



A life of magical flute

An interview-biography with Pacifican Gail Edwards

Written by Jean Bartlett

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(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)

"I'm an advocate for music in the schools," said Pacifican Gail Edwards. "That's how I got my start on flute. When I was in fifth grade in Taiwan—my father was in the U.S. Army and we moved around quite a bit when I was a kid—the teacher said, 'Do you want to play the flute?' And I said, 'Yes!' Half the girls at that school chose the flute. I don't know their thinking, but for me, the flute was it."

Is it flutist or flautist?

"They say flautists get paid more than flutists," Gail laughed.

According to various notes on the subject, "flutist" is the preferred American English word and "flautist" reigns in British English. However, the Oxford English Dictionary dates the word "flutist" to 1603 and "flautist" to 1860. Then there is the French "flûtiste" and the Italian "flautista." But there is one absolute regarding the flute; Gail Edwards plays it because she loves it. She loves to practice on it, she loves to teach it and conduct it, she loves to play it as a solo artist, in a duo, in an ensemble, as a member of an orchestra, a Broadway production, a symphony – and she absolutely loves constantly learning something new on it. She never tires of it.



In Pacifica, many locals have heard the professional flutist—who is also the founder and director of Bel Canto Flutes—lead her flute choir in programs, free to the public, at: the Pacifica Coastside Museum at the Little Brown Church, the Sharp Park Library and the Sanchez Library. All of the aforementioned performances offered and offer up a mixture of any of the following music genres: classical, old-time folk, popular jazz, pop, Hollywood musicals, Disney hits, Brazilian choro, holiday favorites, Gaelic traditional and so much more.

◀In September of 2022, Gail conducted her San Francisco Bel Canto Flute Choir at a Pacifica Coastside Museum performance. (She also has a South Bay Bel Canto Flute Choir.)

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Recently, on June 4, the conductor and her flute choir introduced their Pacifica Coastside Museum audience to one particular song that defies any standard music genre. Titled "Railroaded," the 3-minute piece was written by composer and flutist Nicole Chamberlain who lives within earshot of night trains traveling through Atlanta, Georgia. Masterfully, using beat boxing and pitch bending, the composer captures, through a choir of flutes, all the familiar and frankly comforting sounds of a train as it shuffles along the tracks sounding its horn. This "train chugger," quite literally, brought audience members to their feet and the talk after the performance was, what a perfect piece to showcase the Pacifica Historical Society's saved passenger car, [Car 1409](#), the last passenger car of the once dream railroad, the Ocean Shore Railroad. *(From 1907 to 1920, the OSRR took passengers coastside from San Francisco through today's Pacifica and on towards Santa Cruz. "70 miles of the grandest, most magnificent railway in the world.")*



Bel Canto Flutes Conductor Gail Edwards (top row, fifth from left) with her San Francisco flute choir at the Pacifica Coastside Museum, 2023.

Did Gail inherit her love of playing music from her parents?

"Neither of my parents played a musical instrument. I think my father was very musical but he didn't go there much. My mother's sister, Dorothy Tristan, was a screenwriter and an actress and she was in movies, and her first husband, Aram Avakian, was a film editor and director. One of their children, Alexandra, is a photographer for National Geographic, and Alexandra's brother, Tristan, is this rock 'n' roll dude! So, there's got to be an 'arts' gene somewhere in the family!" *(Alexandra Avakian's photographs have been published in TIME, LIFE, The New York Times Magazine, National Geographic, and many other high-end media publications throughout the U.S. and Europe. Also her photographic memoir, "Windows of the Soul: My Journeys in the Muslim World," should be investigated.)*

"My parents did not even play music on the record player," Gail laughed. "I think I came out of my mother trying to play music! Because when they give me little music toys, like a xylophone, I just sat there, for hours, trying to make music out of it. I found a harmonica one time and I did the same thing with that and then I had a recorder. I was just always trying to make music. Now they did give me piano lessons when I was a preschooler and those didn't really take with me. But they did send me to concerts. They didn't want to go, but they did want me to have what I needed. If I said to them, 'Can I have this metronome?' They said, 'Yes.' 'Can I have this book?' They said, 'Yes.' They didn't understand my fixation

with the flute, but they didn't get in my way either. They didn't prevent me from pursuing it and they did assist me where they could." (*While Gail's piano lessons did not take with her at her preschool age, she continued to take piano lessons enjoying them more—though never with the all-out thrill she found with flute—and in fact, taught piano at her high school, in her junior and senior years. In addition, like all college and conservatory music majors, Gail was required to meet, and did meet, the level of piano proficiency required to pursue a music degree.*)

Who were Gail's parents?

"My parents were Robert and Rhoda (Behrndt) Edwards. My dad's name is interesting. His family is Jewish and he was born Edward Cohen on June 25, 1927, in Chicago, Illinois, to immigrant parents. His father was from Russia and his mother was from Poland. But my dad went to West Point and there was a lot of anti-Semitism back then so he changed his name to Robert Charles Edwards.

"My dad's father was a lawyer and during the Depression, my father had a pony – so he was not feeling any effects of the Depression. From the window in his house, he could see Wrigley Field and he loved that. My dad, a very social guy, was a lifelong Cubs fan. In fact, one of the things he said on his deathbed in February of 2013 was, 'I guess I won't have to watch the Cubs lose anymore.' He also said, 'Guess I won't have to do my taxes this year' – because I had to do them!"



Commissioned a second lieutenant, Robert Charles Edwards graduated from USMA (United States Military Academy West Point) in 1950 and served as an Infantry Officer.

"My father's West Point class was the first to go directly from graduation to war, the Korean War."

The second lieutenant served as a platoon leader in a heavy mortar company. The enemy forces were fierce and they heavily outnumbered Robert's company. In addition, winter weather was icy and miserable. Frostbite was prevalent.

"My dad and his classmates went from graduation to being massacred. They were driven to the coast by the Koreans and the U.S. Navy rescued them."

After his return from Korea, Robert transferred from Infantry to the Ordnance Corps where he remained until his retirement. He retired in 1970 as a lieutenant colonel. While serving as an Ordnance Officer, he received an

MBA, in finance, from Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Throughout his Army career, he had a number of both U.S. and overseas assignments, which included two tours of duty in Vietnam.

"By the time I came along, my father's father was gone. I believe he was a smoker. My father's mom was still going, but only when I was an infant or a toddler. So she met me but sadly, I have no memory of her.

