

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 16: French Horn with Kelli Reynolds

September 1, 2020

Hey, I'm Julie Rose. Welcome to *Love What You Love*. I'm an author, creator, and enthusiast, and I've always been fascinated by the things that people are super into, because they're always a unique expression of curiosity, and joy, and wonder. So every week I'll introduce you to another fascinating human who's into really interesting stuff.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! Right out of the gate I have to say a huge thank you to Slo Lyons, Ambermom1975, and KatrianaGames. Reading your reviews on Apple Podcasts this week made such a huge difference. I mean, yes, rating and reviewing helps other folks find the podcast, but oh my gosh, you guys know what the world is like; these reviews 100% revived my flagging spirit. Thank you, truly. Thank you.

Speaking of reviving a flagging spirit, let's meet this week's guest. Kelli Reynolds has a BA in Music and a Master's in French Horn Performance and has been performing for almost 20 years. She's absolutely passionate about music; playing it, listening to it, and getting kids excited about it. In this conversation recorded back in June, we talk about her French horn origin story, the origin story of the French horn, performing during COVID, arts education, and so much more. So find out why Kelli loves the French horn, and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hello, Kelli! Thank you so much for joining me today.

Kelli: Thanks for having me.

Julie: I am very excited to talk with you. You've got a BA in Music from Cal Poly, and a Master's in Music from UC Santa Barbara in the French horn. You've been performing for over 18 years, so I'm really interested to know, why the French horn? What is it about the French horn that got you excited and has you performing and getting degrees in music?

Kelli: It's funny because as a kid I didn't start out thinking, "This is my favorite instrument and that's what I want to play!" I think as a kid I wanted to play a lot of instruments and I was motivated by just that and wanting to learn a lot of instruments. So, when I was in sixth grade I said, "I want to be in the orchestra. I want to play the violin!" And so my parents got me a violin, and I played in the elementary orchestra, and I enjoyed it.

Meanwhile, I said, "I also want to play piano." So I played the piano, and then went to middle school, and in seventh grade they said, "We have a band, and who would like to join the band?" And I said, "Well, me! I want to play all the instruments." First of all, I said to my mom, "Okay mom, I want to play the flute." My mom said, "Kelli, you're playing piano, you're playing violin, you're doing fine. If you want to play flute, if they have a flute, you can play the flute."

So I show up and I said, "Do you have a flute? I'd like to play the flute." And they said, "No, but here's a French horn." And I went home with this big horn and my mom says, "That is not a flute." [laughs] So that's how I started to play the French horn.

[clip of Kelli performing solo from Tchaikovsky - Symphony No. 2]

I don't know, I just loved the sound of it. I didn't know then how much I would love the sound of the French horn and that it is in all the most beautiful parts of any musical piece. I mean, this is totally an opinion, and of course I have so much appreciation for all the other instruments, but I definitely have a bias towards the horn. In any movie, in a part that's emotional, or exciting, it's the French horn! It's just a really special sound. It can be somber, it can be uplifting, it can be heroic, and I'm lucky to play it, or try to anyway.

Julie: I have so many questions. Why did you want to play all the instruments? Where did that come from? What was that impulse? Did you grow up in a really musical family? What was that about?

Kelli: No, I had a teacher, and she could play so many instruments. She played violin, and piano, and she plays the hammered dulcimer, just a lot of different, wonderful instruments, and she'd sing. I just thought that was so cool. I wanted to do that too. And not just specifically those, but I wanted to be able to play a lot.

It's funny now because that's not the case for me at all. I think I've lost my piano knowledge. I can plunk a little. We had to do it in college, and I can help my kids with their piano lessons. But yeah, it's always a teacher in your life that's inspirational in some way, and in different ways, especially my French horn private teachers. They have held some of the dearest spots in my heart throughout my life. Teachers can be, of course, very inspirational.

Julie: What was it about playing and music that made you want to get degrees in it, an advanced degree in it? And what goes into getting an advanced degree in music?

Kelli: I look back and I often think, "What led me down this path? What were my original intents when I set out to be an adult in this world?" I think that I was always really involved with music. I was in the marching band; I was in the pit orchestra in all the theater productions. Also, in high school, we traveled. With my band in Texas we went to New York and played in Carnegie Hall, and a lot of that was so inspirational to me, and so powerful, and the best moments of my life, and the camaraderie with people.

