

Circle of In

by Nathan Chan

My journey into music started when I was quite young. I am lucky to come from a musical family: My mother is a concert pianist and piano teacher who studied at Juilliard, my sister plays the violin and the viola, and my father, who is a cardiologist, also plays the violin in an orchestra. Hearing music around the house and being exposed to the joy of music from an early age made it easy and natural to love and learn music.

At home, my parents had an incredible collection of videos of amazing conductors and their orchestras. When I was two or three years old, I was fascinated by conductors like Herbert von Karajan and Seiji Ozawa. I would conduct along with these masters on screen, waving and shaping the music with my arms, hands, and facial expressions. Karajan was stoic, able to communicate so much with just his arms and hands, cupping and releasing musical phrases as if he were their master. Ozawa, on the other hand, was animated and exhilarating to watch; he used his whole body to control sound and excitement as beads of sweat flew from his forehead. As a toddler, I would splash water on my face to emulate this intensity. Growing up, these conductors became my heroes.

I actually got started in music by conducting. When I was three years old, after catching a conductor's attention by "air conducting" during one of my mother's performances, I got to conduct a set of Mozart Variations with the San Jose Chamber Orchestra. When I was four, I conducted Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with the Palo Alto Philharmonic.

It was an exciting introduction to music, but my parents knew that I needed a deeper knowledge of music—the knowledge that can come only from studying an instrument.

Technique & Expression

When I was five years old, I began taking cello lessons because I was drawn to the low sounds of the orchestra. Of course, I had to start with the basics, such as posture, open strings, and left and right hand coordination. I quickly noticed the physical differences between conducting and playing the cello: When conducting, I could use my body to communicate my thoughts;

but when playing the cello, I had to use the instrument as an intermediary medium to relay my musical ideas.

When I first started playing, my greatest strengths were in hearing the music, feeling the music, and, most of all, enjoying the music. I loved the sound of the cello. I loved performing. Practice was an evolutionary experience for me, because as I improved, I enjoyed playing that much more. As I grew older and developed my technical skills, I learned how to use them to better convey the emotion and meaning behind my music. The American dancer and choreographer La Meri once said, "The only reason for mastering technique is to make sure the body does not prevent the soul from expressing itself." That is true in music as well as dance.

Over time, I realized that the meaning of the music came not just from me playing my cello. It also came from people listening, watching, loving the story being told, and becoming inspired. In the same way that Herbert von Karajan and Seiji Ozawa had inspired me, I hoped I might have a similar effect on others through my playing.

Classical, Online, with a Twist

One of the most important things I can do as a musician is to help make classical music accessible to others. What started as a hobby combining my interests in music and cinematography eventually led to one of the most rewarding things I do as a musician. I posted my first YouTube video, in which I performed an incredibly intimate and emotional contemporary piece called "Elegy" by Ian Venables, about five years ago, and gradually posted more videos to share other repertoire from my classical background. The positive responses I received and

spiration

the growth I experienced in both cinematography and music only made me want to work harder to make each new video unique and better than the one before.

I started exploring musical genres beyond the classical. Dabbling in pop, rock, and other genres, I created a wide variety of videos featuring everything from the Super Mario Theme Song to “The Final Countdown” and “Clocks” by Coldplay. By playing these songs with my own classical twist, I am opening the door to classical music for viewers and listeners who otherwise might not seek it out. Some of the best feedback I have received is from people who wrote that my videos inspired them to persevere and continue pursuing their own interests. That I have been able to inspire others simply by doing what I love has shown me that passion can not only be shared, but be transformative.

Music is such an important thing in my life, but I know that its true power lies in its ability to enhance other people’s lives. It is meant to be shared. My musical journey so far has taught me that if you love what you do and share it with others, you can create a circle of inspiration that positively affects everyone around you. **i**



Nathan Chan, 19, is a student in the Columbia University-Juilliard School Exchange. He appeared in the HBO special *The Music in Me* and in the three-part British documentary, *The World’s Greatest Musical Prodigies*. Nathan has played

with the San Francisco Symphony, the Royal Philharmonic, the Albany Symphony, the Marin Symphony, and other orchestras. He was named a 2012 Davidson Fellow for his music project entitled “The Importance of Passion.”

Read more about Nathan at nathanchanello.com, and view his videos at www.youtube.com/nathanchanello.