"My parents met because they were both in the Army."

The eldest of four, Rhoda Behrndt was the daughter of William and Winifred Behrndt.

"My mom grew up in New York in the Yorkville neighborhood of Manhattan. She had a bad childhood and when she was 16, she went to live with a cousin."



Rhoda graduated from the all-girls commercial high school, Julia Richman High School, then located at 60 West 13th Street in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, in June of 1943. In December of 1943, she entered the Cadet Nurse Corps program at the Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing, then a part of NYU. From 1943 through 1945, the federal government recruited nearly 180,000 young women nationwide to fill the nursing shortage left by World War II. Rhoda graduated with her bachelor of science in nursing from the Cadet Nurse Corps in December of 1946.

←Rhoda Behrndt, senior year, Julia Richman High School, 1943. Her senior photo lists "pool assistant" as her high school title and "nursing" as her career.

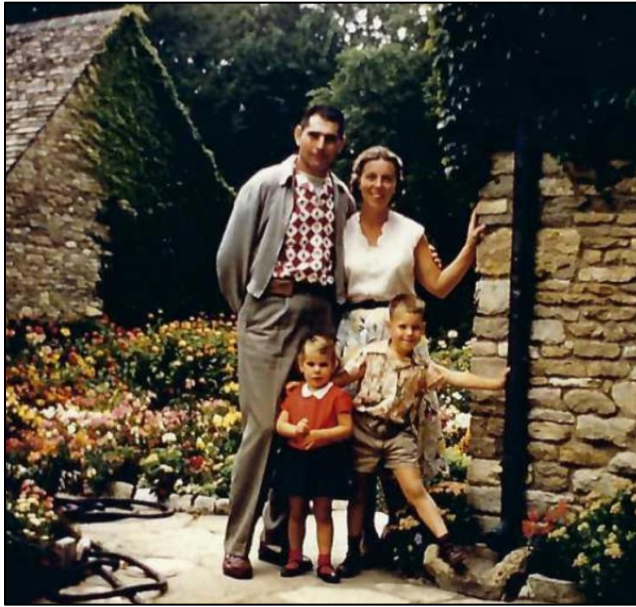
"My mother began as an Army nurse, which again, is how my parents met. She eventually became an enterostomal therapist. My mother's family was very working class and they were not Jewish. But she converted before she and my dad married. His family was very Jewish and that was mandatory.

"My mother was a very strong person. That's how she survived her childhood. I believe her mother had difficult mental health issues, though my mother's siblings did not move away and they all thrived. My mother did keep in touch with her siblings which was not easy to do when we were constantly moving hither and yon!"

Robert and Rhoda had three children: Ken, Gail and Bruce.

"My brother Ken lives in Santa Rosa, my brother Bruce died in 1981, just shy of his 22nd birthday. I was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1956 and have lived in Pacifica since 1985. And I love living in Pacifica. This is paradise! It's so beautiful, the ocean is right here, the air is so fresh and I feel it is very safe. Plus there is so much creative energy here and it has real community.

"We did a lot of moving around when I was growing up. Now my parents moved a few times before I came into the world, but after Germany, the next place we lived was in Virginia and then we moved to Natick, Massachusetts. I went to first and second grade in Havertown, Pennsylvania – to Lynnewood Elementary. We had a great house in Pennsylvania. It was not Army housing. We lived right across the street from this church which had a good hill and we used to sled down it. That was fun! I went to third grade in San Francisco. I went to Sherman Elementary School on Union Street. I remember doing the Presidential Fitness Test there – sit-ups and push-ups. I also remember being intimidated by the bathrooms. They were so big! Sixty years later I had a reason, starring the flute of course, to return to Sherman Elementary. But that's further along in my story. Anyway, my family lived at Fort Mason and we were in San Francisco for about a year and a half." *(By the late 1960s, the Department of Defense identified Fort Mason as no longer necessary for military purposes and began the process of turning the U.S. Army fort over to the National Park Service.)*



Gail, her older brother Ken and their folks in Germany, 1958.



Gail at Sherman School, San Francisco, 1964-1965.

The Edwards family left San Francisco for Tokyo, Japan. Their stay wasn't long in Tokyo, just a summer.

"My mother was a very curious person so wherever we went, we would learn about and visit what that place had to offer. For instance, when we were in the United States, a lot of our summers were spent driving to see everything. We would go to the Grand Canyon, to the Petrified Forest. My mother wanted to get to know the place where she lived and be a part of it. When we were in Japan, my mother saw to it that we went to a tea ceremony, we learned flower arranging, we visited a silk factory, we learned how to do origami, we tried all the local food and we traveled everywhere. I remember Tokyo was very tidy and everyone was so polite.



"I went to fifth and sixth grade in Taipei, Taiwan. Now, I am sure there are all these beautiful places to see in Taipei, but my family had to dump me because I was sick all the time. I couldn't eat a lot of the fruit because I was immediately sick. I thought Taipei smelled bad. They had open sewers. There were bugs and snakes. I was a wimp. My family left me at Girl Scout Camp while they did some traveling and I ended up in the hospital with dysentery. Something else that didn't sit well with me was the awkward attention my younger brother was given. He had red hair and was covered with freckles and people in Taiwan were not used to that. When we walked down the street, they would come up to him and touch his hair.

"My family learned to speak some of the language spoken by the Taiwanese while we were there. I learned a few swear words, but I was resistant to learning much of the language. I took French instead. But the greatest thing happened to me in Taipei, and it was completely life changing. I met the flute and I loved everything about it,

like I still do! I loved its sound. I loved practicing it. I loved playing it in school band.

"Being in a music group was thrilling, and whenever we went to the new place, I now had all these friends in band that were as equally geeky as me. My father was next stationed at Rock Island, Illinois, and we lived in Davenport, Iowa, just across the Mississippi River from where he worked.

"Davenport was the most bigoted place we ever lived. I hid the fact that I was Jewish when we lived there. They used to beat my brother up all the time because he was Jewish. This is when I was in 7th and 8th grade. I hope it has changed now. Back then, it was a very small-minded town.

"I did, however, have a great time playing in band in Davenport and another really wonderful thing that happened when we lived there was my parents got me a subscription to the local Quad City Symphony Orchestra. As a kid, I went to those Quad City concerts by myself and had a fantastic time. Also, as it turns out, I made a very good friend in Davenport, though I didn't know it at the time."



