I began taking cello lessons in second grade at the insistence of my parents, who wanted me to play a musical instrument. For a few years, the cello remained a hobby, a wooden apparatus I would fool around with for a few hours each week. Then, when I was 10 years old, I began working with a new cello teacher, Dr. Kim. She noted that I was able to play with great dexterity, which enabled me to play fast passages with ease. She told me I had perfect pitch and that my large hands gave me a natural advantage in playing cello. Dr. Kim pushed me to practice harder and to listen more critically to my own playing.

With her encouragement, I became more committed to my music. I learned several advanced pieces and began performing in concerts and competitions, one of which led to my performing a Haydn concerto at Carnegie Hall at age 11. In middle school, I attended Juilliard Pre-College, a weekend program that features youth orchestras, private lessons with well-regarded instructors, and chamber music groups.

In the fall of 2013, when I was 15, Dr. Kim told me about Boston University’s Tanglewood Institute, located in the woods of Lenox, Massachusetts. Tanglewood’s offerings include the six-week Young Artists Orchestra program, which features orchestral performances, master classes, and chamber music. I researched the program online and talked with classmates who had attended it. The intensive study and high quality of instruction appealed to me, and I decided to apply. I began working on the necessary application repertoire.

For several hours each day, I practiced Tchaikovsky’s Rococo Variations and Popper’s Elfentanz, two technically demanding pieces. It was especially challenging to maintain the intense, brisk tempo of Elfentanz. After spending the winter and spring refining my playing, I recorded the pieces, submitted them online to Tanglewood, and waited. I knew I was competing with some of the best young musicians in the country and around the world, but when the admission decision arrived by email two months later, to my elation, I’d been accepted.

Toward Harmony and Balance
I arrived on campus on a sweltering July afternoon, lugging my heavy cello case and my travel bag to Lenox Hall, where I met the other students with whom I would share a dorm. Students, faculty, and staff kicked off the program with a barbecue on the great lawn. Afterward, we watched the teachers perform a chamber concert, providing a spectacular sample of what was to come.

Beginning the next morning, I rehearsed with the Young Artists Orchestra, playing in the middle row of the cello section in an 80-person ensemble. But as the music of Beethoven, Mahler, and Strauss filled the air, I began to feel overwhelmed. I wasn’t accustomed to such challenging orchestral music, and I struggled to coordinate my reading with the conductor’s beat and with the other parts. The sheet music in front of me seemed to jumble into an incomprehensible mess of notes.

That evening, I practiced the new music in my dorm room, slowly going over the most difficult passages. After several days, I mastered the technical aspects of the orchestra pieces and sought to play them more expressively. During daily three-hour rehearsals, I listened not only to my part but also to the whole orchestra so I could learn to integrate my sound into that of the larger group and achieve the right harmony and balance.
Performing in Sync
One of the most remarkable features of the program was the caliber of guest conductors. Paul Haas, Tito Muñoz, and Ken-David Masur, who work with renowned professional orchestras, each conducted us for two weeks. Whether leading us through Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* or Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7, they used their extensive experience to guide the ensemble, which improved our music considerably. After two weeks of rehearsing and practicing, we performed the pieces in Seiji Ozawa Hall, where a thousand spectators—relatives, locals, and tourists from all over the world—watched and applauded effusively.

I also participated in chamber music. A violinist and I rehearsed Ravel’s enigmatic, esoteric, and exceptional Sonata for Cello and Violin every other day, working on the syncopations until we could flawlessly sync our rhythms. Chamber music provided a more intimate setting, with only two performers instead of dozens. At the same time, it was a more dangerous setting, as every mistake could be easily noticed. But with meticulous practice, we tackled the difficult piece. On the penultimate day, we performed it in front of scores of peers, faculty members, and outside guests, all of whom warmly received our performance.

Expanding My Repertoire
During weekly lessons, my teacher helped me expand my solo repertoire as I studied a Beethoven cello sonata, Francoeur’s Sonata for Cello and Piano, and Tchaikovsky’s *Rococo Variations*. We also worked on technical aspects of my playing, including varying my vibrato and my bow speed to develop a wider array of tones.

The opportunity to showcase my efforts came during the third week when Norman Fisher, a professor at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, visited Tanglewood for a master class. I signed up for the class and was approved by the faculty. For my half-hour session with Mr. Fisher, I played both movements of the Francoeur Sonata. It was gratifying to receive input from this renowned professor, which greatly improved my playing.

A Wealth of Opportunity
One of the unique aspects of Tanglewood is its pervasive musical culture. A half-mile from the camp is the Koussevitzky Music Shed and the aforementioned Seiji Ozawa Hall, where concerts are performed almost daily by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and other notable musicians. In the evenings after activities and rehearsals, camp members can freely attend the concerts. One such concert featured the Boston Symphony Orchestra performingStrauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel*, which our orchestra was also performing the following week. It was interesting and rewarding to see a professional interpretation of the piece.

The most memorable concert took place at the Shed on the final day of camp, when Yo-Yo Ma played Tchaikovsky’s *Rococo Variations*—the same piece I was studying! Although I had to sit in the back and it was difficult to see Yo-Yo Ma play, I was stunned by his amazing sound and how far it traveled over the playing of an entire orchestra and past thousands of spectators. Afterward, he came outside to sign autographs. Unable to find a suitable piece of paper, I almost panicked, but at the last moment, I pulled out the Tanglewood souvenir shirt I had just bought and asked him to sign it with his Sharpie.

What made Tanglewood truly special were the people I met. I made great, lasting friendships with my peers and learned from the faculty, who were excellent professional musicians. My encounters with famous figures such as Norman Fisher and Yo-Yo Ma helped me better craft my music and inspired me to further commit to cello. Most importantly, I came away with a greater love of music.

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