

By Feel and By Ear

A Conversation About Music and Rolwing® SI

By Carolyn Pike, Certified Rolfer™, and
Lynn Cohen, Certified Advanced Rolfer



Carolyn Pike



Lynn Cohen

ABSTRACT A conversation between Carolyn Pike, Rolfer/violinist, and Lynn Cohen, Rolfer/cellist, on the interplay between body mechanics and spatial orientation as they inform the practices of string playing and Rolwing Structural Integration (SI). They share their respective trajectories from musical training to Rolwing SI and explore how the two disciplines continue to influence one another.

Lynn Cohen: I've been hearing/seeing your name as "Carolyn Pike, Rolfer/Violinist" for years now. I'm so glad we've finally connected. I identify myself as a Rolfer and as a cellist, but not together. What does your dual title mean to you?

Carolyn Pike: Well, I've tried many professions to try to become 'happy' in my work. As it stands now, "Carolyn Pike, Rolfer/Violinist" fits me well. I've become a registered nurse and taught middle school; I also do paperwork and appointment setting for my financial advisor husband. What I have learned of late, after battling chronic fatigue associated with mononucleosis diagnosed about three years ago, is that I can be 'happy' and 'self-actualized' no matter what profession, vocation, or avocation I pursue. It's been kind of an awakening of sorts, starting with reading *The Untethered Soul* by Michael Singer.

I am always so glad when the universe calls me back to the Rolwing SI office, as that is where I can work in the physical realm, and work within my clients' physical realm, and use my physical-realm training to effect change. What the client does with it after that is up to them. I can then just let it all go.

I don't play violin much anymore, but if the need arose, I could teach a lesson or play a wedding at a moment's notice. Like riding a bike! It will always be 'in my blood', so to speak, since I began so early in life. Rolwing SI is a close second there, as I feel I will always be able to free up someone physically while asking their body what is appropriate.

LC: Why/how did you choose the violin?

CP: I started studying violin 'late' (by the usual standards), at about age ten or eleven. I had taken a year of piano lessons, but those lessons 'didn't take' for me! Like many upper string (violin/viola players) and smaller wind instrumentalists, I am a 'sky' person. Violin was my first choice, then flute, then oboe - but I didn't want to blow into an instrument, so violin it was. I think I was attracted to the physical holding of the instrument with my upper body. It just seemed like something I could do. It wasn't so much the sound that attracted me, but a kinesthetic pull. I always worked and learned from the 'feel' of the instrument and the placement of the fingers and the pressure of the bow. I had to learn in my college years and early professional career to play 'by ear.' I'd gotten along 'by feel' well enough, and

had to cultivate the 'by ear' skill in order to survive as a violinist.

LC: You know, I've never thought about instrumentalists - how they chose their given instruments - in terms of 'sky' or 'ground' orientation.

CP: I've had 'ground-oriented' students take up the violin or viola, but they usually didn't last too many years.

LC: That was absolutely the case for me. I am very ground oriented. As a kid, I wanted to play the cello, but since my brother did, that was (obviously) out of the question. So I played violin through grade school, but, as with your piano lessons, it 'didn't take.' I had the opposite experience from you; it felt so unnatural to me, holding it up against gravity, the asymmetry, the chin clamp, the neck twist-bend, the vibrato . . . all of it. And on a pure sound level, I was more drawn to bass clef instruments. I loved the whole-body rumble, the way the floor vibrated, tickling my insides. Now that I think about it, it's so obvious: cello and bass (the two instruments I played) are 'grounded' instruments, literally needing the support of the ground in order to be played.

CP: But I can see how a 'ground'-instrument person can benefit from some 'sky' training early on, and vice versa for the sky instrument person.

LC: Yes, if only to discover what feels - or sounds - more like 'home.'

CP: I actually think the 'by feel' way I learned violin is what turned me on to Rolwing SI. I listen with my hands to my clients, and the kinesthetic has always been my preferred learning style. I guess Rolwing work was what I was really born to do, with a significant detour on the violin for about thirty years! Kind of a pre-Rolwing training. I also learned quite a bit about the therapist/client relationship from my years of private teaching, violin and viola.

LC: How has playing the violin changed *your* structure over your lifetime?

CP: I grew around my violin. I still have an indentation on my right forefinger/second knuckle where I held the bow. My left shoulder and neck were constantly 'holding' the violin even when I wasn't playing or practicing. My right shoulder and neck were always accommodating the bow/sound production. And, of course, there are compensatory factors in the lower back, hips, and knees. If I could turn back the clock, what I would do differently

would be to learn yoga early in my career and, of course, get some Rolwing work done earlier too.