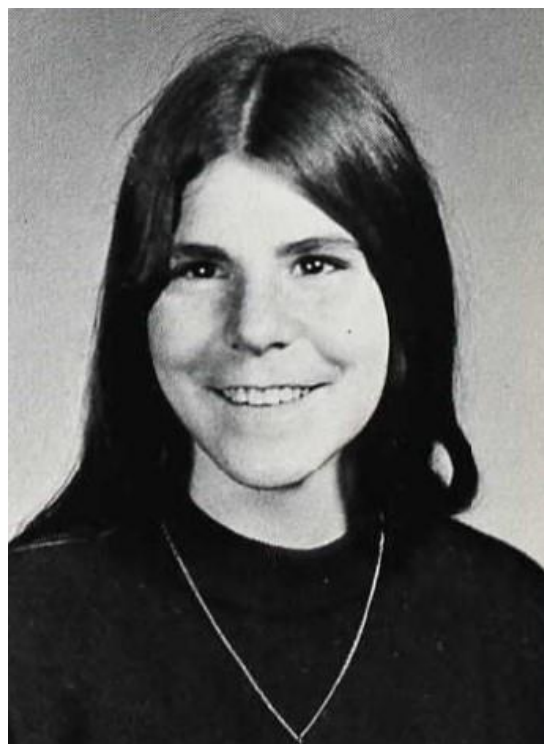
Gail with her brothers, Bruce to her left, and Ken, to her right, Davenport, IA, January, 1968.

"Because I moved around so much until high school, I can't tell you who I was friends with at any of the schools I went to before that, or who I even knew. But not too many years ago, someone I went to school with in Iowa remembered me because she also played in band. She and her husband were stopping in the Bay Area on their way back from Hawaii to Colorado, where they lived. She Googled 'Gail Edwards and the flute' because of course she knew I would still be playing the flute. She contacted me and I didn't remember her until she sent me her picture and then I remembered her. She played saxophone in our Davenport school band. She and her husband stopped in the Bay Area and I picked them up at the airport and we had so much fun. We were laughing until tears came out of our eyes and we became really good friends. Her husband was so generous with us. He paid for us to go to Vail, CO, to see the summer music

festival which included the Philadelphia Orchestra. We had such a good time. Then his Michigan college class took a cruise and I also went along. My Iowa friend's name was Karin and she counteracted all the bad in Davenport. Right before the lockdown she died of pancreatic cancer. I'm so sorry she's gone but so happy we found this incredible friendship years after we met in middle school. She also had a flute which her husband sent to me after she died.

"When did I get my first flute? Not for a long time. I used what the school had."

In 1970, Robert Edwards retired from the Army after a 20-year career, and the family moved to Schenectady, NY, where Gail's father went to work for General Electric Company (GE).



"When I was in high school in Schenectady, there were all these really, really good flute players in my neighborhood. I was not the good one. Right across the street from us was this incredibly good flute player and she and all her flute-playing friends had these really beautiful flutes. I was begging my father to buy me a flute. He didn't want to buy me a flute. He wanted to buy me a car. I didn't want a car. I wanted a flute. I didn't even drive until I was 22! So, I bought my flute, a little junker, for \$500. My father was this businessman and he negotiated contracts and so he was negotiating with this guy selling the flute to me and he was negotiating him down. And I said, 'No, no, Dad, please.' I wanted that flute. Well I did get that flute and my dad did negotiate the guy down. My dad also kept his promise. He told me he would get me the flute that I wanted when I went to music school and when I got into music school, he bought me the flute I wanted!"

←Gail, senior year, Niskayuna High School, Schenectady, NY. Extracurricular, 1970-1974: Girls Track; Girls Volleyball I; Varsity Band I; Symphonic Band 10, 11, 12; Orchestra 10, 11, 12; Teach Piano 11, 12.

During her high school years, Gail taught swimming.

"My mom was a big swimmer and she had me swimming as a preschooler. She always had me on the swim team. When I was in high school, my mom signed me up to teach swimming and cooking, both through the Synagogue as a volunteer. The latter meant opening brownie mixes and making brownies! Additionally, again as a volunteer, my mother had me playing flute in the Synagogue's youth music group and they thought I was the cat's meow because I could read music. I hated being in the youth group because I had to play all these non-classical things, except for the part that I loved playing with other people and I loved playing my flute. But being in that youth group really paid off for me, because it enabled me to play all kinds of music. In addition, because my mom volunteered me for everything at the Synagogue, the Synagogue gave me a college scholarship.

"I always practiced the flute, even when I didn't like the non-classical pieces I played in the Synagogue's youth group. My mother told me that from the start, she never had to tell me to practice."

Gail said that her high school music program was excellent.

"People from my high school did well musically. For instance, one of the horn players was the principal horn player for the San Francisco Symphony for decades. He just retired. As for me, I've made a life as a professional flutist. I wasn't the best one in the high school band, but flute was all I could see. When am I going to practice my flute? I remember I was doing really badly in biology. I just wasn't taking the time to learn it. We had some band trip coming up and I was going to have to miss biology and the biology teacher told me, 'You are going to flunk.' I didn't tell the biology teacher this, but I really didn't care because I wanted to go on this band trip. And I did go on that band trip and I didn't flunk, though I barely passed.

"My father used to tutor me in math and I just didn't get it. He was an MBA and it used to make him crazy that I didn't understand math. He was convinced I would never get into college. But I couldn't think of anything else but flute. Our high school music teacher, Mr. Melvin Schiff, was an excellent teacher but he really discouraged me from trying to go to school for music – because he thought it was so hard to make a career as a musician. But that kind of thinking didn't stick with me and thankfully, when it was time for college, my parents said, 'Yes, you can go to school for music,' as opposed to telling me to go learn to type!"

As a teenager, Gail listened to orchestras. She did like Joni Mitchell and Linda Ronstadt but she wasn't much of a pop music fan. The first piece of classical music that she particularly loved was Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker."

