

# A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A SUPERSTAR STUDENT

by Korey Konkol

As a university professor of an applied instrument, I can relate to many of my colleagues when it comes to sharing opinions on the topic of recruiting. We spend countless hours with prospective students trying to woo them into our studios. We give sample lessons, correspond via email and phone with both student and parents, invite them to our studio classes and recitals only to find that our institution is too big, too urban, too cold in the winter, too-too! This phenomenon is what I term the “Goldilocks Effect.” It seems like all the stars and planets must be in alignment for a prospective candidate to feel just right about a teacher or school to ultimately matriculate. Then there are those miraculous occasions when a marvelous student appears unexpectedly at your doorstep without all the fanfare and sweat and tears of a hard sell.

Ah, pure serendipity!

Arjun Ganguly is one of these treasured unanticipated gifts. I first heard Arjun perform during a master class with the viola goddess Nabuko Imai at the MacPhail Center for Music back in the spring of 2013. I was immediately taken with his exquisite tone, exemplary technique and exuberant stage presence, all of which belied his age. Arjun was a junior in high school at the time, and his private teacher, Dr. J. David Arnott at the College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University, contacted me and suggested Arjun play for me. Dr. Arnott conveyed to me that Arjun was a braniac and would most likely end up at a university such as Harvard or Yale not majoring in music, so I had no preconceived notion that Arjun would consider the U of MN for his undergraduate education, yet alone formally audition for the School of Music. Arjun had a very productive lesson with me, and I also met his charming mother afterwards. After all was said and done, I thought, “Okay, that was that,” and was appreciative of what I perceived to be a one-time encounter with an extremely talented and promising young musician.

In June of 2014 to my complete and

delightful surprise, Arjun informed me that he would be attending the University of Minnesota in the fall as a biomedical engineering major in the College of Science and Engineering but also wanted to take lessons and play in the University Symphony Orchestra, schedule permitting. Booyah! Thus began our student/teacher relationship. Little did Arjun and I know that we



Arjun Ganguly

were both in for a heck of a whirlwind year—one that would ultimately rock my teaching world!

## July – August 2014

- Arjun continues on the playlist of MPR as one of only 13 performers/composers to reach the featured artist round in the 2014 Classical Minnesota Public Radio’s Minnesota Varsity competition performing the first movement of Sir William Walton’s *Viola Concerto*.
- Arjun is chosen as a second-year participant in the 120-member National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America touring with acclaimed violin virtuoso Gil Shaham on an eight-city, coast-to-coast U.S. tour including performances at Carnegie Hall, the Tanglewood music festival, an Appalachian Summer Festival, Grand Teton Festival, Grant Park Music Festival and the famed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

## September 2014

- Fall semester begins at the University of Minnesota. While Arjun’s academic studies are chiefly focused on engineering, his musical studies with me commence with a full plate of repertoire including the reworking of Sir William Walton’s *Viola Concerto* as well as starting Ernest Bloch’s *Suite 1919* and J.S. Bach’s *6th Cello Suite*, BWV 1012.

## October 2014

- Performs the first movement of Bloch’s *Suite 1919* in a guest master class with U of MN alumnus Dr. Jacob Tews (University of Southern Illinois).
- Begins working on Carl Friedrich Zelter’s *Viola Concerto in E-flat Major* as the required work for the 2015 American String Teachers Association National Solo Competition.

## November 2014

- (November 1) Records audition for the National Youth Orchestra including excerpts from Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*, Mendelssohn’s *Symphony No. 35* and Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 6*.
- (November 9) Records preliminary audition for the ASTA 2015 National Solo Competition including Zelter’s *Viola Concerto in E-flat Major* and J.S. Bach’s *6th Cello Suite*, BWV 1012.

## December 2014

- (December 3) Records the fourth movement *In the Sun Country* of Bloch’s *Suite 1919* for the 2015 Classical Minnesota Public Radio’s Minnesota Varsity competition.
- (December 4) Performs the first movement of the Zelter *Viola Concerto* at the U of MN String Division fall semester Solo Gala in Lloyd Ultan Recital Hall.

## January 2015

- Wins first place in the American Fine Arts Festival (AFAF) Competition for Piano, Voice, Strings and Winds, NY, NY.
- Wins first place viola in the junior division of the American String Teachers Association 2015 National Solo Competition and is chosen as a

Laureate Finalist, one of only six overall winners from both the junior and senior divisions, to compete for the Grand Prize and Audience Favorite awards at the ASTA National Conference held in Salt Lake City, Utah in March. Arjun competed against numerous national entrants representing violin, viola, cello, double bass, guitar and harp.

#### February 2015

- Travels to New York City to perform the first movement of Walton's *Viola Concerto* in the AFAF winners' recital at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall on February 14.
- Begins "revisiting" Niccolò Paganini's *Rondo "La campanella"* from *Violin Concerto No. 2 in B Major, Op. 7* (transcribed by William Primrose) for an upcoming competition.

