Alumni Highlight: Ivan Tan, piano

How did you first become involved with Apple Hill?

A whole bunch of my friends from SUNY Purchase had been going to Apple Hill for several summers and recommended it to me enthusiastically. I joined the bandwagon relatively late (Session II of 2012), but had come up the previous year for a participant concert and had heard many stories about Apple Hill from one Purchase friend in particular, so I had some idea of what to expect. What I didn’t expect, however, was how transformative the experience would be: I’ve been back every summer since then, and have developed many close friendships and experienced many musical milestones (and some important life events) at Apple Hill.

What are you doing now? What is it like?

I currently teach in the music department at Brown University, where I’ve developed an introductory music theory course focused on popular music and songwriting. No prior study of music is necessary to take the course, so students come in with a wide range of musical experience. Although it’s been challenging to design the course so that it meets everyone’s educational needs, it’s also been inspiring to watch my students’ musical growth over the course of the semester.

Additionally, I’m also working on a Ph.D. in music theory at the Eastman School of Music. My dissertation is on keyboard performance in 1970s progressive rock, including bands like Emerson, Lake, & Palmer, Yes, Gentle Giant, etc. This is not music that you’d typically hear at Apple Hill (unless I’ve somehow gotten control of a post-concert dance playlist), but that still requires a similar attitude towards small-ensemble music making, which may be why I’ve enjoyed studying it so much.

How has what you learned at Apple Hill helped you in what you do now?

I often think about one of the founding principles of Apple Hill—everyone has an expressive voice and should be encouraged to develop it—which has been especially important to me while teaching. Finding the appropriate balance between supporting and challenging my students is always difficult, but remembering how AH faculty and participants embody the concept of “radical acceptance” every summer has been tremendously helpful.

It’s also interesting to reflect on the degree to which the listening and performance skills you develop as a chamber musician are reflected in other parts of life, particularly in the way your role within the musical texture may change throughout a performance. The skills you learn at Apple Hill—not just the basics of when to lead and when to follow, but also how to lead in a supportive way, how to make an accompanimental role interesting, and how to integrate with (or
stand out from) the rest of your group—have important applications beyond the context of playing music.

On a more practical level, Apple Hill’s commitment to featuring music by overlooked or underrepresented composers has provided me with a lot of great music to analyze and to give to my students.

Can you tell us about one of your favorite Apple Hill memories?

There’s an obvious answer (my wife Lisa Sailer and I were married at Apple Hill in August 2018, with Lenny officiating), and many other amazing moments I could choose, but I’m going to share a memory that most people may not know about—which technically did not take place on the Apple Hill campus.

The day after we left Apple Hill in 2014, several of us were feeling severe withdrawal—we had just experienced 10 days of intense music-making and community-building, and were trying to figure out what to do next. The best solution was, of course, to have a massive sight-reading party, so we all crammed into the living room of Lisa’s tiny apartment in Jamaica Plain and played through as much music as we could. Since we didn’t have access to a piano, Valerie Peters and I ended up joining forces to play the 4th violin part of the Mendelssohn Octet, and acquitted ourselves reasonably well for two pianists who hadn’t touched a violin in years.