"This was in high school. My cousins were living in New York City, on Staten Island, and my aunt got my cousin and I tickets to go see 'The Nutcracker.' My aunt would not allow the two of us to go by ourselves, so she got us a babysitter which was so smart. I don't know how we would have gotten there otherwise. But here's the story. I was already addicted to the flute, yet when I heard 'The Nutcracker' I said, 'Oh yeah, that is it for me.' I didn't even see the dancers during that performance. All I saw and heard at that performance was the orchestra. 'The Nutcracker' is so fun. It is 77-pages long and every page has something delightful on it. I would say that was a very impactful music experience for me, and I had one other particularly impactful performance event as well in my earlier childhood. When we were in Davenport we went to see the show, 'Up With People.' That also really resonated with me. Funny, after all this, I can't even tell you why flute is it for me. It just is!

"What was my first solo on the flute? In high school, I was always the most driven flute player but as I mentioned, I was never the top flute player. I was second chair and first chair does the solo work. As it turns out, this would be the start of my piccolo career, because since I wasn't going to be first chair, the band teacher put me on piccolo, and as it turns out, my career is on piccolo! Back in high school, I would have piccolo solos and I would be so nervous, but I did it."

Following high school, Gail auditioned for and was admitted into State University of New York, Crane School of Music in Potsdam. Founded in 1816, SUNY Potsdam's Crane School of Music has a long legacy of achievements, which includes providing all of the music for the 1980 Winter Olympic Games in Lake Placid, NY. Gail attended the Crane School of Music for two years before moving to California with her mom. Her dad was already there.

"My father got a job as an administrator at the University of California, Berkeley, and my parents were having all kinds of problems trying to sell our house in Schenectady. It was a really big house, split levels, and when they were trying to sell it there was a gasoline shortage crisis. So the heating bills for their house alone made it extremely difficult to sell and it was on the market for several years. In addition, they were having problems in their marriage. They really always had problems and sometimes it's hard to believe they were together, though they both had very likable personalities.

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"One of my mother's traits was she was very politically active. When I was of voting age, she would call me up and tell me, you have to vote for so and so, and please tell all your friends to vote for so and so, and please tell me you are not going to vote for so and so. Ha! Ha! In Schenectady, she was getting arrested and put in jail for protesting anything that had to do with nuclear anything. This job my father took with GE when he retired from the Army had some nuclear thing going on. So my mother getting arrested for protesting the company my father was working for was not good, for my parents' relationship at least!"

At that point in time, GE in Schenectady was collaborating in the production of nuclear-powered submarines. Informationally, Schenectady is where Thomas Edison founded what would become the General Electric Company.

"I came out to the Bay Area and my father wanted me to go to the University of the Pacific in Stockton. I went for one semester. I really hated it. First of all, I had just come from the pretty little town of Potsdam in upstate New York, and Stockton was definitely a change of scenery, plus our classrooms were in Quonset huts. In addition, at UOP they really supported their football team and we had marching band rehearsal at 8 a.m. on Saturday mornings. That wasn't for me. I transferred to San Francisco State University and that was a much better fit, plus I got so many gigs.

"When I was in college, I didn't go to parties. Once, I went to one of the fraternity parties and I was bored immediately and left. If it was the day before I had a flute lesson at college, forget it. I was in bed early listening to orchestra music.

"From the first moment, I loved playing in orchestras and I loved listening to orchestras. I was just driven. They say it takes 30 auditions before you win one. I didn't know that until I started winning one. Recently a world famous skier said, 'They talk about all my wins but they never talk about my losses.' And I say, unless you are blinded by your art, which I always have been, you can't do it, because you just won't keep at it. I feel fortunate. I am lucky that I found my art at such an early age."



Gail performing at an outdoor San Francisco gig, 1983.

Gail received her Bachelor of Arts from SFSU in 1980 and in 1984, she would audition for and be accepted into the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Graduate Assistantship, where she would go on to achieve her Master of Music. As to her parents, they divorced shortly after 1976 and her mom then moved to Alaska where she lived and worked as a nurse with a small group of Alaska's indigenous people. Gail's father continued his administrator work at UC Berkeley.



"My first job out of college was the Golden Gate Park Band. I also worked for the City and County of San Francisco, the Recreation Department, teaching recorder. I've always had a million jobs. Then I got an additional job with the City. The City of San Francisco used to have an orchestra and I was their orchestra administrator. I did everything except conduct. I found concert locations, I did the music library – this is in my twenties. In my career I have three aspects: playing, teaching and administration. I've done a lot of administrative work. That's the part I get from my dad. Later my dad recognized that even though I don't know how to do math, I could still do things!"

←Gail playing in a Golden Gate Bandshell Concert in 1986. These iconic and free outdoor concerts take place at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park Music Concourse.

"For instance, I was the general manager of the Oakland Youth Orchestra—this is later in my career, from 2009 through 2013—and I took that orchestra, these are teenagers, on several international tours. They said to me, 'How much money do we need to raise?' And I said, '\$50,000.' I just put that number out into the air. I didn't have any idea and that was exactly what

we needed and that's what they raised. I don't know how I figured it out, I just did. I do the same with my flute choirs. I just do it."

The Oakland Youth Orchestra General Manager took her teenage musicians to Costa Rica, Uruguay and Argentina, as well as various U.S. locations. Besides getting the orchestra members on planes, she also saw to it that harps, percussion and numerous other instruments also made those flights. Once in-country, off to their performance venues they went. Her job description, in abbreviation, included: scheduling concerts and auditions; booking venues; creating print materials; touring; budgets; fundraising and grant writing; running student, board and parent meetings; hiring coaches, musicians and staff; and doing publicity.

"Frankly, I don't know how I did it," she laughed. "Nobody lost their instrument or broke it. Nobody got pregnant, not that I know of. Ha! Ha!"

But back in her twenties and even her late teens, besides orchestra and band gigs, Gail rolled up her sleeves for some other résumé highlighters.

"On the East Coast, when I first went to college, I was on the college swim team but I couldn't keep up with swimming and music school, so I dropped swimming. But in the summers, I worked at a Music Camp as a lifeguard and as a camp counselor. At one point, still on the East Coast, I tried working at the Friendly Ice Cream Store as a waitress. This is a very well-known place. But I was horrible at it because they kept changing the schedule every week and I couldn't keep up.

"When I first moved here, I didn't get the lifeguard thing going and I was playing flute on the street and in different places and making a living. My brother Ken and I played on the street for tips, all non-classical music of course and I can thank my mother and Synagogue for making that possible! Ken played rock 'n' roll and blues guitar and he didn't read music. He also played bluegrass. Both my brothers played guitar. When I came to San Francisco, I took jazz classes and sometimes would play in a trio at the Cannery in the Wine Cellar. I think one of the most splendid things that happened immediately when we moved to San Francisco is I played all kinds of music."

