

MEET A MUSICIAN

CHRISTINE MARTIN THE VIOLA PERSONALITY

In the orchestra world, it's often joked that a musician's instrument matches their personality. Christine (Tina) Martin, a North Carolina Symphony violist since 1972, laughs as she lists off some examples — the percussionists and double-bassists are the jokesters, the violinists are the extroverts, the trumpeters are a bit wild. And the violists? "The viola personality is more mellow, more reserved" she says.

"I love that the violists get to hold things together with the inner parts; we unite the high and the low," Tina continues. "We have our moments to shine, but we don't like the limelight all the time."

So it makes sense that Tina chats at least as much about her children's accomplishments as her own. She is the mother of three grown daughters: Victoria is a schoolteacher, Rebecca is a psychotherapist, and Ashley is a violinist with a busy private teaching studio.

All three of her children "grew up in the orchestra," says Tina, recalling that she would often bring them along to Symphony rehearsals when they were young. "They were so good — they would just sit there quietly with their coloring books!" she remembers. Her youngest daughter, Ashley, followed in her mother's footsteps, studying music at Tina's alma mater, the University of Michigan. (These days, when Ashley is at NCS rehearsals, it's as a substitute violinist.)

Although Ashley is the only daughter who went into music professionally, Tina proudly recalls the musical talent that each of the girls showed from an early age. That, in fact, is a trait going back generations in her family. "My grandmother played honky-tonk piano for silent movies," Tina explains. "She didn't read a note of music, but she must have had perfect pitch. She would watch the movie screen and just play along!"

Both of Tina's parents were classical music lovers; her Italian father, in particular, was an opera buff. Classical records were always spinning in their home outside of Boston, and the family would play "drop the needle" — one person starting a record at an arbitrary spot and the rest hurrying to call out the name of the work. Tina began piano lessons at age seven and says that she knew "from day one" that she would grow up to be a musician.

When she was in fourth grade, Tina found her dad's old violin in the attic and was immediately captivated. But at her Catholic school, students didn't begin string instruments until the sixth grade. "My mother had to work hard to convince the nuns!" she laughs.

A few years later, it was one of the nuns who set out to convince Tina to trade in her violin for the larger, lower viola. The night before auditions for the youth symphony in Boston, Tina agreed that she would try auditioning on both instruments. Even though she barely knew the viola clef — violists read music from their own unique clef, positioned in between the treble and bass clefs — Tina was told that she was a natural.



Three generations of musicians: Tina (left) with her daughter Ashley and granddaughter Abbey, both violinists.

She was skeptical about the switch, but admits that she did find the deeper tone of the viola more pleasing to the ear. Plus, she jokes, "I never liked the E string. One time when I was tuning, it snapped and hit me in the face. It was like a razor blade!" (The E string — the highest-pitched and thinnest of the violin's four strings — is replaced by the lower C string on the viola.)

Playing in the youth symphony was a dream for Tina. "My whole life revolved around Saturdays, the day I had youth symphony rehearsals!" she says. "All week, I yearned for Saturday to come!"

Now, after nearly 50 years with the North Carolina Symphony, Tina says she still feels that sense of anticipation and excitement when she's playing her favorite orchestral repertoire, like works by Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, and Strauss. The appreciation from the audience as they stand and cheer keeps her motivated — and she feels especially proud of the impact the Symphony makes on its youngest audiences through the education program. "Kids fall in love with music when they experience it live," she says.

Tina has seen the evidence firsthand. About 25 years ago, on a trip to Asheville for an Education Concert, she made a quick run to the mall to buy a new white blouse for the performance. When she mentioned to the saleswoman that she was a musician in the Symphony, the woman's eyes lit up. "She told me that she remembered seeing me in the Symphony when we performed at her elementary school when she was a child," Tina recalls. "I couldn't believe it!"

As one of the longest-tenured NCS musicians, Tina has collected many Symphony memories over the years. Her home in Raleigh, meanwhile, is filled with collections of other types. The dining room holds miniature spoons from all over the world (Tina has been an avid traveler ever since studying abroad in Vienna during college) and the walls of her kitchen are lined with photographs taken on her trips (she taught herself to master the camera and loves capturing scenery).

And, she always has little collections of items ready to give to her three children and five grandchildren the next time she sees them — newspaper clippings they'll find interesting, jewelry or clothing that will look great on them. It's not surprising that Tina is always helping others to shine. It's her viola personality!

This season, Tina is most looking forward to playing Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, April 30 - May 3. For tickets and details, visit ncsymphony.org or call 877.627.6724.