



EDUCATING THE ARTIST

MUSICAL IMMERSION

by Laura Carther

It was just another normal day of high school. I rolled out of bed and flexed my stiff fingers. With quartet rehearsal first thing on my schedule, and with the frigid Michigan winter upon us, it was important to at least try to warm up for the vigorous Prokofiev that lay ahead. A few minutes later, I quietly made my way with my violin case down the rickety stairs of the aging dorm building while my roommate labored with her cello case a few steps behind me. Before slogging our way through the snow for our rehearsal across campus, we stopped at the cafeteria for coffee—a necessity for getting through a day of quartet and orchestra rehearsals, music theory class, a private lesson or studio class, English, history, and the odd hour of individual practice.

As you might have guessed, I didn't go to a typical high school. I spent my junior and senior years among 500 young artists of varying disciplines at Interlochen Arts Academy, a boarding school deep in the woods of northern Michigan.

Arts at the Core

Despite having played violin since the age of four, it wasn't until I attended the Interlochen Arts Camp after my freshman year of high school that I knew music was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. At Interlochen, I experienced the indescribable beauty of playing in an orchestra of a hundred enthusiastic kids who loved music as much as I did. I loved it so much that I came back to camp the next summer.

I knew that the Interlochen Arts Academy would allow me to continue doing what I loved, every day of the school year. So I auditioned twice, once before my sophomore year and again before my junior year. I was accepted both times, but it was only after the second audition that scholarship funds made it possible for me to attend.

Everyone at Interlochen understands something that the rest of the world doesn't: that for us, art is not an extracurricular, but a necessity. Here, the teachers understand that practicing for recitals or putting the finishing touches on a portfolio or rehearsing for acting technique class sometimes takes priority over academic homework. However, even with arts at the core, there remained

lots of room for a more traditional high school curriculum. In my junior year, in addition to orchestra, chamber music, music theory, and violin studio class, I took AP Calculus, chemistry, French, and English. Instead of general English or history courses, however, classes were similar to college humanities courses. Some of my favorites were Middle Eastern Literature, Tales of the Jazz Age, and History of Hatred.

Almost every day started with an hour-long meeting with my quartet, all close friends in the same year. My other performance-based classes included violin studio and orchestra. Studio class met once a week and, besides offering a chance to perform in an informal setting, often ended up being a relaxing hangout where our teacher shared stories from his long career as concertmaster of various symphonies. Orchestra, on the other hand, met two hours a day and gave a concert every three to four weeks.

Living with other serious musicians meant that I was surrounded by people who were eager and able to learn difficult orchestral repertoire. In my time at Interlochen, we conquered many giants of the field, including Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Stravinsky's *Firebird*, Beethoven's 7th Symphony, Holst's *The Planets*, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, and more. I was even lucky enough to sit in a principal position for a few of those concerts. Since my goal is to be an orchestral musician, a field which is more competitive today than ever, getting an early start on these pieces was invaluable.

Proximity Effect

A signature benefit of the boarding school is the ease of collaboration with artists of other forms, allowing us to find new ways of combining ideas and mediums. I participated in several exciting, innovative projects I wouldn't have found anywhere else. One such project was the "Heart & Art" show put on by the comparative arts majors (a small discipline that allows students to create their own combination of arts majors), in which I played in the centerpiece of the project, a soulful jazz piece written by two student composers for string quartet, clarinet, saxophone, and string bass.

ON AT INTERLOCHEN

MONTERRAT GUERRA SOLANO; LETTERING BY KEONI BOLDING



Laura (second from left) with her string quartet

But this was no standard performance: While we were performing the piece, an audience member would be hooked up to a cardiology machine that projected the image and sound of their beating heart. Instead of playing at a set speed, our tempo would be determined by the living, changing beat of the heart. This presented quite a challenge, but the piece was beautiful and fun to perform, and it even ended up catching the attention of the Art Schools Network. Ten months later, the school flew us to Seattle to play the show again for the Network's annual conference of art students and educators from around the country.

Family Ties

Perhaps the best part of going to Interlochen, though, was the people I met. My senior year, I lived in the smallest dorm on campus, where 30 upperclassmen were cooped up in a tiny “papier-mâché chic” building with small showers, hard mattresses, and paper-thin walls—and I

wouldn't have wanted to live anywhere else. While many of us were American, I also lived under the same roof as students from China, Japan, Australia, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela. Instead of a spacious lobby like all the other dormitories had, our building's common area was an unoccupied student room. Somehow we managed to fit a couch into it, and needless to say, you get comfortable with people pretty quickly when you're trying to have a *Lord of the Rings: Extended Edition* marathon and there are twice as many people as there are seats.

In those nine months I learned as much from my dormmates and counselors as I did from my teachers. After spending all day working on music, it was illuminating to spend the evenings learning about what the theater majors and voice majors and writing majors had been doing all day. Our 10 p.m. curfew didn't seem as oppressive when it meant coming home to a makeshift family of art kids sharing food shipped in from various countries.

Now that I'm in my second semester as a violin performance major at Northwestern University, I could not be more grateful for the preparation Interlochen gave me: I was able to take charge of my own career as I learned the importance of collaborating and forming bonds with so many different people. Moving on from Interlochen has been an exciting process, full of new people, places, and challenges; and every day I am reminded how fortunate I am to have built a foundation in a place that taught me not to fear change, but to embrace opportunities with open arms. ■



Laura Carther graduated from Interlochen Arts Academy in 2016. She is now a freshman at Northwestern University, where she is majoring in violin performance. In addition to music, Laura is also pursuing studies in computer science and Asian American studies.

Learn more about Interlochen Arts Academy at academy.interlochen.org.