So when I was thinking about going to college, that's what I wanted to do. When you're applying to be a music major you have to go for auditions, and in some cases, like at UCLA, they have you do a theory and musicianship test at the same time. And I was clueless. I hadn't done any of that before going to college, so UCLA was a very stressful experience. I didn't realize at that time what went into a music major. Going to Cal Poly just felt like home. I'm analytical in a lot of ways, and I'm an overthinker, and all of those things. When I made that decision, I'm not sure that I thought about it so much as I just, kind of, followed my heart. I think that's why I wanted to be a music major, first of all, and why I chose that place.

Cal Poly was wonderful. It was a small program. Other universities, where if you're studying music you'll probably get a Bachelor of Music and it's more performance oriented. At Cal Poly it was a lot of history, and we did the theory, and musicianship, and all of those things, but also a lot of performance. Because it was small, I played in every group. I'd start at 8am with theory and end at 10pm playing in the wind orchestra there. There were long days and wonderful people; wonderful teachers, wonderful friends.

And come to the end of that, you have a choice when you're a music major of, "What do I do now? Do I continue and get a credential and be a music teacher? Or do I want

to try to be a performer?" For me, I don't know why I didn't pursue being a teacher except I was just excited to keep playing and to keep learning about the horn. I wanted to do the master's degree. I tried for UCLA again and got in there, and UCSB, I tried two places. I got into both, but again, it was a feeling, and I was excited about my teacher at UCSB, and also it was a smaller program there. I think I was drawn to that because of the way Cal Poly was. It felt like a family.

That was a Master's in Music, MM, and there's a lot more research and writing. The classes that I chose, I've always been interested in history of music, and so I would choose ethnomusicology, music of the world. I would choose those types of classes. I'm not as much drawn to theory, though it is important. And then musicianship, you have to do more of that. That's ear training.

Julie: So when you got to your master's program, and part of it was research, was there a specific historical era that you researched, or a theory that you got deep into? What was your focus in your master's program?

Kelli: The focus of my master's was French horn performance at that point. I was also a graduate assistant there, and so a lot of my duties were that I would run the freshman undergrads in their French horn studio. So, teaching privately, running a group of horn players, that was my main task. But I was also really interested in where things come from, kind of the ancestry of an instrument.

I took this one class, organology, and it was the classification of musical instruments and how you would organize them within, like, a museum. It was really cool because there were only maybe six of us, sitting around a table, inside this great collection of historical musical instruments. What she did for one of these projects is she just set down an instrument in front of us and said, "You have to tell me everything about this instrument. All you know is what's in front of you." In my case I was given, like, a sheep's horn, but it had art on it so I ended up in the art library because of the art on it.

Julie: Oh, I love that. That sounds so interesting. It's like anthropology, and art, and music all in one.

Kelli: Yes, I love that kind of thing where multiple subjects cross over and you're learning about the past.

Julie: I love it. Speaking of the past, when did the French horn... When was it developed, and what era of music is it most prominent in?

Kelli: It's not really from France. A lot of times we'll just call it a horn and people will say, "Well, what kind of horn?" French horn. So, it's a European instrument, and it derives from... You know, back hundreds of years ago they didn't have cell phones so they used a ram's horn or a sheep's horn to blow on to send a signal, "Hey, dinner's ready." And those turned into these metal hunting horns that you see in a lot of pictures of hunting expeditions or whatever. They would send calls, you know, "Ba-duh ba-duh! I hear a rabbit!" [laughs] I don't know what they were saying, but for hunting, right?

So eventually those were curved so they could send the message backwards. Then 1600...? Gosh, don't quote me. They wanted to use the sound of the hunting horn and that pastoral element in an opera. I think that was in France. So, that was the first time it was in an orchestra. They're like, "Hey! This works, so let's use this in more pieces." So originally it was just one tube, curved. It's conical, meaning it's tapered, so at the top it's thinner, at the mouth, and then it gets bigger as it goes on. Other instruments

can be cylindrical where they're just one size most of the way like a trumpet is cylindrical. Trombone is cylindrical.

