

The National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America, a free program created by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, recruits talented musicians from across the nation through a competitive audition process. After an intensive residency, the NYO-USA performs a concert at Carnegie Hall before embarking on a tour to some of the great music capitals of the world. According to cellist Ryan Chung, the NYO-USA fosters a communal passion for orchestral ensemble and offers a unique opportunity for members to grow as musicians.



A MUSICAL AMBASSADOR My Summer with the National Youth Orchestra

by Ryan Chung

I first heard a cello performance at a charity concert when I was in second grade. Mesmerized by its warm, mellow tone, I implored my parents to find me a cello teacher. But even after I began working with a teacher, my lack of motivation to practice hindered my growth as a musician. Then one day in fourth grade, I was on my way to recess and heard my elementary school orchestra practicing for an upcoming concert. I was captivated by their ability to interweave melodies and by the idea that they were preparing for a shared experience between the orchestra members and the audience. That day after school, I told my mother, “I want to learn how to do what those kids can do. I want to get better.”

I joined my elementary school's orchestra. I started working with a new teacher and began practicing seriously. Then, in sixth grade, I auditioned for the Juilliard Pre-College Program, a Saturday program that runs through the school year, and was lucky enough to be accepted. By playing in chamber ensembles, in orchestras, and as a soloist, I saw my skills burgeoning, and I started to look toward further goals as a cellist.

Taking Up Residence

When I was 14, I read an article about the National Youth Orchestra of the USA (NYO-USA) in *The New York Times*, which detailed

NYO-USA's tour that summer. I was intrigued, but because only musicians ages 16 to 19 are eligible, I would have to wait two years to audition.

When the audition excerpts for 2016 were finally posted online, I immediately started practicing them—and continued practicing for close to three months. I would imagine myself in the orchestra as I played, thinking about how my part related to the rest of the orchestra. For example, if one part was a cello solo, I would emphasize it more; or if I knew that there was a violin solo in another part, I would play more of a supporting role. I recorded my audition with all this in mind and uploaded it, hoping for the best. Three months later, I opened an email that began with “Congratulations.” I was one of the 12 cellists accepted!

Soon after that, I received the music we would practice and perform: Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat Major, Bruckner's Symphony No. 6 in A Major, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4, and Prokofiev's Symphony No. 4. It was a significant amount of repertoire to learn and practice—and we'd have just three weeks to work as a group to perfect it.

Our residency at SUNY Purchase began in June. Because we had to learn two sets of repertoire—one for the concerts at Purchase College and at Carnegie Hall, and the other for the four European cities of Amsterdam, Montpellier, Copenhagen, and Prague—we needed many rehearsals and great concentration. Rehearsals typically lasted around six hours, which was physically taxing yet still enjoyable because of the nurturing atmosphere fostered both by returning members from 2015 and by the staff who supported us throughout the tour.

We were led by Maestro James Ross, director of orchestral activities at the University of Maryland and associate director of the Juilliard conducting program, who prepared us on both sets of repertoire. At the end of our residency, he passed the baton to the tremendous conductors we would work with during the concerts: Christoph Eschenbach, music director of the National Symphony Orchestra and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in the United States; and Valery Gergiev, artistic and general director of the Mariinsky Theatre, in Europe.

A Magical Musical Tour

Our first concert at Purchase College was exhilarating. It was the first time I had performed in a sold-out concert. I counted down the minutes to the concert time with great anticipation because this was exactly the experience I had longed for as a fourth grader. Although I had been performing in orchestral ensembles at Juilliard Pre-College and at my high school, the experience of collaborating with people I had never met showed me the true power of music. The audience's engagement and appreciation of the music was palpa-

ble as we played. Our performance at Carnegie Hall was equally memorable. Playing under the direction of Maestro Eschenbach in that storied venue was an incredible experience that could only be topped by touring Europe.

Each European concert was rewarding—and even liberating. Having labored on the pieces for so long, it was refreshing to truly enjoy the essence of the music as we presented it to foreign audiences. Each audience demonstrated their appreciation of the music through their anticipation, attentiveness, and enthusiastic applause. It was incredible to feel so connected to people from other countries through the music.

In addition to the opportunities to play in world-renowned halls such as the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Tivoli Hall in Copenhagen, and Smetana Hall in Prague, we got to experience each country's culture through food, tours, and activities such as biking and visiting museums, my favorite being the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Our last concert, in Prague, was highly emotionally charged. Following what was arguably our best performance during the whole tour, I already began to feel an emptiness as we congratulated and embraced one another. When we arrived back in the United States, I said many painful goodbyes as we ended the five weeks of daily contact that had brought us all close together as performers and as friends.

When I returned from my trip and reflected on my experiences, I realized how much NYO-USA had helped me grow as a musician, especially in my heightened ability to understand and appreciate orchestral music. My cello teacher was pleased with the improvement in my musicality, which proved valuable in my solo recital and in subsequent orchestra concerts. Thanks to both Maestro Gergiev and Maestro Eschenbach, who brought us very close to the essence of the music and to one another, I had learned to listen more closely and contribute to a more complex, blended sound. In that way, NYO-USA brought me back to my original inspiration for becoming a cellist. And in return, I had become a musical ambassador, sharing what I loved most with audiences I otherwise would not have reached. ■



Ryan Chung is a junior at Manhasset High School in Long Island, NY. He is in his fifth year as a cellist in the Juilliard Pre-College Program. A two-time National YoungArts winner, Ryan was selected again this year for the National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America. His other interests include history research, reading, and traveling. He is an editor for his school newspaper.

Learn more about the NYO-USA at carnegiehall.org/nyousa.