

MNjcc Suzuki Program Teacher Bios – 2026-27 season

Gretchen Paxson Abberger – Artistic Director Emeritus of MNjcc Suzuki Program, Co-Director of MNjcc Suzuki Summer Music Camp, Violin, Viola, Ensembles, and Manager of Adult Music Programming



Gretchen Paxson Abberger holds a Bachelor of Liberal Arts from Bennington College, a bachelor's degree in Music Performance from the Manhattan School of Music, and a master's degree in Historical Performance from the Mannes College of Music in New York City, as well a 2-year Long Term Certificate in Suzuki training from the School for Strings in New York City studying with Louise Behrend. Further teacher development has been short-term training courses with the following:

Ronda Cole, Daphne Hughes, Allen Lieb, Carol Smith, Ed Sprunger, Carey Beth Hockett, Brian Lewis, Sera Smolen, and Alice Kay Kanack. Gretchen taught at the Manhattan School of Music prep department, and Louise Behrend's School for Strings in NYC before moving to Toronto in 1994. Since then she has been free-lancing, teaching privately, and as a guest teacher at Suzuki workshops throughout the GTA. She has also taught for the Southwestern Ontario Suzuki Institute, and Camp Sparrow. As a guest teacher at winter workshops, Gretchen has taught all levels for RCM, Hamilton Suzuki Program, Etobicoke Suzuki Music, and in Ottawa for Suzuki Programs of Laura Nerenberg, and Leslie Wade. She teaches all levels at the North York Suzuki School of Music, and was Artistic Director for the Miles Nadal Jcc Suzuki Program from 1999-2024. This coming season Gretchen is looking forward to handing the reins of Artistic Director of the program to Kate Shaner, and taking on a new role as Emeritus Artistic Director, while continuing to teach in the program, and oversee the adult music programming. In 2010 Gretchen founded and directed the MNjcc Suzuki Summer Music and Arts Camp, which she will continue to co-direct alongside Kate Shaner.

In 2002, she founded Thanks to Dr. Suzuki Concert Performances, a charitable organization whose mission is to create community among students and teachers of Toronto area Suzuki schools in a yearly collaborative gala concert. Gretchen approaches Suzuki philosophy from two sides of the Suzuki triangle, as a teacher, and also as a parent of two adult children who learned violin by the Suzuki method studying at the MNjcc Suzuki Program.

Philip Clark – Collaborative Pianist



Philip studied piano and harpsichord at Oberlin College, while majoring in philosophy. In his teens and twenties, he played jazz piano with various ensembles. Since 2002 he has taught philosophy at U of T. Both Phil's children studied at the MNjcc Program, son Sam on violin, and daughter Gwendolyn on cello. He became an accompanist for the Suzuki Program in 2014.

Debra Cutler - Violin & Ensembles



Debra Cutler has enjoyed teaching for the MNJCC Suzuki program over the past 14 years. Though she has devoted much of her time recently toward raising her three young children (two of whom study the violin through the program), Debra continues to love teaching and sharing a love of music with her students.

Debra received her Bachelor's degree in Violin Performance from Indiana University and a Master of Arts in Music Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She studied Suzuki pedagogy at Indiana University, and received her Suzuki Books 1-8 Certification through the School for Strings in New York City. She has also taught various early childhood music classes and received her New York State Teaching Certification in Music for grades K-12. Debra has appeared as a solo and orchestral performer in Cleveland, Ohio, Interlochen, Michigan, Bloomington, Indiana, Jerusalem, New York City and Toronto.

Andrew Dawydchak - Violin & Fiddling



Andrew Dawydchak (David-chak) has demonstrated a passion for performing and commitment for teaching. He has a Bachelor of Music Degree (Violin) from Humber College and has completed Suzuki Teacher Training Units 1-5. Andrew has demonstrated how his classical training as

a Suzuki student can intertwine with a passion for folk, pop, Canadian fiddle, Celtic, country and jazz music. Andrew has studied with some of North America's premier players and teachers. He notably credits Margot Jewell and Drew Jurecka on shaping his playing and teaching style. While initially volunteering to teach the first fiddle class in 2013 to the students at Etobicoke Suzuki Music, the class has since cemented itself as part of ESM's Enrichment Classes and continues on!

Andrew is no stranger to the stage. Winner of many top honour fiddle awards since 2005 including being a Canadian Open Finalist and Jr. Open Champion, Ontario Open, Southwestern Open, Northern Ontario Open, Maritimes and many other categories. Andrew has had the opportunity to share the stage, record and produce with countless musicians spanning across many genres including Grammy and Juno nominated artists. When not performing or teaching Andrew can be found perfecting his golf swing or stopping pucks on the ice. Go Leafs go!

