

Sarosh Syed: Welcome to the Wallace Foundation podcast. I'm Sarosh Syed.

Today we're talking to two classically trained musicians, Olivia Cosío and Renate Rohlfing. Olivia and Renate have together created Sounds that Carry a firm that, among other things, helps design educational programs for schools, nonprofits, and other community organizations.

A special focus of their work is how arts education can tap into communities' histories, focus on their students' well-being, and cultivate meaningful and lasting connections between individuals and communities.

Renate comes to this work from a background in music and psychology. She trained as a pianist at Juilliard and then got a masters in music therapy at NYU. Olivia comes to it from the world of education. She trained, also at Juilliard, as an operatic mezzo soprano and as an educator at Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

Among the foundations of their work together is a Wallace commissioned publication called the Connected Arts Learning Framework, an Expanded View of the Purposes and Possibilities for Arts Learning.

The publication offers five approaches that could help create art education programs that help students benefit personally from the arts and remain engaged with them. We are talking today to Olivia Renate to see how this all works in practice.

Olivia and Renate, thank you both so much for joining me. We have a lot to cover today, so why don't we start off with the basics? Why don't you guys tell me what brought you to this sort of work? Renato, why don't we start with you?

Renate Rohlfing: So I trained as a classical pianist, and I went to Juilliard in New York and, you know, had a great arts education there.

And then as I was performing and deeply embedded in the world of the performing arts, I started to realize that there was so much more that musicians could do with all of their skills and their resources. And I felt called to do that. And so I started on this new journey of music psychology and got a second master's in that.

And that's how we're here today. And I'll leave it to Olivia to bring us together.

Olivia Cosío: Like many other things, Renate and I connect a lot on our stories as well, what brought us to this work.

I actually trained as an opera singer, and Renate and I connected at the Juilliard School and where we both did our masters. I was in an opera ensemble in Europe for a few years and realized while there that I wanted to really understand the impact of what I was doing and that I felt like, in order to do that, I needed to pivot careers. I needed to go into education and really see firsthand the power of what I was doing in music.

So what brought Renate and I together? I think we connected on our experience at Juilliard and realized that we had very similar goals but different and complementary skill sets, with Renate focused on the intersection of music and health and my focus on music and educational

outcomes. We just became very excited about the possibilities and I'm sure we'll go into that soon, but I'll leave it there for now.

SS: Yeah, so let's get into that. So tell me about Sounds that Carry. What were you guys hoping to achieve out of this? What were you hoping to get to and where did you start?

RR: We're still hoping. It's a long, hopeful process.

But we actually started doing projects together because we were in Boston at the same time when Olivia was finishing up her masters at Harvard and I was teaching at Berklee. And so we just thought, let's try some projects and do some creative work together.

And then it became really clear that there was a large gap, I think, in trying to have these projects be really accessible and in ways that arts organizations could implement them as well. And so that is one of the reasons why we started the partnership.

OC: And we noticed what I would call the dual crisis. We were talking to nonprofit arts leaders and arts organizations who were concerned about audience retention. They were concerned about engagement within their community. They were seeing declining ticket sales, declining engagement.

And at the same time, we were seeing a lack of resources in community music initiatives and music education. And I think that this becomes a cyclical problem because if people are not having positive experiences with creativity, with the arts, with music, they're less likely to be patrons of or participate in their local arts organizations.

And if the musicians or the artists at these organizations, like myself, couldn't understand their impact as a performer and as a creative, my theory is that they're less likely to stick around as only a performer.

And so we kind of sought to solve both problems at once through this bidirectional, through bidirectional projects where organizations were learning as well as as kids and longtime residents.

SS: So you guys are at the intersections of psychology, music, and education. How do you start to create a music program from that? Where do you begin?

OC: I think the first thing that we did was we thought about the communities that we belonged to and communities that we were connected to. I think that's what grounds us in, in the work in general.

I grew up in San Francisco's Tenderloin District, which is really low income, I would say like a high crime district. And so, even though I wasn't working, I haven't had the pleasure yet of working in the Bay Area in this capacity, I'm always really sensitive to Title I schools, which are schools that are underfunded or have students that are under-resourced. And I always begin to think about those communities first.