Then there was her job, in San Francisco, as a singing messenger.

"Of course I can't sing," she grinned. "And get this, I was a singing messenger in a gorilla outfit. We were called, Gorilla Grams and this is before GPS and people gave horrible directions. Also, you would go to the door in your gorilla outfit and sometimes people thought we were going to strip. No! My friend from college, Liz, who is a flutie, she remembers much more about Gorilla Grams than I do. She has a ton of stories! Those gorilla outfits smelled bad, by the way. We weren't the only gorillas!"

Gail never studied specifically under a flute teacher until she was a senior in high school. It was then she realized she was going to study music in college so she started on some serious lessons. But throughout her music journey, she never encountered any hurdle that veered her even slightly from her life of magical flute.

"I think my learning was cumulative. I worked hard and I was eager to improve and I wanted to play and I was always trying to play music. After I had my master's degree, I took lessons from Cathy Payne. Cathy is the piccolo player with the San Francisco Symphony." (*Cathy joined the San Francisco Symphony as their piccolo player in 1996. She previously performed with the Boston Symphony as acting second flute.*)

"After I began studying with Cathy, I started winning auditions. I had won auditions to get into schools, which I learned later, some people don't win those auditions. I just thought you auditioned and got in! But auditioning for an orchestra is quite different from auditioning for a school and Cathy had a tremendous influence on my career. I can also say this about flutist Julie McKenzie.

"When I was an undergraduate at San Francisco State, there was a student, Julie, who became the principal flute for the San Francisco Opera Orchestra in her 20s, which she still is. (*She is also the principal flute for the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra.*) I had just arrived here and they had flute class and all the flute players were together and immediately I could see that she was so amazing. But she wasn't the Queen Bee at San Francisco State, so to speak, someone else was. But Julie was winning all these regional orchestra jobs, such as the Modesto Symphony, and eventually she won the San Francisco Opera job.

"In the 1990s, after I had my kids and I had my master's degree I was so nervous at auditions, I couldn't even catch my breath. I went and got hypnotherapy and I did coaching with Julie and she helped me

tremendously. She gave me some really concrete tools to employ when they say, 'You're next.' Now, I knew all along I was never going to give up the flute. I just needed to give up those nerves!"

Earlier in the 1980s, when selecting graduate school possibilities, Gail auditioned for the Manhattan School of Music, the New England Conservatory (Boston), Julliard (NY, NY) and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

"I got into the Manhattan School of Music but I did not want to live in New York City. I don't like New York City. I did not get into Julliard or the New England Conservatory, but regarding the latter, I didn't want to live in Boston either. I did not get into the San Francisco Conservatory on my first try, so I tried again. I went to the flute teacher and said, 'What do you want me to play?' And he told me what he wanted me to play and I played it and I got in.

"I know some flutists who did not get into graduate school on their first try and they did not try again. I play the flute because I love to play the flute and if you love to play the flute—I say this to my people, especially my high school people—you cannot say, 'Well, if I am not first chair, I'm not going to do it.' I've never been that way. I've always felt like I love to play my flute and where can I play my flute and where can we play it together?"

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play. I do love the piccolo and apparently I am a really good piccolo player. Even in graduate school, all my teacher did was put me on piccolo. There have been piccolo auditions where committee members have said, 'You were the only one who could play that.' I won this piccolo audition in Sacramento in 2000. It was a triple audition. A lot of auditions are not fair. There was a favorite at one audition and that favorite was not me. And auditions are blind. I advanced to the final and they continued the auditions blind because I was actually subbing as a piccolo player at this point and they wanted this other woman. You are supposed to be separate and not talk. She left and I was going in, and my friend was this other woman's proctor and he said, 'She only made one mistake.' On the very first note, I made a mistake. I accidentally tweaked it. But then I won the audition.

"Ten days later, they had a San Francisco Opera Orchestra audition and I made it to the final 10 people. And then they asked this really easy thing, something I've played a million times. But I'm thinking, 'Did I take a breath?' and then I messed up and they said, 'Thank you!'"

Gail has and plays each of these members of the flute family: piccolo (the smallest and highest-pitched member of the flute family); a regular flute or C-flute (also called the concert flute); the alto flute and the bass flute.

"In an orchestra, you have to learn how to count when you are not playing. Sometimes when you are supposed to come in is really tricky and scary, so you have to do that counting. I just played the music from 'Star Wars' alongside the movie in Modesto." (*Gail was playing with the Modesto Symphony.*) "Before that we did 'Pirates of the Caribbean.' This year we are going to do another 'Star Wars' and Sacramento Philharmonic & Opera Orchestra is going to do some movie also." (*Gail is a member of the Sacramento and Modesto symphonies as their piccolo player.*) "It is so fun to be in these orchestras. But you have to always be aware. You have a microphone right in front of you, so you can't say, 'Oh bleep!' if something happens.



Gail on piccolo with the Modesto Symphony Orchestra. (Photo courtesy of Modesto Symphony Orchestra.)

"You know, one of the really great earlier experiences for me was playing in the Golden Gate Park Band. I was playing the regular flute/C flute. But the Band had a lot of music from the turn of the 1900s and a lot of that music was D-flat and E-flat. The conductor at the time was doing ballet and opera arrangements, and I was transposing and sight-reading at the same time. So I really got good at transposing while I was performing. When you play at a church, the organ often has a button that they can change what key you're in, which is due to the singer. Those earlier performances with the Golden Gate Park Band made me really able to play these church gigs, where the organist is changing the key of the music that you are looking at – because I can do the transposition. This summer, at the end of June, I worked at the Sequoia Chamber Music Workshop and I learned, finally, how to transpose viola clef because I was coaching a viola player and I needed to do it."

Gail left the Golden Gate Park Band to play 'Sunday Brunch at the Top of the Hilton' in San Francisco.

"It was flute and harp. so I started working with a lot of harpists. Harpists do a lot of wedding gigs on Sundays and so this was a conflict for them performing at a Sunday brunch. I had to find a lot of subs. But I eventually met a harpist, Janice Ortega, and she and I started doing all these gigs together. In fact, at one point we played at Pacifica Performances. We also played, one time only, on one of the stages at the Pacific Coast Fog Fest. That's more of a rock, blues, country or bluegrass venue so our classical music performance was probably not the best fit – though we did have an audience. There are always classical music fans to be found!"