But a French horn and, I think, a tuba, they're conical instruments. The flare of the horn bell became interesting because there weren't originally valves on the horn. There weren't keys, so people used their hands to change notes. So if you cover the inside of the bell it'll make it more flat, so it makes it lower. And then as you open it makes it higher. You can play different notes just using the hand. They discovered that.

So for a long time these horns - we call them now natural horns, and people still play them today - they were used in orchestras. A lot of repertoire is written for... The horn parts are written for the notes that you can play just on the horn just by moving your lips. When you're playing a brass instrument, you are not putting down keys like you would on a flute or a clarinet. You are changing the pitch by changing the size of your embouchure, the hole in your lips as you're buzzing.

And the sound is made by the buzzing of the lips. You know, the raspberry sound. [buzzes lips] But the size of that, when you change it, it changes the notes on the instrument. So that changed the notes, but also, on the horn you can also... as you're playing one pitch you can change it to be lower with your hand. Eventually that... Okay, if you have one length of tubing, you're going to be in one key. So if you want to change the key, that's kind of hard.

So in some early pieces, the horn will just bow out at some point because they modulated to another key. Well, the horn can't modulate because it's pitched in one key. So eventually they started adding piping that you could take out and grab a bigger one, or grab a smaller one, so you could change the key of the instrument. Also they would have two horns pitched in one key and two horns in another key.

So in a lot of Mozart, say, you'll have four horns but it'll be two in one key and two in another key. That went on... even through Beethoven you see a lot of that, so through the 1800s. Eventually, "Well, this is kind of cumbersome to carry around all these different slides, so let's put it all in one horn." That's when you start seeing the valves, and what the valves do is send the air down different length pipes, and that helps you play those notes. Now we even have rows of valves where you can send them in all different which ways.

It also makes the sound better than if you're covering your bell. When you cover your bell it makes kind of a brassier or a more closed-off sound, as you would imagine because you're closing it off. It has a better tone quality when you can play all the notes in a row with an open bell. But that's why we have to have our hands in the bell, because that is changing the pitch of things. As we're playing with people and you need to change your pitch depending on the note you can cover or open... depending on where you're falling, or how it's feeling, because you want to play in tune with other people.

Julie: What's your favorite piece of music that features the French horn?

Kelli: I think Richard Strauss is one of the best. He has two horn concerti and they are amazing. They're kind of the go-to for... especially his first concerto is, kind of, the go-to for a lot of French horn players for showmanship. I love Dvořák and the New World Symphony. That's... I don't know, it's one of the most beautiful duets in the second movement. Just so many.

Julie: So when you were doing your master's, did you have, like, a performance recital that you had to do at the end?

Kelli: Yes.

Julie: What did you perform for that?

Kelli: We had recitals that we could participate in that were department-wide and you could sign up to be a part of the recitals. There were plenty of opportunities to practice performing. And then at the end of my junior year I did a joint recital with my best friend. She's a cellist. She and I shared one, so that was great as juniors to be able to practice doing that. And then at the end of my senior year, you have a senior recital. And because we were Bachelor of Arts, different people had different options. Some people did education projects if they were going to be a teacher, or some wrote papers. Mine was a recital.

My senior year I did an unaccompanied solo piece by Frøydis Wekre, and that was cool. I was playing at a church and played it from the balcony. And people sat down and there's nobody in front of them, and I stood up in the top and I just started playing.

Julie: Oh my gosh! That's dramatic. I love that.

Kelli: And I think I played a Mozart concerto. Those are great. The coolest piece I played on that recital was written by one of my professors, Craig Russell. He wrote this horn rhapsody for Richard Todd, who's a famous horn soloist. So, that's was really special. I still... I think I'm the only one that's ever played that, and I have it here at home. And I had two master's recitals, and some Strauss.

[clip of Kelli performing Strauss - Horn Concerto No. 2 in E flat]

Julie: So what is it about performing with other people? What does it do for you, and why is it different for an audience?

Kelli: Playing with other people is the best. You're working on something that's so powerful. I know that sometimes when you're in an audience, maybe it's not your jam or something, but sometimes it is because everything is so different. When we talk about classical music, I mean, we're talking *hundreds* of years. There's so much music that to say, you know, "I don't love classical music," well, have you listened to it all? There's a lot to choose from.

