



Conference Artist

In Service to Others Through Music

A Profile of Violinist and Educator, Adrian Anantawan

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As a child growing up in Canada, I often saw special televised features produced by the War Amps, an organization of veterans providing support for amputees. They often highlighted the inspirational stories of young children overcoming these physical challenges. I was first introduced to the talent of Adrian Anantawan through this TV feature. As a youngster also taking violin lessons at the same time, I was intrigued to hear the beautiful quality of sound he was able to create, even though his bow arm did not have use of a hand, wrist and forearm. Since that time, it has been exciting to see him progress in his performing career. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Adrian about his development as a student, his performing and speaking career and his recent educational initiatives. I quickly learned that this multi-talented individual has an unquenchable thirst for reaching out and helping others through all aspects of his career.

Adrian was fortunate to study with teachers who looked beyond his disability and worked with his immense talent. They taught him to

sensitize his ears to what good sound is, and he learned to grow through imitation. He found that the use of imitation helped him strive for the highest quality of sound and to look at and listen to others, thereby increasing his toolbox. He said, "You will find what is you in the end." He found that this approach offers an "agency to use your imagination." His bow arm technique was based on the connection between the ear and body. Having the tools to express his thoughts, emotions and feelings on the instrument was groundbreaking for him. He felt like he could do something and that he could help make a contribution to the world. Through his studies he also discovered that relationships are just as important as the art you produce. Adrian crucially noted, "If you have the right teacher, it can really change your life."

Adrian grew up in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. The documentary, *The Story Behind the Notes* beautifully captures his journey as a musician and the people who have helped him along the way (Watson, n.d.). His parents wanted to make sure all their children had music in their lives. In the documentary, his mother, Maria Anantawan, recounts how he started violin lessons at age 9. She contacted a local violin teacher, Peggy Hills, and provided details about Adrian's disability. Maria recalled that Peggy was slightly speechless, and Peggy stated that this was "a phone call I



never forgot.” As a teacher with an open mind and heart, she just stated, “Come on over!” This resulted in Adrian’s initiation to play the violin. She taught him left-hand technique, and since he did not have a prosthesis at the time, she served as his right-hand bow arm. This account is a pure example of how we as teachers always need to be open to accommodations for our students as they come from different backgrounds and with a variety of experiences.

Eventually, Adrian and his family were led to the Bloorview MacMillan Centre in Toronto, where he was fitted with a prosthesis enabling him to control his own bow. When he was 12, he still had not met other people with the same disabilities he had. That was when he joined the CHAMPS program run by the War Amps of Canada, an organization founded by amputee war veterans to support and assist other Canadian amputees (War Amps, n.d.). This experience opened him to another world and sense of belonging.

Adrian continued to progress as a burgeoning violinist. During his high school years, he was not sure if violin was going to be a part of his career. He participated in competitions at the local, provincial and national levels and started gaining recognition for his immense talent. He spoke about how he had to always overachieve in life, especially in music. Adrian ended up applying to the Curtis Institute of Music a year earlier than he anticipated. He was not expecting to be accepted, so when he was offered a spot, he took it as a sign—music chose him. Upon graduating from Curtis, he went on to pursue a master’s of music degree at Yale and a master’s in education degree at Harvard. The list of his significant teachers and

Adrian Anantawan

mentors reads like a Who's Who List of the leading violinists in the world. They include: Ida Kavafian, Peter Oundjian, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman and Anne Sophie Mutter (Anantawan, n.d.).

Performance provides Adrian an outlet that connects him to the world. In addition to performing on some of the most celebrated stages like Carnegie Hall and collaborating with leading orchestras, he has performed at the White House, the opening ceremonies of the Athens and Vancouver Olympic Games and the United Nations. He has also played for Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama. His performing achievements and artistry have garnered him significant recognition, and he has been awarded a Juno Award, the Diamond Jubilee Medal from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, admittance to the Terry Fox Hall of Fame and the award designated for the VSA International Soloist Winner (Anantawan, n.d.).

