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YAMAHA

Who is Awadagin Pratt?

Awadagin Pratt is artist-in-residence at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, performer with every major orchestra in the world and winner of the elite Naumburg Competition.

But that is not who Awadagin Pratt is. He is a relentless learner, taking up improvisation in these last 10 years alongside his classically trained playing. He is an arts advocate, starting a foundation for young artists called “Art of the Piano.”

Awadagin Pratt (AP, as we call him) is also a conductor and violinist, with degrees in both. He is an exacting intellect, with superior knowledge in details about music of all sorts.

AP is also cool. He is a professional-level tennis player. When he walks on stage you sit back and take notice.

Also taking notice is the White House—three times.

And did I mention Sesame Street?

I was able to have a short, yet intense, interview with AP. Of all the interviews I’ve conducted, this was the most fun. Because, behind the intense, intelligent, genius musician, there is a cool guy.

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Michelle Conda: How did you get started playing the piano? I know your parents are academics, at least your dad.

Awadagin Pratt: They both were [academics]. But my dad played the organ when he was younger. He loved classical music, and so that was the music that was in the home.

MC: Were you a good student?

AP: I thought I was a good student. I was reasonable, I guess. My parents were pretty engaged in making sure that we had piano lessons and violin lessons, and they were on top of all of it, making sure that we were doing what we're supposed to be doing.

MC: I know that you are also a violinist. Also a world-class tennis player.

AP: Well not world class. I had been offered a scholarship to Kalamazoo college, which was one of the best [at tennis] Division III schools at the time.

MC: Why did you choose piano?

AP: When I was at the University of Illinois, I was a violin major. They didn't allow double majors. I studied piano with a graduate assistant for a couple of years, and then a Brazilian teacher for one year and Ian Hobson for the rest of the time.

[I want to go to where] I could be double major, so I applied to the New England Conservatory, which took me as a violinist and not a pianist. Cleveland Institute of Music took me as a pianist and not a violinist. Peabody took me as both [laugh], so I went to Peabody after I finished my undergrad.

I had done well on the violin at Peabody. [However] there are a limited number of the Central European pieces that I love. I just... I never wanted to play in an orchestra. I didn't have the kinds of tricks (up-bow staccato) a violinist needs. There's just so much more of it [repertoire] for piano.

I had started studying conducting during my undergrad, and in my graduate degrees I was doing the AD in piano and focused on conducting also for a Graduate Diploma.

A month before the Naumburg [Competition] I had done the Affiliates Arts [Competition] for conducting. In 1993, I was in the finals of

the Louisville orchestra conducting position and actually conducted an audition with a live orchestra. I was one of the top 12, and that went pretty well. But I wasn't selected as one of the three, and the Naumburg was one month later. Whichever way that I would get into the field that's how I would get in—and it happened to be piano.

MC: Does your violin playing and conducting affect your piano playing?

AP: For sure. The way that I hear melodic lines is influenced by playing the violin and having played in orchestras. I don't know what it feels like being a pianist who doesn't play the violin. And my entire approach to music and playing is related to having played the violin for a long time.

[But] On the violin you've got a limited range of notes. And your bass note is not really a bass note right and so. And a lot of times they're playing one line—there's not a huge focus on harmony.

I think that my approach to harmony, phrasing and the organization architecture of material is based out of my conducting. You have to have a plan when you work with the orchestra—you have to know exactly how you want to.

MC: Your teaching approach is different than most—I know that you teach in groups. Where did you get that idea, and what are the benefits?

AP: My last years of study were with Leon Fleisher. He was teaching a master class for the students who weren't his students. You had to audition for that class. You play for him a minimum of two times per semester. There were some semesters where I'd ended up playing quite a bit. My initial contact with him was in this master class method. He taught in group lessons of three, but the entire studio was welcome to any lessons.

If there was a piece I wasn't playing, or was interested in, or a piece I was just starting, I could go to the lesson of another student and start to become informed about what he thinks about the piece. I'd study the score while he would be teaching. I realized it is a great way to learn the piano repertoire.



As a student you've committed a three-hour pocket of time, which is a lot, I know. But with a piano repertoire so vast that we're responsible to know as an artist and as a teacher, this is a way to learn it. I can't play it all [for the students], and my students can't play it all, but they will learn it through the others.

There's another thing that happens in lessons. The teacher talks about the way you are sitting and playing, and the teacher might "say drop your hands or shoulders," or whatever, and the sound changes. As the one doing it sometimes you don't hear it as clearly. But when the students are sitting there and listening to somebody else, they're like, "Oh my goodness, that made such a difference!" They can tell the student playing, "You have no idea how much better that sounded." Listening to ourselves is the hardest thing to do as pianists. [Teaching in groups] works on several levels to help the students.

I was inspired by my experiences as a student learning in the master class setting, so that was useful to me when I started teaching.

MC: Now tell us about Art of the Piano.

AP: Art of the Piano celebrated what I call our "First 10th Anniversary." We had a big season planned, but obviously we couldn't do all those things.

