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Bound for Boston

Juilliard violist and Texas-fiddle champ David Wallace takes the reins at Berklee's string department

By [Rory Williams](#) posted



Life after conservatory can be hardscrabble, but at the kitchen table of David Wallace, D.M.A., anything seems possible. He's preparing to move from his Manhattan apartment to take a new job at Berklee College of Music in Boston, and between sips of high-grade Gyokuro green tea, Wallace expounds on his bootstraps philosophy in which the key ingredient of any successful career in music is just a dash of versatility.

"Part of the future of strings education is really committing to the creative musician," Wallace says. "I've long been advocating for a music education that is comprehensive. By that, I mean that we're

not just teaching people to play an instrument—they can improvise, compose, and they're fluent in multiple styles and multiple instruments.”

Wallace could very well be the archetype of the multifaceted musician he describes. The Mannes- and Juilliard-trained violist, who was a onetime protégé of Coordination Technique—founder Karen Tuttle, has also been a Texas swing-style fiddler since childhood. All of this pairs perfectly with his new role as chair of the string department at Berklee, an institution that pioneered and continues to lead contemporary strings education.

Wallace started the position this fall.

At 44 years old, David “Doc” Wallace has firmly established himself as an inspirational educator and orator as well as an authority on the subject of the teaching artist (he’s even writing the book on it: *Reaching Out: A Musician’s Guide to Interactive Performance*).

His expertise in the field has come from being a senior teaching artist at the New York Philharmonic for the past 17 years, as well as seven years at the Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute, where he’s also been a curriculum writer and music arranger. During his 14-year tenure at Juilliard, Wallace served on the graduate studies faculty and has been a mentor to the Morse Teaching Artist Fellows, taking the apprentices into New York City public schools to present hands-on workshops and lessons.

“David has had an enormous influence over the development of our pedagogy for inner-city classrooms, and really over the whole, growing field of teaching artistry,” says Theodore Wiprud, vice president of education at the New York Philharmonic. “Whether you’re a brand-new teaching artist quaking in your boots, or a jaded intellectual taking in a new work, David has the insight to move your thinking to the next level.”

Eric Booth, one of Wallace’s earliest mentors at Juilliard, agrees: “David is the perfect example of the 21st-century musician, and it is no surprise he is becoming a major leader of the field. As an artist, he is the ‘full package,’ and he is one of the nation’s best teaching artists.” Booth should know: he himself has been called the father of the teaching-artist profession.

Along with pedagogy, Wallace’s strengths as a composer have landed him commissions from Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic, the Juilliard School, violinist Rachel Barton Pine, and the Marian Anderson String Quartet. Since 2003, he’s passed along this knowledge through the New York Philharmonic’s Very Young Composers Program, which teaches composition skills to public-school students. “[Wallace] started as a protégé of mine and wound up being one of the great teaching artists on an international level,” says Jon Deak, founder of the Very Young Composers Program. “He can animate and inspire a roomful of kids like you wouldn’t believe.”

On the artist side of the teaching-artist equation, Wallace is a busy solo and chamber musician, typically presenting nearly 70 concerts, recitals, and educational events annually. He's been broadcast on CBS, ABC News, NPR, WQXR, and even KTV Korea. Demonstrating the eclecticism he espouses, he's the leader of the Doc Wallace Trio, a bluegrass group formed in 1997 with composer and acoustic guitarist Daniel Levy and electric guitarist Dana Scofidio. At the same, he plays in Hat Trick, rounding out a trio with flutist April Clayton and harpist Allegra Lilly. They plan to record Debussy on their debut album later this year.

"There are a few pieces I will always put everything down to play, no questions asked," Wallace says. "And this includes the Debussy Sonata."

With his new gig at Berklee comes the responsibility of leading a diverse string faculty of 15 artists that include master fiddlers, violists, cellists, and bassists, as well as harpists, banjo and mandolin players—even an oud player. [See the sidebar "Who's on Deck at Berklee."]

"I plan to approach it collegially, because a lot of these people are old friends and heroes. I mean, I got Darol Anger!" says Wallace, who met many of the musicians while teaching at the Mark O'Connor/Berklee College of Music Summer String Program and the Mark Wood Rock Orchestra Camp. "Everybody brings a certain amount of genius to the table, and during the faculty meetings, I want to make this the most powerful strings think tank."

