

Growing as a musician: A PMAY Artist shares her experience

By Talia Yellin Fisher



November 2018... Musicopia is a member of the Philadelphia Music Alliance for Youth (PMAY), a collaborative of 15 organizations in the Philadelphia region dedicated to providing music education and performance opportunities. The collaborative started in 2012, and its members share a commitment to improving communities through the regular study of music. Musicopia is among the subset of ten organizations in the PMAY collective that received a \$2.53 million multi-year grant award in 2017 from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation for the PMAY Artists' Initiative. The Initiative is a project that supports 5th-12th grade students to remove barriers for young musicians and increase the number of professional musicians from underrepresented communities.

The PMAY Artists' Initiative (PAI) offers young musicians financial support to make lessons, music classes, youth orchestra participation, and summer music camps affordable. As a PMAY Artist, students attend free college and career preparation workshops, receive private lessons, instruments, specialized coaching, and a dedicated student advocate. In addition, PMAY teachers and staff work with each family to ensure that each musician has a strong plan in place for acceptance into a conservatory, college or university majoring in classical music. The goal is for the students to be able to realize their full potential forming the next generation of professional orchestra musicians.

In 2017-18, ten Musicopia String Orchestra (MSO) students were selected by audition for the inaugural PAI class (joining approximately 65 additional students from the other member organizations). One MSO musician selected as a PMAY Artist was Divine Epps. Divine, who is 14 years old and in 9th grade, has been a musician since elementary school, a member of the cello section of the MSO since last fall, and has been a PMAY Artist since spring 2018. She also plays in Tune-Up Philly, an ensemble of the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra program. "Divine is a pleasure to have in MSO and it's been wonderful to watch her in the workshops and to see her growth over the last year," said Daniela Pierson, Artistic Director of the MSO. "She's always willing to work hard and get into the details of a phrase or a particular technical challenge and she does so with a cheerful smile and warmth toward her colleagues. It's a nice combination - serious worker, great attitude, willingness to collaborate - that bodes well for her continued growth. We can't wait to see what she'll do over the next few years!"

Some things that Divine enjoys the most about playing in the MSO are making new friends and playing new music. “Because the pieces are really hard, it kind of pushes me to play more,” Divine said. “Last year, one of the pieces we worked on was *Warrior Legacy*. It’s really aggressive, and since I play cello, I liked it because we can play it with our lower C string. We had to put a lot of pressure on it and it was really fun to play.”

And, as is the case for many young musicians, Divine has also encountered some musical challenges. “I’ve had to work on 4th position a lot,” she said. (4th position is a particular hand placement on the fingerboard/strings). “It was frustrating because I wasn’t really comfortable with it, so my Tune-Up Philly teacher helped me. We would practice with the rest of the cellos, and do scales and finger exercises too.”

Being a PMAY Artist has also helped Divine overcome some of her musical challenges through workshops, coaching, and mentoring with Aileen Rimando Jackson, Musicopia’s PAI Student Advocate and other MSO coaches. Aileen, a Musicopia String Orchestra coach, is a Class Instrument Music Teacher for the School District of Philadelphia and also performs regularly throughout the Philadelphia area as a freelance violinist. “Divine has a sincere love and enthusiasm for playing the cello,” said Aileen. “She is meticulous and works with care, and has made vast strides in her playing in a short period of time; we are excited to see what her future holds.”

The opportunities afforded to Divine as a PMAY Artist have also helped her to feel more comfortable around her fellow cellists, and to grow as a speaker and as a musician in a supportive, respectful environment. The workshops are what Divine is most looking forward to this coming year as a PMAY Artist. One workshop in particular with her fellow PMAY Artists allowed each musician to perform for each other, and then give and receive feedback. “I think the workshops really help because we learn and have fun at the same time. We perform for each other, and then give constructive criticism,” she said. “For example, if our intonation [pitch] isn’t good, someone might say, ‘when you’re practicing maybe you should work on your intonation more.’”

Another PMAY workshop included training on how to best present oneself at an audition. The PMAY Artists practiced introducing themselves into a camera, saying the name and composer of the piece they would be playing in clear, loud voices, while making eye contact into the camera and keeping their bodies still. As a PMAY Artist, Divine has also been taking weekly private lessons with Andrea Weber, another MSO coach. “I used to play violin, so string crossing with my cello bow was pretty difficult because I had a violin bow hand. My intonation is also in progress with Ms. Andrea, and she’s helping me improve it through scales and other pieces,” Divine said.

All of this training will serve Divine well in her goal to becoming a professional orchestra musician. She also enjoys reading, doodling, musical theatre, learning Spanish, and writing music. She even has a couple of measures written for a solo cello piece, and watches YouTube videos to help her grow as a composer.

“When I first joined the MSO and became a PMAY Artist, I was worried about fitting in and being successful because I just assumed that everyone would be a lot older than I am and would have been playing for a longer time,” Divine said. “But I saw that we were all on the same level, because we each had our own things that we had trouble with, and that really helped me to see that because now I know it isn’t hard to fit in, because everyone in there loves music.”

To learn more about the PMAY Artists' Initiative, visit <https://www.musicopia.net/pmay>.