LC: As a [bass] student at music conservatory, I don't recall much - if any - attention paid to body awareness for the sake of preservation/self-care. The goal was to 'play that lick' any way I could. Now, when I think of the toll it took on my body, that huge, unwieldy instrument, those massive strings . . . I'm not a big person! I ended up with bilateral impingement syndrome in both shoulders. I know other double bass players whose back and neck injuries nearly paralyzed them after years of playing. Was injury part of your experience as a violinist?

CP: Starting in high school, and continuing (unchecked) throughout college and beyond, I just kept playing/working too much and not taking time for self-care. This eventually led to forearm tendonitis as well as a frozen shoulder, which inhibited my career. Not to mention a big L5-S1 disk problem in my lower back. I know that high school drama/acting programs introduce self-care practices such as yoga. I do think that would have helped me in my musical endeavors. I did try to give some of my violin students some stretches to do and encouraged a day of rest instead of constant daily practice.

LC: So how *did* you find your way to Rolwing SI?

CP: I had received some occupational therapy through a college training program at a neighboring university. The teacher and student did some very minor myofascial release for my forearms and coracoid process. It helped. The semester ended and I never pursued going back for more therapy. Then a few years later, things got very tough for me physically and I was living from massage to massage. Each treatment lasted me only about two to three days before I was in pain again.

I took an Alexander Technique (AT) seminar for two days after I finished my degree in violin performance. When I went to seek out the AT therapist to make an appointment after the seminar, I had trouble connecting with her, so I kept researching. This is how I found out about Rolwing SI. I called Sam Johnson in Dallas, and when he said that the sessions are pretty much myofascial release, I immediately made an appointment. By my sixth session, I was asking how I could enroll in Rolwing school. I graduated in late 2003.

LC: Something like that happened for me; I was in massage-therapy school, and Bruce Schoenfeld gave a class on postural alignment. His ability to point out structural patterns seemed like magic to me. I scheduled a session with him. Lights just went on. In the first hour, I was asking him where I could go to learn Rolwing SI. Fortunately, my massage training had set a high bar around body mechanics/awareness. What do you remember about the physical challenges of learning Rolwing SI?

CP: As a sky person, a big challenge for me as a Rolfer was to 'find my feet' and access the balance I needed from the ground. I got yoga mats out for either side of my table when in Unit II, and often worked barefooted so I could start developing what I needed. To this day, I use my strength as a sky person and always look for my 'balancing root system'. I don't have yoga mats on the floor anymore in my Rolwing office, and I often prefer to work in tennis shoes with rubber soles for traction rather than bare feet. Additionally, if I see more than two clients in a day (I work as a Rolfer only part time/limited practice), I have to be careful not to overuse my upper body. It's strong, but also vulnerable. I try to use leverage and great body mechanics like I was taught in Rolwing school. Also, keeping a light schedule helps in this regard as well.

LC: Talk about your hands, and how, as a string player, you use them in your Rolwing work. Do you feel there is a relationship there? I ask because I use my fingers *a lot* in Rolwing sessions, perhaps more than many Rolfers. Do you think the fine-motor demand on your hand and fingers has informed your work as a Rolfer?

CP: Yes, I do use my fingers and soft back of hand a bit more than elbow in my practice. This might be due to the heightened development of a sense of touch from playing violin all those years. But staying open in my shoulders is something I regularly remind myself of. If I don't stay open, I pay the price and have to work that much harder to get open again with yoga and getting Rolwing sessions for myself. Once you go down that path a few too many times, you learn to stay out of it as much as possible!

LC: Do you find any conflicts between the two disciplines of Rolwing SI and violin playing?

CP: I don't play violin much anymore, but when I did violin jobs and Rolfing sessions in the same week (sometimes the same day), I found that working with clients actually helped me because it was so different than playing my instrument. Also, an admittedly sporadic Bikram yoga practice helped my violin playing in the past and helps me stay connected to the Rolfing work I have received. I also get regular work done on my structure about every four to six weeks.

LC: We use the word 'practice' for both instruments and our work. How do you approach the concept of practice differently, between violin and Rolfing SI?

CP: Practice for a performing discipline such as music or dance or the like is about perfecting one's craft. Getting it right, over and over again, until it's second nature and then producing when called upon. Practice for Rolfing SI is a little different idea. Rolfing work is about me learning to become better at my craft. Better at contacting a client 'where they are at'. Better at learning what that client needs from me as a practitioner. (Yes, our clients are some of our best teachers!) Better at coming out of a session maybe a little tired, but also resilient.