Ideas are already percolating and include publishing a chord book by jazz violinist and bassist Rob Thomas, further collaboration with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (from which some of the Berklee faculty hail), and investigating opportunities for string players in the school's new master's programs.

Just down the hall from Wallace's new office will be violinist Matt Glaser, who headed the strings department for 28 years following its founding by jazz violinist Randy Sabien in 1978. (In 2009, Glaser passed the reins to violist Melissa Howe, who has since been promoted to chief of staff to Berklee president Roger Brown.)

"The strings department has grown exponentially so that it's the epicenter in nonclassical string instruction," says Glaser, who leads the American Roots Music Program at Berklee. "My boss, Matt Marvuglio [the dean of the Professional Performance Division], said to all of the candidates: 'The main thing you have to do is not screw it up.' There's tremendous respect and comradery in the department." But Glaser has faith in Wallace, who "had us take a bass line from a Bach cello suite and improvise melodies on top of this bass line," Glaser says of Wallace's instructions to the search committee. "I was very struck by that. I'm very interested in all the students learning to improvise and make up variations on melodies from a by-ear standpoint."

From his snug apartment, which was in a quaint Edwardian village in Hudson Heights, Manhattan,

at the time of the interview—though soon be traded for a three-story townhouse in Boston—Wallace described his approach to strings education and an unlikely model for his program.

“Many don’t know that for the past 12 years, I’ve also been teaching musical studies in the Juilliard dance division, which basically trained me for my job at Berklee,” Wallace says.

“People come from strictly classical-ballet traditions, modern backgrounds, or urban street-dance traditions with very diverse career goals. But in the span of four years, they study with every member of the faculty, basically getting a boot camp in all these different styles and developing comprehensive technique. That way, when they graduate, they can do whatever they want. Some are going to the San Francisco Ballet. Others are starting their own downtown company.

“My question is: can we do what the Juilliard dance division does with our strings program at Berklee?”

For Wallace, learning other instruments and styles is more than making oneself marketable or keeping yourself entertained: it’s about filling the gaps in music education and perfecting technique.

“I really enjoy pizzicato, and part of the reason is that I don’t treat it as though I’m plucking a string,” Wallace says. “I spent time with bassists, guitarists, and harpists to really get to know that touch on the strings. To master strings, you need to spend time on more than just your instrument, you need to study with people who play other instruments.”

Growing up in Houston, Wallace played piano at age seven and, following in his sister’s footsteps, picked up the violin at ten.

It wasn’t until he was 21 that Wallace began to play the viola. “I like busting myths,” Wallace notes later. “People say you cannot have a career as a violinist unless you start before you’re five, even though Isaac Stern didn’t start until he was ten, and Mark O’Connor didn’t start until he was 12.

I’ve also heard people say you cannot be a real violinist unless you start before you’re 18, and that’s also terribly erroneous. It’s all about your ear and physique—not a start date.”

He was drawn into old-time fiddling by his father, who had learned to play Bob Wills—Western swing tunes on the violin by ear. He also credits his open-minded, public-school music director, who encouraged his performances at fiddle competitions, for allowing his interests to progress. “Her idea was that as long as kids are playing their instruments, it’s practice and it’s good. A lot of people thought it would be bad for technique.”

Wallace readily offers that the bulk of his early technical education was the Texas fiddle scene,

which complemented his lessons from the Samuel Applebaum String Builder and Shin'ichi Suzuki books. "For me, the Texas fiddle repertoire was a real blessing because it built my left hand," explains Wallace.

"A lot of these breakdowns you're playing with the fourth-finger drone. You cannot have a bad hand position and play these fiddle tunes well. It's physically impossible. These bluegrass waltzes have thirds in them. They've got lots of sixths in them. Playing fiddle waltzes is much more helpful in building left-hand technique—you're putting them to a musical purpose."

And those gaps in the strings repertoire? Eclectic repertoire can fill those, Wallace notes. "So much of the [classical] repertoire does not stand alone if you don't have a piano or orchestra," he says. "If you open up the repertoire, beyond the method book to what you're hearing on the radio or what you're composing, suddenly you become much more independent as a musician."

Fiddling can also save your career, as Wallace found out during his college days.

