

## ALJAVAR'S STORY: WHY JOINING MSO MIGHT BE THE BEST DECISION YOU MAKE

*By Daniela Fernandez*



Aljavar is pictured center

A single choice can open unexpected doors. For program alumnus Aljavar McFarland, auditioning for the ***Musicopia String Orchestras (MSO)*** set him on a path of growth, connection, and opportunity. **Our 2025–2026 season begins September 9**, and [video auditions](#) are due by **Saturday, August 30**.

When Aljavar McFarland first picked up a violin, he had no idea how far it would take him. Over the years, his journey transformed him from a nervous beginner into one of the most recognizable MSO alumni. What started as a hesitant step into music led to a journey of personal growth, lifelong friendships, and unforgettable experiences.

Now a rising sophomore at Arcadia University, Aljavar is recognized by the Musicopia community not only for his talent but for his energy, confidence, and determination. Over his seven years in the program, he served as MSO concertmaster during the 2023–24 season, emceed two of the organization's largest fundraisers, and helped support the MSO program

behind the scenes as an intern. After graduating, he made the choice to come back and perform with current MSO players at Musicopia's 50th Anniversary Concert. Aljavar credits his growth during those years to the guidance of Musicopia's staff, especially Taia Harlos, who served as MSO's Artistic Director during his years in the program.

Aljavar's transformative journey with Musicopia began in fifth grade, when his school orchestra teacher encouraged him to audition for MSO. At first, Aljavar hesitated. "I was like, 'no, I don't want to. I'm scared'," he recalled. But he agreed to audition and walked in with a simple piece: 'Happy Birthday'. And with that song, he got in.

The first rehearsal was overwhelming. The music was faster, harder, and more complex than anything he had encountered. "I almost quit. I wanted to quit that same day," he said. But encouragement from a friend persuaded him to stay, and that decision ended up changing his life.

MSO pushed him beyond what he thought he was capable of. "Not gonna lie, Musicopia showed me just how trash I was at the time," he said. He compared Musicopia to having an older brother who humbles you when you think you're good at something, showing you how much better you could be.

Through countless rehearsals and performances, he sharpened his rhythm, improved his music reading, and deepened his understanding of music as a form of expression. He shared that MSO taught him not only musical skills but also important life lessons, such as discipline, confidence, and perseverance.

MSO also gave Aljavar a chance to grow in other ways. Orchestra Coach Ashley Vines encouraged him to take on public speaking roles at events, something that pushed him outside his comfort zone. “I was all nervous,” he said. But over time, those moments helped him find his voice. “Now, I’m just able to just walk up there and speak.” He eventually brought his confident presence to the stage as co-emcee of Musicopia’s *High Note High Step* celebrations in 2023 and 2024. Anyone who has seen Aljavar speak at an event would have a hard time imagining such a charismatic speaker ever having stage fright.

Aljavar also experienced significant growth while interning with program, where he supported the MSO staff and filled in when a orchestra coach was absent. Then-Artistic Director Taia Harlos taught him how to conduct and mentor younger students, giving him the opportunity to pass on the same guidance he had once received. “Over time the kids started to like it when I conducted, and it was then when I realized that I had a niche for this type of thing. I discovered that this was building my leadership skills just from this and it really started to show,” he explained.

While the music was meaningful, it was the community that kept Aljavar coming back year after year. He formed close friendships with fellow string players who supported each other through tough rehearsals and celebrated one another’s successes, creating bonds that extended far beyond the stage. He also developed close relationships with the then-MSO Artistic Director, Taia Harlos, and the coaches.

MSO also opened doors to other musical programs, including PMAY, Play On Philly, and Appel Farm, which helped him grow further as a musician. He said these experiences helped him grow musically, but Musicopia remained the foundation he returned to again and again.

Even now, as a computer science major at Arcadia University, music remains a part of Aljavar's life. He plays in the university's chamber orchestra, which he discovered during a club fair. "I'm gonna continue doing that for the rest of my time here at Arcadia," he said. Though he plans to work in the video game industry, he shared that he would love the opportunity to combine his tech skills with his musical background, saying he'd be excited to help create music for a game if the chance ever came his way.

Looking back, Aljavar believes his life would have looked very different without MSO. He might not have attended The Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), discovered his confidence, or found such strong direction. He went on to describe that alternate reality as "shameful," depressing," and "empty."

For younger students thinking about joining MSO, Aljavar is proof of what's possible. He encourages them to embrace the challenge, trust the process, and stay open to growth. The hard work, he says, leads to confidence, community, and opportunities they might not see coming.

If you play the violin, viola, cello, or bass and are wondering where playing music could take you, consider joining the Musicopia String Orchestras!

MSO is a tuition-free program with three levels of ensembles, so there is a place for musicians at different skill levels. We rehearse on Tuesday nights in Center City, and our

2025–2026 season begins September 9. **Video auditions are due by Saturday, August 30.**

Learn more and **submit your audition at:** [www.musicopia.net/mso-audition](http://www.musicopia.net/mso-audition). What are you waiting for? Your musical journey starts here!