

Under the Mango Tree

Victor makes music for a mango tree. At age four, going on five, he's been studying violin for a little more than a year—exactly as long as his mom, Maria de Fátima Leite, an HHMI international research scholar who lives and works in Brazil.

Starting with no more musical background than her son had, she never intended to pick up a bow. When Leite enrolled 3-year-old Victor at a local Suzuki-method school, however, she found that she had, effectively, signed herself up for 30 minutes of violin practice every day. The Suzuki philosophy emphasizes training in a “noncompetitive, nurturing” environment; teachers expect a parent to attend the student’s weekly lessons and to supervise daily practice sessions.

The parent isn’t expected to play, or even know a tailpiece from a fingerboard. But Leite saw an opportunity to turn a half-hour monitoring chore into a shared experience. She started practicing with Victor and, to her surprise, found herself enjoying it. The buddy system helps her avoid practice-or-else confrontations and provides Victor with a role model: “He’s stopped trying to practice while lying on the floor,” she notes.

“Most of the time my husband joins us, a one-man audience, so the whole family is in it together. We practice all over the house—sometimes in the living room, sometimes under a tree in the backyard.

“My son likes to make up compositions, and he’ll say, ‘Now we’re going to make music for a mango tree.’ It’s not clear whether he’s playing to the tree or *about* the tree. At this point, it sounds like the tree is falling. Or like someone is falling out of it,” says Leite, with a laugh.

Violin practice, she says, has given her fresh insight into both education and performance anxiety. “When I teach physiology, I’m confident, because I have a great deal of background. But I’ve never had a violin teacher, and at first I was feeling pressure to be a teacher for my son.”

That meant a little extra homework. But keeping one lesson ahead seems to do the trick. “I focus on teaching what I’ve just learned, and that makes him comfortable. He doesn’t feel pressured, because he knows I don’t know much more than he does. We make mistakes together, and we laugh.”

When she’s not practicing with Victor, on compositions ranging from Suzuki’s variations on “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” to arrangements of works by J.S. Bach, Leite investigates the

effects of calcium on liver-cell behavior, which she hopes will yield clues to tumor reduction therapies.

The lab work goes on at Brazil’s Federal University of Minas Gerais, where Leite divides her time between research and teaching. “Each time my son and I practice, there’s a little progress. We both understand that, if the process can be fun, it’s not so important to get to the end. As I tell my students, when they feel the pressure of deadlines, ‘Love what you’re doing right now. All you can hope to do is to get a little bit better each day.’”

—George Heidekat

FOR MORE INFORMATION: To learn more about Leite’s research, see the Lab Book spotlight on page 51.



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