I'm also Latina, so I'm thinking about how we can serve the Latinx community, the Hispanic community. But also, just as a teacher, I have dropped into so many different schools and have had the pleasure of working with so many different educators. And I really believe that every group of kids I work with becomes a kind of a micro community.

And so, you know, my first my first thought is always schools. But I know community can be defined in many ways so I'll let Renate take it away for herself.

RR: Just like Olivia was saying, home is always a big inspiration for community. I'm from Honolulu, Hawaii, originally, that is truly a melting pot, and my mother's family is Japanese, and so I feel very connected to Asian-American Pacific Islander communities across the globe.

And the clients that I work with really span in different kinds of challenges and needs. Like people who are experiencing acute psychiatric needs. I work with many children who are on the autism spectrum.

We're very lucky to have relationships with different partners, with other organizations or community organizations, arts organizations. And we started thinking about ways to connect those organizations. And that is ultimately what brought us to the Connected Arts Learning Framework. Jumping ahead...

SS: I think you're jumping to exactly where we are right now. Let's get into what we are here to talk about, that is the Connected Arts Learning Framework. Can you guys tell me what it was that you were looking for when you stumbled upon this framework? What was the problem that you were hoping to solve?

OC: So, at the risk of sort of oversimplifying, most resources that we found for music and community music fell in three camps. There is the traditional music education camp where, you know, there's an orchestra, there's a band, there's a choir. Kids are learning a piece and then performing it.

There is the community engagement visit program, which is where, you know, perhaps me as an opera singer, I'd go in and sing a song and then I'd leave.

And then, of course, there is the individual private lesson model, where kids are learning something. The goal is excellence, and they may or may not be connected to any other people who are creative or musicians outside of that one teacher.

And what we were really looking for was a way to facilitate bidirectional learning, where the teacher was learning as well, not just presenting. The kids were doing something, or the participants were doing something. And frameworks that leveraged creativity as an asset, and that looked to what was already there, looked at the wealth of resources and genius that already existed in a space.

And so we were very excited to find this framework. I'll let Renate talk a little bit more about it, but that's the intro.

RR: Yeah, I think we're especially interested in histories building on that community, cultural wealth, history and how that can be used as an asset in individual learning as well.

And as somebody who really focuses on community connection, I was trying to actually find the language. Because both Olivia and I are in academia, we're kind of inundated with a lot of research papers and academic writing, which is great, but it's really hard to communicate everything that's in there. And theory is great, but actually putting it into practice can be a challenge.

And so we kind of stumbled upon the connected arts learning framework on the website and we were like, “This is it.” Because it used so much language that was really meaningful and quite simple.

Something that we've taken is this idea of individual learning and communities thriving. Because we wanted something also that could expand people's definitions of arts education.

With an Asian-American background and a Latina background, we're also very interested in intergenerational connections and believe that building projects that can strengthen those connections is really, really important. And so we were able to use this framework not only in educational spaces, but in community spaces, and that's what was really powerful about it.

SS: So I wanted to touch just a little bit on what you guys said about intergenerational learning. Can you tell me why that's important to both of you

OC: I have to think about this. It's a very good question. It's one I think about a lot.

I think that intergenerational connections lead to community thriving, and I think that they sustain the work of creativity.

When a teacher or a musician or the person facilitating any given experience leaves. You know, when you introduce people to older community members or younger community members, you're giving everyone an opportunity to be archivists of their own stories, right? And to find a place to put them. And so I think that there's a really organic way that music and storytelling come together.

That's something that we strive to do in all of our projects, is find some intergenerational connection.

RR: It's like when someone taught you how to cook a dish, when you were maybe young, or maybe older, like me. Not only do you have that relationship, that emotional relationship with that person, but now you have this representation of the relationship.

And then every time you come back to it, you remember that person. And you have this thing that is kind of holding and containing the relationship as well, so that you can always come back to that. And it's not just a memory in your mind, but it's actually tangible. It's something and it's a skill. It's something you can do, whether that's storytelling, creating music together, creating a song together that you record, or cooking. All of these things are tools that can enhance and also actually keep relationships alive.