In 1985, Gail was in her second year at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. That same year, she and her partner decided to move out of San Francisco and bought a house in Pacifica near the Sanchez Library. In 1986, Gail graduated from the Conservatory and the couple married. (*They split in 2004.*) They are the parents of two, Jeffrey and Rebecca. "Neither of whom is a musician," she noted. (*Rebecca works with children with autism and Jeffrey is in business.*)

"And I have two grandbabies," Gail beamed, "Adeline and Zane."



Grandma Rhoda with Rebecca and Gail in Pacifica, 1990.

Both of Gail's children attended Vallemar Elementary followed by Cabrillo School, here in Pacifica. From 1997 through 2001, Gail volunteered with the Pacifica School District as a "Classroom Music/Band Teacher." As such she taught classroom music to grades three through five, creating a music curriculum to integrate with their class work. She also taught classroom recorder, and she additionally taught and developed curriculum for the middle school music program. Later, in 2013, she worked as a volunteer with PSD Music Teacher Mark Unbehagen, several times a week. "I know how important and how much fun music is for kids!"

In the early 1990s, Gail served on the Pacifica Cultural Arts Commission. Other members on that Commission included: Michael Slaughter, JoAnne Arnos, Roberta Ewald and Anna Boothe.

"We did the Poetry Festival," Gail recalled. "We started the Lifetime Achievement Awards. We are responsible for placing the statue, that is oceanside, in front of the Moonraker Restaurant."

* * *

In the summer of 1999, Gail founded and ran the Seaside Summer Music Academy in Pacifica.

"I wanted to bring aspiring musicians together with successful local professional musicians in a performance-oriented atmosphere. I wanted to provide a fuller music education, such as music theory and rhythm drills. I wanted a camp, a little different from many music camps at the time in that it was for students who were interested in performing and in playing in ensembles. Of course, 'fun' was a highlight of the camp, but so was inspiration. In five days, these students learned a totally new piece of music and played it in an ensemble to an audience. This was a very positive camp because these students were performing with kids their own age and really enjoying the incredible music sound you can be a part of when you are playing with other like-minded musicians."

Gail said the idea really came to her because of her own experience coaching and performing for four years at a similar camp in Oregon with her flute/harp duo partner and good friend Janice Ortega. Janice was then and still is a harp teacher and lecturer at California State University, East Bay. That Oregon camp, which is still very much going, was the Summer Music Camp hosted by the Valley Catholic Music School in Beaverton, OR.

"The Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon ran the program and Janice and I were bringing up a lot of students from here, and the sisters were putting us up in the convent. They were running out of room! So we just thought, "Why don't we start one here?"

Gail coordinated students, teachers and curriculum, and wrote grants. All the teachers were professional musicians and most lived in Pacifica. All were paid.

Included among those teachers were: Gail on flute; Janice on harp; Kay Stern, concertmaster with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra on violin; Charlie McCarthy, a many-time saxophonist with the San Francisco Symphony, on saxophone; Ruby and Doug Pleasure, choral and orchestra directors, respectively, at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and San Francisco's Washington High School; and Handbell Choir performer Carolyn Harnly on handbells. Pianist Jiun-Chyi Yew was brought on board as the Camp's piano accompanist.

"We did the Seaside Summer Music Academy right here at the Pacifica Community Center. We also did it a couple of times at San Francisco State, but State got too expensive. We did the Academy through the summer of 2005, and then as so often happens with grants, we lost our major funder. But that was an extraordinary experience for all of us, from students and their families through faculty and their families."

Of course, the Seaside Summer Music Academy wasn't all that was on the flutist's multi-jobs-that-she-loves work schedule.

From 2002 through 2008, Gail was adjunct faculty at the University of San Francisco.

"I started out as a woodwind teacher and I ended up being the orchestra conductor, which really was a misnomer, it should have been called mixed instrumental ensemble conductor. We had flutes, saxophones, trombones and viola. I taught individual lessons and prepared students for the semester-end jury. I found performance venues and opportunities, and put the students together in small ensembles, and led the large ensemble and managed the performance logistics."

While working as adjunct faculty at USF, Gail was also the flute choir director at San Francisco State University. There she managed all aspects of the ensemble, which included: recruitment, researching and booking venues, selecting the music library, leading the ensembles and producing program and advertising materials.

While she still teaches individual students, ages 10 and on through adulthood, from her private home studio, GEMS (Gail Edwards Music Studio) in Pacifica's Sharp Park neighborhood, her Bel Canto Flute Choirs are for adult amateur flutists – intermediate or above playing level. For a number of years, Gail did provide flute choir performance opportunities for her-flute musicians in middle school and high school – provided they could learn the pieces. This was her GEMS Flute Choir. Currently, if one of her younger students has the ability and desire to perform with her adult flute choir, Gail noted exceptions can always be made.

"One of the biggest joys of playing music is making music with others. It's very difficult to stay motivated in your personal practice if you don't have a performance to look forward to."

A life of magical flute

An interview-biography with Pacifican Gail Edwards by Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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Her younger flute choir, often joined by some of the members of her adult flute choirs, played at a number of Bay Area locales, including: Oracle Park (then AT&T Park); The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and San Francisco's City Hall.

"One great thing about flute choirs is that within a piece, the difficulty of the parts varies. That way we can do a really hard piece, like 'Flight of the Bumblebee,' and within the piece will be parts that are much easier than others. For players with less experience, it is a tremendous growth experience to play with others who are better than you. It's like a wave pushing you along."



A combination of Gail's flute choir students, youth and adults, pose in The Rotunda of San Francisco's City Hall following a performance, December 2003.

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Several of Gail's middle school and high school students have gone on to participate in Gail's adult flute choirs.

"To be successful at anything takes time and commitment to really learn whatever it is. Whether you're an athlete or a writer or an actor or a dancer, they all take practice. If it was easy to be good at any of those things, then everyone would be able to do it, like breathing. With music, proper practice yields fruit quickly."

Along with her adjunct music faculty work with USF and SFSU, Gail's teaching credentials also include: City College of San Francisco; Laney College; Skyline College, where she continues to do private lessons; and from 1998 through 2022, just giving up her spot this year, Gail has been the Flute Artist-in-Residence at Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts (SOTA High School). She has additionally performed many outreach programs representing the Sacramento Philharmonic and the Musician's Union. And on the administrative side, she currently serves on the Executive Committee of the American Federation of Musicians Local 12 (that is Central California, from Bakersfield to the Oregon border). She is also on the Orchestra Committee for both the Sacramento Philharmonic and Modesto Symphony.



