

Musicopia Helped Paved the Way to Peabody Conservatory for Violist Justin Williams



Justin Williams (center) receiving a viola gifted to him through Musicopia’s Gift of Music program.

Justin Williams is on his way to becoming a professional violist, a dream he realized during his two years in the [Musicopia String Orchestra \(MSO\) program](#). Now a sophomore music student at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, he credits his experience with MSO for igniting his passion for classical music and launching his journey to college and beyond. In Justin’s words, “Musicopia was a stepping stone to everything else.”

MSO was the “first real orchestra experience” for the then-middle school-aged Justin, who was already blossoming into a talented young musician. He began his musical journey at age five (starting with the violin before switching to the viola in third grade) and attended a performing arts school. Despite having this experience, he admitted that playing music felt more like an obligation than a hobby before joining the MSO program. “The difference is that with Musicopia, everyone cared, which meant a lot to me,” Justin shared. In the MSO, he worked with passionate coaches and alongside peers eager to grow as musicians — a highly motivating environment that pushed Justin to reach his full potential. He was also challenged by the pieces, which were the most difficult he’d played at the time. Justin felt newfound excitement emerge.

It wasn’t just playing in the orchestra that helped Justin become passionate about music. In addition to the weekly rehearsals, the Musicopia String Orchestra program offers educational

opportunities, such as connecting its students with established local artists. At an MSO rehearsal, Justin and his fellow violists had a session with guest artist [Kerri Ryan](#) of the Philadelphia Orchestra. This experience was Justin's first time seeing a professional violist play, and he will never forget what this opportunity meant to him. "It was life-changing," he recalled. "I wasn't listening to or going out to see classical music at the time. [Ryan's] playing showed me what the viola could sound like, where I could go, and what I could strive for." This experience also showed Justin that playing music was a viable career path, something he had never considered.

After working with Kerri Ryan, Justin's interest in classical music skyrocketed, and he started looking to expand his music education beyond the MSO program. Through Musicopia, Justin learned about [The Philadelphia Music Alliance for Youth \(PMAY\) Artists' Initiative](#). Musicopia is one of eight music organizations that make up the PMAY collaborative, which supports 5th-12th grade students from historically marginalized communities to pursue their dream of becoming professional classical musicians. PMAY offers students financial support to make lessons, music classes, youth orchestra participation, and summer music camps affordable, with the long-term goal of increasing diversity in the professional musical landscape.

Justin applied and became a 2019-2020 PMAY Artist. Through PMAY, Justin gained the connections to work with Settlement Music School, Project 440, and the Philadelphia Sinfonia. The program also made it possible for him to attend Interlochen Art Center's six-week camp in 2019 and its week-long summer viola intensive in 2021. Taking advantage of these opportunities paved the way for Justin to get accepted into the highly competitive Peabody Conservatory.

Unfortunately, Justin's path to college wasn't consistently smooth sailing. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Justin's high school experience, isolating him from his peers and the communal orchestra experience. As much as Justin longed for a return to normalcy, this challenging time illuminated why he was happy to have music in his life. "Music helped me get through the pandemic by giving me actual meaning. If I didn't have music, that stretch would have felt much more miserable," Justin noted.

Before heading off to college, Justin was gifted with a high-quality viola from Musicopia. This gift was made possible by the generosity of the Loder family, who donated their late mother, Doris Ann Loder's, viola to Musicopia's [Gift of Music instrument donation program](#) in her memory. Justin is grateful for the education he's receiving at Peabody and is seeing a vast improvement in his intonation (pitch), rhythm, and overall playing ability. He is excited to see where his career takes him post-graduation. "I'd like to join a professional orchestra one day. That's the dream. That's the top thing I want, but as long as I'm playing music and making a living doing it, I'm happy," he shared.

Justin will always be thankful for the opportunity to play in the MSO. "I don't know that I would have had the experience or the desire to [pursue a career in music] if I didn't learn what an

orchestra could be with only my prior experience. Because of Musicopia, I got to know what I wanted,” he shared. Musicopia is proud to provide pathways to the arts for the students we serve who dream of becoming professional musicians. It is a privilege to have helped a young musician as talented as Justin realize his dreams and set him on the path to success. We cannot wait to see all the doors that open up for Justin as he advances in his career.