SS: That's wonderful. You guys are making me a bit emotional about the generations that came before me. But let's get into some of the practice part.

You have mentioned before a few examples of the work you have done using this framework. The first one that I thought was interesting was Music of the Spheres. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

OC: Yeah. So Music of the Spheres is a K-5 curriculum that leverages music and sound as a way to enhance literacy.

The namesake is actually from Ted Hughes's novella, *The Iron Giant*. The book is about this Iron Giant who comes to Earth, and because he is so other, no one accepts him except this young boy named Hogarth, who slowly integrates this Iron Giant into the community.

And then when they are presented with yet another other being, this Space-Bat-Dragon—which is hyphenated, and I think a really charming name for a creature—this Space-Bat-Dragon comes to Earth, and suddenly everyone's faced with the same problem. There's someone new, there's someone different, and there's this huge fight.

And the Space-Bat-Dragon actually says—when someone says, “Why are you here?”—he says, “Well, I heard all the fighting. I heard all the war. I heard all the conflict on Earth, and I wanted to see what it was about. Space is super peaceful.”

And he has this beautiful passage where he says that space has music of the spheres, where space sings to itself, and it's the music of peace.

And so we thought, why don't we offer kids in the curriculum the opportunity to make their own music of the spheres, whatever it is that brings them peace. Which can mean all kinds of things to different people.

It was innovative and weird, even for us at first, structuring this curriculum. Kids would start with an opening sound. We'd pass out anything from an instrument to tinfoil (because of the Iron Giant.) We'd ask them to explore that material, and then that would move into a musical exploration. Maybe we're adding instruments or voice.

So, from the beginning, we were infusing a lot of active participation and what we really believe in, which is kids doing things not just us telling them what to listen for. So it culminated in each kid writing their music that brought them peace.

And it was a wide range, which I thought was a success.

SS: So how did the Connected Arts Learning Framework play into all of this? How did you begin with the Connected Arts Learning Framework and end up with this program?

RR: I'll start and pass it off to Olivia. The idea of doing well by doing art.

I'm thinking about all the holistic benefits of the arts that was part of arts learning in this framework.

Educators for a long time have been talking about socioemotional learning. But I think this idea of the holistic benefits of the arts, and not having to have a specific socioemotional goal, or a specific learning goal. That it's just about wellness, however that translates.

For example, with the student who, you know, has a very soft voice. Holistic learning for her was how to communicate with her classmates without having to vocalize or to use her voice or verbalize. To not have to be constrained by typical types of communication or communications that we expect.

And music is very fluid, right? It's full of nuance and you can have different articulation, different dynamics, use different instruments. Those are all different representations of communication.

And that's one way that we bring in the Connected Arts Learning Framework and are inspired by it, is by all of the different types of learning that can happen.

OC: And something that we also really believe in is assessment, defining what success is. I continuously turn to the idea of culturally sustaining arts when thinking about what a good assessment looks like and what a good previous assessment looks like.

Because I think so often we, you know, teachers or artists, can come into a classroom or to a community and just assume what kids are good at already, or what kids are bad at already, and what they want. And I think that the connected arts learning framework really puts an emphasis on finding out what's already existing, what's already going well.

And that has inspired us to become even more well acquainted with the wealth of resources in a community before we enter it as guests.

And also, we defined what engagement was, I think, based off of this framework. I think so often engagement, we noticed, was, "Did kids show up or did they not?" Right. We could say 99% of kids are engaged, and it really just comes down to they were there on the day that the string quartet played.

We were really thinking, how do we know they're engaged? And as Renate just said, how can we define engagement differently for each kid based off of who they are. So engagement for one student, like a really quiet voiced student, we might hold her to a different standard of engagement than a student who actually maybe struggled to keep some thought then.

So that's something that we come back to as well as the assessment using the framework.

SS: So has that assessment helped you change the program as you go? Can you tell me a little bit about how you use that assessment?

OC: I think we use it, we use it to track individual students and make sure that we're doing right by them individually. Because whether or not we think we'll remember the next week if a kid really enjoyed piano, we might not. And so it's really helpful to put that down as a form of engagement, or a form of something on the assessment, so that we can remember what the student was drawn to.