Gail conducting Bel Canto Flutes in 2010. That same year, Bel Canto Flutes was selected to perform at the National Flute Convention where they premiered two tangos written by Christopher Caliendo in honor of Gail's birthday. (Lars Johannesson photo.)

"There are always more flute players than there are spots in orchestras," Gail pointed out. "For instance, the Peninsula Youth Orchestra just had auditions. They had 27 flutists audition, they took three. They had 27 violinists audition, they took them all. They had five violas and they begged them to be in the orchestra. There are always too many flute players. It's very, very competitive. I just try to play my flute anywhere I can.

"I was subbing around on flute in 2000 and 2001, when I won my positions with the Sacramento Philharmonic, Opera and Ballet orchestras and the Modesto Symphony Orchestra. *(In both Sacramento and Modesto, Gail continues to serve as Piccolo/Flute 3.)*

In addition, Gail's symphonic experience includes: the Napa Valley Symphony, and the San Francisco Ballet and Opera orchestras. Gail also has a long list of Broadway orchestral work, playing in national touring productions presented at the Orpheum Theatre and the Curran Theatre, both in San Francisco, and other high-end Bay Area theatres.

A frequent chamber music performer, she has recorded soundtracks for various independent filmmakers and was the flute voice behind the PBS series, "Classical Stretch." Among her many chamber music performances are numerous concert series, which include: San Francisco's Noontime Concert Series, Old First Church Concerts, Trinity Chamber Series, the National Flute Association Convention; USF Faculty Series and San Francisco Conservatory Faculty Series. At these chamber music performances, the flutist performs in combination with any of the following instruments: harp, piano, strings, guitar and other flutes.

"It is my life's goal to share my music with others – whether that is through teaching or playing or working as an arts administrator."

During the pandemic, it was a rough road for most professional musicians but Gail and her flute forged a trail, which she is 100 percent thrilled with. Essentially, the musician figured out how to create solo flute performances for audiences of all sizes.

"Funny, my whole career has been flute but during the pandemic, I spent hours and hours online playing music with other artists and something about that just made me stronger and more confident. I played hours and hours with orchestras on YouTube during lockdown. I have a wireless speaker and I blasted it. I played with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and I would play Beethoven and Mozart, and Hector Berlioz's 'Symphonie fantastique.' I tried to do Rachmaninoff. The thing is, sometimes they don't show you the conductor enough so it is, at times, really hard to follow. The other thing is, I discovered this little back-tracking machine, PK110A."

A PK110A is a "50-Watt powered PA sound-reinforcement loudspeaker with a built-in, high-performance media player and Bluetooth." It is ideal for live "concert" sound and it is exceptionally portable. It allows one musician to play along with other instrumentalists who were previously recorded, so that that one musician is the only actual performer at a gig.

"So now I can go out on my own and play gigs on my own and I figured it out on my own. I'm proud of me! I go all around the Bay Area. I just hustle jobs. The machine plays the backing-tracks and I play the flute along with it. The union is sponsoring a lot of these little jobs. Mostly, I go to assisted-living places and senior centers. I played 'Danny Boy' and someone started crying. I play at our Pacifica Senior Community Center, the first Wednesday of every month. This is so much easier, because it is so hard to coordinate schedules and I don't have to worry about rehearsing with people, and for the client, I don't take up much space. I have hours and hours of repertoire. The library had this book, 100 songs from the 1960s and it came with backing-track. Of course I still love playing with actual people, this is just another way for me to present flute!"

Right before the pandemic lockdown, the flutist was working for the San Francisco Symphony in their Adventures in Music (AIM) Program. Established in 1988 by the San Francisco Symphony, AIM's goal is to provide the elementary school children of the San Francisco Unified School District with equal access to music education, free of charge. An interdisciplinary program, AIM integrates "live music performances and related music learning experiences with the everyday classroom curriculum. It offers a specially-designed classroom curriculum, a sequence of in-school presentations by music ensembles, and a visit to Davies Symphony Hall for a private concert by the San Francisco Symphony."



Gail was signed on with AIM for 2019 and 2020. Musicians were part of specific trio ensembles and each trio traveled to all the District's schools. For instance, there was the Building Brass Trio and these three musicians introduced students to the trumpet, the French horn and the tuba. There was the trio Cascada De Flores, who worked with multiple string and percussion instruments to engage students with the rich tradition of Mexican music. Gail was a part of the string and woodwind ensemble, Soundscapes Trio: Gail on flute, James Pytko on clarinet and Anna Maria Mendieta on harp.

"This was such an exciting program for the kids and the musicians," Gail said. "And don't you just know, one of the schools we went to was Sherman School. That's where I went to third grade! Of course that made me even more excited about the project and I was thrilled to bring my class photo from way back when and show everyone. I will say, however, the bathrooms were not at all as big as I recalled!"

←Gail's school photo from her 2019 AIM visit to Sherman School.

"For a musician, it is so much fun to talk about your instrument and the music that you love, and demonstrate how you can make these beautiful variations of music on your instrument, and then – how you can combine your instrument with someone else's instrument and create something that is really lovely and just so much fun to do.

"The first year we did AIM 1 and we worked with the little kids, first and second graders. The second year we did AIM 2 and we worked with third through fifth graders. In our second year with AIM, we called our trio, Musical Magic. At the end of all the classroom sessions with the students, the students then attended a special, private concert at Davies Symphony Hall to hear the San Francisco Symphony performing pieces that were presented in their classrooms. It's just an outstanding program.

"The pandemic shortened our 2020 program but I would like to say that during the lockdown, the San Francisco Symphony very generously paid us for our contract – they didn't have to."

During the lockdown, the Modesto Symphony did a video piece on Gail.

"When there was lockdown these orchestras that we have contracts with, the regional orchestras – they committed to a number of services. Each concert set you do is so many rehearsals and so many concerts, and each time you go that's called a service. So during lockdown they offered a service, but we obviously couldn't go anywhere. So one of the things the Modesto Symphony did with me was an interview. It was an educational thing. I talked about me and how I came to be in the Modesto Symphony. I so appreciate them for doing this.