After receiving his master of music degree from Mannes College, Wallace entered Juilliard to obtain an advanced certificate in performance, then continued on to pursue his doctorate of musical arts there. It was in the midst of this transition that he fell into a funk and gave up playing for six weeks.

His introduction to Juilliard had been humbling. His ego took a shot when he was placed in the back of the undergraduate orchestra, and with a small scholarship, he was roughing it. Tuttle, his viola teacher, was also riding him. "I remember her telling me, 'Only ten percent of my students understand what I'm talking about.' If she saw you could do it, she would dog you until you were doing it all the time."

It was at this point that he attained nirvana, he says. "I had absolutely no desire for anything," he adds, laughing at the juxtaposition. "The first desire for me was desiring to have a desire again of some sort."

It just so happened that Wallace's family was going to Hawaii, and his father offered to fly him out. Later that summer Wallace had a gig teaching at the Bowdoin International Music Festival, for which he still had to prepare; so he carted along his father's \$8 fiddle from the '60s to save his own instrument from the tropical humidity. He then took an alternative approach to warming up—he played the fiddle. Before he knew it, he rediscovered his passion for strings, which was reaffirmed by playing great chamber music with friends at Bowdoin. He was ready for the doctoral program. "Really, how I got back into music was playing fiddle tunes that I had never played before," says Wallace.

While in the doctoral program, another turning point occurred when Wallace took a gamble on a

required lecture-performance. He proposed to present Texas-style, contest fiddling before the entire student body. “I figured this is either the biggest mistake I’m making in my academic career,” he says, “or it’s the best possible move. Either way, it’s big.” The concert program packed Morse Hall, and its enthusiastic reception proved Wallace had made a wise decision. At the end of his recital, the head of the doctoral committee approached and urged him to write his dissertation on contest-style fiddling. “I’m like, ‘no problem!’” recounts Wallace. “It’s something that I know about, and love, and it’s something that I can’t be skewered for by someone who knows more about it, which would be the case if I took on Brahms’ sonatas or something like that.”

The resulting document was 377 pages, including nearly 75 pages of transcriptions. “One of the things that I realized was that if you do things with integrity and intellectual acumen,” Wallace says, “you can really help people understand the greatness in anything.”

Looking around his Manhattan apartment, it becomes noticeably apparent that moving boxes are missing from this scene, which begs the question: is he ready to leave the city he’s called home for 22 years to begin his job in less than a month? At this, he chuckles. “When people ask me when my job starts, I’ll tell them, ‘Yesterday.’”

He’s laughing, but not joking. Just a day after he accepted the position this past spring, Wallace was asked to direct the Mark O’Connor/Berklee College of Music Summer String Program, which he did—subsequently boosting enrollment from 40 to 118.

“It was all about how can we get everybody on the same team and make it happen,” Wallace says. “That whole week was really affirming. You never know what goes on behind a summer festival or program until you run one yourself.”

Next year, Wallace plans to use the Berklee facilities for a summer program to give people a taste of what it might feel like to be at Berklee for the year. “My fondest memories were at fiddle camp,” Wallace says wistfully. “An old friend of mine said, ‘Berklee is like going to fiddle camp all year long.’” At David Wallace’s fiddle camp, anything is possible.



What David Wallace Plays

- 1988 Joannes Crucis Finnanzza violin (São Paulo, Brazil)
- 1991 Alexander Tulchinsky viola (Houston, Texas)
- 2002 six-string fretless Wood Violins Viper viola by Joe Domjan (Port Washington, New York)

- Undated Gilchrist mandola (Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia)
- 1937 flattop Gibson tenor guitar

Who's on Deck at Berklee

- Darol Anger: Fiddle, associate professor
- Jason Anick: Jazz violin, instructor
- Mike Block: Cello, associate professor
- Wesley Corbett: Banjo, associate professor
- Eugene Friesen: Cello, professor
- Maeve Gilchrist: Harp, instructor
- Patrice Jackson: Cello, associate professor
- Sandra Kott: Violin, associate professor
- Julianne Lee: Violin/viola, associate professor
- Felice Pomeranz: Harp, professor
- Mimi Rabson: Violin/viola, associate professor
- Simon Shaheen: Oud/violin, professor
- Rob Thomas: Jazz violin/bass, professor
- Joe Walsh: Mandolin, instructor
- Owen Young: Cello, associate professor

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