

ONCE UPON A TIME

Jennifer Montone's path from ordinary to exceptional inspires students

BY RUOKAI CHEN

For every handful of musicians smitten by an instrument when hearing Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, another group will claim Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. The elementary *Let's Go Band*, by Andrew Ballent, may not be of the same caliber, yet it introduced fourth grader Jennifer Montone to distinctive sounds, thanks to her sister, Michelle. Michelle played a tape recording of her band's concert performance for her young sister and showed her pictures of the instruments. Jennifer chose one she remembers as sounding and looking "pretty": the horn.



A lesson with Jennifer Montone
~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

By the age of twenty-nine, Ms. Montone was principal horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra. It was 2006, and she was one of the youngest principal female brass players in a major orchestra. She joined the Curtis faculty a year later and performed her debut recital at Carnegie Hall in October 2008.

"I've lived a very charmed and fortunate life," she said. Her path is a memorable, yet realistic, story that serves as an inspiration to young musicians.

Ms. Montone came up through school band programs, in northern Virginia. Then, like many who become enamored with the music

profession, she attended a summer festival. As a participant in its Youth Fellowship Program, she observed the National Symphony Orchestra rehearse and perform. "Wow, I can definitely see myself doing this someday," she remembers thinking.

As an undergraduate at the Juilliard School, she began auditioning for orchestras, like many of her peers. After advancing through rigorous rounds, she won a position in the New Jersey Symphony. Then came associate principal in Dallas and principal in St. Louis.

However, her outlook on making music shifted after a car accident in 2004 left her with a broken jaw and an asymmetrical face. To recover Ms. Montone required months of surgery, physical therapy, and acupuncture. She realized, for the first time, the extent to which her identity and her instrument were intertwined. Without her ability to play the horn, she would have to grow stronger and rely on another source of personal fulfillment, to discover that it was "worth being alive even if this particular talent wasn't able to be accessed."

It took several months for Ms. Montone to recover and resume playing the horn at a professional level. "It was so much more of a joy," she said, "because I didn't feel like it was quite as necessary to [define] me." During performances she felt exhilarated by the sheer ability to make music, which hadn't been at the forefront of her thoughts for years, even before her accident.

"That's actually when I won the Philadelphia audition," she said. "Maybe there's fate in there somehow?"

Influences and Inspiration

Ms. Montone regards Edwin Thayer, her teacher through high school, and Julie Landsman, her teacher at Juilliard, as significant influences in developing her talent. "Edwin Thayer ... talk about committed, completely devoted to everything that he did, making sure that he was the best possible," she said. "His standard for himself is so high, and that was a really good inspiration early on."

She describes Ms. Landsman's teaching style as "very motherly," noting the devotion Ms. Landsman had for her students. "You know that she is there for you, to the death, and, in that vein, she'll tell you absolutely everything that you'll need."

Ms. Montone's own teaching methods reflect her admiration for former teachers. Current students describe her teaching as energetic, supportive, and driven. In the moment, she will excitedly invent new words or phrases, or draw upon onomatopoeia to accurately explain the sound she wants to convey. In addition she seeks to craft a relationship with students that extends beyond music.

"[She] isn't just concerned about me as a horn player or a musician, she is concerned about me as a person," Rebekah Daley, a third-year student, said by e-mail. "She is my teacher ... but she can also seem like a big sister or friend."

Ms. Montone expects incoming students to exhibit a level of intensity and devotion that mirrors her own. "I think the most important thing is for everyone involved to stay as open and dedicated as possible. I feel that teaching at a school like this is the greatest responsibility one could have," she said, "as great a responsibility as playing principal in a major orchestra."

"She rarely misses [our] performances," Ms. Daley said of her teacher, "and does her best to attend anything we tell her about."

Identifying the dedication is the first task in developing a student in Ms. Montone's studio. First-year students will inevitably arrive with different approaches to horn-playing. Some may prefer a lush sound while others may prefer a brassy one, for instance.

Ms. Montone relies on her own versatility as she personalizes each student's education, with the hope that her students "will emerge as the most well-balanced player possible." While working on Mozart's Fourth Horn Concerto with third-year student Courtney Prizrenac, Ms. Montone encouraged Ms. Prizrenac to construct an individual interpretation by asking her to envision a "nice place in [her] hometown." Ms. Prizrenac drew upon the imagery and atmosphere of a downtown



'Say what you mean, be respectful, but just say it. People deserve the respect of [hearing] what you think.'

cathedral in Toronto and noticed a substantial improvement in her approach to the concerto. She describes her approach to horn as methodical and specific, but adds that Ms. Montone "makes sure I'm always keeping my own mental picture."

Ms. Montone emphasizes seeing each student weekly, allowing her to develop strong individual bonds with every one. This connection also enables her to extend and fine-tune her personalized instruction and evaluate her students at *any* moment. "Each person is a constantly changing being, and especially a constantly changing player," she said. "I think it's most important to be in the moment with them, as much as possible, so that whatever the challenges for them that particular day, you can help them problem-solve that particular issue."

When students begin their studies, Ms. Montone stresses building a solid foundation of technique through études and exercises, encouraging students to master seamless transitions across registers and develop a consistent, beautiful tone throughout the dynamic range. Through this process, she said, "the repertoire is reborn again technically."

As students progress into their third and fourth years, Ms. Montone tailors her teaching style to reflect the specific interests and needs of students, in addition to emphasizing initiative and self-critique. If a student expresses a liking for contemporary and chamber music, for instance, she tailors her teaching to reflect those interests, with the

belief that most aspects of playing the horn can be covered through the repertoire.

"She encourages me to come up with a plan," said Ms. Daley. "I'll make a list of what I think I need to work on in a semester or month by month, and she'll make adjustments. One semester I may focus on auditions and excerpts, and another, I'll focus on being a soloist."

By the time students graduate from Curtis and begin their careers, Ms. Montone hopes they will have learned how to interact with colleagues and conductors on a professional level, especially if they are appointed to leadership positions. She encourages her students to discover their own personalities in developing leadership qualities.

"I think that every person has a different personal tendency in how they deal with others, and I think the main thing they'll want to come out of school with is a strong knowledge of what their tendencies are, and what kind of dangers they might have in terms of that tendency in professional situations.

"I was too soft," she said, recalling her early professional experiences. "That's problematic because it's not strong and honest enough. So that was something that I needed to figure out: Say what you mean, be respectful, but just say it. People deserve the respect of [hearing] what you think."

It is rare to reach the pinnacle of any profession at such a young age, and rarer yet to have the opportunity to develop and hone the talents of students at Curtis, so that they may become the highest-caliber musicians of their generation.

"I'm so thankful to be where I am. I want to do justice to the principal horn chair of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mason Jones, Nolan Miller—huge shoes to fill," said Ms. Montone. "I want to continue growing and ... [be] worthy of the chair." ☺

Ruokai Chen, from Hockessin, Del., is a clarinet student of Donald Montanaro and entered Curtis in 2006.