But there's something about being in it that is so fun, and even though sometimes, you know, we don't have the closest relationships with every single person in an orchestra, of course, but you definitely bond over working on something that has history, and emotional power, and is so challenging. Sometimes this music is just really hard, and you start playing it and you think, "Gosh, are we going to be able to do this?? Am I going to be able to do this?" I think that all the time. Every time we try something new and I start playing, I think, "I have to work really hard on this!"

Then, when you work hard, you overcome frustration... I mean, there's so much frustration that happens when you're working on pieces, and whether it's your own - it's usually mostly my own - or trying to sync up with other people, sometimes you hit a wall. I always tell my students, "If you're struggling, that means you're about to learn something and you're about to get better. You're almost there when it's your most difficult moment." I think that's a good analogy for life as well.

When you do that with other people, there's something about it, and everyone at the end is like, "Yay! We did it! That was great." And the audience probably won't totally understand what you just went through to do that, to accomplish a good performance. Even if you honk notes... You always honk notes, you always mess up somewhere. That's also the beauty of live music, just getting through it. If you mess up, you keep going. You don't stop and walk off the stage. You keep going and try again.

Julie: And there's something about learning and performing music that, like... it encompasses so many things. You have your analytical side where you have to, like, understand what the piece is doing, but then you have your emotional, creative side where you're just feeling into the music, and then you have to work hard. Do you feel like every kid should... I don't know about be required, but be super encouraged to take up an instrument when they're young?

Kelli: Yes, totally. I absolutely believe that. I mean, I'm so frustrated. You just see it so much in so many areas where every time something is cut it's always music. Maybe not always, because someone pointed out art, too. Gosh, these things that make us human, why is that the first thing to go? It breaks my heart. I just feel like that should always be funded and that every kid should have the opportunity to play an instrument. I think it would make people better humans. Even it's not your thing, at least you tried. Maybe that instrument wasn't right. And that's okay if it isn't everyone's thing, but I feel like there would be a lot more appreciation for the challenge that it presents, and just music in general.

There's a lot more than guitar, and piano, and singing. There are so many instruments out there, and maybe those would suit people. But I think for kids, I just... I'm not a teacher, and I didn't go down that route, but I am very... You can ask any of my friends, I just think it's so important. I say, "Get your kid an instrument, and get them lessons, and enroll them in the band, and deal with the learning sounds." It's so good for them, not that they're the best musician in the world. They don't need to be at all. It's for the teamwork, and the camaraderie.

When you're reading music you're learning a new language. You're learning how to translate that into making it into a sound, and then when you're making the sound you have to learn how to make it sound pretty, and how to use it to be expressive and artistic. There have been many studies that have proven that it's a great thing for your brain. But for many other reasons I feel like it's such a good thing for children and adults alike.

Julie: I was going to ask you about adults. It's intimidating to start learning a language, or to your point, music as a language when you're an adult. Do you have any recommendations for folks who listen to this podcast, and get fired up, and want to take up the guitar, or take up the piano? What would you recommend how to approach it?

Kelli: If you get a private teacher... And now you can do a lot online. I mean, you really can. I know a lot of people learn things on YouTube. It's not the same as having someone be able to, you know, position your hands in the right place and everything, but finding a teacher is helpful. And you can play... there are so many groups out there. I've known people that have stopped playing and then started playing again, and we play together. There are different levels of community groups, or there were. This Covid-19

has changed a lot, and I'm trying to be hopeful for the future but it's definitely... Playing in a big group is just... I don't know when that's going to happen again and it's sad.

Julie: Do you do Zoom or WebEx calls with other musicians just to get a fix?

Kelli: Yeah, you can't really play together because it's delayed, but I have been... just a couple of nights ago I recorded with... We've been recording our individual parts and then someone splices it all together. So a few weeks ago the woodwinds from the group that I play in in San Jose, Cambrian Symphony, the woodwinds from that group, we each recorded our own parts and then our clarinet player, he put together all of the parts into one. It's not the same as playing together, but at least we're playing.