LC: What about the principles of adaptability and stability in your approach to both violin playing and Rolfing SI?

CP: Adaptability in violin is about being able to operate in different playing situations: different groups of musicians, different instruments (violin/viola), different demands of the music desired. Adaptability in Rolfing work is not only giving the client access to develop adaptability in their body, but also me being adaptable enough to physically 'get to the client'. I might have to adjust my table height or even put a knee on the table or sit. My body just needs to be available for the client and the Rolfing contact needed. Stability in violin playing can inhibit adaptability if employed too strongly. And then we get stuck. In Rolfing SI, stability in the practitioner is very important. If I'm stable, I can provide the work; if I'm unstable, it's not good for me or the client's session. I see stability as the balance between access to sky and ground, as well as staying open in my major joints while working.

LC: Along those lines, talk about 'space' as it pertains to your work as a Rolfer and as a violinist.

CP: I once was in a continuing education class and the Rolfer/client I was working on asked me to ". . . lean back and give him some space." I feel fortunate that I didn't take this as a put-down, but as the constructive criticism that I believe he meant it to be. To this day, years later, I find that I remind myself of these words of wisdom often while I'm working. Sometimes I use it outside the Rolfing office with everyday interpersonal interactions. It's a good lesson for anyone who wants to maximize any type of interaction.

LC: Have you had any clients who are instrumentalists? What have the issues been, for them?

CP: I have had a handful of clients who were instrumentalists. Of course, coming out of Rolfing school as a professional violinist, I thought that every other professional musician was going to be 'knocking down my office door' looking to receive Rolfing sessions, but my practice is anything but centered on this group. I have a wide variety including the young adult martial artist who came for a few sessions before he went into three years of seclusion/vow of silence because he "wanted a better relationship with gravity." (Yes, the day I met him I thought I'd died and gone to some sort of Rolfing heaven!) And I have many middle-older-aged clients with scoliosis, knee replacements, old injuries related to the desire to continue a running routine that was wearing their joints down. Some of my older clients have brought their younger kids in for short sessions and their older kids in for healed football injuries.

LC: I also have a clientele (the majority) that actually matches where I'm at in my life (late middle-age). When I was a little younger, so was my clientele. It's uncanny, isn't it, that we attract ourselves, in a general sense, to our practice? I've had clients whose injuries are ones I have been through myself, and I believe I know what it feels like to them, very precisely. Yet I've had a hard time attracting musicians to my practice. I've worked with a few musicians from the symphony here, even a cellist, and I was so excited! I so badly wanted to get them 'fixed' so they'd spread the word, and the entire orchestra would be beating down my door! It didn't happen. In fact, I didn't have much success with the musicians who *did* show up; their patterns were too entrenched, and they had to go back to playing. Humbling, no? Maybe there's something about the

'needing to' that keeps the 'dream' practice from developing?

CP: I agree that if you think you 'need' a certain type of client or a certain type of practice, that just doesn't allow the natural flow of things to develop. And yes, some have patterns that are entrenched and that they are currently using! We have to respect that the body isn't going to let go of stuff that is currently needed.

I like to think that each of our clients is a 'teacher' to us. They take the time and financial energy to grace our office with their presence. Whatever is 'up' with them (neck ache, knee problem, posture issue, etc.) is our opportunity to see how Rolfing SI can 'meet' them. Even if we can't solve the issue to any extent, we are there to witness the issue. Sometimes I get the same knee or shoulder or low-back issue three to four times within a relatively short timeframe. When this happens, I know that I have something to learn!

I always thought that I would like to work with relatively young clients with scoliosis. But I usually get the relatively older clients with this condition, when I can't do as much to help and prevent furtherance. But in they walk. My teachers. My gifts.

I used to think that all the musicians, actors, dancers, and athletes would be clamoring to get a session or series with me. I've had a few, but mostly I'm getting not what I want, not what I expect, not what I 'figured' would be in my practice; I'm getting those who can benefit from Rolfing SI and those who can help me develop my skills. I'm reminded of the Rolling Stones song "You Can't Always Get What You Want," but "you get what you need"!

Carolyn Pike is a Certified Rolfer, violinist, music teacher, registered nurse, financial-advising office manager, and yoga practitioner who lives in Simpsonville, Kentucky, the Saddlebred Capital of the World.

Lynn Cohen is a Certified Advanced Rolfer, cellist, writer, and dog lover who lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and makes no apologies for it.

