may need to be replaced. “If the instrument is damaged by a fall or by bumping into something,” Gilley said, “a technician may need to realign the tubes or roll out a dent.” Over years the instrument may need to be overhauled and taken apart completely, which necessitates chemical and physical cleaning, replacing all pads, reassembly, oiling and adjusting. This is labor intensive, requires specialized knowledge and tools, and requires precision at all points.

If one senses that playing and maintaining an instrument are “labors of love,” then it is because they are. Moreover, Gilley wants to share and encourage music. “One of the best things you can do with your time is make music with a group of people. The reward does not depend on the quality of the music produced, only on the time spent with the people around you and it is never too late to start,” he continued. “Pick up an instrument or join a choir and give yourself permission to do it badly, and you will have a great time. You will feel like you are young and growing, no matter your age.”


*Gilley performing with friends and students in November 2023*

## *Fischer Remains Vigilant Over Violin Maintenance, from page 2*

be adjusted constantly.” She changes strings two to three times per year, which she finds “a pretty easy process.” It is important to wipe one’s violin off after every time it is played so that rosin dust doesn't build up on the strings and varnish. She further insures that the bridge is standing up properly, and checks that no open seams exist. They can cause annoying buzzing sounds while playing.

Paying for maintenance is an inevitability. “Shops usually employ luthiers who are string instrument makers and or restorers, and then there are bow makers and restorers,” she said. “I have to get my bow re-haired at least twice a year.” That is not all! “If a seam is open, I'll take it in to be re-glued or if my fingerboard needs to be planed to smooth out any wear, bumps, or grooves that develop over time, that's a job for the shop too,” she clarified. “The violin I currently play on is sturdy, but I tend to take it in to have someone look it over once a year to make sure things are in good shape.” The luthier or restorer will also conduct sound post adjustments to make sure the instrument is at its optimal sound.

When not teaching, mentoring, and guiding music students at GGC, Fischer also sustains an active performance agenda. Invitations to perform have included regional, national, and international events in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Ohio, South Carolina, Croatia, France, Scotland and Slovenia.

Fischer teaches in a Suzuki violin studio in Athens. A past president of the Suzuki Association of Georgia, she is currently co-director of the Atlanta Suzuki Institute. Her encouragement to GGC faculty? “Invite folks to see the ensemble students perform near the end of each semester. The groups of percussion, strings, jazz, and choir keep growing and the students work so hard all year!”

# Irina Escalante-Chernova's Love of Piano

Irina Escalante-Chernova remembers being nine years old and asking her mother if she could play the piano. Soon thereafter she started taking private classes. Two years later, at the age of 11, she entered the vocational art school in choral singing in Camaguey, Cuba.

In 2000, Escalante-Chernova received the "Residence" award at the 27th International Competition of Electro Acoustic Music and Sonic Art, in Bourges, France, for her first electronic piece "La Primavera del Angel." A year later, she earned the bachelor's degree in music composition from the Higher Institute of Arts in Havana, Cuba. She then moved to the United States to earn her masters and doctorate degrees in electro-acoustic music and music composition and music theory.

Escalante-Chernova is understanding about the dedication needed to learn to play the piano, and it comes out of personal experience. "Like any instrument, it requires patience and time to see the results," she commented.

Every instrument has its own unique forms of maintenance. Pianos are no different except that not all are created the same. " I have an electric piano, and I do not need to worry about maintenance of that instrument," Escalante-Chernova observed. Acoustic pianos are another story. "It is difficult to keep pianos in tune, and they can be affected by humidity," she said. "They need to be tuned about once every 6 months, but it also depends on the use that is given to the instrument."

## What About GGC's Instruments and Maintenance?

As a member of the University System of Georgia, Georgia Gwinnett College must observe certain rules about paying for the maintenance of instruments. This means that the institution cannot pay to maintain faculty owned musical instruments. Even if a professor were to bring her or his favorite instrument to play at an on campus event, the faculty member remains responsible. However, that does not mean that GGC pays for the maintenance of no instruments. According to Associate Dean of the Liberal Arts and a music faculty member, Marc Gilley, GGC has two upright pianos used in Music classrooms dedicated to music appreciation and to the newly formed GGC Chorus. GGC also owns an 8 foot baby grand for performances. "We tune these once each semester," said Gilley. "Ideally we would tune them twice a semester because they aren't stored in climate controlled spaces, but with the intensive classroom use and course schedules on campus it isn't possible." There is also a piano for general student use on the first floor of the student center and it is maintained by Student Affairs. The institution also pays to maintain other instruments it owns such as percussion and cellos. According to Todd Mueller, "GGC's first acquisition of instruments happened in 2013-14 when we obtained a set of South African Kudu horns, a small African marimba and four Anlo-Ewe drums from Ghana to help in classroom activities and demonstrations for Music Appreciation." The collection of instruments has increased slowly ever since. "The Grizzly Percussion Club has used RSO funding to purchase several drums, and they now have enough instruments for a small drumline," said Mueller. In 2021 Dean Winterhalter helped us obtain a starter set of steelpans shipped from Trinidad and Tobago. This includes three lead pans, three double seconds and one triple guitar.

**Credits:**

**Photos** furnished by Whitney Holley, Todd Mueller, Rachael Fischer, Marc Gilley, Irina Escalante-Chernova and Richard Rawls
**Text** written by Richard Rawls based on written interviews with the musicians.