#### March 2015

- Wins first place in the college strings division of the Thursday Musical Young Artist Scholarship Competition (March 7) held at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul and performs on the winners' concert (March 26) at Antonello Hall, MacPhail Center for Music.
- Travels to Salt Lake City, Utah, to perform at the 2015 American String Teachers Association convention as a Laureate Finalist on March 20 and competing for the 2015 ASTA National Solo Competition grand prize. Arjun performed the first movements of the Walton and Zelter viola concerti as well as the *Prelude* and *Sarabande* of Bach's *6th Cello Suite*.
- (March 29) Wins the Minnesota Sinfonia 2015 Young Artist Competition including the Claire Givens Violins cash prize held at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul. Arjun will perform a transcription of Niccolò Paganini's *La campanella* twice with the Minnesota Sinfonia under the baton of Jay Fishman this coming November.

#### May 2015

- Performs Niccolò Paganini's *La campanella* at the U of MN String Division spring semester Solo Gala in Lloyd Ultan Recital Hall.

#### July –August 2015

- Accepted into the National Youth Orchestra for an unprecedented third season. Under the baton of Charles Dutoit, Arjun first performed at Carnegie Hall and then travelled to China for seven performances in the leading concert halls of Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Xi'an, Shenzhen, Xinghai and Hong Kong.

This dizzying flurry of events would be enough to make any teacher's head spin; that Arjun accomplished all of the aforementioned activities whilst excelling as a biomedical engineering student is even more mind boggling. Throughout this astonishing journey, Arjun has remained incredibly grounded, perhaps because of the fact that he is not a music major (at least at present) and may not have any expectations or feel an immense pressure to succeed in music. Arjun has one of the sweetest personalities I've ever come across in this world, yet when he plays the viola, what you hear and see is a person with a tremendous passion and joy for music. Musically sensitive and possessing an ability to project varying emotional intensities and temperament, he is able to connect with his audience like an effective storyteller. It is my hope to maintain and nurture these qualities as Arjun continues to grow and mature as a vital artist.

Upon reflection of my past year's teaching, a shining highlight was travelling to Salt Lake City to attend the 2015 ASTA National Conference and working with Arjun and his wonderful collaborative pianist, Vedrana Subotic, just before his performance as a Laureate Finalist at the National Solo Competition. It was heartwarming to be seated in the audience next to other Minnesotans who also supported and cheered on Arjun, our home-state talent from St. Cloud, including Claire Givens (Claire Givens Violins, Inc.), Tanya Remenikova (Professor of Cello, University of Minnesota) and Elizabeth Ericksen (President, MNSOTA). To be honest, I'm not sure what was more exciting for Arjun—performing in the recital or having his picture taken with the luminary violist Kim Kashkashian, who accepted the 2015 ASTA Artist Teacher Award on stage while the judges were deliberating! Ms. Kashkashian, also in the audience during the competi-

tion, was extremely kind and generous to Arjun afterwards complimenting his playing and allowing for some fabulous photo opportunities.

Arjun was one of 100 original entrants narrowed down to six Laureate Finalists from a panel of six judges: bassist Jeffrey Bradetich, violist Brett Deubner, harpist Deborah Fleisher, violinist Grigory Kalinovsky, cellist Terry King and classical guitarist Martha Masters. Each of the finalists were winners in their own right, but were then offered a chance at a grand prize and audience favorite award after their winners' recital performances. The finals judges were guitarist Nicholas Goluses, violist Leslie Harlow, cellist Thomas Landschoot, harpist Marina Roznitsky Oster, violinist Eduard Schmieder and bassist DaXun Zhang. For the record, I did not know or had never met any of the judges prior to the competition. Arjun's substantial Laureate prize money was awarded from the Nathan Gordon Fund, and I am most grateful for the financial support of MNSOTA which aided Arjun's travel to Salt Lake City.

Kudos to Dr. J. David Arnott for his own mentorship of and many successes with Arjun in the years prior to the one documented here.

It is always a blessing when teachers work together in order to create a niche for students to flourish and further their artistry. I don't consider myself biased when it comes to promoting my instrument (well, maybe just a little), but I tend to put the viola in a special recruitment category along with harps, oboes, bassoons, and mezzo-sopranos as scarce and precious commodities. I would hope that any scholarship committee or performing ensemble shares this sentiment since violists *don't grow on trees, don't cha know*. I've often heard the expression, "Violists are worth their weight in gold!" since good ones are exceedingly rare.

If this is the case, Arjun Ganguly is certainly worth twice his weight in gold!

As far as gifted viola students falling from the heavens or seemingly coming out of nowhere are concerned, I'll take a dozen more, please!!!!

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