In the documentary *The Story Behind the Notes*, it is clear that Adrian is very grateful to all individuals who have assisted him throughout the years. As a result, there is also a strong urge to give back to others so they can be afforded the same opportunities he has experienced. This can be seen in the projects and initiatives he has started and in his role as a teacher.

As a dedicated educator, Adrian is making his mark on the next generation of blossoming musicians. He had always wanted to teach, but his music career first took him in the direction of performances and competitions. He said he “had to find his way back” to teaching and enjoys a balanced career that allows him to now help others both through his artistic and pedagogical skills. While “performance is a language to explore the world,” he also finds that “working with young humans is enjoyable and intellectually engaging.”

Adrian is currently chair of the music department at the Milton Academy in Boston, an educational K–12 institution founded in 1798. While he primarily teaches in the high school division, he enjoys being able to see the scope of students in this setting and observe



how music education can support them in their way of exploring the world. He finds it critical to be as responsive as possible to the current and future needs of the students. At Milton, there is a culture of humility, and music is a component of a holistic education. Adrian mentioned that he is fascinated with “seeing how a music program can support them in their way of exploring the world.” Music education is a vehicle for which young people can engage with the rest of society. This highlights the necessity of exposing all students to this art form. The study of music positively affects humans, especially in the critical developmental stages of life, making the need to provide access to music education for all students more urgent.

Furthermore, Adrian is significantly involved in using music to represent inclusivity as a model for the rest of our society. He wants to make sure the opportunities he received to develop as a musician are offered to all. In Toronto, he was the creator of the Virtual Chamber Music Initiative (VMI) at Holland Bloorview, a rehabilitation hospital for children. Using technology, this is an ensemble that allows young people with different abilities to participate in a music-making group. As their website states, “The Virtual Music Instrument addresses past limitations by providing children with an interface that

enables them to play music without having to hold or manipulate an instrument. The non-invasive, non-encumbering technology translates physical gestures and movements into music, giving children with disabilities access to the therapeutic benefits of music” (Holland Bloorview, n.d.). This project developed from his desire to provide opportunities for others. He said, “I don’t want to be an exception.” Our society is enamored with individuals born with disabilities who are able to beat the odds and succeed in their chosen endeavors. Their successes are seen as unique, unusual and unprecedented. However, Adrian would love to help make this completely ordinary. Seeing people with disabilities succeed should be a part of our daily lives. His involvement with VMI allowed him to get his feet wet in programmatic leadership. In Boston, he founded the Music Inclusion (MI) Program, bringing youngsters together in a unique orchestra program. This pro-social environment encourages all involved to learn from each other and their individual circumstances. The experiences offered with this program bring students with disabilities and their typical peers together as they explore the arts. MI is committed to “removing individual and systemic barriers of access due to disability and socio-economic background” (Music Inclusion Program, n.d.). Adrian describes this as “not your typical orchestral program.” They continue to live with the positive attitude that “We’ll make it happen.”

Adrian is also a sought-after speaker. He has given a TED talk on the “Violin’s Human Emotion.” He was also a featured presenter at the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship. As a keynote speaker for conferences and other professional gatherings, he always incorporates music and performance which is always a delight to the audience.

In our conversation, I mentioned to Adrian that he clearly has a varied career that places emphasis on performing, educating and speaking. It has created a fulfilling portfolio of roles and accomplishments. He noted that although he is involved in a range of initiatives, they all stem from a common seed: music. The core of whatever he does stems from the mindset of service. He

always asks himself, “How do I use my particular gifts to leave the world a better place?”

There are so many lessons that can be learned from Adrian’s story. They include the importance of persistence, hard work, teachers who work with students’ individual circumstances and develop adaptations, being grateful and serving others. We all have challenges that we must overcome and endure. Some may be related to our socio-economic background, our personal lives, our physical or mental health or disabilities. By acknowledging that we will all need assistance or accommodations in our lives, we may be more willing to open our minds to helping others, especially when they are in need. This extends to our unique roles as music teachers and the important part we play in the lives of our students and prospective students. By creating and facilitating opportunities for all people, especially children, to experience and encounter music, we will likely be making an impact in their lives. The seed of interest that we initially plant may be small, but with some nurturing, it will grow, and we will all benefit from its fruit.

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