On a macro level, we use these assessments to see if we need to pivot our curriculum in real time. So rather than doing these assessments and looking at them summatively and saying, "Okay, for the next iteration of the six week curriculum, what are we going to do," we look at them each week and we say, "Okay, well, 50 percent of our kids were not engaged. How are we going to pivot as educators and as people with a responsibility to these children to make sure that we have at least 70 percent next time?"

So we use it on the individual level, the group level, and now the really exciting thing is that, as we continue to develop new curricula, we continue returning to the old assessments to make sure that engagement is super high the first time.

SS: Now I'd like to play one of the many compositions that came out of the Music of the Spheres project, which I loved. Can you tell me a little bit about the young man who recorded what we are about to hear?

OC: Yes. So his name is Theo. He is seven years old in this clip, he's probably eight by now. And he was in first grade, so he was a student who I think started the process as more of an observer.

I'd say the first few weeks, he really took the time to observe more what his classmates were doing. But what you'll hear is something that was a rap that was drafted after he became fascinated with beatboxing.

During one of the classes, we were experimenting with ways kids could use their bodies to make sound. And he truly thrived with beatboxing. He used it. Other teachers were telling me he was beatboxing in class, and so it made total sense to us that this was his personal music of the spheres, or music of peace.

SS: With that, let's take a quick listen. It is just a few seconds of tape.

Theo (on tape): None of you know how to rap.

It's a snap. It's just a swing and a tap.

Ya use fast talking to bounce around the groove

Ya just need ya mouth, ya don't need your moves

To rap, ya gotta rhyme at the right time

To rap, ya gotta wipe out the grime

In ya sound box

Ya see, rappin' is so super easy

Easy peasy lemon squeezy [inaudible]

OC (on tape): Can we play it back and listen?

Theo (on tape): No.

SS: I think the last part is my favorite part.

OC: And I realize now, upon my hundredth listen of this, that he's writing about the process of creating music and how easy and how fun it is. And I think that ... that just makes me thrilled.

RR: It's easy peasy lemon squeezy.

OC: And a little update on this student is that his parents actually asked me for recommendations on music lessons because he was coming home so excited about music. And I believe he's taking private lessons in some instrument. His mom mentioned the ukulele they were really into, and perhaps maybe the percussion would be great for him. But the update there is I think he's still connected to music.

SS: That's fantastic. Let's talk a little bit about your work with Chamber Music America and Casita Maria, which is a longstanding community organization in the Bronx. Can you tell me a little bit about how that partnership came about, how the Connected Arts learning framework and maybe the experiences you've had with the Connected Arts Learning framework affected that partnership?

OC: You know, Chamber Music America has a wealth of creatives, composers, musicians. Casita Maria, in parallel, has a robust, incredible, storied education program and a huge emphasis on their young musicians being creative in their own right.

So their programming really seemed to jibe naturally with what Renate and I would like to continue doing. I think that this is particularly interesting because, so often, these elements of music are taught through what we what we usually in the music world consider as, you know, standards, genius, right. Which is typically Mozart or usually deceased, white, Western classical musicians.

And we really wanted to highlight living excellence, and excellence that really reflected the Casita Maria community. So we've had the pleasure of training the teaching artists and delivering this curriculum. It's currently underway. The Chamber Music America resources, combined with Casita Maria resources, I think it's culminating in something really interesting and exciting for these kids.

RR: And I think what is interesting, when we were talking to the folks at Chamber Music America about what kind of outcomes they wanted, what goals they had for the organization, for the partnership they have, like Olivia was saying, they have all of these resources. This amazing variety of people. But they were sensing that their community of musicians didn't have a lot of opportunities to develop the skills that they might need to be flexible, to actually utilize their own musical histories.

For example, one of the teaching artists is Peruvian. So she's showing a lot of indigenous Peruvian instruments to the class as openers when she shows her own music. And that's really inspiring the class to try different instruments, to think about what they have at home, things like that. And we know that CMA really wants to create many different partnerships within the community to offer their resources.

