

Interview with Jesse MacDonald, violin, October 15, 2019



Tell us about your background and musical training.

I was adopted from Korea and grew up in Bozeman, MT. I went through the public school system there (shout out to the amazing music programs they have!), and then went to New England Conservatory in Boston for my undergrad and Manhattan School of Music in NYC for my Masters. By then I felt like I'd had enough of big cities, so I moved to NH for a year and now this is my second year living in Maine.

When I was little, I was very much into listening to my parents' records—piano, chamber music, classic rock—and making music with anything I could. So, for my fourth birthday, my parents gave me the choice between piano and violin, and I chose violin. The resident Suzuki teacher in Bozeman was also a Celtic fiddler, so I started out by playing bluegrass and swing. After a year or two, I started the classical Suzuki training and decided I preferred classical music. By mid-high school, I started to think seriously about violin as a career. I went to New England Conservatory to study violin with Masuko Ushioda, which was an incredible experience for me. We spent my first year fixing the left side of my body, and we spent the second year fixing the right side of my body. In my third year, we started working on sonatas, which I'd never done in high school. During my Masters at Manhattan School, I spent a lot of time in lessons talking about what my teacher Mark Steinberg of the Brentano Quartet called “being a boring musician”—using the muscles as efficiently as possible and making playing look “easy,” as well as avoiding injury.

How did you first learn about Apple Hill?

I heard about it from Miranda Henne. She wanted to form a quartet based in Boston and she recruited me and my roommate at that time, violinist Ryan Shannon, who I enjoyed playing music with. We made a recording together, but all I knew was that we were auditioning for a camp in New Hampshire that I'd never heard of before. But once I started learning about AH, and the fellowship program we were applying for, my interest was piqued to 100%. Working on a string quartet for a week—we were going to do Schubert's Death and the Maiden—and learning all the movements really appealed to me. I had an absolutely wonderful time that summer, making lasting memories and connections that bore many kinds of fruit, both musical and non-musical.

I came back to AH for a couple summers as a Teaching Assistant. It was so different, something I'd never done, helping people learn their chamber music. It was a really rewarding experience and I learned a lot, especially teaching all the different ages. I was used to teaching just littler kids, so teaching older and younger students gave me a lot of insight into what being a teacher means. Everyone has different ways of playing, and you have to really accommodate each one, rather than just try to get everyone to all do the same thing.

What makes Apple Hill so special?

It was the first camp I'd been to that was 100% nurturing and supportive. Other camps I had been to were very supportive, welcoming, and helpful, but there's always a sense of people wanting to leapfrog over each other, that you have to go home and practice 10 hours a day to get better. Of course, everyone at AH wants to get better, and people push each other to improve, but it's pushing in a good way, a teaching way. That really resonated with me and gave me principles that I wanted to carry through my teaching and my life.

What has it been like playing with the Apple Hill String Quartet?

It's a dream come true. I've looked up to them since I first came here in 2014 and they've been such an amazing support. It's exciting and a little daunting. I'm trying to complement and gel with the sound that Elise, Mike, and Rupert have been creating for over two decades. It's amazing to listen to them play and to hear what they have to say in rehearsals. The challenge for me is to make a cohesive sound and leave my mark for four months. It's wonderful and I'm learning a lot.

I'm really looking forward to the trips this fall to Oberlin and Ireland, to meeting the Fidelio Trio and returning to Donegal. I'm excited (and a bit nervous) to see what the outreach and teaching on those tours is like. I went to Ireland last year to visit my cousin and his new baby. I got to play in pubs with the old timers. They are amazing—after a few pints, they can still play so fast and so articulately!

What do you do for fun when you're not playing violin?

My cousin (in Ireland) got me into fantasy baseball last summer which took over way too much of my time... I really like to be outside, going for walks, biking, playing baseball, frisbee, fishing. I also help (when they ask me to!) my parents with their new house and yard, in Warner, NH.