Nancy Lokan – Violin, Viola, Chamber Music, String Orchestra



Nancy Lokan started her violin studies in Ottawa, studying with Walter Prystawski, former concertmaster of the National Arts Centre Orchestra. She started playing professionally in solo and chamber music as a teenager. After her degree in music at the University of Toronto she joined the Canadian Forces String Ensemble based in Ottawa. After moving back to Toronto Nancy began exploring the Suzuki method of teaching while raising her three children. All three of her children have grown up in the Suzuki world at the MNjcc and beyond, and have embraced music. Currently one of her grandsons participates in the MNjcc Suzuki Program. Nancy teaches privately, and group and ensemble classes for the MNjcc Suzuki Program.

Rob MacDonald - Guitar



Sincere performances of bold and engaging repertoire have established guitarist Rob MacDonald as one of Canada's most exciting performers of new music. As both a soloist and chamber musician his persistent quest for fresh repertoire regularly leads to the creation of new works and the presentation of rarely heard pieces.

He has performed with Soundstreams, Madawaska String Quartet, Canadian Opera Company, Amadeus Choir, Continuum, Talisker Players, Contact Contemporary Music, Tapestry New Opera and Toca Loca. Alongside Tracy Anne Smith, he is co-founder of ChromaDuo, an ensemble actively commissioning, premiering, and performing new repertoire internationally. Their debut recording, Hidden Waters, has been called 'nothing short of inspirational' (Simon Powis, Classical Guitar Review) and 'modern guitar music at its most powerful, extending the form and substance of the guitar to give the listener an almost orchestral experience' (Kirk Albrecht, Minor 7th). He teaches at The University of Toronto, The North York Suzuki School and The MNjcc Suzuki Program.

Elizabeth Morris - Chamber Music



Elizabeth Morris, viola, B.Mus (perf), originally from Edmonton, began studying the viola at age 12 in the Edmonton Public School System, then continuing at University of Alberta, University of Western Ontario, the String Quartet Institute in Kingston, and the Banff School of Fine Arts. Recent studies have been at the Maggini Quartet Chamber Music Courses in Yorkshire, UK. As well as playing in the Tost String Quartet, she is currently principal violist with Orchestra Toronto. As a freelance musician, she has played with many ensembles including the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, Hamilton

Philharmonic, Canadian Opera Company, the Royal Winnipeg and National Ballets, Stratford and Shaw Festivals, and was principal violist for Livent's productions of musicals presented at the Toronto Centre for the Arts. Elizabeth has also been active in the visual arts, creating watercolour and pencil crayon miniatures. An avid bread baker, she writes about it as well as humanitarian and environmental concerns in "blog from OUR kitchen". She also maintains the website for Peacemakers Trust, the Canadian charitable organization for research and education in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Rebecca Morton - Cello



Cellist Rebecca Morton began her studies at the age of six at the Hamilton Suzuki School and went on to study at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto with David Hetherington where she was awarded the Gold Medal for achieving the highest string mark in Canada. Continuing at the Eastman School of Music, she was the recipient of a six year scholarship and graduated with highest distinction receiving Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees under Paul Katz and Steven Doane. Since graduating, she has won numerous scholarships and awards including semi-finalist in the 2003 Eckhardt-Gramatte

String Competition.

Currently living and freelancing in Toronto, Rebecca has taught extensively in the Toronto area as well as at McMaster University.

Lenny Ranallo - Guitar



Drawing inspiration from Bach to Coltrane and beyond, American guitarist [Leonard Ranallo](#) blurs the boundaries between performer, composer, and improviser. Praised for his “*sensational*” performances (WXVU), Ranallo is equally at home on classical and electric guitar, bringing his unique voice to concert stages across North America and Europe. Recent highlights include appearances at the University of St. Andrews (UK), the Peabody Conservatory (US), the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (CA), and BBC Radio Scotland.

An avid chamber musician, Ranallo regularly performs with [Quartet Malamatina](#), pianist Yolanda Tapia, and [The Happenstancers](#), hailed as “*Toronto’s Chamber Music Innovators*” (Ludwig Van Toronto). At just 17, he made his orchestral debut as a concerto soloist with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. A passionate advocate for new music, he collaborates with composers from the US, Canada, and the UK to expand the repertoire for both classical and electric guitar.

Ranallo is a dedicated educator, formerly on faculty at the Peabody Preparatory, Swarthmore College and the Interlochen Arts Academy. In 2024, he launched the

Suzuki guitar program at the MNjcc Suzuki School and established the Ranallo Guitar Studio in Toronto.

Elena Spanu – Violin, Improvisation, Chamber Music



Elena Spanu started playing the violin at the tender age of three. She began her studies at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto Ontario after signaling to her mother she wanted 'that' while pointing to the television screen of children playing the violin. She continued to develop her skills at Western University where she received a Bachelor of Musical Arts. It is there that

she discovered her interest in Baroque violin performance and moved on to pursue an Artists Diploma in the subject while at the University of Toronto under the direction of Jeanne Lamon and other members of Tafelmusik.

