



# TAKE IT BEYOND THE CONCERT HALL

with From the Top Alum  
Olivia Marckx



photo credit: Caitlin Cunningham

## WHAT IT TAKES

- ▶ **Time:** While each performance is only 15–20 minutes long, it can take Olivia a month to make the right communications and schedule a classroom visit-performance.
- ▶ **Connections:** First, Olivia asked her physical therapist for contacts, who then directed her to area school districts. With district special needs coordinators, she reached out to individual teachers to find classrooms interested in having her and Charlotte perform.
- ▶ **Busking:** Olivia and Charlotte performed outside over one weekend to raise enough money for a set of egg shakers to use in their performances.
- ▶ **Repertoire:** Each performance is about 4–5 pieces. In addition to classical music and some violin-cello fiddle arrangements, Olivia discovered that students really like classic rock, so she and her sister arranged Michael Jackson and Beatles covers to add to their repertoire.

Olivia Marckx is a 16-year-old cellist from Bellevue, Washington. She performed on *From the Top* on shows [297](#) and [314](#) is a [Jack Kent Cooke Young Artist](#).

“Visiting special needs classrooms lets me see my music at work. It’s amazing how much power music can have for kids who aren’t exposed to live music regularly.”

## MAKING MUSIC WITH SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

### What It Is:

Cello-violin sister duo Olivia and Charlotte Marckx have visited and performed for 10 different special-needs classrooms in the greater Seattle area over the past two years. They tailor each performance to their audience, playing everything from classical repertoire to Michael Jackson covers, and interact with the audience between pieces. Olivia and Charlotte invite the students to “join their band,” and they pass out egg shakers so students can keep time and participate in music making.

### Why It Matters:

As a young child, Olivia was in the low 1% of motor function for her age. She began playing cello as a form of physical therapy, and the cello quickly developed her motor skills as well as her love and aptitude for music. Performing in special needs classrooms allows Olivia give back, using her music to communicate and interact directly with students. In districts where the special needs music curriculum is mostly appreciation-based, Olivia and Charlotte’s visits provide an up-close-and-personal musical experience, allowing students to join in with rhythm and movement as the music inspires them.

## Q&A WITH OLIVIA

### From the Top (FTT):

Special-needs students are a unique audience. Tell me about designing a program for them.

**Olivia:** It doesn't feel like a typical audience, but it is very real: they don't have a lot of inhibitions, and no one is going to pretend they're enjoying something if they aren't. It's very clear to see what they like and are responding to. They vocalize and wiggle in their chairs – one student was nonresponsive for much of our program, but started kicking her legs in time when we played a fiddle tune. Some kids have sensory issues, so we try to start with a soft or slow piece, getting them used to the sound. We ramp up the energy as we go along, ending with a high-reel fiddle tune with a great beat for them to shake [their egg shakers] along to.

**FTT:** Why did you decide to make the egg shakers part of your outreach program?

**Olivia:** Our audience is either physically or socially special needs, and they would have a difficult time taking private music lessons. We wanted a way for the students to participate in the music and give them something physical and energetic that they could be successful and together in. The egg shakers make them feel part of the music more than just listening to it.



Above: Egg shakers in action!



Above: Olivia (on right) and her sister Charlotte perform for students

**FTT:** Has anything about your experience challenged your expectations?

**Olivia:** I think we assumed that kids would love our music unconditionally, and while most kids have loved it, the variety of reactions was challenging at first. Some kids can't handle the sound, and others jump around and vocalize because they're enjoying it. But for some kids, it's the best part of their day, and seeing the impact on the individual level makes it worth it.

**FTT:** What advice would you give someone looking to do similar work?

**Olivia:** You have to be prepared for a lot of failure, whether getting bogged down in scheduling or seeing a variety of reactions from the audience. It can be shocking to walk into your first classroom – you feel a little overwhelmed by all the wheelchairs and equipment and different reactions. It's intense. But through doing this, you learn to engage with anyone and play anything under any circumstances. If you can dodge egg shakers being thrown at you while playing a fast movement, you can do anything!

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