"I have contracts with the Modesto Symphony and the Sacramento Philharmonic & Opera Orchestra, and they are really wonderful orchestras. I have so many contacts in these areas, that I do a lot of freelancing in and about both cities. I play a lot of music festivals."

There is not one specific type of performance that Gail loves on the flute because she loves every performance on the flute. She even loves practicing on the flute, which she does every day for two hours a day, and that does not include rehearsals or lessons. But her Bel Canto Flute choirs are particularly dear to her heart.

"Recently, the San Francisco branch of Bel Canto Flutes gave a wonderful performance – which frankly they always do – at the Randall Museum in San Francisco."

Owned and operated by the San Francisco Recreation & Parks Department, the Randall Museum is a free-admission, hands-on learning center for children and adults. Its focus is science, nature and the arts, and on exhibit always, along with changing exhibits, are "live native and domestic animals and interactive displays about nature."

"We loved performing there and we were a big hit!" the enthusiastic flute choir director said. "It was a very educational and of course highly listenable concert we performed and one of our song selections was 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,' and it had all these variations. The kids and the adults were especially dazzled by that one!"

Gail's San Francisco Bel Canto Flute Choir averages yearly anywhere from 12 to 15 players. Her South Bay Bel Canto Flute Choir is generally 12 or 13 players. Many of her flutists have been with Gail for 15 to 18 years. One has been with her since she was in middle school. Interestingly, so many of her flutists are in, or are retired from, the medical field and they include: a nurse practitioner, a pediatric cardiologist, a cardiologist, a pediatrician, a nurse, a retired nurse and a brain researcher.

"Eight-five to ninety-five percent of the people in both of my flute choirs started playing the flute in elementary school, when they were 9 or 10.

"How do we practice for the flute choir? We have rehearsals on Monday night. I rent a space at Lakeside Presbyterian Church, near Stonestown, for my San Francisco group. Tuesday, the South Bay group rehearses and I rent a church space in Palo Alto. Generally, I have eight rehearsals and then two concerts, and that makes a session. This year I will be doing four sessions. In the past we have only done three sessions – one in the spring, one in the summer and one leading into the holidays. We finished a session in May and that was going to be it until July, but one of the flutists in the South Bay choir said, 'Oh, no. That's not it!' She is a former librarian and she booked all these concerts. A mutiny! Ha! Ha!"

The next session will be a water theme and the music selections will include: Henry Mancini's "Moon River;" Scott Joplin's "The Cascades;" the traditional American folk song "Shenandoah," arranged by Kelly Via; and selections from the film, "Pirates of the Caribbean."

The session themes are generally chosen by Gail, with flute choir members sometimes contributing flute-music finds that might inspire a theme or themes.

"People in the flute choir will buy a piece of music and of course I will try it. They like classical and Baroque period pieces – 'Eleanor Rigby,' not so much!"

Themes are also chosen based on particular pieces the flute choir director likes.

"For instance, I found a flute arranger I really like and her name is Judy Nishimura. She arranges all these famous classical pieces to five minutes, such as the '5 Minute Tour' of (Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky's) 'Pictures at an Exhibition.' She does Tchaikovsky's 'The Nutcracker' in 5 minutes, Mozart's 'Magic Flute' in 5 minutes, and they are very fun and playful and there is always a part that is virtuosic.

Composer, arranger and flutist Ricky Lombardo is someone I am very familiar with and it seems like I always have something of his in a flute choir performance. I also love Mel Orriss's arrangement of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow,' and my flutists love it too!

"I have to reiterate this, because it is so important and so true. The thing about flute choirs is there are different levels. You can have players that are really good and there is a spot for them. You can have people that are not very strong players and there is a spot for them. And it is just fun to play in groups. My students will sometimes say, they don't care if they perform. They just want to play together."



In June of 2023, South Bay Bel Canto Flute Choir performed in San Jose.

Except during the realities of lockdown, Gail is never without flute jobs.

"Because I have worked in Modesto and Sacramento, I get hired in Marin, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Berkeley and Stockton. Last year I played the Mid-Summer Mozart Festival. This year I played the Mendocino Music Festival and taught at the Sequoia Chamber Music Workshop. All these things are because I won auditions."

Not long after we met for this interview, Gail was playing first flute with the Oakland Municipal Band in their summer concert series at the Lake Merritt Bandstand.

"We always do John Philip Sousa's 'The Stars and Stripes Forever,' but our performance will also include: Sousa's 'March of the Royal Trumpets,' Gustav Holst, 'Pirates of the Caribbean,' 'The Duke' by Dave Brubeck and 'Shallow' by Lady Gaga." Somehow Gail also took on the job of auditioning conductors for next season's concert series.

"There are a lot of different jobs you can get as a musician that people don't realize. Like administrative jobs with orchestras, work at a music store. These days, I have friends in their 20s and 30s who do these things on Spotify, something with music – I don't even know what it is. But they are playing music and making money. That's their day job. There are always opportunities.

"Like church gigs – you don't hear a lot of flutists playing church gigs. But you can't wait for them to come knocking, you have to knock on their door, and that's what I do. And I can play it in any key. Put something in front of me and I will play it and it is easy for me and it sounds beautiful on the flute. I hustle work because I want to play my flute!

"Why is the flute the best instrument? Okay, there are things the flute can't do, like the double-stops they do on string instruments. But the flute is pretty darn versatile and I just think the sound of the flute is so beautiful. And it is very portable, which cannot be said about the instruments of a pianist or a tubist. Ha! Ha!

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"I couldn't be doing some of these gigs with my little back-tracking machine if I didn't play the flute, because it has to be some beautiful, melodic instrument. And you know, I never stop learning something wonderful on the flute."



The freelance flutist, who can be contacted directly at flutege@sbcglobal.net, and through her website: gailedwardsflute.com, wants it also to be known that she is additionally a voracious reader and a steady gardener.

Samples of Gail Edward's on flute as well as conducting her San Francisco flute choir can be heard here. From her CD "Easy As" (Contemporary American Flute Music: Gail Edwards, flute; Michael Slaughter, piano), two pieces: "[How My Heart Sings](#)" and "[Rose Cottage](#)." And, as recorded and filmed by Pacific Coast TV, the San Francisco Bel Canto Flutes play a holiday concert at the Pacifica Coastside Museum. Enjoy the [show](#).



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is also a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author.

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