Elena currently holds the chair of principal second violin with the North York Concert Orchestra and plays regularly with the Niagara Symphony. As a freelancer, she also plays with orchestras and chamber groups in and out of Toronto. Elena has a keen ability to play sensitively with other musicians. She enjoys using this aspect of her skillset in aid-ing and fulfilling the powerful collective music making of an ensemble.

Elena has always enjoyed listening to the sounds and grooves of folk music, finding it to be uplifting and energizing. The isolation period of the pandemic created a space for her to master her favourite tunes and explore the genres of Old Time and Irish music.

Thanks to the prominence of virtual environments, she has had the opportunity to study under the guidance of exceptional artists and composers such as Patrick Ourceau, Judy Hyman and Rayna Gellert in the pursuit of these new genres. One of Elena's favourite pastimes is attending jams as she enjoys connecting with other musicians, learning new tunes, meeting new people and learning their stories through music. She is often inspired by people of all ages and stages of life who are fiercely dedicated to their craft and love what they do.

Elena is a trained Suzuki violin instructor and Creative Ability Development coach. She directs the Toronto Suzuki Studio and is a faculty member at the North York Suzuki

School of Music. She enjoys teaching music to both children and adults and strongly believes that one is never too old or too late to learn an instrument. Her goal as a teacher is to nurture her students to be their own creative guides. Through their instruments they learn the power of discipline, commitment and to trust and share their voices through their expression, creativity and connection to their community.

Yolanda Tapia - Collaborative Pianist & Music Theory



[Yolanda Tapia](#) is a multifaceted musician, international pianist, educator, vocal coach, and Fulbright Scholar currently based in Toronto. She is actively engaged with institutions like the University of Toronto, El Sistema Toronto, and the Community Music Schools of Toronto. Past roles as a staff pianist and collaborative pianist include the Instituto Superior de Música in Veracruz, and Western University.

As a member of Obsidiana Duo, this year Yolanda has embarked on national tours with Prairie Debut and Debut Atlantic alongside her duo partner, Camila Montefusco.

Mexican-born, Yolanda has performed as a soloist with the Xalapa Symphony Orchestra and CSU Symphony Orchestra, obtaining awards from Mexico's Chamber Music National Competition, the CSU concerto competition, Xalapa Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition, and Kiwanis. She has delivered piano and collaborative piano masterclasses at the University of Veracruz, FIM Loja in Ecuador, Cambrian College, and presented lecture recitals at CollabFest2021, Latin American Chamber Players, Western University, and El Canto Online.

Her commitment to the music community is evident through co-founding [collaborativepianist.info](#) and [Cybercollab 2021](#). As an orchestral and chamber musician, she has performed with various ensembles, including a residency with Holland America's Lincoln Center Stage Piano Quartet. Yolanda holds a Bachelor of Music from the University of Veracruz, a Master of Music degree from Colorado State University and a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Western Ontario. When not performing, she delights in experiencing live music across a spectrum of genres, ranging from heavy metal and punk to rock and jazz.

Natasha Zado Fox - Associate Director of MNjcc Suzuki Program, Cello, Early Childhood Education, Suzuki Partnerships



Natasha is a passionate cello, music theory, and early childhood music teacher who aims to help her students find their musical voice through a solid foundation of technique and a love of music. Currently, she teaches cello and Suzuki Early Childhood Education classes at the Etobicoke Suzuki Music School and Miles Nadal JCC Suzuki Music programs. She has taught at a number of music programs, most notably the Miles Nadal JCC Music and Arts Summer Camp, as well as El Sistema and The Hammer Band, two social programs which bring free music lessons to students in underserved communities. In addition to her teaching responsibilities she has an active career as a performer, freelancing at weddings and other events in Toronto.

Natasha is a certified cello and early childhood music teacher in the Suzuki method, and has completed ECC and Cello Unit 1 with both Catherine Walker and Dr. David Evenchick, Units 2-8 with Dr. David Evenchick, Units 9-10 with Dr. Shu-Yi Scott, Units 1-3 Overview with Sally Gross, Cello Practicum with Dr. David Evenchik, as well as SECE Stage 1 with Sharon Jones. At Wilfrid Laurier University, she enjoyed facilitating Supplemental Instruction sessions for the first-year music theory course, as well as tutoring private students.

Natasha is a graduate of Wilfrid Laurier University, and holds an Honours Bachelor of Music Degree in History, Theory, and Critical Analysis, with a concentration in Music Theory. During her time at Laurier, she studied cello with Dr. Katie Schlaikjer of the Penderecki String Quartet. On top of her studies in music theory, she regularly performed in solo and chamber music recitals, as well as orchestra concerts and opera performances as principal cello.