SS: So you guys had both mentioned teaching artists and the teachers and how they have to be learning from the students as well. Can you tell me a little bit about how you make that happen?

OC: I think that the biggest thing we emphasize is critical thinking and challenging one's own assumptions. Teaching artists are different than traditional music teachers or arts teachers in that they typically—not always, but typically—appear for a shorter amount of time, have to build connections with kids in a rapid way, and often don't have a standardized metric of success in training.

So whereas a teacher would have had to pass several tests to be able to conduct an orchestra in a school, a teaching artist, in my experience, I often felt totally out to sea. Just in a classroom and the teacher saying, "All right, do music." So one of the things that we encourage is having teaching artists actually set their own goals for what they'd like to learn.

And then the other thing is kind of helping facilitate the mindset that they are students as well when they are in the classroom. In our teacher trainings, we also ask teachers to kind of go within and think about their own experiences with music, what they'd change, what they would keep the same. And then we also ask the teaching artists to fill out their own assessments so that while they're teaching, they're not just focused on, "Okay, am I getting through the curriculum." They're looking out for signs of engagement.

And that in itself I think is a learning process too, to learn what each of your kids looks like when they're engaged.

RR: Something we've added is something that I was actually taught at school, at therapy school, which was to create your own musical tree and then to share that with your other teaching artists or maybe other people you work with.

Because we cannot get away from our histories, as much as some people try. So what we really try to do is to encourage the teaching artists to be able to embrace and to use their histories. And because everyone has a really different relationship with music. That's maybe different styles. Maybe you were brought up with blues. For example, even though I have a lot of classical music training, you know, my mom loves Motown and Jimi Hendrix. So I know those albums really well because it was played in my house all the time.

That's part of my musical tree. That's actually something, that knowledge is something that I can pass on. I can actually use in exercises and activities with other students or with other partners. And so I think that that, for us, is the biggest thing, to have the teaching artists be able to understand their own strengths and resources that they can pull from any time.

SS: Okay, as we wrap up, let's talk a little bit about the future. You guys have talked about your intersections in art, in psychology, in education. You talked about how you wanted to use all of those things to bring communities together, to be able to give voice to people and to communities. How do you know that that's working? How do you know whether you're achieving the goals that you set out for yourself?

RR: How tired we are? No.

OC: Then we're really successful.

SS: How're you feeling right now then?

OC: Really successful.

For me personally, I think, success is more people identifying as creative or as artists. If one person in an experience is like, "I didn't think I was a singer and I am, and I'm going to keep singing," that, to me, a mark of excellence. And that's what gets me really excited.

RR: And for people to be able to consciously use the arts in a way. That ability to be able to be conscious of your own resources is a big goal for us. And it's something that, you know, to create more creative beings in the world. To get ready for that Space-Bat-Dragon to come.

SS: Well, this has been absolutely wonderful. Guys, thank you so much. But before we sign off, what do you guys have going on next? Where can people listening catch up with you guys?

OC: Well, if you want to get in touch with us and check out our projects, you could go to soundthatcarry.com, where we will be updating with our latest happenings.

RR: Yeah, and we're starting a partnership with Chelsea High School through a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. And the high school students are going to create their own sound map that will be presented at the school where people can record and upload their own sounds

from the community. And we hope that that will inspire connection and familiarity between the students.

SS: Renate, Olivia, thank you guys again, so very much. This has been wonderful. Thank you for enabling people to be creative and to affect other people, and thank you for sharing some of that work with us. We really, really, really appreciate it.

RR: Thank you so much.

OC: Thank you for the framework.

SS: That's a little glimpse of how one organization is using the Connected Arts Learning framework to help improve arts education and promote the arts.

If you'd like to learn more about the Connected Arts Learning Framework, you can go to wallacefoundation.org and search for Connected Arts Learning. The full report should be among the first results you see.

Special thanks to Delaney Smith from Reason.com and Associates for hooking up with Renato and Olivia.

We hope to bring you more such stories soon. In the meantime, please use our website or look us up on Facebook, X, LinkedIn, Instagram, or Threads to let us know what you think. I'm Sarosh Syed with the Wallace Foundation. Thank you for listening.