Next year [2021] we'll have what I'll call our "Second 10th Anniversary." Hopefully it will be live. It's grown from barely 20 kids applying our first year to well over 170 kids now. That's great to have 170 people apply, but then it's a lot of work to decide which ones are coming, because they're all so wonderful. But it's been incredible.

The students initially were learning in the master classes, but I was also in the master class. I was learning from all these different wonderful teachers. Every one of them had a different teaching style, different things that

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they prioritize, different vocabulary, so I was stealing things. I was taking things expressed way better than I ever have, and I would steal metaphors and all kinds of things.

We evolved to have a focus as well on not just having pedagogues who played the piano well as faculty, but also having great concert artists to perform. This year [2020] we were online, but had people such as Garrick Ohlsson, Jeffrey Kahane, Simone Dinnerstein, Vladimir Feltsman, Olga Kern and Alexander Korsantia perform and engage in discussions with our young artists.

Recently we changed the direction from mostly pedagogical focus to being pedagogical and performing arts organization-focused as well. Presenters gave concerts. And as the level of the festival grew, we were also able to have a focus on some of the young artists' concerts.

For instance, we had a young woman a few years ago who was 16. This year she won the American Chopin Competition. The young artists coming through are great. We developed a partnership with Salon 21 [concert series in Cincinnati], and one award goes to a student to be able to play on that series. We have an incredible organizational board now, who make it free for the students. We house them and tuition is free. It's grown in a lot of ways, and I think we've made a nice contribution to the field.

MC: I saw you playing piano on *Sesame Street*, and I know you played for the president at the White House.

AP: Well, *Sesame Street* was a long, long time ago. It was a skit with Big Bird about sharing the piano. Then they had me singing the ABCs with a montage of famous people, like Harry Belafonte. I'm kind of like, "I should not be singing."

I was in my 20s, and I had friends my age who were like, “I saw you on *Sesame Street*.” I’m like, “Wait a minute, you don’t have kids!” But that was cool.

The first time I went to the White House was the first Clinton administration. That was quite something. Vernon Jordan was Clinton’s chief of staff. His wife had heard me play a number of times with the National Symphony Orchestra, and she’d come up and spoken to me. I think she engineered my first visit there.

That was a “trip.” There was a dinner before the concert. I usually would not have gone to it because I needed to focus on the concert, but it’s in the White House, and how can I not go? I was also trying to think, “Okay this is this is just a normal concert,” and I usually don’t get super nervous before normal concerts.

I left the dinner, and I went up to the East Room to warm up, and I’m walking into the room with an armed color guard. I was thinking, “Oh my goodness, this is the White House!”

I started playing, and President Clinton is not five feet from me. And Hillary. Al and Tipper Gore were right there in the front row, and I was like, “Oh my God, I’m playing for the leader of the free world!”

I was nervous at first. But then I told myself “Okay, you know these pieces, just play the piano.” It was fun.

I got to do a larger event at a state dinner for the South African president during the second Clinton administration. That was an even bigger concert. The second time I wasn’t as nervous, as there were so many people that you couldn’t see faces.

Then the last time was a huge event because that was called “Classical Music at the White House with President Obama. [He] and Michelle hosted the event. There were four of us—Joshua Bell, violin; Sharon Isbin, guitar; and Alisa Weilerstein, cello.

We gave a presentation to 40 or so kids on our instrument. We were able to invite children, so I had several kids from the School for the Creative and Performing Arts Cincinnati (SCPA) who came to the White House. We also had kids from my family’s Pratt Music Foundation. I managed to have 15–20 kids there.

This event was hosted by Michelle Obama. There was a little concert beforehand. One of

the students from the SCPA played a movement of a Schubert Fantasy for four hands with me.

The formal concert in the evening...Walking into the White House takes a certain amount of energy. Giving the little concerts and a 40-minute talk, with cameras everywhere and little interviews was tiring. I went back to the hotel at 6:00 already exhausted before the 7:30 concert. You’re giving 110%. But it was fun.

I feel incredibly lucky to have been to the White House three times. Any time over one and you know you are with nice company!

MC: Given everything that you play on the piano, what is your favorite thing to play?

AP: When I was a kid, Beethoven was far and away my favorite composer. I started reading his biographies, and I loved his. Every opportunity I had to write a 10th-grade paper, if I could read about Beethoven in some way I did.

I have great admiration and respect for composers. It used to be so tedious to write, and if you’re a writer of literature, and you want to say the man went to the store you just write a man went to the store. But in music it’s different because you have to write the man went to the store multiple times for each voice or line, there is so much energy going writing, but it has to come out.

It’s our job to really figure out *why* the composer *had* to write this piece of music.

I’m in love with composers, and I have the highest respect and admiration for what they do. I can’t reduce that to a few [names]. What I’m saying is that pianists have the responsibility to bring out what is perfect about that piece of music. No matter what style that this was, it’s amazingly fine.

AMT

Michelle Conda, NCTM, is the head of the keyboard division, chair of secondary piano and piano pedagogy, and professor of piano at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM). She is a member of the MTNA e-Journal Editorial Committee.