But I wanted to go back to what people can do. Music education for adults, I don't think it's limited to just playing an instrument. Attending concerts, or supporting musicians, or just looking for something different than what you are used to listening to. Like if you say, "I love just country music," maybe try listening to something else. Not just classical music, any kind of other music. I just want to highly encourage reaching out and trying other things.

Julie: You know, YouTube of course has all sorts of stuff, but pretend somebody just has no idea where to start. Where would you point them in their journey to find new music?

Kelli: I'm an Apple music subscriber, and you can click on a genre of music. Just clicking on it and maybe just having it on the background - which has its benefits as well - and then maybe something spikes your interest, like, "That's cool. What was that?" And then you look at what's playing. Even if you have it on in the background and you're not necessarily like, "Oh I want to dance to this," having classical music specifically does a variety of different things. It can increase your productivity, calms you down, sparks creativity. It has different benefits than even if you're actively listening.

Julie: Well this has been super eye-opening and enlightening. I will definitely include links to a lot of the stuff we talked about, and I'll include some clips from some of the pieces you recommended. I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. This has been fantastic.

Kelli: Thank you. I appreciate it. I do hope that whether it's listening yourself, or people who are listening to this podcast, if you're listening, or you play an instrument, keep going. If you played it in the past, maybe pick it up again. Or if your kids are interested, support them and get them the resources they need. If you don't have the means to do it, then find it and support your school music programs. And vote in ways that will help encourage some of that funding, or if there's donations to make to local symphonies that are struggling right now. It's such a wonderful thing that humanity has created.

[clip from Mozart - Horn Concerto No. 3 in E flat, K. 447]

Kelli's passion for music is so infectious, right? I've got a ton of links in the show notes to YouTube videos of different iconic French horn pieces and performances, curated by Kelli of course. Check them out and let me know on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), or on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#), which ones were your favorites. The show notes also include links to Kelli's favorite nonprofits, and to a rotating list of my own as well.

Zeke Rodrigues Thomas at Mindjam Media provided amazing editing assistance. You can find Zeke at MindjamMedia.com. Also, huge thanks to Emily White for the episode transcripts, which are available to patrons at Patreon.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod.

And you know what I'm going to say: Be good to yourselves, be good to each other, and love the hell out of whatever it is that you love. Thanks for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Kelli online: [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#)

[Dvorak Symphony No.9 "From the New World"](#)

[History of the Horn](#)

[Leia's Theme from Star Wars](#)

[Live Oak Music Festival](#) a three-day folk, world, blues, bluegrass, jazz (and more!) festival

[Mozart Horn Quintet in E flat K407](#)

Craig Russell's [Rhapsody for Horn and Orchestra](#) with Richard Todd on horn and the San Luis Obispo Symphony, conducted by Michael Nowak ("Wistful Musing" movement)

Sarah Willis and the Havana Horns play ["Barber of Brazil"](#)

[Strauss Horn Concerto No.1](#)

[Strauss - Till Eulenspiegel](#)

[Tchaikovsky The Nutcracker Scene 8](#)

Kelli's Favorite Nonprofits:

"Your local elementary school's parent and teacher club, which often funds art and music programs. Also, many high schools have funds/clubs for music education support to buy instruments or uniforms or provide touring opportunities for students."

"Your nearby symphony orchestra. Many have funds right now dedicated to preserving their future programs and are offering online performances as well! Most usually have music education outreach— you can't go wrong supporting these organizations."

Bay Area Orchestras: SFSymphony.org, SymphonySiliconValley.org, CambrianSymphony.org

Central Coast Orchestras: SantaCruzSymphony.org, SLOSymphony.org

Your local NPR affiliate – most commercial radio stations have a single genre of music, so I prefer these stations for more trusted, fact-based news, and varied musical offerings.

Food banks: FeedingAmerica.org

Civil Rights: NAACP.org, ACLU.org

Other Action: Always vote in local elections as there are often bonds associated with preserving funds for education and/or question school boards about music education funding.

A rotating list of my favorite nonprofits:

[Humane Society Silicon Valley](#)

[World Central Kitchen](#)

[Vote.org](#)

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Transcribed by Emily White: HireEmilyWhite@gmail.com